

Shelter in a Storm

Revitalizing Feminism in Neoliberal Ontario

CASEY READY



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Preface

I stood in front of the YWCA¹ and tried to comprehend the news. The Harris government had just cut funding for the YWCA's entire community development and advocacy programs in one fell swoop, and reduced funding for shelter and counselling programs for women escaping abuse. Following soon after the 21.6-percent cut to social assistance, this would devastate the lives of many of the women served by the YWCA. It delivered the message that the recently elected Harris government intended to introduce policies that would hurt women, a direction that became all too clear in months to come. As I heard this news, I felt sick. The YWCA was central to the well-being and safety of women. In the past, it may have been able to soften the blow of cuts to government funding. The YWCAs were resilient and deeply committed to the women they served; they held strong feminist agendas empowering this commitment. I was afraid it would be different this time: funding cuts would be deeper, and the impact of policy changes more insidious and harder to resist.

My interest in the research for this book grew out of my own experience of the negative impact of the Harris government's policies on women, people living in poverty, and community-based social services. I witnessed effects of these changes personally through my work as the executive director of three non-profit agencies and as an advocate, volunteer, consultant, facilitator, researcher, funder, and community partner with dozens of other

¹ References to YWCA and YW are used interchangeably in this document to refer to the Young Women's Christian Association.

such organizations. Funding cuts immediately followed the 1995 election of the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government, and I watched with growing anger as organizations lost funding for valuable programs, struggled to maintain services, lost services, or closed completely due to these cuts.

Changes created by the Harris government not only angered me; they also took me by surprise. I was forced to learn quickly that the shift to this new government marked the creation of a new “culture of tolerance for inequality” (Wiegers 2002, 86). With hindsight, this direction is clear, but at the time I struggled with shock and questions. Who was this government and how did they get elected? Who supported this devastation? How could so many people allow and accept increasing poverty, homelessness, violence against women, marginalization, and exclusion? Who supported and voted for a government that would do this?

Yet I kept working in the non-profit sector. When the Harris government came to power, I was the executive director of the United Way in my community. I became involved in local groups that monitored and advocated against the funding cuts and shifting policies. In the middle of the first term of the Harris government, I left the United Way to become the executive director of the local social planning council. This role gave me greater latitude to examine and speak out against the cuts and their impact. It also increased my frustration as I witnessed valuable advocacy being ignored and dismissed by the Harris government. While I valued the need for and importance of advocacy, the Harris government’s powerful and seemingly relentless assault on advocacy and lobby efforts was discouraging. I didn’t want to admit it, but I was burning out.

In 2001, I once again switched jobs, this time to become the executive director of a multi-service agency offering direct services for people living and dealing with issues such as poverty, housing insecurity and homelessness, violence against women, unemployment and underemployment, personal stress, and social exclusion. I felt that getting closer to direct services would offer spaces for me to work more positively to develop the best services possible in the negative funding environment; I also hoped that the connection to direct services would provide platforms for advocacy. In this role, I gained a new and disturbing understanding of the extent of the Harris government’s policies and their impact on women, people

marginalized in society, and the social welfare state. The combination of my roles in funding, research, advocacy, and direct services gave me multiple vantage points from which to view the effects of this government, yet I still could not completely put together, or believe, what was going on. It wasn't that I didn't see the depth of the cuts or witness and feel their impact, but I struggled to understand how this government got away with such devastation.

My frustration led me to a long and valuable journey over more than eight years as I studied these issues and completed the research for this book. Even I am amazed I entered, let alone completed, this research. I wanted to study, understand, and do something about the changes I experienced. In particular, I sought to uncover the ways in which the policies of the Harris government attempted to erase the voices of women and force women to live with increasing poverty, violence, hunger, and homelessness.

When I initiated my research plans in 2004, the Harris government was the subject of much study for many academics and activists, and its policies and their effects were gradually well documented. As my work progressed in the following years, it became more interesting and relevant for me to examine the policies of Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government, which replaced the Harris government in 2003. McGuinty's Liberals promised to "reinvest" in many of the programs cut by the Harris government, but these promises increasingly turned out to be hollow. I experienced this shift personally through my involvement in a direct service agency at the time the McGuinty government took power. Like others, I was initially optimistic and hopeful that this new government would undo much of the damage caused by the Harris government. I witnessed the government's friendlier connections with the non-profit sector and a more positive attitude to people living in poverty. Yet as the policies of the McGuinty government took shape, my experience was that they created new, more subtle, and, in many ways, more dangerous impacts. Outwardly, the policies of this government appeared to be more supportive, yet they did little to address the poverty and marginalization of women and did much to control and weaken non-profit organizations working to empower women. I was discouraged again and recall feeling that I would rather have "needles in my eyes" than have to witness and endure the policies and controls of this government while being unable to openly respond or resist.

This book studies the violence-against-women (VAW) policies of the McGuinty government in its first term and the beginning of its second term (from 2003 to 2008) and how these policies affected the feminist work of three YWCA organizations. It examines how neoliberal policies that were initiated by the Ontario government under Progressive Conservative premier Mike Harris continued under Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government during this time, and how these policies affected the capacity of the three YWCAs to implement a feminist agenda in their VAW work.

My research included questions I asked staff, volunteers, and clients at the three YWCAs about how their YWCA defined its work with women, followed by more specific questions about whether their YWCA identified its work as having a “feminist agenda” and, if it did, how this was defined. I also asked if their YWCA worked in ways they would define as *not* being feminist.² The term “feminist agenda” in this study refers to the idea that the purpose and actions of the YWCAs were informed by goals the staff, volunteers, and clients would define as feminist. Questions related to this are central to my research: they probe how representatives of the three YWCAs perceived their organizations as having a feminist agenda or not, and what this meant to them and their work with women.

The time frame chosen, from 2003 to 2008, builds on the now extensive scholarly research on the impact of neoliberal policies that occurred from 1995 to 2003, the years when the government was led by Progressive Conservative premiers Mike Harris and Ernie Eves.³ I examine how the YWCAs experienced the McGuinty government as a continuation of, and a departure from, the neoliberal policies of the Harris government. This research is based on a literature review, an examination of publicly available Ontario government publications and selected documents of the three

2 Actual wording of these questions was: “How does your YWCA define its work with women? In this study, feminism is defined broadly as representing ‘a movement to end sexist oppression’ (bell hooks). Does your YWCA identify its work as having a feminist agenda, and if so, what does this mean? Are there ways that the YWCA does its work that you would not define as feminist?” (See the questionnaires for this research in the appendices of this book).

3 Following this, the Harris–Eves government will be referred to as the Harris government.

YWCA's and VAW activists, and interviews and focus groups with forty-one people, including clients, volunteers, and staff of the YWCA's, as well as representatives of the Ontario government and of activist groups.

In spite of anticipation and “great hopes” (comment from staff focus group)⁴ that things would change with the 2003 election of the McGuinty Liberal government, experience indicates that neoliberalism persisted and that this government’s policies continued to be a challenge to women’s organizations and to women. One of the activists interviewed commented that the effects of the Harris government “lingered on” into the McGuinty term. Her use of this phrase referred to the ongoing impact of the attitudes and policies of the Harris government. My findings suggest that it was not only the impact of the Harris government policies that continued, but that, in fact, neoliberalism lingered on, as the McGuinty government enacted policies that continued to represent neoliberal beliefs.

My study reveals a wide-ranging awareness of neoliberal policies and their impact, but a lack of understanding of neoliberalism as a term and as a broad-reaching project. While I define and examine neoliberalism in depth in the chapters that follow, it may be helpful to comment briefly on some of the confusion I encountered about the concept in the course of my research. As I spoke with people at the YWCA's and even as I presented preliminary findings at academic conferences, people often took me aside to say they didn't really understand the term “neoliberalism.” Some who knew the types of policies referred to as neoliberal questioned why they had this name, as, in their view, these policies were neither “new” nor “liberal.”

I found that responding directly to these questions in a personal way, without academic jargon, helped bridge this gap in understanding. My responses would include some of the following general points. In Canada, neoliberalism sounds like it refers to the Liberal party, which can be confusing. It actually comes from political theories about classic “liberalism,” which refer to individual freedom and freedom of the market and are what we might consider to be very conservative. The preface “neo”

4 References to direct quotes from participants in this study are cited as comments from staff focus groups, staff interviews, client focus groups, executive director interviews, volunteer interviews, board president interviews, activist interviews, and funder interviews.

refers to a return to that form of liberalism. Neoliberalism includes a shift to a stronger focus on free capital markets, entrepreneurialism, and the belief that individuals should be responsible for themselves, while moving away from commitments to collective welfare rights. As such, the cuts we associate with the Harris government were neoliberal. Reducing taxes, cutting government funding to a minimum, expecting people to be responsible for taking care of themselves and their own families, and shifting funding from women and adults, who in neoliberal theory should take care of themselves, to children, who are seen to be not yet responsible and are also seen as an investment in the future, all represent neoliberal policies.

I believe that the near invisibility of neoliberalism benefits those who profit from it, and the lack of general awareness of the project of neoliberalism was the result of intentional efforts to keep its goals and methods hidden. Power that is kept invisible, whose existence or importance is denied, can render systemic discriminations invisible (Hartsock 1996, 41). Dismantling hidden powers, such as classism and sexism, is difficult, reinforcing the notion that “privilege cannot work if it is to be noted and argued for” (Spelman 1998, 76). The neoliberal project conjures the image of a powerful force, sometimes visible but often not, connected and fortified by hidden and extremely resilient roots.

My research calls for a rekindling of strong, autonomous feminist agendas and organizing to resist neoliberalism. One of the participants in my study commented on how important it was for feminists to be “still speaking out” against the negative effects of neoliberal policies and, in particular, the impact of these policies on women (staff interview). This call for feminist resistance, coming from the voices of the people I interviewed, connects my findings with decades of feminist research and advocacy on violence against women and the complicated relationship between the battered women’s movement and the state. It reinforces complex claims by some feminist scholars that VAW work drifted away from its feminist roots as activists formed and maintained relationships with the state and the criminal justice system. In order to gain state recognition and resources, these activists increasingly presented the issue of violence against women as an individual problem, rather than a systemic one. It could then be treated or resolved “without considering the issues of women’s

equality and gender insubordination. In this way, the concept of battering has been unmoored from its historical roots of gender subordination and feminist action” (Schneider 2000, 27–28).

Services for women and action on issues of violence against women became distanced, separated, or, as aptly stated by Schneider, “unmoored” (28) from feminism as those providing the services or protesting violence against women entered into complicated relationships with the state. As alliances were formed between feminist VAW advocates and conservative law-and-order policy makers, “domestic violence reformers actually strayed from the underlying values of the feminist movement” (Gruber 2007, 748). Such alliances, representing links between feminist and neoliberal interests in addressing issues of violence against women, were “tenuous at best” (758). With them, the feminist movement was led “awry” (824), as the focus of VAW work shifted toward the individual and away from the social structures that subordinate and marginalize women (830).

My research reinforces Aya Gruber’s call for feminists to “reclaim a movement, to reform a vision, and to resituate ourselves within a feminist politic that refuses to sacrifice women’s experience and autonomy to the prerogatives of the state” (824). At the same time, it recognizes subtleties in this and the value of a nuanced approach, as feminists are called to “critically examine the murky middle ground between total rejection and total endorsement of working with the state” (Schneider 2000, 196).

The key finding of an international study examining VAW policies and actions by governments described as neoliberal or new-neoliberal was that strong, autonomous feminist movements were needed to bring issues of violence against women to the attention of governments and to advocate successfully for government action (Htun and Weldon 2012, 553). This study examined seventy countries, including Canada, from 1975 to 2005. It concluded that it is essential that women’s movements be clearly identified as “feminist” rather than as general women’s movements, that they be strong enough to mobilize and influence political change, and that they be truly autonomous, or independent of the state and of institutions, in order to create the political will required for governments to combat violence against women through progressive social policies (551–54).

Shelter in a Storm reinforces the power of feminist movements to resist neoliberal policies that are dangerous to women. It invigorates the call to

revitalize and strengthen feminist movements that will name, negotiate, and contest the negative effects of neoliberalism on women, and it challenges such movements to be feminist, strong, and autonomous. Further, it promotes the importance of feminist advocacy and the value of the YWCAs to be “still speaking out” against the effects of neoliberalism on their programs and on the women they serve.

The forty-one people interviewed for this study shared their experiences of the impact of funding and policy cuts and changes enacted by the Harris and McGuinty governments. In research for this study, I examined scholarly and theoretical perspectives on violence against women, government policies, neoliberalism, feminism, and the roles of organizations such as the YWCA in working with women who have experienced violence. My research includes assessments of government and activist reports detailing and critiquing “facts” relevant to VAW funding and policy changes. It also examines what the people I interviewed told me about the VAW work of the YWCA and how the YWs were affected by, and resistant to, the government funding and policies of the Harris and McGuinty governments.

There is a risk that I approach this study in ways that are too formal, too careful, too academic, or too impersonal. To counter this, I present my research and findings from a more personal viewpoint, bringing myself deeper into it and being “reflexive” about it (Naples 2003, 42), leading me to comment on what I personally feel is most profound about it. My impression is that the people I spoke with were remarkably dedicated, informed, committed, and feminist in their views; I also perceive that they were quite polite. They work hard every day to assist women who have experienced violence. They are committed to this work. They are politically savvy, exceptionally smart, and extremely resourceful. Their work, day to day and year to year, involves fighting and overcoming oppression, sexism, and adversity. They told me that they respond to barriers facing the women they serve with creativity and resiliency. Obstacles put in their way do not stop them; instead, such obstacles make them “mad” and even “more stubborn” (executive director interview). They recognize and understand oppression and the “oppressors’ tactics” (activist interview) and know how to mobilize resources and rise to challenges against these tactics. They have achieved much in their VAW work and are justifiably proud of their

achievements. They share this pride with many women who collaborate with them in their goals and work.

As I entered this research, I gained access to people and information at the three YWCAs, and I was received with a high level of openness, credibility, and trust. My involvement in community-based social services spanned the entire period of my research. From the viewpoint of non-profit organizations, I witnessed the changes made by both the Harris and McGuinty governments. I believe that my experience in direct service work and advocacy helped me gain access to the people I interviewed at the three YWCAs. I am honoured that the people I wished to speak with made themselves available to me and spoke openly and honestly with me. It is now my challenge to reflect on their words and carefully represent their comments on the impact of neoliberal policies on the feminist work of their YWCAs, and on ways their feminist agendas empowered them to negotiate with and resist neoliberal governments.

The people I interviewed were adamant about the negative impact of the Harris government on their VAW programs and on the women they served. They were also unanimous in reporting “relief” at the improvements brought about by the McGuinty government, while expressing concerns about the ongoing challenges women faced in terms of violence against women and poverty. I report and reflect on their comments with great care and respect, and with the hope that their concerns will bring new, critical attention to feminist action on these issues.

1

Neoliberalism

THE PROJECT THAT HAS NO NAME

This book examines how the violence-against-women (VAW) services of three YWCA organizations in Ontario experienced the policies of the neoliberal Harris government and the “new-neoliberal” McGuinty government: how they were affected by these policies and also how they fought back and resisted them. Its findings are specific to the programs and organizations studied, yet they can also be seen as characteristic of the experiences of many women’s and community services and organizations in the non-profit sector. This study adds to a now well-established body of work on the funding policies and funding cuts of the Harris government, and, in particular, the impact of these policies on women. It contributes to a growing body of research on the policies and impacts of new-neoliberal governments as it specifically explores how the McGuinty government’s funding of YWCA VAW programs continued, in a different form, the neoliberal policies that had been pursued by the Harris government.

A focus of this research is to understand how the YWCAs responded to the policies and funding cutbacks of these two governments, including the ways in which their philosophies of VAW service changed, and how they found spaces for resistance, rethinking, and re-visioning in response to the policies of these governments. Ultimately, this study examines the impact of neoliberalism on the feminist agendas of the YWCAs, and the power of these feminist agendas to resist and respond to neoliberalism.

Three YWCAs were selected for this study in order to provide specific information from communities of different sizes and locations within Ontario. Choosing three organizations provided opportunities to compare

common information, trends, and differences in their relationships with government. A multi-site approach reduced the likelihood that a single organization's particular culture or programs would dominate the study. The decision to limit this research to three organizations also reflected limitations of time and resources.

Neoliberalism values and privileges individual freedom and the primacy of the market over collective claims to welfare, and holds that the role of the state is to protect and nourish market growth and entrepreneurialism. Political theorist David Harvey has claimed that neoliberalism is a project to restore class power based on the belief that people will best achieve well-being through a political system valuing individualism, free markets, and a reduced role of the state (Harvey 2005, 2, 16).

Key tenets of neoliberalism are valuing the primacy of the market, privileging individualism and individual freedom, limiting the size of the state, and focusing the state's role on the protection of the market (Harvey 2005). Scholars define neoliberalism in differing ways, considering it to be an ideology, a project, a form of governance, and a series of related policies and programs (see Braedley and Luxton [2010] for multiple descriptions and understandings of neoliberalism). In this study, the notion of neoliberalism as a *project* is held closely, while also recognizing it takes other forms. Defining neoliberalism as a project acknowledges it as a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted movement aimed at transforming social structures and restoring class power. This study explores changes as one form of neoliberalism is "rolled out" by the Harris government and another form is "rolled back" by the McGuinty government, and as both forms are contested and altered. These changes can be seen as "a story of the never-inevitable ascendancy of neoliberalization, as an open-ended and contradictory process of politically assisted market rule" (Peck 2010, xi).

My research reveals a wide-ranging awareness of neoliberal policies and their impact, but a lack of understanding of neoliberalism as a term and as a broad-reaching project. This is an important finding, as I contend that the lack of awareness of the project of neoliberalism was intentionally created and that neoliberalism's near invisibility benefits those who profit from its policies. This follows Nancy Hartsock's contention that power that is kept invisible, denied as existing, or denied as being important can render systemic discrimination invisible, enabling and supporting vagaries such

as colonialism, slavery, and Western patriarchy (Hartsock 1996, 41). It furthers Judith Spelman's warning of the difficulties of dismantling the hidden power of sexism and classism and her argument that privilege "cannot work if it is to be noted and argued for" (Spelman 1998, 76). Spelman defines privilege as a "hardy shrub" (166). Considering these claims in relation to neoliberalism's project to restore class power brings to mind an image of a powerful force, sometimes visible, fed by a system of hidden and extremely resilient roots.

Changes made through neoliberalism represent a "tectonic shift in public policy" (Cossman and Fudge 2002, 3), involving privatization, deregulation, marketization, re-regulation, selling government operations for profit, and commercializing government services. They have profoundly affected the social welfare state as they have led to a "fundamental retrenchment of the state in social reproduction, with families and charities left to shoulder a greater part of the burden of caring for people" (171). Neoliberal policies inordinately affect the lives of women, substantiating arguments that neoliberalism is "a decidedly gendered process" (Brodie 1995, 19), and that the policies which shift responsibilities from the state to the market and the family, and which pressure women to take on unpaid and underpaid caregiving roles as social services are cut, are "explicitly gendered" (Bezanson 2006, 36).

Neoliberalism rejects socialism and collectivism as it favours competition and policies that "unleash and 'liberate' the processes of capital accumulation" (Braedley and Luxton 2010, 9, 3). It is now seen to represent the "hegemonic political thought," as its tenets are widely accepted as common sense and natural, yet it "is not the only political thought" (10). It can be, and is, questioned and countered. By choosing to focus on monetary and quantifiable impacts of neoliberal policies, proponents of neoliberalism neglect analysis of its effects on markets, states, families, and communities (11).

Neoliberalism forces women to accept lower wages and increased requirements to carry out the unpaid work of social reproduction while it promotes the "vested interests of elite men" and maintains inequalities through gendered divisions of labour, male privilege, and wealth (12–15). Belief in the inescapable nature of neoliberalism and the notion that it is common sense, natural, normal, and unavoidable enhances its power and creates the feeling

that nothing can be done to counter it. These views are deliberately constructed to produce passive resignation and to limit resistance (164).

There is a growing body of research on the differences and similarities between neoliberal and “new-neoliberal” governments. (For key works on the shift to new-neoliberalism in Ontario see Collier 2008, 2009, 2010; Hackworth and Moriah 2006; Lightman, Herd, and Mitchell 2006; and Mitchell, Lightman, and Herd 2007. For broader studies on new-neoliberalism see Dobrowolsky 2002, 2009; Jenson 2007, 2008; and Lister 2006.) I use the term new-neoliberal for governments that are variously defined as Third Way, social investment, post-neoliberal, contingent neoliberal, roll-out neoliberal, and the LEGO model. The latter is named to reflect new-neoliberal states’ focus on children and on policies that invest in the future, and also to represent how these states carefully reinvest funds in specific and targeted ways likened to the use of building blocks (Jenson 2008). New-neoliberal governments present themselves differently from their neoliberal predecessors, offering programs in ways not supported by the earlier neoliberal regimes.

The term new-neoliberal suggests continuation and change as new-neoliberal states converge with and diverge from key neoliberal assumptions (Jenson 2008, 5). They differentiate themselves from their neoliberal predecessors by investing in select social programs: they spend, but in ways that carefully match their values and agendas and are “costed, calculated and highly strategic” (Dobrowolsky 2002, 44). New-neoliberal governments take more active roles than neoliberal states as they re-embed the state in chosen issues. They strive for “efficiency and effectiveness,” seeking to “spend wisely” and use their resources selectively (49). New-neoliberal beliefs hold that conditions in the social welfare state will improve if the state adopts management principles proven to work in the private sector (Pierson 2007, 180–81). This approach is defined as the “new public management” system or “new public managerialism” (D.E. Smith 2005), often shortened to “NPM” (see Pierson 2007; Mahon 2005 for descriptions of NPM). It introduces decentralized decision-making combined with a reliance on performance indicators, outcome measures, audits, and technology to monitor accountability for use of state funds (Pierson 2007).

Priorities chosen by new-neoliberal states include investing in the future through children and youth, which takes the form, for example, of initiatives

addressing child poverty and youth crime, while moving away from investment in adults and, in particular, women (Dobrowolsky 2002, 2009; Jenson 2007, 2008; Lister, 2006; Mahon 2005). Children are the “ideal subjects” for social investment: they are deserving, race-less, and gender-less and offer hope for the future (Dobrowolsky 2002, 45). Investing in the future moves social investment states away from addressing immediate inequalities, such as the poverty of women, and toward holding more concern for the experiences of people over a lifetime or life course (Pierson 2007, 236–37). Attention is taken away from addressing poverty and directed to employment and employment-related training. These changes in priorities are relevant to my research on the YWCAs and the impact on the women they serve of the shift from the neoliberal Harris government to the new-neoliberalism of the McGuinty government. There are significant risks for women as social investment states focus on children. Parents are increasingly viewed as providers and workers and are expected to engage in paid work to support their children. These views were evident in the development of child tax credits that favoured working parents and were also evident in the Ontario government’s choice (Government of Canada 2005) to deduct, or “claw back,” these benefits from parents on social assistance.

There is “a need to worry” about the multiple dangers created for women by the policies of social investment states (Jenson 2008, 138), and a need to raise questions about the disappearance of women in public policy (Brodie and Bakker 2008). Through their focus on children and the future, new-neoliberal states pay less attention to the immediate needs of women and their families. As the social investment state “writes women out and folds gender in” (Jenson 2008), it erases the visibility of inequalities faced by women. The social investment state’s focus on children and gender, rather than on women, has created a “declining attention to gender equality” and a “significant silence” regarding inequalities in women’s employment and wage rates (138, 142). Attention to child poverty and children’s needs through policies such as the National Child Benefit represent the “disappearance of the gendered subject of social policy” as the child is “recast” as the focus of concern (Brodie and Bakker 2008, 76). Textual analysis of Speeches from the Throne in Ontario in the 1980s and 1990s reveals “the progressive disappearance of women as the subject of social policy interventions” (77).

While my research distinguishes “neoliberalism” from “new-neoliberalism,” they are both forms of neoliberalism and share many features in common. The “new” version is an extension, with both similarities and differences, to neoliberalism. Where I am highlighting their distinct characteristics, I refer separately to neoliberalism and new-neoliberalism. However, in many cases I am making points related to the commonalities between these two versions of neoliberalism. In these situations, I refer to them collectively as neoliberalism.

Key components of the Canadian social welfare state, which expanded significantly in the post-World War Two era, have been dismantled through neoliberal policies since the mid-1970s. Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton (2010) claim that “neoliberalism is not advancing social justice or equality, but is, instead, re-inscribing, intensifying, and creating injustices and inequality” (6). In particular, it is creating and extending the poverty of women (13) and of people marginalized by race (16). By valuing individual responsibility, neoliberalism fosters blame-the-victim thinking and reduces awareness of systemic causes of inequalities (Luxton 2010, 172). Through neoliberal policies, women have lower wages and more unpaid work than men, as the interests of elite men and gendered divisions of labour and male privilege are maintained and promoted (15).

Poverty rates in Ontario have grown steadily during neoliberal and new-neoliberal times. The percentage of Ontarians living below the Low Income Measure – After Tax increased steadily from a low of 8.7 percent in 1989 to 9.9 percent in 1999 and 13.1 percent in 2009 (Ontario Common Front 2012, 17). Measures of income inequality show similar trends. The Gini Co-efficient measures inequality based on after-tax income, with a measure of “0” representing no inequality and “1” representing total inequality (19). Based on this measure, inequality in Ontario increased by 17.2 percent from 1981 to 2010 (19). This marked the largest increase in inequality across Canada, where the average was an increase of 13.2 percent during the same time (19). Ontario’s Gini Co-efficient, at 0.396, was the second highest in Canada in 2010 (19).

Experiences of poverty are even greater for women and racialized Ontarians (Wallis and Kwok 2008). In 1996, 37.6 percent of racialized groups in Canadian urban centres experienced poverty, compared to 20.9 percent of the rest of the population; and racialized women, in particular,

experienced low-paying, precarious, part-time, contract work with little or no benefits (14). While pay-equity legislation has contributed to shrinking the income gap between men and women in Ontario from 38 percent in 1988 to 29 percent in 2012, women were still earning only 71 cents to every dollar earned by men in 2012 (Ontario Common Front 2012, 19). Racialized people earned 81.4 cents to every dollar earned by non-racialized people in 2011, while the poverty rate for Aboriginal people was 12.6 percent, much higher than that of the non-Aboriginal workforce (22).

A key goal in my research is to better understand how neoliberal policies have impacted women, and how feminist values and beliefs offered a platform from which to negotiate and resist the negative effects of neoliberalism on women. A significant finding that emerged almost incidentally in my research is the lack of common awareness of neoliberalism as a project. The people I interviewed were knowledgeable, politically astute, and active advocates for women. They spoke incisively about the Harris and McGuinty governments and about feminism, violence against women, homelessness, patriarchy, sexism, poverty, and the growing and gendered gap between the rich and the poor. But, with few exceptions, they did not know or commonly use the term “neoliberalism,” even as they understood its implications. This is surprising, as neoliberalism has affected almost every aspect of our lives for the past thirty years. Tenets of neoliberalism are recognized and identified with certain political figures, such as Margaret Thatcher or Mike Harris, but as a project it is almost invisible. The term “neoliberalism” is not commonly used publicly. To me, this strengthens the power held by neoliberalism. By being presented as common sense rather than as an intentional project, neoliberalism holds great hegemonic power; the sense that it is natural and not to be questioned also makes it more dangerous for women.

Even as it has been at the forefront of academic attention for decades, the project of neoliberalism is barely visible to the general public. Neoliberalism is complex and dynamic; it is not a single strategy, policy, or program but rather “a sprawling family of related policies” and “a large-scale historical *project* for the transformation of social structures and practices along market lines” (Braedley and Luxton 2010, 32–33, italics added). This complex, sprawling family of policies is at its best when it works under the radar, when it is not recognized as a whole and connected

project. As such, neoliberalism cultivates and thrives on an “air of inevitability” (31), on the belief that it cannot be stopped or changed. This myth is fed by claims that neoliberal policies are natural and needed, as in Margaret Thatcher’s mantra, “There is no alternative,” and the Harris government’s claims that the massive changes made by its neoliberal revolution were simply “common sense.” Neoliberalism’s near invisibility complements the notion that it is inevitable, natural, and unstoppable. As proponents of neoliberalism intentionally erase its visibility and the visibility of systemic issues, they cultivate passivity, reduce resistance, and generate significant challenges for those, including feminists, who advocate against it.

The Project That Has No Name

Betty Friedan unleashed a rallying call to women with her 1963 revelation of the “problem that has no name.” Friedan uncovered and named a pervasive and hidden problem that was “buried, unspoken of for many years”: the problem of women feeling “tired, trapped and bored” in their traditional roles (Friedan 1963, 3). With this call, she challenged the hegemonic and largely invisible powers of patriarchy and capitalism, powers that benefited and profited from being largely imperceptible as they frustrated and oppressed women. Friedan exposed a problem concealed from public view in the 1960s, unspoken but experienced by many. Naming it contributed to a revolution of change for women. While Friedan is appropriately critiqued for representing white, middle-class, second-wave, American feminist views, her work demonstrates the potency of an unnamed and almost invisible power and the possibilities for resistance in naming it.

Neoliberalism can be seen as “the *project* that has no name.” It is neither named nor well understood in public discourse, even as it is hegemonic and holds pervasive power over and influence on our day-to-day lives. As a highly gendered and primarily masculine project, neoliberalism conflicts with feminism and feminist values. Action is needed to name neoliberalism: to create awareness of its presence and powers, and to build understanding of the dangers posed to women in neoliberalism and in the tensions between neoliberalism and feminism.

While neoliberalism changed under the new-neoliberal or Third Way governments of the late 1990s and the 2000s, key tenets of it lingered on. Scholars studying new-neoliberal and Third Way governments include

Dobrowolsky [2002, 2009]; Collier [2008, 2010]; and Jenson [2007, 2008]). My research follows recent studies on the impact of new-neoliberalism on feminist VAW work, which warn of the need to look closely at the “finer details of state policy responses” (Collier 2008, 22) to uncover and understand the ways that government policies support, are neutral toward, or oppose a feminist approach in VAW work. Such studies contend that, on its own, funding for VAW work does not indicate support for feminist goals. Building on this, I examine specific cases by looking at how the YWCAs negotiated tensions between feminism and neoliberalism.

Criteria to select the three YWCAs for my study included that they be autonomous women’s organizations, rather than joint YMCA/YWCAs; that they operate VAW programs, including shelters for women who had experienced violence; and that they reflect diversity in geographic location and community size. Three YWCAs fitting these criteria were approached to be included in the study, with several others to be approached if any of the first three did not work out. As the first three accepted, the study continued with their involvement. The YWCAs selected remain anonymous in this study.

I coded and analyzed interview comments in relation to nine content areas: the Harris government, the McGuinty government, feminism, NGO/state relationships, funding, fundraising, advocacy, work, and professionalization. I also coded these comments according to the different interviews and focus groups I held with clients, staff, executive directors, presidents, activists, and government representatives. Additional research included analyzing documents from government sources, advocacy groups, and the YWCAs, including annual reports from the three YWCAs.

In total, forty-one people participated in the interviews and focus groups. I was successful in interviewing the executive directors of all three YWCAs, and two of the three volunteer presidents of the boards of directors. I held staff focus groups at all three locations, including two separate staff focus groups in one of the locations, interviewing a total of thirty-six staff. I succeeded in organizing client focus groups in all three locations, reaching seven clients. I was able to contact two representatives of activist groups as planned in my design. It was more difficult than anticipated to arrange interviews with the Ontario government staff members who were the local contacts for the YWCAs. When it was apparent that this would

not be possible at any of the locations, I was successful in locating one Ontario government employee in the violence-against-women policy branch of the Ministry of Community and Social Services for an interview.

All people involved in interviews and focus groups were asked the same questions about the feminist agenda of the YWCAs and the impact of the Harris and McGuinty governments on this agenda. My findings reflect the opinions of the participants at the time of the interviews and focus groups. The actual words of those participants are shown in quotations, indicating who made them (presidents, executive directors, staff, clients, government representatives, or activists). They are not identified by the particular YWCA they were associated with, or by the date of the interview or focus group, as these identifiers could reveal the location of the YWCA or the identity of the person interviewed.

This study draws on multiple frameworks, or lenses, to illuminate and make visible power relations that may be unclear or invisible if seen through only a single lens. These frameworks include theoretical understandings of the state; postmodern theories of governmentality and relations of ruling; research on neoliberalism and new-neoliberalism; feminist theory and research methodologies; research on violence against women; studies on the Canadian social welfare state and its relationship to the non-profit sector; and, information on the history of YWCAs and their feminist agendas in their violence against women work. These various frameworks shed different light on the study of the impact of new-neoliberal policies and funding on the feminist agenda of the YWCAs' VAW services.

An issue of concern prior to conducting this research was the possibility that the YWCAs under study would be reluctant to comment on the policies of the then current Ontario government, as it was one of their major funders. I addressed this concern by maintaining the anonymity of all research participants and of the locations of the YWCAs participating in the project. I further addressed it by limiting the end point of the research to the first term of the McGuinty government, from 2003 to 2007, so as not to incorporate current policies and funding practices. The end date was revised to include policies in 2008, the first year of McGuinty's second term, after I discovered a significant change in the government's funding policies at that time. I found that some participants wanted to talk about

policies and funding relationships that were current at the time of their interviews; where relevant and appropriate, these are included in my findings with notations of their dates.

Participants did not express reluctance to comment on policies of their current government. In part, this may reflect the fact that many of them experienced the current government much more positively compared to their experiences with the Harris government. The anonymity of the interviews and of the YWCA locations may also have played a role. What I was not able to judge was the extent to which participants may have framed their comments to avoid the disfavour of their current government. In some cases, this framing is suggested by the differing responses from representatives of the YWCAs compared to the responses of people from activist groups. I explore this possibility in my findings. However, there is no definitive way to determine the extent to which comments may have been affected by this concern, and this is clearly a limitation of the research.

Another potential limitation of my research is that its focus on the VAW work of the YWCAs does not necessarily represent VAW work in other organizations. The YWCAs are not the only organizations addressing violence against women or offering shelters to women who have experienced violence. I acknowledge differences between the YWCAs, whose VAW work is only part of their mandate, and organizations that focus solely on this work. The YWCAs often have a broader base of services, longer histories, and more resources than many agencies dedicated solely to VAW work. For these reasons, the YWCAs may be more resilient in the face of funding and policy challenges. Recognizing these differences, findings from this research will still hold value to all women's organizations, all organizations offering VAW services, and the broader non-profit sector.

Changes in the Canadian welfare state since World War Two, and, more particularly, in Ontario since 1995, are an important context to my research, as is a brief exploration of the history of Canadian YWCAs and how they defined and enacted feminism and feminist agendas in their work. My study of the YWCAs is limited to their VAW work, as this is an appropriate program area by which to examine the impact of neoliberalism and new-neoliberalism on their feminist agendas, while keeping the scope of my research manageable. I analyze information taken from YWCA annual reports, as well as from Ontario-wide government and activist documents

on VAW funding and policies, to differentiate the approach and initiatives of the neoliberal Harris government from those of the new-neoliberal McGuinty government.

I present the “great hopes” (comment from staff focus group) felt by many research participants in the shift from the Harris to the McGuinty government, and examine the extent to which these hopes were realized. Included in this discussion, I explore the pressures on the YWCAs to “be like everything” to the women they served during this time period (staff focus group). While VAW services received support as a priority of the McGuinty government, my findings show that few real changes were made to address women’s poverty or their need for other community supports such as housing, child care, and legal aid. Participants’ description of the YWCAs as a place of refuge brings to mind the image of the YWCAs as “lifeboats” offering shelter and essential services to women in the midst of a devastating storm caused by poverty and lack of affordable housing.

In [Chapter 6](#), I examine the relationship between the YWCAs and the Ontario government from 2003 to 2008 and show how it exemplifies the relationship between non-profit or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the state. Drawing on Katherine Scott’s (2003) depiction of this relationship as a deeply frayed rope about to break, I argue that the frayed rope offered by the Harris government became multiple tight strings as funds were reinserted in new ways by the McGuinty government. Funds reinvested in the YWCAs, for example, were attached to strings pulled tight by high levels of government regulation and accountability, and by tensions produced by resistance from the NGOs in response to these government policies of control.

Analysis of the YWCAs’ fundraising and partnerships, in [Chapter 7](#), offers a more specific look at the pressures created by neoliberalism and at the YWCAs’ resistance to these pressures, as they sought resources on behalf of women experiencing violence. Key to this is a critique of a successful and sometimes controversial fundraising event, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, which shows ways the YWCAs negotiated uneasy alliances between neoliberal and feminist goals in response to a growing and “desperate need to raise funds” (staff focus group). I examine how fundraising through events such as this supported, and inhibited, the feminist agendas of the YWCAs.

My research uncovers many such uneasy alliances between feminism and neoliberalism through the YWCAs and reveals how, in the words of a YWCA staff member, “feminism has had to get a whole lot more personal” (staff interview) in order for the YWCAs to address issues of violence against women in a neoliberal environment. By this, I believe the staff member meant that she would have to engage more personally with feminism to address the issues created by neoliberalism. This reinforces the notion of neoliberalism as the project that has no name, the dangers that the invisibility of neoliberalism creates for women, and the power feminist agendas bring to resisting and overcoming these dangers. Feminism and the feminist agendas of the YWCAs are powerful tools in naming, negotiating, and resisting neoliberalism’s negative effects on women.

The advocacy work of the YWCAs sheds light on the pressures they experienced from neoliberal governments and also on their strength and resiliency. Comments from my interviews and focus groups reveal an actual situation in which the Harris government threatened women’s groups involved in advocacy, claiming that they would have their funding cut if they didn’t stop criticizing the government. This is evidence that advocacy is central to the YWCAs and that, in spite of such threats, they were “still speaking out” (staff interview) on behalf of the women they served.