Feminist community work in preventing violence against women: a case study of addressing intimate partner violence in Finland

Anna Nikupeteri, Pia Skaffari and Merja Laitinen

University of Lapland, Faculty of Social Sciences, Rovaniemi, Finland

ABSTRACT
This study focuses on feminist community work in addressing violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence. With reference to a case study conducted in Finland on intimate partner violence we ask, (1) What are the central features of feminist community work in addressing violence against women and (2) What guides feminist community work in preventing the violence? The analysis brings forth three aspects of feminist community work that are crucial in preventing violence against women: (1) gaining a diverse understanding of female victims and their experiences, (2) using different community-based methods and spaces to approach the issue, and (3) forming partnerships with agents and agencies. Our findings show that increasing people’s awareness of violence through feminist community work may prevent intimate partner violence and bring best results when guided by a perspective on gender as a social construct and by an intersectional and holistic approach to violence.

KEYWORDS
Feminist community work; preventing violence against women; intimate partner violence; case study

Introduction
Violence against women is a significant problem in regard to its scale and impacts across the globe. It has adverse physical, social and mental effects, and it is an expression of inequality between men and women (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) 2014). Social workers are key professionals in helping the victims and perpetrators and in addressing the issue as a violation of human rights and dignity. However, intervening violence through case work only and approaching it as an individual problem do not solve the issue, because the methods lack collective empowerment, emancipation, and an aim for social change (e.g. Dominelli 2006; García-Moreno et al. 2015; Ledwith 2011; Sjöberg et al. 2018). Community work makes it possible to prevent violence and works towards changing the conditions that engender it. The need for community approaches in preventing violence sets a challenge for contemporary welfare states undergoing a change towards increasing individualism (e.g. Gutiérrez and Gant 2018; Popple 2015).

In this paper, we focus on feminist community work in the prevention of violence against women, especially intimate partner violence, in Finland representing a Nordic welfare state. We define intimate partner violence as a violation of human rights, covering all acts of gender-based violence that result or are likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of freedom occurring in public or private life (Council of Europe 2011). Feminist community work as a method of social work offers a possibility to regard violence against women as a social problem in specific settings and to perceive its structural connections. According to Popple (2015), feminist community work improves women’s welfare and contributes collectively to challenging and eradicating inequalities
suffered by women. Increasing public awareness of violence against women, changing social norms and attitudes and, ultimately, changing behaviours towards the violence can be seen as the central aims of feminist community work in preventing the violence (Heisecke 2014; see also Emejulu 2011).

Based on our hermeneutic research interest, we seek to learn more about the prevention of violence through a case study on intimate partner violence. Our research questions are as follows: (1) What are the central features of feminist community work in addressing violence against women and (2) What guides feminist community work in preventing the violence? Our aim is to contribute to the academic and professional discussions on community work by arguing that feminist community work can increase our understanding of the prevention of intimate partner violence.

Community work in preventing violence against women in the Nordic welfare societies

The Nordic countries have experienced global and local transformations and are challenged by new social, political, and economic tendencies (e.g. Harrikari, Rauhala, and Virokannas 2014). For example, new public management and neoliberal ideology have contributed to privatization, where the responsibility of the public sector has decreased and the role of the private and civil sectors has increased in the distribution of welfare services. This has turned the attention to citizens and the third sector in distributing welfare services and increased an individual’s responsibility for creating welfare (Juhila, Raitakari, and Löfstrand 2017).

The changes in welfare systems and individual living conditions create a need for community practices that help individuals and communities to improve problematic contexts (Gutiérrez and Gant 2018; Ledwith 2011; Popple 2015). Within the field of social work, community work can be seen as social work’s macro practice aimed at reforming communities and society (Gutiérrez and Gant 2018; Rothman 1995). It is based on a person-in-environment orientation (Gutiérrez and Gant 2018) and the values and principles of social work, such as advancing social justice and the integrity of individuals (Gamble and Weil 2010), and it supports empowerment, bottom-up approaches, and participatory processes (Koutra 2015). In the Nordic countries, public welfare institutions have a mandate to do community work and to co-operate with other institutions in improving the social conditions and in realizing the welfare state’s commitment to the active participation of its citizens (Hutchinson 2009).

We focus on feminist community work as an approach to the prevention of violence against women by expanding the insights of previous literature. Feminist community workers have tackled problems by emphasizing gender issues. They have, for example, redefined private problems as social ones; developed methods of consciousness-raising; enhanced the welfare of women, children and men; and revealed the political nature of social relations (Dominelli 2006; Popple 2015). Our definition of feminist community work includes characteristics of Popple’s (2015) models of community work practice as ‘community organisation’, where the strategy is to improve the coordination between different welfare agencies, and ‘community development’, which emphasizes people’s active participation and focuses on assisting them to acquire the skills and confidence needed to improve their quality of live.

We regard feminist community work as radical community development that involves collective action aimed at effecting a transformative change in social justice, focusing on the structural causes of oppression and characterized by empowerment through critical consciousness and an analysis of power and discrimination in a wider political context (Ledwith 2011). Feminist community development can be seen as a social and political construction bounded by power relations. It is a process of transforming norms, values, and politics that give rise to gendered inequalities by focusing on micro and macro social relations that create unequal social roles for men and women (Emejulu 2011). In the context of the Nordic welfare states in transition, there is a need for feminist
community work to ensure that women exposed to intimate partner violence do not have to take individual responsibility for the violence and change their living conditions. Feminist community work can enable us to approach violence against women as a structural problem and find collective ways to prevent it.

Preventing different forms of violence against women has been a political and professional challenge in the Nordic countries during the recent decades (Eriksson et al. 2005). Often, the emphasis has been on increasing people’s awareness of violence and its consequences (e.g. Ogunsiji and Clisdell 2017). For example, educational approaches to violence against women and children play a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting dialogues on violence as a social and cultural phenomenon (Ellis and Thiara 2014). Some means of prevention focus on changing social norms and attitudes. In order to change the norms of gender relations, work has to be done with both men and women, and the interventions should recognize differences between the genders (e.g. Dominelli 2002). Moreover, in high-income countries, the focus is on responses such as women-centred advocacy and home visitation programmes in preventing violence (Ellsberg et al. 2015) and on developing professional and interprofessional interventions (García-Moreno et al. 2015). In low- and middle-income countries, the focus is rather on violence prevention, for example community mobilization interventions and combined livelihood and training interventions for women (Ellsberg et al. 2015). On the whole, previous studies show that preventing violence against women requires age-, gender- and context-specific actions and the recognition of differences between various communities, such as sexual minorities (Turell et al. 2012) and migrants (Ogunsiji and Clisdell 2017).

The prevention of violence against women is an acute issue in Finland despite its status as a Nordic welfare state with extensive gender equality (e.g. Eriksson et al. 2005). A study conducted in all the EU member states (FRA 2014) shows that from age 15 onward about one out of five (22%) women who are or have been in a relationship has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. The corresponding figure in Finland, however, is 30%. Interventions to address intimate partner violence have mostly involved cases of trauma and crisis and family-centred issues (Husso et al. 2012). The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO 2019) has criticized Finland’s policy of gender equality, as it easily shifts towards gender-neutrality in service provision, while the gender-specific nature of violence is ignored.

Research material and method

Case study of preventing violence against women

The case study is based on material produced in a project of preventing intimate partner violence in Finland during the years 2015–2018. The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters1 coordinated and implemented the project in one rural and one urban municipality. The communities involved were selected based on professional knowledge about their needs and readiness (also Turell et al. 2012) to work against violence. The urban municipality had roughly 84,000 inhabitants, and the main employers were the social and health care sector, industry, and wholesale and retail trade. The rural municipality had approximately 13,000 inhabitants, but the activities also extended beyond the municipal border. The economic structure of the latter consisted mainly of agriculture and forestry, comprising a number of micro- and small enterprises. Using a case study as the research method allowed us to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of community work in the prevention of violence and to realize the theoretical and practical aims of our study (Stake 1995).

Four community workers were involved in the project. Two of them carried out the activities at the local and regional levels, one in each municipality, and two functioned at the national level communicating with different interest groups such as Victim Support Finland and planning and
coordinating the community work at the local and regional levels. The role of the community
workers was to enable and facilitate the improvement of women’s welfare and to work against
violence (Popple 2015). All the workers were females. The project activities were targeted at four
groups: (1) the general public, (2) key professionals working with women and families (e.g.
child health centre, day care, parish), (3) decision makers at the political and organizational levels, and (4)
women who identify themselves as victims of violence. The activities consisted of raising awareness,
promoting dialogue, supporting inter-professional cooperation, and advocating empowerment (e.g.
García-Moreno et al. 2015). The researchers had access to an online file in which the community
workers stored all their material. The community work activities are illustrated in Table 1.

| Community work activities |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Activities directed at Place | Action | The aim of the activity |
| The general public | Free time places (e.g. open-air dance floor) | The master of love quiz | Raise the public’s awareness of violence in close relationships |
| | Public places (e.g. shopping centres, library) | Deliver fliers | Change the general attitude of citizens towards violence in close relationships |
| | Schools | Give open lectures | Create possibilities for mutual encounters with the community workers |
| | Prison | Recruit volunteers | - Case management |
| | Media | - self-organize art- and music-based events and exhibitions (e.g. Story Shoe Exhibition, Art Against Violence Festival, dance productions, drama) | |
| | | - Participate in public events (e.g. a fair concerning social and health issues, panel discussion in local Jazz event, senior event) | |
| | | - Participate in annual events (e.g. Women’s day, pop-up restaurant) | |
| | | - Raise awareness of violence and project activities in local and regional media (newspapers, radio, social media) | |
| Key professionals working with women and families | Social and health care services (e.g. family counselling and child health centres, early childhood education, school nurses, social work with substance abusers, social duty) | Give lectures to practitioners | - Create possibilities and lower the barriers to build up partnerships |
| | Victim support Finland | - Train practitioners to recognize violence and to intervene in it | - Map the situation on interventions against violence in the region |
| | Parish | - Share and exchange expert knowledge of violence against women | |
| Decision makers | Meetings with local and regional officials | Lobby decision makers | - Add knowledge about standing up to violence: co-operation and support |
| | Trade union | | - Raise administrative recognition of and support for violence work |
| Women who identify themselves as victims of violence | Low-threshold Welfare café | Make announcements about the groups in social media and newspapers | - Possibility to share personal experiences |
| | Art- and action-based groups (e.g. dance therapy) | - Peer support | - Consider women’s special needs in violence intervention |
| | Peer support group | - Art- and action-based methods | - Start empowering process |
| | Virtual Safety House | - Women’s day event at the mall | - Build safety environment and space to contact and get help |
The research material has been collected from multiple sources to gain a multidimensional understanding of the case (Stake 1995). It consists of all the material produced in the activities by the community workers, written feedback thereon, reports (documents, memos) from the project meetings, interviews with four community workers, and the reflective diary of a community worker. The forms of data used in our case study are as follows:

- **Reports on project activities produced by the community workers**
  - Facts concerning the project activities (e.g. how many participants there were in a certain event and what their gender was).
  - Documents and memos on all the activities, project team and steering group meetings, and project development days, plus a project diary (altogether 730 pages).

- **Researchers’ interviews with community workers**
  - Four individual thematic, semi-structured interviews. The interview themes were based on an analysis of the project materials and included the following: applying a women-specific approach, producing knowledge, gaining an understanding of violence in the project, and defining the role of women in the activities.
  - The interviews were conducted at the end of the project at the workers’ offices. They lasted 109–208 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim (altogether 73 pages).
  - Interpretations of the meaning of the project activities.

- **Reflective diary of a community worker**
  - One community worker wrote a diary where she reflected on her work and shared it with the researchers but not with the other community workers.
  - Includes reflections on personal work and project activities (altogether 59 pages).

We, as the researchers, were already engaged in planning the research during the phase when funding was sought for the project. The decision on the focus of the research and that the material produced in the project would be used as research material was made collaboratively by the community workers, the researchers, and the project’s steering committee. The researchers finalized the research questions, made the decisions concerning the theoretical commitments, and carried out the data analysis. We conducted the study by following the Finnish ethical principles of research (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019), while the community workers, as practitioners in the social and health care sector, adhered to professional ethics in conducting their work. Conducting research on an ethically challenging theme, as is the case with violence against women, required dialogue and trust between the researchers, the community workers, and the workers’ local associations, as well as careful consideration regarding the use of female victims as partners in community work. The challenges dealt with how community work lends itself to the trauma-orientated tradition of violence work and whether to approach violence against women through the perspective of violence or women’s welfare. The community workers needed to carefully consider the role of women victims as partners in carrying out the activities by considering their experiences of violence and the stage of their traumatization or survival from violence in every form of action. In the worst case, bringing together women with traumatizing experiences can deepen their victimization, and the community action may end up having negative consequences for the local community (e.g. through inappropriate communication and blaming various actors in social media).

**Analysis**

Our study drew upon constructivism, where knowledge is regarded as a human construction (Stake 1995). We started the first phase of the content-oriented analysis by examining the material in terms of the nature, form and places of the community activities; the reactions of people to violence; and the community workers’ evaluations of the project activities. We then encoded and abstracted the material based on content themes (Kvale 2007). In the second phase, we read the interviews several
times, encoded them and named broader themes, such as the challenges of reaching out to the victims, the methods of community work, and the meaning of collaboration. Thereafter, we discussed the themes of the project material and interviews and how they complement one another. In the third phase, we analysed the themes from the perspective of the interrelationship between the phenomenon and its contexts (Stake 1995) and interpreted what is important in preventing violence against women. Finally, we confirmed three central features of feminist community work in the prevention process: (1) gaining a diverse understanding of female victims and their experiences, (2) using different community-based methods and spaces in approaching it, and (3) forming partnerships with agents and agencies. Next, we present the features by using excerpts from the community workers’ (CW) interviews and by showing pictures from the project material. We do not use excerpts from the diary of the community worker because she wanted to share it with the researchers only.

Features of feminist community work in preventing violence against women

Gaining a diverse understanding of female victims and their experiences

The project activities were based on a diverse understanding of violence against women and women as victims. The starting point was that women can experience different forms of violence: sexual violence, violence in religious communities, technology-assisted violence, etc. Gender was understood as negotiated at ideological and institutional levels, and located in a wider cultural and historical context (Lombard and McMillan 2013). This approach included the idea that women are seen as a heterogeneous group involving different ethnic backgrounds, ages, and social classes (Emejulu 2011). Women are not only victims of violence; they are also mothers, sisters and co-workers:

It is difficult to find a single way to reach those people because the person is not only a victim of violence, but also a lot more. Maybe she is a single mother living the busy years of her life, and if we just offer a welfare café for victims of violence . . . I myself wouldn’t bother to go there . . . ( . . . ) And as for community work, maybe you should narrow it down a bit, like, who you are reaching out to: are we trying to reach older women who experience violence or long-term unemployed people who need some special support or social and health care workers . . . who feel that they need help but don’t dare or aren’t able to ask? (CW 2)

Gender played a significant role in the community work, even though it was not highlighted. The aim was to empower women who self-identified as victims and to awaken them to recognize violence as an issue that affects their wellbeing negatively. With this in mind, the materials concerning the activities (e.g. leaflets) were designed especially for women.

For example, the pictures we have used in advertisements are clearly of women or something feminine, or we have used things like pink colours. It sounds stereotypical, and it is not the whole picture, of course, but the message is delivered in a way that is not neutral. (CW 2)
In the activities directed at the general public, violence was addressed as a gendered issue and preventive action was promoted in a persuasive manner. For example, in the Story Shoe Exhibition organized by female victims you could leave your own story in a woman’s shoe on a piece of paper (see Photo 1 Story Shoe Exhibition). Through this event, women’s subjective experiences were brought to public places:

I think the Story Shoe Exhibition is a great way to reach people, and it encourages them to talk. So, it is a very good means to reach out to people. (CW 3)

Gender was also present when the community workers collaborated with professionals working with male victims or perpetrators of violence. This shows that work on violence against women includes the male as well as the female perspective even though the activities are directed at women (see also Dominelli 2002). To prevent violence, the focus must be on both men and women in order to change the norms in a meaningful way and to reduce gender inequality:

Even though our project is woman-centred, it doesn’t mean that all women are victims and all men are perpetrators. We don’t see it that way. Rather we think that we help women and acknowledge that what we bring to women is passed forwards through them to men, and through women we can affect their partners and children. (CW 4)

The discussed role of gender raises questions in terms of achieving wider structural changes. As Welsh (2010) argues, making real changes in women’s lives will not be possible without an accompanying focus on the role of men as individuals and collectively. On the whole, the community work activities demonstrate that preventive work calls for a strong theoretical and practical knowledge of violence against women and women as victims, which means understanding the differences that exist among women and the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories (Emejulu 2011). It is important to reach out to potential female victims in different ways and to target the work at specific groups of women in order to unravel the category of women as victims and to enable them to gain new agency.

**Using different community-based methods and spaces in approaching violence against women**

The project workers used various community-based methods and spaces in raising people’s awareness of violence against women. Context-sensitive actions require an open attitude and an understanding of the local environments and communities where the prevention work is conducted. In this study, for instance, community work was conducted in two different settings, rural and urban, where the communities’ responsiveness to violence varied. The community workers contacted people in their everyday surroundings:

We visit places where we haven’t been earlier. Of course, our organisations have visited events, having a booth and being present, so it isn’t new as such, but I think that so far nobody has paid a visit to a dance hall to discuss [violence] with people. (CW 4)

Creating space and promoting participation in various social activities are central features of community work (e.g. Sjöberg et al. 2018). The community workers considered it important that information on violence be present in public places, for example in libraries and shopping centres, in order to reach local people in the course of their everyday lives (Ledwith 2011). The activities included self-organized events and participation in events organized by others, for example a trade fair relating to women’s health and welfare. The methods for raising public awareness of violence included the use of the senses to tempt people to stop by the booth. For example, music stimulated the sense of hearing, arts events the sense of sight, and the senses of smell and taste were stimulated by a pop-up restaurant on a restaurant day. Exploiting the senses enabled the community workers to attract people’s attention and to make them think about the violence that women may encounter in their partnerships. In the public events, it became clear that intimate partner violence is an
avoided topic and that people have stereotypical perceptions of it. At one of the events, people who passed by the organizers’ booth made comments veiled in humour or withdrew when they saw that the booth offered services for victims. It shows that subjugation to violence is often considered an embarrassing and avoided topic:

Our table is usually situated in this way … it’s unbelievable … be it the Heart Union, the Finnish Kidney and Liver Association or the Cancer Society of Finland, people approach all tables with curiosity. But when they reach our table, they simply pass by. (…) Or, there is at least a justifying back-up story, such as: “I’m working at the child healthcare centre” or “I’ll take these to our parish” or “I’ll bring these to the school where I’m working as a nurse.” People somehow have a compulsion to explain why they come here. (CW 1)

The data show that preventive activities require systematic planning as to where and how violence can be approached and what the appropriate means of discussing are in the local context. Compared to the countryside, cities provide more variety in the use of public places, for example art galleries and music venues. In the countryside, violence is typically approached through the context of farming or some other local livelihood:

We are planning to make a very small brochure, like MELA (Farmers’ Social Insurance Institution) does whenever a new entrepreneur starts; they visit the farm, and an officer gives a free information package that contains MELA’s brochures. I thought it would also be a good idea to place a small [intimate partner violence] brochure there, because they have broadened the concept of wellbeing at work, and farmers usually work as a couple, so, it is important to have this welfare approach that includes the partnership, its stability, and its welfare. (CW 3)

In some activities, violence was approached by using art- or humour-based methods as a disguise. The community workers also contacted people in unusual places such as open-air dances, where people were given the possibility to answer a quiz on intimate partner violence so as to motivate them to visit the booth. The project meeting memos also mention public places where people were not allowed to talk about violence. These restrictions are associated with the taboo nature of violence in certain cultural contexts and the communities’ reluctance to address it (also Turell et al. 2012).

For example, next week we’ll have a restaurant day. (…) Every visitor will be given a pouch with a message hidden inside, like this one. Then there is also a tea bag. The message is sort of hidden in there. (…) And the dishes all contain a slogan of some sort against violence. (CW 1)

CW 2: … there was this silent protest (…) where we dress and make up women, and also men, to make them look like victims of violence, and then they stay at the shopping centre or wherever the booth is so people can see them … (…) And we tried to do this at the shopping centres in the city, but were not allowed to.

Interviewer: For what reason?

CW 2: I think it was, if memory serves, October or November, but anyway, they were preparing for Christmas. (…) I think it was just an excuse not to let us in there. Maybe they felt that, reading between the lines, it would be distressing for customers and spoil their shopping mood.

Although some of the activities were one-time events, the community workers considered it important to be regularly visible in the same place so that victims would know that they can get help when they need it. When violence as a phenomenon becomes visible for victims, it can help them identify their experiences as abuse. The project also organized peer groups for women, a low-threshold drop-in welfare café (see Photo 2 Welfare café for women), and wellbeing evenings for women. Instead of focusing on trauma and crisis, the purpose of these activities was to strengthen women’s wellbeing, which may allow them to become aware of the injustices they have faced.
Forming partnerships with agents and agencies

The data show that forming partnerships with a wide variety of agents and agencies is important in addressing violence against women and in reaching out to potential victims (see also Sjöberg et al. 2018). In establishing these partnerships, the dynamics of the local institutions and agencies had to be examined first (see Lombard and McMillan 2013). For example, in rural areas, there are fewer agents and partnerships usually already exist, whereas in urban settings, there are diverse possibilities to create them. The main collaborators were social and health care professionals, who often meet women and families with experiences of violence. In preventing violence through partnerships, the community workers considered it important that knowledge be shared equally between the agents. Besides professionals, also female victims acted as partners and played a central role in producing knowledge that derives from lived experiences of violence (also Hague and Bridge 2008).

And I have tried to create a setting where we are on the same level so that these women and other people who experience [violence] are not addressed through a top-down approach, rather they are considered a group of individuals in which anyone can find themselves. (CW 2)

The aim of creating partnerships was to increase the social workers’ and other professionals’ knowledge of violence and to encourage them to identify it. It was necessary because personal attitudes and worldviews influence the way in which professionals respond to clients facing the issue. If one is not prepared to deal with violence, the responsibility of addressing the issue gets easily forwarded to other professionals (also Sundborg et al. 2012). In certain cases, for example at a child healthcare centre, some professionals were reluctant to increase the role of violence intervention in their work.

Some thought that this [training] was a really great idea, you know, but in general, the mentality was that this is not our business. (CW 1)

One of the tasks in the community work was to advocate awareness of intimate partner violence among local politicians and other decision makers, including municipal leaders. The community workers brought forth politicians’ lack of knowledge not only of the dynamics and harmful consequences of violence for its victims, but also of the financial loss caused by it. Even though politicians may have recognized the problem, they lacked confidence in tackling it and defining their responsibility in confronting it. This emphasizes the importance of the political will and concerted effort of leaders and administrators in addressing the violence (García-Moreno et al. 2015).
Sometimes I’ve noticed that these agents feel that they should know about the issue but actually they don’t, and they are too embarrassed to admit it. Somehow, they prefer to do nothing, even though they realise that they are supposed to know what to do, but since they don’t, they are too ashamed to ask anything. (CW 2)

The project collaborated with different interest groups and formed multiple partnerships with parishes and nationwide associations and institutions such as the Women Entrepreneurs of Finland and Victim Support Finland. Public places, such as libraries, and free time activities offered new opportunities to disseminate information and to confront violence. The collaborators also offered low-threshold premises for action.

The good thing about it has been that I have gained partners that our association didn’t have earlier. Also, I have received invitations to talk about our art-based methods at a network meeting of the municipality’s cultural and social and health care agents. (CW 1)

It may happen that someone doesn’t identify with this kind of target group [victims of violence], so this [service offered] could be better done in collaboration with some other agent, in a way that one’s own interest is clearly visible. If it is, say, the parish, then it should be done in collaboration with the parish, where for example a group for female victims of violence could feel a sense of community. (CW 2)

The partners also provided important input that complemented the community workers’ knowledge in the activities. For example, The Farmers’ Social Insurance Institution (MELA) considered it important that instead of directly addressing violence, the strategy should start from the security of the family. This is to avoid stigmatizing any specific group as violent.

Moreover, the community workers actively used media relations in raising awareness and in challenging the cultural and social norms concerning intimate partner violence and gender. Around 20 news articles concerning the topic were published in local and regional newspapers during the project. Also, social media were an important channel to share information about the services and project activities. The media had a supportive role that made it possible to raise people’s awareness.

Well, I think that of all those who have participated, the biggest thanks belong to a long article that was published in a local free newspaper. (CW 2)

The data suggest that community work benefits from the creation of partnerships with various agents and organizations. The main partners in the project were professionals working in various sectors of society. The data show that the central elements in the co-operation are professional trust, reciprocity, and equally shared knowledge, but co-operation also demands sensitivity towards the other organizations’ main tasks. In accordance with feminist principles, developing non-hierarchical structures and more participatory ways of working and supporting the women in challenging professionals’ conceptions of the violence may have placed the women’s relationships with professionals on more equal terms (Dominelli 1995; Popple 2015).

**Dimensions of feminist community work in raising public awareness of violence against women**

Our analysis indicates that increasing people’s awareness of violence against women through a feminist community work approach may provide a significant contribution to the prevention of intimate partner violence in communities. According to the analysis, this work is guided by a perspective on gender as a social construct and by an intersectional and holistic approach to violence against women (see Figure 1).

Our findings show that intersectionality and understanding gender as a social construct play a significant role in preventing violence against women through community work. Perceiving gender as a socially constructed phenomenon makes it possible to negotiate its meaning in local communities. This poses a need to constantly reframe gender and violence in order to gain a better understanding of women’s experiences of violence and the channels of getting professional help (Lombard and McMillan 2013). Critical feminist analysis enables us to reflect on gender
asymmetries at the cultural, ideological, and political levels (Dominelli 2002; Ledwith 2011). Moreover, it is important to consider other social aspects, such as age, cultural backgrounds, and local circumstances that affect women’s experiences of violence and communities’ responses to it. Intersectionality can be seen as an analytical tool that makes it possible to view the complexity of social structures and power relations and thereby to avoid simplifying the interpretation of gender and violence (Mattsson 2014). Through this perspective, preventive action can be planned to support a politics of progressive social change based on diversity (Emejulu 2011).

The findings also highlight the importance of a holistic community approach that requires efforts from all people in changing the prevailing attitudes towards intimate partner violence, effecting social change in women’s lives, and, ultimately, preventing violence against women. Based on our data, increasing general awareness of violence calls for making it an everyday issue that concerns all people – victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and professionals. This echoes the feminist efforts in addressing violence by emphasizing the communal condemnation of violence and communal support for intervention (Haq and Lewis 2014). Moreover, a community approach to the problem is necessary in order to gain collective empowerment for social change (Sjöberg et al. 2018). The prevention of violence requires a multidimensional understanding of the issue based on the experiential, professional, local, and cultural knowledge of different agents.

Our findings highlight ‘community organisation’, that is, improving the coordination between different welfare agencies as an important community work practice in preventing violence against women (Popple 2015). Based on our findings, the prevention of violence against women requires comprehensive and multisector collaboration (García-Moreno et al. 2015) between social workers and other professionals, enabling them to take and share responsibility and to regard women with lived experiences on violence as important knowledge producers (Hague and Bridge 2008). Our analysis shows that the female victims acted mainly at the individual and group levels but not on the organizational level (Hokkanen et al. 2017), which would be imperative in preventive feminist community work aimed at transforming social relations and achieving structural change (Dominelli 1995; Popple 2015). The case study stresses the importance of scrutinizing the local

---

**Figure 1.** Dimensions of feminist community work in preventing violence against women.
environment where the work against violence is implemented (see Stake 1995). More specifically, one should critically evaluate the possibilities of community work to mobilize social change, which may not be possible if the work is integrated into an institutional setting (Lindén 2009) and if unequal political, social and economic structures are not disrupted (Emejulu 2011). We also found that many agents are willing to address violence, but they need support in implementing their work and in creating new partnerships. This calls for cumulative action where organizations and individual professionals support one another in addressing and dealing with intimate partner violence (Sundborg et al. 2012).

There are a number of limitations in the present study that bear mentioning. Most importantly, the nature of the case study did not enable us to evaluate whether the activities induced mobilization for social change in the long term (Lindén 2009). In this respect, instead of redefining the problem of violence and chancing gender dynamics (Dominelli 1995), the main accomplishment of the project was to provide ways to address the violence more comprehensively in the local contexts. Also, the methods used were strongly related to the sociocultural contexts that engendered violence in the urban and rural settings. However, the findings can be utilized for improving feminist community work practices in the prevention of violence against women for instance by organizing pop-up restaurants or using arts to effect change in the social reality of women. Even though our study highlights the importance of community work in preventing the violence, the approach may obscure women’s individual experiences of it. Thus, case work and specialist services are needed in helping the individual victims of the violence.

**Conclusion**

Our study shows that feminist community work may provide a significant contribution to the prevention of violence against women and raising public awareness of it. To change the prevailing social norms concerning the violence requires a variety of community-based methods, as well as viewing the violence and its prevention from a feminist perspective, where reality and knowledge are considered manifold (e.g. Popple 2015). Moreover, rather than being dependent on specialist services, action against the violence belongs to all citizens. Community work in preventing violence against women requires a robust theoretical framework that guides theoretically sound policies and service system responses while enabling all the relevant parties to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon and to go beyond individual assumptions (see Mattsson 2014).

**Note**

1. The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters is a nationwide child welfare organization that helps children and families in difficult and insecure situations and prevents domestic violence. It is the most important professional actor in developing services and preventing violence against women and children in Finland. https://ensijaturvakotienliitto.fi/en/

**Acknowledgments**

We wish to thank the community workers who participated in the interviews and conscientiously gathered all the case study material. We also extend our gratitude to the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters for their research collaboration.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). The study was supported by the Academy of Finland (308470).
ORCID

Anna Nikupeteri http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3897-4834
Merja Laitinen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9418-5004

References

Council of Europe (2011) Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Council of Europe Treaty Series. No. 210 Accessed 29 October 2021. :. https://rm.coe.int/168008482e

Dominelli, L. 1995. “Women in the Community: Feminist Principles and Organising Community Work.” Community Development Journal 30 (2): 133–143. doi:10.1093/cdj/30.2.133.

Dominelli, L. 2002. Feminist Social Work Theory and Practice. UK: Macmillan Education.

Dominelli, L. 2006. Women and Community Action. Revised. 2nd ed. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ellsberg, M., D. J. Arango, M. Morton, F. Gennari, S. Kiplesund, M. Contreras, and C. Watts. 2015. “Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls: What Does the Evidence Say?” The Lancet, Series on Violence against Women and Girls 385 (9977): 1555–1566. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61703-7.

Emejulu, A. 2011. “Re-theorising Feminist Community Development: Towards a Radical Democratic Citizenship.” Community Development Journal 46 (3): 378–390. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsr032.

Eriksson, M., M. Hester, S. Keskinen, and K. Pringle, eds. 2005. Tackling Men’s Violence in Families: Nordic Issues and Dilemmas. Bristol: Policy Press.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2014. Violence against Women: An EU-wide Survey. Main Results. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union Accessed 29 October 2021. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf

Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). “The Ethical Principles of Research with Human Participants and Ethical Review in the Human Sciences in Finland.” Publications of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 3/2019. Helsinki: Finnish National Board on Research integrity Accessed 29 October 2021. https://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/Ihmistieteiden_eettisen_ennakkoarvioinnin_ohje_2019.pdf

Gamble, D. N., and M. Weil. 2010. Community Practice Skills: Local to Global Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press.

García-Moreno, C., C. Zimmermann, A. Morris-Gehring, L. Heise, A. Amin, N. Abrahams, O. Montoya, P. Bhate-Deosthali, N. Kilonzo, and C. Watts. 2015. “Addressing Violence against Women: A Call to Action.” The Lancet 385 (9978): 1685–1695. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61830-4.

GREVIO (2019). “Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.” GREVIO’s (Baseline) Evaluation report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Finland: Council of Europe Accessed 29 October 2021. https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-on-finland/168097129d

Gutierrez, L. M., and L. M. Gant. 2018. “Community Practice in Social Work: Reflections on Its First Century and Directions for the Future.” Social Service Review 92 (4): 617–646. doi:10.1086/701640.

Hague, G., and S. Bridge. 2008. “Inching Forward on Domestic Violence: The ‘Coordinated Community Response’ and Putting It in Practice in Cheshire.” Journal of Gender Studies 17 (3): 185–199. doi:10.1080/09589230802204134.

Haq, J., and R. Lewis. 2014. “The Violence of Community? Conceptualizations of ‘Community’ in Responses to Intimate Partner Abuse.” Community Development Journal 49 (3): 373–389. doi:10.1093/cdj/bst041.

Harrikari, T., P.-L. Rauhala, and E. Virokannas, eds. 2014. Social Change and Social Work. The Changing Societal Conditions of Social Work in Time and Place. Farnham: Ashgate.

Heisecke, K. 2014. “Raising Awareness of Violence against Women: Article 13 of the Istanbul Convention.” In A Collection of Papers on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Strasbourg: Council of Europe . Accessed 29 October 2021 https://rm.coe.int/168046e1f1

Hokkanen, L., Nikupeteri, A., Laitinen, M., and Vasari, P. 2017 Individual, Group and Organised Experiential Expertise in Recovery from Intimate Partner Violence and Mental Health Problems in Finland The British Journal of Social Work 47 4 1147–1165 https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw074

Husso, M., T. Virkki, M. Notko, J. Holma, A. Laitila, and M. Mantysaari. 2012. “Making Sense of Domestic Violence Intervention in Professional Health Care.” Health & Social Care in the Community 20 (4): 347–355. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2524.2011.01034.x.

Hutchinson, G. S. 2009. “The Mandate for Community Work in the Nordic Welfare States.” In Community Work in the Nordic Countries – New Trends, edited by G. S. Hutchinson, 15–37. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
Juhila, K., S. Raitakari, and C. H. Löfstrand. 2017. “Responsibilisation in Governmentality Literature.” In Responsibilities at the Margins of Welfare Services, edited by K. Juhila, S. Raitakari, and C. H. Hall, 22–48. London and New York: Routledge.

Koutra, K. 2015. “Community Development: A Challenging Strategy for Social Capital, Health Promotion, and Community Social Work.” In Social Capital: Global Perspectives, Management Strategies and Effectiveness, edited by C. D. Johnson, 1–17. Nova: Economic Issues, Problems and Perspectives Series, Chapter 9.

Kvale, S. 2007. Doing Interviews. London: Sage.

Ledwith, M. 2011. Community Development. A Critical Approach. 2nd ed. Bristol: Policy Press.

Lindén, K. 2009. “Community Work: Integration or Mobilisation.” In Community Work in the Nordic Countries – New Trends, edited by G. S. Hutchinson, 168–182. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Lombard, N., and L. McMillan. 2013. “Taking Stock: Theory and Practice in Violence against Women.” In Violence against Women: Current Theory and Practice in Domestic Abuse, Sexual Violence and Exploitation, edited by N. Lombard and L. McMillan, 233–244. Research Highlights 56. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Mattsson, T. 2014. “Intersectionality as a Useful Tool: Anti-oppressive Social Work and Critical Reflection.” Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work 29 (1): 8–17. doi:10.1177/0886109913510659.

Ogunsiji, O., and E. Clisdel. 2017. “Intimate Partner Violence Prevention and Reduction: A Review of Literature.” Health Care for Women International 38 (5): 439–462. doi:10.1080/07399332.2017.1289212.

Popple, K. 2015. Analysing Community Work. Theory and Practice. 2nd ed. London: Open University Press.

Rothman, J. 1995. “Approaches to Community Intervention.” In Strategies of Community Intervention, edited by J. Rothman, J. L. Erlich, and J. E. Tropman, 26–63. 5th ed. Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers.

Sjöberg, S., M. Többe-Schukalla, S. Singh, and K. H. Martinus. 2018. “Community Work in Germany and Sweden in Context of Changing Welfare Models.” International Social Work 61 (4): 553–570. doi:10.1177/0020872816666662.

Stake, R. E. 1995. The Art of Case Study Research. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Sundborg, E. M., N. Saleh-Stattin, P. Wändell, and L. Törnkvist. 2012. “Nurses’ Preparedness to Care for Women Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: A Quantitative Study in Primary Health Care.” BMC Nursing 11: 1. doi:10.1186/1472-6955-11-1.

Turell, S., M. Herrmann, G. Hollander, and C. Galletly. 2012. “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Communities’ Readiness for Intimate Partner Violence Prevention.” Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services 24 (3): 289–310. doi:10.1080/10538720.2012.697797.

Welsh, P. 2010. “Community Development: A Gendered Activism? the Masculinities Question”. Community Development Journal 45 (3): 297–306. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsq023.