Deconstructing the role of gender and power in restorative approaches to child protection: Reimagining justice for children

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ABSTRACT

This article critically deconstructs the role of gender and power within restorative approaches to child protection, with the overarching aim of reimagining justice for children through a gender-sensitive lens. By applying a qualitative, exploratory research design, the study delves into the complexities of how gendered power dynamics shape the experiences of children, particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable groups, in restorative justice processes. A desktop study methodology was employed, systematically reviewing existing literature, policies, and case studies to analyze the intersections of gender, power, and justice in child protection frameworks. Thematic analysis of the data revealed key insights into how traditional restorative practices inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal norms and power imbalances, often marginalizing the voices of children, especially girls and gender-diverse individuals. The study also highlighted the challenges and opportunities of rethinking justice to create more inclusive, equitable systems that not only address harm but also transform the power structures that facilitate violence and exploitation. The findings offer critical perspectives on the potential for restorative justice to serve as a tool for empowerment, suggesting a transformative approach that goes beyond repair of harm to dismantling systemic inequities within child protection.

Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding child protection has evolved significantly, with a growing emphasis on restorative approaches that prioritize the needs and voices of children (Gal, 2011). This shift reflects a broader recognition of the limitations of traditional punitive systems, which often fail to address the underlying issues that contribute to harm (Kelly, 2018). However, as we explore these restorative frameworks, it is crucial to explore the intersections of gender and power that influence both the implementation of these approaches and the experiences of children within them. This study seeks to deconstruct the role of gender and power in restorative practices, ultimately reimagining justice for children in a way that is equitable and inclusive.

The intersection of gender and power dynamics plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of restorative approaches to child protection (Hodgson, 2022). According to Long, Manchanda, Dekker, Kraynov, Willson, Flores, and Rhodes (2022), restorative justice is rooted in the principles of accountability, healing, and community involvement. It seeks to repair harm by fostering dialogue between victims and offenders, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances surrounding the offense. While restorative approaches have shown promise in various contexts, they are not without challenges (Bukhari, 2024). The dynamics of gender and power play a critical role in shaping the experiences of children and families involved in these processes. For instance, societal norms and expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity can influence how individuals perceive justice, accountability, and the roles they are expected to play in restorative practices (Mohamed, 2021).

Moreover, historically child protection frameworks have often been influenced by patriarchal structures that prioritize certain voices over others leading to a disproportionate impact on marginalized groups (Williams, 2023). The restorative justice model, which emphasizes healing and accountability rather than punishment, presents an opportunity to challenge these power imbalances. However, without a critical examination of how gender influences experiences of justice, restorative approaches may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities (Evans & Vaandering, 2022). Additionally, the child protection system itself is often imbued with power imbalances that can exacerbate existing inequalities (Bywaters, Featherstone & Morris, 2019). Children from marginalized backgrounds, particularly those who are female or identified as LGBTQ+, face additional barriers in accessing justice and support (Kekana, Mudau, Munzhelele, Rakgwata, & Sikhitha, 2025).

Despite the potential benefits of restorative approaches to child protection, there remains a significant gap in literature regarding the interplay of gender and power within these frameworks (Sehmar, 2023). Many existing studies focus primarily on the mechanics of restorative justice without adequately addressing how these practices inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics or fail to account for the unique needs of diverse populations. This oversight led to a one-size-fits-all approach that does not consider the specific challenges faced by children based on their gender, cultural background, or social status (González & Buth, 2019).

This study is significant as it aims to fill the existing gap in research by providing a comprehensive analysis of how gender and power dynamics influence restorative approaches to child protection. By examining these factors, we can better understand the barriers that children face in accessing justice and support, ultimately leading to more effective and equitable practices. Additionally, this research has the potential to inform policymakers, practitioners, and advocates working within the child protection system. By highlighting the importance of incorporating a gendered lens into restorative practices, this study seeks to promote a more inclusive approach that recognizes and addresses the unique needs of all children. Finally, by reimagining justice for children through the lens of gender and power, we can contribute to a broader movement toward social justice and equity, ensuring that all children can thrive in a safe and supportive environment.

Literature Review

Restorative justice (RJ) has emerged as a transformative approach within the field of child protection, emphasizing healing, accountability, and community involvement. The intersection of gender and power dynamics in restorative practices is crucial to understanding how justice is administered and experienced by children (Long et al., 2022). The Children's Act 38 of 2005 serves as a foundational legal framework for child protection in South Africa. This legislation emphasizes the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all matters affecting them. It aims to provide a comprehensive approach to child welfare, encompassing prevention, intervention, and support services. However, critiques of the Act highlight that while it seeks to protect children's rights, it often fails to adequately address the gendered dimensions of child protection (Abbas, 2018). Moreover, research indicates that the implementation of the Children's Act can be influenced by societal norms and power structures that perpetuate gender inequality. For instance, the Act may not fully account for the ways in which gender-based violence impacts children, particularly those from marginalized communities. This gap underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender and power dynamics shape the experiences of children within the child protection system (Bessell, 2021).

Research indicates that gender plays a significant role in shaping experiences within restorative justice frameworks. Osterman & Masson (2018) highlights how gendered experiences of violence and victimization can affect the outcomes of restorative processes. For instance, female victims may face unique challenges in engaging with restorative practices due to societal norms and expectations surrounding gender. Additionally, the representation of women in restorative justice processes both as facilitators and participants often reflects broader societal power dynamics that can marginalize women's voices (Hodgson, 2018).

Power dynamics are inherently present in child protection systems, influencing how justice is perceived and enacted. The literature reveals that children often lack agency in traditional systems, which can perpetuate cycles of disempowerment (Davies, Ross, Cocks, & Foote, 2023). emphasizes the need for restorative approaches to actively involve children in the decision-making process, thereby empowering them to reclaim their narratives (Alexius & Hollander, 2014). However, the challenge remains in addressing the structural inequalities that exist within these systems, particularly those related to gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Feminist Theory and Child Protection

Feminist Theory provides a critical framework for analysing the role of gender in child protection It posits that traditional power structures often marginalize women's voices and experiences, leading to a skewed understanding of justice and protection (Few & Allen, 2020). In the context of this study, Feminist Theory advocates for the inclusion of women's perspectives, particularly those of mothers and caregivers, in decision-making processes. Goodmark (2018) have shown that restorative justice practices can be more effective when they incorporate feminist principles, such as empowerment, collaboration, and community involvement. According to Hodgsonv (2022), centering the experiences of women and children, restorative approaches can challenge existing power dynamics and promote a more equitable system of justice. This approach not only addresses the immediate needs of children but also fosters a broader cultural shift towards gender equality in child protection.

At the core of feminist theory is the analysis of gender relations and the power dynamics that shape them (Brubaker, 2021). In the context of restorative approaches to child protection, it is essential to recognize how gender influences the experiences of children. For instance, girls may face unique vulnerabilities due to societal expectations and norms surrounding femininity. By examining these dynamics, we can identify how power imbalances affect children's access to justice and protection. Feminist theory encourages individuals to question who holds power in restorative processes and how this power can be redistributed to empower children and their families (Pepi, 2018).

Social Control Theory and Restorative Justice

Social Control Theory offers another lens through which to examine the dynamics of power in child protection (Featherstone & Gupta 2018). This theory posits that societal norms and values play a crucial role in regulating behaviour and maintaining social order (Tittle, 2018). In the context of child protection, social control mechanisms can either support or hinder restorative justice efforts (Maglione, 2021). Restorative approaches often face challenges when they intersect with established social control practices, such as punitive measures and institutional responses. These traditional methods can perpetuate cycles of disempowerment and marginalization for both children and their families (McCluskey, 2018).

Research Methodology
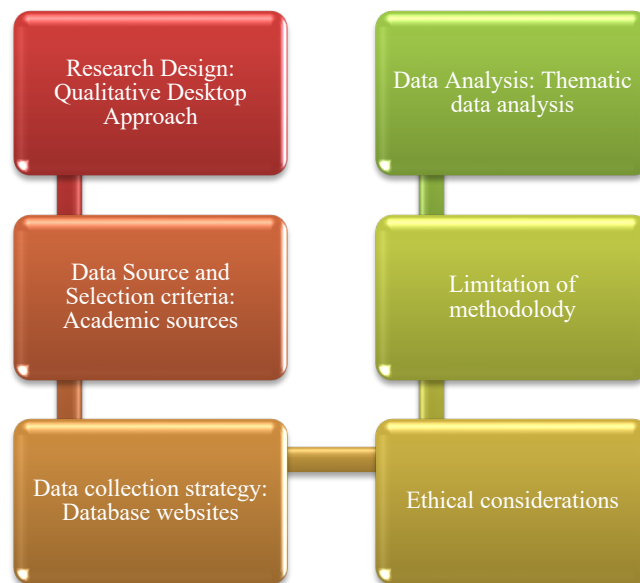
Figure 1: Research methodology diagram

Research Design

The research design follows qualitative approaches through a detailed analysis of secondary data obtained from desktop investigations. The main research goals involved analysing gender along with power dynamics on restorative child protection approaches while investigating justice system redesign for prioritizing children's rights. The research focuses on examining established social structures and institutional procedures alongside ideological fundamental beliefs because of which a qualitative method best suited the study.

Data Sources and selection Criteria

The research data originated from academic resources composed of published books together with policy documents and official reports from NGOs and peer-reviewed journal articles in addition to legal frameworks. These resources provided the starting point to understand the presence of gender and power dynamics within child protection institutions and their implementation or absence of restorative justice principles. The selection criteria included author credibility alongside organization credibility together with publication dates from 2015 to 2025 and both African and global regional focus and direct connection to research subject matter. Researchers focused on evidence that emphasizes the real-world experiences of children especially during their involvement in restorative justice or judicial processes.

Data collection strategy

Database websites including JSTOR alongside Scopus and Web of Science and Google Scholar and institutional repositories and legal databases constituted essential tools for gathering data. The research focused on four combinations of search terms including gender roles and juvenile justice as well as alternative justice systems and Africa alongside restorative justice and child protection

and power dynamics and children's rights. Organizational literature from entities such as UNICEF and Save the Children and the African Child Policy Forum was used because they present experiences from the field which academic studies often neglect.

Data analysis

A thematic content analysis served to analyse the secondary data. The analysis involved a proper examination and coding of content to identify repeated themes and patterns alongside contradictions. The analysis focused on discovering potential research issues concerning child legal system representation as well as gender norms which shape child protection methods alongside restorative justice practices that either reinforce or destroy present authority structures. The manual coding approach might have received supplementary support from NVivo qualitative data analysis software to ensure systematic interpretation.

Limitations of Methodology

While desktop research enables the collection of a wide range of data and perspectives, it also comes with limitations. These include:

i. Lack of real-time or contextual field data

ii. Potential biases in published materials

iii. Limited availability of disaggregated data on gender and age in child protection cases

iv. Exclusion of marginalized voices not captured in formal literature.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance is not necessary for the study because direct human contact was absent throughout the research. Ethical aspects included rigorous analysis of cultural gender and child-related matters and accurate data presentation and proper documentation of sources. The study preserved the integrity of preexisting local beliefs and ignored no traditional knowledge bases.

Findings of the study

Theme 1: Gendered Power Dynamics in Child Protection Decision-Making.

The study found that gendered power relations have been a powerful influence in the child protection systems in decision making. Abbas (2018) states that these forces are usually expressed in strongly established social norms and stereotypes relating to gender roles that determine who has power and how choices are justified. Women, especially mothers are often the subject of questioning and blame as perceived to fail in their care giving duties, a gendered imbalance that puts more emphasis on judging maternal ability (Daly, 2014). In the meantime, in both cases, men, and in particular fathers are invisible or treated leniently, referring to the socially accepted tendency to justify or downplay the responsibility of men in caregiving situations. This disproportionate power and accountability are not only an indication of gender-based discrimination but also influence the results of the child protection-related interventions and in many cases, populations remain inequitable and unjust (Miller & Hefner, 2015).

In addition, the study underscores the ways that though designed with intentions to promote justice and healing to child protection, the implementation of restorative child protection methodologies cannot ignore these gendered power structure to effect change (Fantus, Cole & Hawkins, 2022). Using a restorative justice framework highlights the importance of dialogue, accountability, and repair but without explicitly focusing on the way gender conditions power imbalances, restorative justice frameworks risk reproducing those hierarchies once more. Beazley (2018) indicates that the marginalization of women participation in restorative processes may occur when their voices are subsumed under those of male representatives who have greater social influence, or whose views on matters of decision-making figure more prominently. Munzhelele, Mugivhi, & Rakgwata, (2025), emphasizes the need of integrating gender analysis as part of the restorative child protection interventions to break these inequalities by including all involved parties based on their gender so that they can equally contribute to the determination of a given outcome concerning their lives.

> The Findings of this study demand that justice in the realm of child protection has to be reimagined with the active disruption of the gendered power or hierarchy. This includes identifying and confronting how gender combines with other identity factors and systems of oppression, including race, class and socioeconomic status, to determine who holds power and instituting decision-making. The analysis encourages policies and practices that endorse gender equity through recognizing the variety of roles and experiences in caregiving, breaking down stereotypes, and redistributing the authority in decision-making areas. It is only by holding these gendered dynamics in view that child protection systems can begin to approach more just, inclusive, and restorative outcomes that in fact recognize the needs and rights of children and families as a complex whole.

Theme 2: Restorative Justice as a Feminist Praxis in Child Protection

This research equips restorative justice as a feminist form of praxis that deconstructs and transforms the conventional child protection paradigm that has patriarchal overtones. Feminist praxis in this regard focuses on neutralizing gender power disparities that characterize traditional systems, which often discriminate against women, especially mothers, and only institute punitive

interventions whereas it should institute supportive interventions (Munzhelele, Rakgwata, Baloyi, & Sikhitha, 2025). The emphasis in restorative justice on dialogue, relational accountability, and collective healing also plays well into feminist ideals of power, equality and acknowledgment of experiences. By prioritizing the experiences of those who are affected the most, usually women and children, restorative approach provides an opportunity to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of harm and responsibility thus challenging the two most common stories blaming women and by silencing them (Daly, 2014).

Moreover, the findings revealed that a feminist-informed restorative justice is interventionally disruptive to the intersectional oppressions that characterize exposure to the child protection systems. This involves the process of gender as an interconnection to race, class and other socio factors to increase marginalization. Aware of such complexities, feminist restorative solutions should not risk a one-fits-all approach that risks overlooking the particulars of individuals (Munzhelele et al, 2025). The study identifies how feminist restore justice can open up a horizon of promise by putting a premium on relational ethics and the importance of mutual recognition, enabling accountability in a way that does not undermine autonomy and dignity, and especially those elements of the women that have been disenfranchised within the mainstream child protective processes (Williams-Butler, 2023). Using this lens, justice is not a one-dimensional act of adjudication or admonishment, but rather the restoration of relationships, the empowerment of the survivors and the creation of community-based support that realizes the transformative change of the structural injustices.

> This study adds that acceptance as a feminist practice of restorative justice necessitates deliberate transformations in policymaking and practice in child protection. It urges practice professionals to think carefully about their own positionality and power, taking care that processes are transparent and concerned with gendered processes. This involves establishing spaces in which the voices of women and children are not only listened to but taken seriously and acted on, and in which the causes of harm are not concealed but countered, whether by structural sexism and violence, say. The inclusion of feminist principles within restorative practice can aid child protection in leaving behind punitive, top-down systems in favor of restorative systems recognizing interdependence and the overarching importance of healing and transformation. The research anticipates transformative child protection that is rooted in strengthening the capabilities of families and communities, disempowering the abusive power bases, and making the principle of care central to safeguarding child health and welfare.

Theme 3: The Silencing of Children's Voices in Power-Laden Processes

The paper identifies a worrying tendency of decontextualizing children and not allowing their voices to emerge in power-driven procedures of child protection. According to Bilson and Martin (2017), children are the most important stakeholders of such systems, their voices are often not heard in their forums of decision-making, with the adults dominating them. This silencing is profoundly coupled with wider gendered and hierarchical power systems that represent the authority of adults, especially those of professionals and caregivers, over the lived realities and knowledge of children. According to Abbas (2018), the child voices always tend to be filtered through adult perceptions and such results in a distraction and suppression of child realities and needs. Not only does such exclusion fail to address principles of restorative justice, which focus on participation and dialogue, but perpetuate a sense of injustice by denying children the right to make decisions which heavily impact their lives.

Besides, the study reveals the intensity of this silence by the combination of gender and power. Girls especially are likely to experience greater obstacles to being heard due to the roles that society tends to put on women with respect to not counting their opinions and attributing female concerns with weakness or being troublemakers. Miller and Hefner (2015) emphasizes that boys are also be held in a prison of expectations to live up to some sort of masculine ideals that do not encourage openness or discussion of feelings. Such gender politics makes it difficult to present truly ES, since the very ways of acting to make the children heard might have the risk of furthering these stereotypes or power distribution. Williams-Butler (2023) implies that to fully minimize the barriers to child participation in restorative approaches, the cultural and structural barriers preventing children the space to speak should be actively disabled. This is the concept of acknowledging children as rights-holders and people who are deemed experts in their own experiences as opposed to being passive recipients of adult intervention.

> The findings demand a reimagining radical child protection principle based on the voices of the children as part of justice and healing. This involves establishing conditions whereby children will feel secure, valued and helped to share themselves in whatever way they want and without the fear of punishment or rejection. It also implies training the practitioner to learn to listen to others reflexively and to question their own assumptions and biases to enable listening to the other in a genuine way. The research promotes a more participatory approach to child protection that rebalances power in more equitable ways that do not privilege just child testimony but includes the voices of children in restorative decision making. This will allow systems to move beyond tokenism, instead of becoming part of the transformation to participate in the justice processes that they are meant to support.

Theme 4: Intersectionality and the Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Groups.

This research puts the concept of intersectionality at the forefront of debates about how marginalized groups are overrepresented in various instances of child protection systems. Intersectionality. Mpilo, Munzhelele and Chauke (2025) point out that the interdependent relationship of the social categories of race, gender, class, disability, and immigration status brings to the front how these systems can be harmful and unjust, but they are not equally experienced. Rather, those who represent a cross-section among

marginalized identities are often compounded negatively. Benali and Oris (2019) states that child protection measures are likely to reflect prevailing imbalances in society, with more vigilance, action and scrutiny directed at already disadvantaged families. There is a focus on Indigenous, Black, migrant, and low-income communities in the study of parenting practices and family structures, a diversity that is pathologized by a white, middle-class interpretation that rarely sees deeper cultural and contextual differences (Brubaker, 2021).

The findings also indicate that restorative childhood protection approaches, without being deliberately approached based on an intersectional approach, pose a threat to perpetuating identical oppressions as which they are targeting. As much as restorative justice can lead to inclusionary and healing processes, the study indicates that without focusing on systemic injustices, these processes can be exclusionary or even destructive (Alexius & Hollander, 2014). As an example, non-citizen caregivers or women of color may present less willingness to feel safe engaging in restorative conversations when their status (social and cultural) renders them susceptible to judgment or criminal consideration in the eyes of the law. Likewise, marginalized children might not feel heard in classrooms that do not explicitly address dominant narratives or bias of the institution (Bilson & Martin, 2017). Intersectionality is not merely an analytical framework, but a required step to allowing restorative practice to be equitable, just and aligned with the realities of communities most impacted by child protection systems.

> The demands that the understanding of intersections must be integrated on all child protection practice and policymaking levels. This entails recognition and consideration of the influence of structural forms of oppression on the ways that people relate to child welfare systems and the need to modify restorative practices to reflect these differences. This is because practitioners should not strive to merely change their inclusion but rather need to focus on changing power relations by involving themselves in the lives of marginalized groups through understanding their histories and lived experiences. Intersectionality becomes not only an area that defines disparity but also a way to develop solutions that are inclined to creating a restorative but culturally relevant and trauma-informed and justice-oriented process. By this lens, child protection has potential to become the place of treating and securing accountability based on equity, inclusivity, and serious perception of intersecting forces that influence lives of people.

Theme 5: The Role of Masculinities and Fatherhood in Accountability.

The paper is a critical analysis of the role that hegemonic modes of masculinity and fatherhood play in explaining accountability in child protection processes. It shows how the conservative culture in masculinity emphasizes stoicism, control, and lack of emotions usually obstructs purposeful participation of fathers in restorative processes. According to Munzhelele, Munzhelele and Munzhelele (2025), these norms impose obstacles to accountability because they discourage men who might want to consider the harm they have caused, become vulnerable, and engage in relational practice of justice. This has meant that in the child protection cases they are more commonly either placed on the periphery or rather shown greater deference through the lowered expectations associated with caregiving by men. Such disequilibrium does not only reinforce gender stereotypes concerning parental care but restricts the possibility of effective accountability and transformation in restorative programs (Barone, Lionetti & Green, 2017).

Moreover, it reveals the systemic propensity to hold mothers to a much more severe degree than fathers and emphasizes yet another gendered double standard in the evaluation of care giving and hurt. Fathers should be positioned as assistants or secondary participants whose role in safety and child well-being is applauded even in a case where they do very little (Bessell, 2021). In comparison, mothers have the sole responsibility of ensuring child safety and well-being. In restorative child protection contexts, these processes naturalize the role of fathers in family harm or dysfunction, and in some cases, enable them to escape accountability or be subjected to less-intensive treatment (Canosa, Graham & Wilson, 2018). The data highlights the importance of introducing a critical eye on masculinities to restorative approaches to avoid perpetuating these trends, since restorative work leaves unchallenged the cultural discourses that justify or absolve male disengagement and violence. Without addressing these dynamics, the restorative justice tradition, therefore, can in fact create unequal accountability standards between mothers and fathers (Alexius & Hollander, 2014).

> To tackle this, the article proposes restorative models of child protection that involve fathers and question detrimental forms of masculinity that interfere with relational accountability. This involves the establishment of forums that allow men to be encouraged and supported in taking ownership of their conduct, reflect on the ripple effects of their behavior and mend relationships through the healing of relationships-rather than engagement in compliance. It also means re-defining fatherhood that is beyond gendered roles including care-giving roles which are emotionally developed, responsible, and fair. By creating new more caring versions of masculinity, restorative practices can promote more balanced and effective versions of accountability. The study concludes by demanding reorientation of the child protection work so as not only to involve fathers more comprehensively but also questions the underlying assumptions of patriarchy that structure the inclusion of fathers and the expectations of justice processes.

Theme 6: Restorative Justice as a Tool for Rebalancing Institutional Power.

This research reveals the transformative nature of restorative justice as an agency to correct institutional power imbalance in the field of child protection. According to Agenda Alliance (2019), child protection paradigms and frameworks tend to be top-down hierarchical and power-laden in which social agencies and professionals maintain most of the decision-making pow-er, leaving families and particularly families of the marginalized lowest in the order of precedence. Restorative justice is an intervention that

upends this hierarchy and instead focuses on the lives of those most impacted, such as children and caregivers (Abraham & Feldman, 2018). The research holds that restorative practices can transform a more democratic and participatory environment to resolve harm and rebuild relationships by empowering inclusive, dialogical processes to shift power away from institutions toward communities and individuals.

Munzhelele, Maladza and Muvhango (2025) states that restorative approaches can be used to deal with the legacy as well as the contemporary distrust of most family members on child protection organizations, especially those who have experienced systemic discrimination. According to Aitani (2015). The history of policing and social control has been riddled with intrusive surveillance and excessive intervention into the lives of communities of color, Indigenous families, migrants, and individuals with low income, and has been overly rife with racialized, gendered assumptions about risk and parental competency (Bessell, 2021). When practiced critically and reflexively, restorative justice can address these legacies, in part by encouraging transparency, collective accountability, and respect. It enables the recognition of institutional injustice and restoration of confidence between families and child protection services (Brubaker, 2021). It does, however, warn that this possibility can only become a reality when restorative practices are carefully crafted in response to actual power imbalances rather than as a desired way of doing things that are otherwise unchanged.

> The study demands systematic Involvement to restorative justice not only as a collection of practices, but also as a framework of changing the institutions. This involves empowering people working in the field to understand their powers and privilege as well as coming up with policies requiring participatory decision-making, and the establishment of accountability mechanisms that are sensitive to the community. Restorative justice should not be viewed only as conflict resolution but as a strategy of redistribution of power in a way to eliminate the structural inequalities inherent in child protection. By putting relational justice and collective healing first, restorative approaches have the potential to transform child welfare systems into a place of empowerment instead of a penal institution, where the paradigm, which views child welfare as the institution of institutional control, will be shifted to the one of shared care, justice and equity.

Theme 7: Trauma-Informed Gender Justice in Restorative Child Protection

The study identifies trauma-informed gender justice as the urgent necessity in the restorative approach to child protection. It contends that conventional child protection apparatus tends to overlook the influence of gendered trauma on individuals in the context of disadvantages, support, and justice (Abbott, 2018). Women, especially mothers, are overrepresented in experiences of histories of domestic violence, poverty, and systemic discrimination but this is often disregarded or even pathologized within the statutory response. A trauma-informed gender justice lens recognizes the interconnected nature of compound trauma, does not compound trauma through judgment or coercion, and includes healing/dignity at the center of restorative work (Cowan & Cowan, 2019). In lacking this lens, the study warns that restorative practices may simply recreate the harm that they intend to stop, especially when they specifically target people who have already failed the system in the first place.

Alexius and Hollander (2014) states that trauma-informed gender justice specifies an individual and an institutional examination of harm. Individually, restorative child protection should establish inclusive, secure environments through which survivors, most of whom are women and children, can tell their stories without fear of non-belief or retribution. At the structural level, practitioners should be able to critically analyze gendered power relationships; institutional biases that sustain the trauma on those who are marginalized (Barone, Ozturk & Lionetti, 2019). That involves being aware of the conditions that pertain to Indigenous women, women of color, LGBTQ + parents, and children exposed to violence. The paper has clarified that trauma cannot be universal nor neutral; it is always expressive of power, identity, and system context. Thus, a truly transformative process will be one which seeks to investigate and confront broader social forces, including patriarchy, racism and classism, that engender and perpetuate trauma (Aitani, 2015).

> This article recommends Integrating tables even at restorative child protection practice to levels of policymaking and case decisions to personnel training and community outreach to achieve trauma-informed gender justice. This means rethinking justice not as some kind of punishment or monitoring, but as a continual process of relationship-building, trust and empowerment. It also implies allowing survivors to have a say in the conditions under which they heal and empowering the voice of children and women to play a central role in deciding safety and accountability. Trauma-informed care and gender justice can work together to generate more lasting change, transformative child protection. The research finds that restorative justice processes can only fulfill their potential of significant, fair, and healing responses to children and families by attending to both trauma and structures of gendered power.

Table 1: Main Themes and Subthemes

Main Themes	Subthemes
Gendered Power Dynamics in Child Protection Decision-Making	Gendered Blame and Accountability. Restorative Justice Risks Reinforcing Inequality. Need for Gender-Informed, Intersectional Practices.
Restorative Justice as a Feminist Praxis in Child Protection	Restorative Justice as Feminist Praxis Intersectional and Individualized Approaches Transformative Policy and Practice
The Silencing of Children's Voices in Power-Laden Processes	Gendered Barriers to Child Participation Reimagining Child Protection Through Genuine Child Participation
Intersectionality and the Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Groups	Overrepresentation and Disadvantage Through Intersectionality. Risks of Non-Intersectional Restorative Practices. Intersectionality as a Transformative Framework for Justice.
The Role of Masculinities and Fatherhood in Accountability	Hegemonic Masculinity as a Barrier to Accountability Gendered Double Standards in Parenting and Justice Reimagining Fatherhood and Masculinity in Restorative Practice
Restorative Justice as a Tool for Rebalancing Institutional Power	Challenging Institutional Power and Hierarchies Historical and Ongoing Distrust in Marginalized Communities Restorative Justice as a Framework for Structural Change
Trauma-Informed Gender Justice in Restorative Child protection	Importance of Trauma-Informed Gender Justice Individual and Structural Examination of Harm Integration of Trauma-Informed Gender Justice in Policy and Practice

Discussion

The practice of child protection is highly intertwined with gender-based and institutional power structures excluding the voices of women and children (disadvantaged or belonging to minority groups, mainly). Conventional systems tend to work punitive, top-down, reinforcing hierarchical authority, instead of an inclusive, healing and relational responsibility. The researchers make it very clear that in the absence of critical questioning of the terms of gender roles and societal norms upon which child protection decisions are designed, any restorative initiative can only end up being a mere perpetuation of oppressive systems rather than an effective alternative to the latter. They discuss that they put excessive pressure on mothers, and they end up under the microscope whereas dads are either nothing much and not questioned or absolved, thus, giving them a skewed gendered approach to justice and further patriarchal constructions.

One of the major arguments that the researchers put forward is that restorative justice observed through the lens of feminist and intersectional praxis can serve as a revolutionary instrument of justice and reform within a system. They warn, however, that restorative practices need carefully and explicitly to be framed to consider structural inequalities to be effective in the context of child protection. This goes beyond gender into the intersection of race, class, immigration status, disability and sexuality. The researchers claim that unless an intersectional perspective is applied, restorative practices would most likely serve to reinforce the biases present in the statutory systems that would further marginalize the voices of those marginalized groups and ignore the corrupting nature of the system and the need to hold dominant groups accountable. They, therefore, promote such a justice-based model as the restorative one that incorporates power-sensitivity and cultural responsiveness to enable the restructuring of relationships on a family-level and between communities and institutions alike.

The researchers claim that, as children are the focus of such interventions, they are largely regarded as passive recipients, with their insights being refracted or otherwise ignored in the adult-focused settings. Such a power-dense process reduces the agency of children and frustrates the existence of genuine and child-focused justice. The authors believe that an effective restorative approach should make children rights-holders by featuring their voices that not only influence but shape decision-making. This would involve the development of settings that children need to speak about their experiences clearly and be listened to without judgment and being heard in the views of their participation in harm and the care systems as well as protection plans.

The researchers are firm in the recommendation of the incorporation of trauma-informed gender justice into the restorative child protection. They argue that trauma-informed approach should move beyond a personalized approach to care and examine the role of

social violence, particularly gendered and racialized trauma in shaping family-systematic interaction with protective services. The researchers insist that only through a holistic approach to the causes of harm and structural disempowerment are restorative practices able to realize their potential to heal and hold those who do wrong accountable. It involves redefining fatherhood outside the strict masculinity and breaking the gendered expectations of care giving, as well as changing institutional mechanisms that afford the same position to power. Restorative justice has the potential to both change the outcomes of child and family protection as well as disrupt the institutional injustices that have been defining child protection.

Conclusion

This paper provides a critical insight on how gendered relations of power, hegemonic masculinities, and inequalities influence the nature of child protection systems at the expense of women, children, and marginalized communities. The paradigms of traditional child protection have been patriarchal and hierarchical respectively whereby significant voices are silenced including that of the mother and the child in favor of the male especially the father that is given leeway and invisibility. Restorative justice processes might not be able to break down but reinforce the status quo of gendered power, at least unless these gendered power dynamics are intentionally disrupted. The key to revamping these systems is the inclusion of feminist and trauma-informed approaches that recognize multiple intersections of gender, race, and class and other social dynamics. When informed by these lenses, restorative justice can reconsider child protection as a participatory, healing-focused practice that attends to the lived-in worlds of survivors, appreciates children as agents, and makes all caregivers including fathers answerable in equal and relational measures. This demands critical questioning of institutional, cultural, and biased oppressions and a strong desire to provide safe spaces that will allow the voices of the marginalized to be heard and be given an opportunity to be acted upon. Finally, the paper recommends a paradigm shift that extends beyond procedural changes to adopt restorative justice as a revolutionary model of power redistribution, equity and social healing. This involves the whole policy change, practitioner reflexivity, and community empowerment to make child protection not a system of control and punishments but a place of justice, care and restoration. It is only through the focus of intersectionality, gender justice, and trauma-sensitive care that the child protection system can transform to better suit the complexity of child and family needs and enable true and sustainable change.

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