This dissertation shines a light on a group of women who helped to create a violence against women (VAW) movement that changed the course of history in Ontario, Canada for countless women, their families and their communities. This study centers the voices of activists, positioning them as knowledge producers with the expertise and wisdom they gleaned during five decades of their work in the VAW movement in Ontario.

A feminist analysis of the VAW movement begins from the standpoint of women. In particular, an intersectional feminist analysis begins from the standpoint of diverse women who embrace the tenets of critical feminist standpoint theory. This study draws on social movement theory (SMT) literature, particularly the scholarship of feminist SMT researchers, to examine the state of the VAW movement in Ontario, Canada. This dissertation is a story about a social movement, specifically the VAW movement in Ontario—a strand of the women’s liberation movement frequently referred to as the second wave, but also on the cusp of ushering in third wave feminism. I document the time period from 1973 to 1993—a period that spans the start of the era when all of the participants in this study began their activist work—until the time of their interviews, which took place between 2014 to 2018.

In this dissertation, I challenge the notion that the VAW movement has been reduced to a VAW sector, merely creating and delivering services to select populations of women. This interpretation suggests that there is a loss or erosion of an expressed political commitment to uncovering and eliminating the root causes of VAW. I argue that the VAW activists in this study have been persistently engaged in and committed to ending VAW, although their activism shifts and manifests in several forms throughout the life cycle of the movement.

I used case study methodology, interviewing 22 VAW activists, conducting a member-checking group and reviewing key government policy reports and feminist rebuttals—rare
materials often buried in what is termed the ‘grey literature’. I intentionally chose a feminist-informed case study approach in order to conduct an in-depth investigation of a social movement as the unit of analysis. Participants were selected to allow for multiple perspectives reflecting a variety of critical feminist standpoints, as well as for their experience working across a range of sectors. Sampling was purposive using specific inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Participants described the goals of the VAW movement in Ontario regarding successes, challenges, and unanticipated consequences and setbacks and provided their perspectives about the future of the VAW movement. Participants shared how they learned to hold the tensions that inevitably arise when doing movement work; they reflected on the importance of self-care for themselves and the movement; they named their successes; they expressed their hopes for the future and where they need to focus their objectives from here onward, and lastly, they collectively provided a detailed description of the legacy that they want to leave for future activists.

The findings of this dissertation research are intended to bring practical and useful implications that can enhance future strategies for change in the VAW movement, contribute to the knowledge base of social work, and lastly infuse the VAW movement with renewed energy, re-ignited passion and with the critical vision it needs to instill hope that we can indeed eliminate violence against women and create a just world.