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Abstract
Recent developments at policy, legislative and practice levels have led to the mainstreaming of domestic violence as a child welfare issue. However, research evidence would suggest that familiar and well established tensions in service provision to women and children continue to be recycled. Moreover, there remains a central dichotomy in relation to men. Constructed as perpetrators or offenders, their identities as fathers remain invisible with serious consequences for the development of policies and practices which engage with them as ‘domestically violent fathers’. The discursive removal of violent men from the category of father or indeed parent needs addressing in order to support women and children, but also to offer possibilities for men to develop non-violent parenting and partnering relationship patterns.

Key words: men, perpetrators, policies, practices, re-focusing

Introduction
There have been important legislative, policy and practice developments in relation to domestic violence and child protection in the last decade particularly under New Labour. First, we will outline such developments. We then interrogate the research evidence that is emerging that would suggest that women and children’s needs continue to be inadequately addressed in practice. We will argue that, in order to offer women and children the supports they require, it is necessary to take violent men seriously as fathers and father figures. Currently, violent men are constructed as perpetrators or offenders. Such discursive constructions, whilst crucial in naming violent...
behaviour as criminal, can serve to obscure men’s multiple identities. In this article we are particularly concerned with one aspect of their identities; that is as fathers and father figures. Whilst contemporary practices appear to be leaving women who are being abused in the age-old position of managing the behaviour of violent men in a context where they are also judged responsible for the welfare of their children, such practices may also represent lost opportunities for engaging with men as fathers at ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991) in families’ lives.

‘Mainstreaming’ domestic violence

By the time the New Labour government came to power in 1997 feminists had been arguing for a decade for the need to place the violence women experienced from known men on the child welfare and protection agenda (see, for example, Mullender and Morley, 1994). An authoritative body of evidence emerged documenting the harms posed to children at different stages of their childhood by domestic violence and the inadequacies of practices that did not support non-abusing parents (usually mothers). For example, violence by men to women may begin or intensify during pregnancy thus placing unborn children at risk (Mullender, 1996). Both women and children may be physical targets of ongoing violence and a number of inquiries into the deaths of children indicated that violence to women was also occurring (O’Hara, 1994). Children who are not physically harmed may be impacted upon in very diverse ways ranging from impaired ability to engage with schooling to poor physical and emotional health. Moreover, violence by men to women may impact upon women’s ability to look after children. For example, there appears to be a link between maternal depression and experiences of ongoing or past violence. Such depression can impact upon women’s ability to care for children and result in a categorization of neglect (Stanley, 1997). A further possibility is that men who are violent may actively intervene in the relationship between the mother and the child/children in order to isolate her and undermine her self-confidence as a mother (Hooper and Humphreys, 1997). Separating from violent men is also no guarantee of safety and indeed can provide the impetus for escalation (Brown, 2006).
A powerful consensus emerged in relation to the need for change in the way domestic violence was dealt with in child protection arenas. The long-standing concerns of feminists about practices that did not treat the issue as significant and/or placed responsibility upon mothers to manage the consequences of men’s violent behaviour dovetailed with wider messages such as those from many of the projects within *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (DoH, 1995) about practices more generally. An incident-focused reactive approach predominated which did not pay attention to ongoing support needs or the larger context in which children were being raised.

The projects under the umbrella of *Child Protection: Messages from Research* were commissioned and disseminated under Conservative administrations, but it was under New Labour, elected in 1997, that significant developments became apparent at the level of policy. Guidance to practitioners ensued, such as the revision of previous Working Together guidelines, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DoH et al., 1999) and the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH et al., 2000). Both these documents located themselves within the broad project of tackling social exclusion. Domestic violence, mental illness and drug and alcohol misuse were explicitly identified as issues that impacted upon ‘parenting capacity’. Under Working Together guidelines the police were encouraged to notify social services when they responded to a domestic violence incident and to make a referral if they had concerns about a child’s welfare or safety. This guidance was a few steps away from the mandatory reporting introduced, for example, in some states in Australia and drew a distinction between a notification and a referral which required clarification of concerns (Stanley and Humphreys, 2006). There has also been a considerable emphasis on the development of screening tools that practitioners, such as health visitors and midwives, can use to assess whether domestic violence is occurring (DoH, 2005).

An amendment to the definition of harm within the Children Act 1989 was introduced in the Children and Adoption Act 2002. This provided the new category of ‘impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another’ and therefore makes explicit in cases of domestic violence the local authority’s duty to investigate whether there has been significant harm or risk of significant harm to a child under Part V Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 and/or whether to provide services under Section 17 to children and their families in need of support (Humphreys and Stanley, 2006). As
Harrison (2006) notes there have also been a number of legal, policy and practice changes in the area of child contact in private law proceedings which are designed to assess for domestic violence in cases involving child contact and residence considerations.

The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act (2004) was implemented in 2005. It represents a strengthening of legislation in the area of non-molestation, occupation and restraining orders and an amendment to the Children Act allows the local authority to seek an exclusion order in certain circumstances.

The organizational context within which services have been delivered to children and families is currently undergoing restructuring under New Labour. Every Child Matters: A Consultation Document (DfES, 2003) marked an important step in seeking to elaborate a common vision for a variety of services via a focus on five key outcomes for children’s services, an emphasis on early intervention and prevention and it set out a direction of travel in relation to the ‘how’ of service delivery. The Children Act (2004) provided the legislative spine for some of these developments including multi-agency working through children’s trusts, safeguarding boards and mechanisms for sharing data between professionals and agencies. These developments all have implications for how services to families, where there are issues in relation to domestic violence, are delivered and are worthy of a paper in their own right (see, Daniel et al., 2005).

In the next section we assess the research evidence that has emerged in relation to some of the above developments which would suggest that, despite considerable activity, familiar tensions in relation to services for women and children are being recycled and opportunities are being lost for engaging with men. Clearly some of the developments outlined above are too recent to be subject to robust research yet, but some are sufficiently long standing to be able to yield important evidence.

Responding to domestic violence in practice

A considerable amount of research and campaigning activity has taken place in order to draw attention to the ways in which known violent men, who are fathers, slip through the legislative framework, particularly in relation to residence and contact issues, and post-separation violence (Humphreys and Thiara, 2003; Radford et al., 1999). What
is of interest here though is what happens throughout families’ lives particularly at the point where domestic violence is first coming to the attention of services. As we have already noted, considerable attention has been paid to screening and assessment but less attention appears to be being paid to case management. Crucially this means that, when evidence of domestic violence is uncovered, nothing may be offered in terms of services.

This can be usefully illustrated by examining what happens when the police are called out to domestic violence incidents. Although their primary focus lies with the offender and victim, Working Together guidelines (DoH et al., 1999) also draw their attention towards children’s welfare:

It is good practice for the police to notify the social services department when they have responded to incidents of domestic violence and it is known that a child is a member of the household. If the police have specific concerns about the safety or welfare of a child, they should make a referral to the social services department citing the basis for their concerns. (Department of Health et al., 1999: 73, 6.39)

There are, however, issues about the extent to which such notifications or referrals are happening in practice, as evidenced by the findings of an inspection report of six UK police forces. This found that, despite local policies about the need for front-line officers to notify police ‘Child Protection Units’ about incidents of domestic violence in households where children are present or normally resident, it was only occurring on average in 50 per cent of cases (it varied from 12 per cent to 88 per cent) (HMCPSI, 2004: 65). The report also identified misunderstandings amongst front-line officers about whether notifications should be made in all cases when children live in a household, or only in cases where they are physically present during a domestic abuse incident. These confusions are further exacerbated by a lack of clarity amongst police ‘Child Protection Units’ about passing this information to social services and the extent to which families are made aware that such action will be undertaken (HMCPSI, 2004: 66).

Research undertaken in social services departments across the UK highlights further concerns about the extent to which child welfare issues are considered when police are called to domestic violence incidents (Cleaver and Walker, 2004). Again the apparent failure to distinguish between notifications and referrals is a key issue:
... in one social services department staff reported that referrals from the police involving incidents of domestic violence came to them in ‘batches’, suggesting this is procedurally led rather than focusing on the needs of individual children. No distinction appears to have been made between police contacts following a response to an incident of domestic violence where there are specific concerns about the safety or welfare of a child (that should form a referral), and those that were simply notification to social services (Department of Health et al 1999, p. 73, 6.39). (Cleaver and Walker, 2004: 186)

Whilst this raises serious concerns about the extent to which child welfare issues are considered when police are called to domestic violence incidents, this picture is further compounded by the evidence into social work practices. Cleaver and Walker (2004: 189) suggest that social services departments are so overwhelmed by the numbers of police notifications of incidents of domestic violence where there are children living in the household that they are not responding until three or more have been received concerning a particular family. They also found that referrals received from the police were amongst the group of cases least likely to progress to an initial assessment (Cleaver and Walker, 2004: 259). Inappropriate responses to known domestic violence were also identified by Humphreys et al. (2000, 2001) who, in a UK-wide study of domestic violence policy and practice, found what they term a ‘cover your back’ letter was being used by at least eight social services departments:

Such letters, written by social workers to the parents in a household where there is domestic violence, warn that the family has come to the notice of social services and, while often ‘offering support’, may also point out that domestic violence is a form of child abuse. (Humphreys et al., 2001: 189)

Implicit within this sort of response is an acknowledgement that both perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse are parents but in practice it would appear that in many cases neither parent gets an appropriate input, the mother does not get support but rather a warning. Moreover, nothing is offered in relation to dealing with the man’s behaviour.

Taken overall, the evidence presented here suggests that, despite policy guidance, the police are experiencing difficulties in engaging
meaningfully with the child welfare agenda when dealing with domestic violence incidents. The implications that children and their mothers (as the non-abusing parent) are not being supported or protected are worrying, particularly when taken alongside the well-documented difficulties that criminal justice agencies face in securing convictions for known violent men. The construction within contemporary policy discourses of violent men as offenders is not only problematic for criminal justice agencies to achieve in practice, but it also blurs and distorts understandings of and responses to violent men’s involvement in the everyday lives of their families.

Police call-outs to domestic violence incidents could be seen as ‘key moments’ for effective and positive agency intervention. Although less than 45 per cent of domestic violence crime is reported to the police, research suggests that when the police are called women have experienced an average of 35 previous assaults (Nicholas et al., 2005; Walby and Allen, 2004), making a police call-out a key indicator of domestic violence. Furthermore, in the UK the police receive over 400,000 calls related to domestic violence per year (Nicholas et al., 2005; Walby and Allen, 2004). However, we do not know how many domestically violent men are involved as carers of children, reflecting a lack of attention to what Harne (2004, 2005) calls ‘domestically violent fathers’. In the next section we explore why there is such a lack of interest and why it is so problematic.

Split constructions – perpetrators/offenders and fathers

It has been widely acknowledged that men who are domestically violent are treated in different ways in public and private law proceedings under the Children Act 1989 although, as indicated above, this is, to some extent, being tackled currently through guidance and training (see, for example, Harne, 2005; Harrison, 2006). A pro-contact philosophy relating to fathers and their children operates in private law proceedings which can have serious consequences when there are concerns about domestic violence, whereas in public law proceedings the recognition of the impact of domestic violence on child welfare may result in serious restrictions on men’s involvement with their children.

However, there is much less recognition generally of the concerns that motivated this article. There would appear to be problematic gaps in service provision at every potential stage at which women
may present for help which reflect further difficulties in thinking about violent men as fathers. For example, there is a lack of joined-up thinking at the level of wider policy developments under New Labour where men as fathers are being offered some recognition (see discussion below) and men as perpetrators of domestic violence are also receiving attention, but those who fall into both categories (those termed ‘domestically violent fathers’ by Harne, 2004) appear invisible.

To illustrate our points we will offer a summary of the policy agenda. Fathers appeared to emerge in an unprecedented way on to the policy agenda in the late 1980s in the UK. However, as Lewis (2002) notes charity workers and advocates of reform at the turn of the 20th century were interested in and often highly critical of the practices of fathers who were poor, seeing them as failing to fulfil their economic responsibilities towards women and children. However, this was replaced post-World War II by gratitude towards men who had fought so bravely and attention was turned towards maternal rather than paternal deficiencies. Policy-wise the establishment of a welfare state based on a ‘strong male breadwinner’ model meant that men were supported to be providers of cash rather than care for their children.

As it became apparent, with the rise in lone parenthood and the concomitant increase in social security budgets, that significant numbers of men were not providing such cash, attention was turned to ‘absent’ fathers in the 1980s and 1990s (Williams, 1998). This corresponded with developments in a range of other countries although Lewis (2002) cautions against assuming too much similarity between contemporaneous developments, because of historical differences in how various policy regimes had constructed fathers in relation to the provision of cash and/or care (see Hobson, 2002). In the UK child support legislation was introduced to ensure that such fathers continued to meet their economic responsibilities towards their children. Fathers were primarily constructed as providers of cash and received little attention or recognition either as potential resources for families in a wider sense or in terms of having support needs.

Lewis (2002) argues that little has changed under New Labour, reflecting a punitive attitude towards men and a restricted understanding of them as providers of ‘cash’ rather than ‘care’. We think this assessment is helpful but does ignore some of the admittedly extremely limited moves there have been to introduce a more ‘family friendly
agenda' within which paid paternity leave, for example, has emerged for the first time. However, what is of interest is the increasing tendency within guidance to service providers in health and social care to emphasize the importance of 'involving fathers'. For example, this is part of the core offer for Children’s Centres which means such centres are obliged to make provision for fathers in their services and is quite explicitly underscored in The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (DoH, 2004). The latter will be referred to hereafter as the NSF.

The developments in relation to Children’s Centres, which are focused on providing services in areas of deprivation, can be read as a continuation of the punitive attitudes towards poor fathers, evident at the turn of the last century, which constructs them as irresponsible in relation to family life. However, it is less easy to read the NSF in such a way as it is designed to reach the population at large. It is important, therefore, to not solely employ top-down analyses in relation to understanding policy developments and also to recognize the influence and, to some extent, success of demands from a diverse range of constituencies, including fathers’ organizations, for services that recognize their desires for more involvement in their children’s lives (see Williams, 1998; Featherstone, 2004 for an account of the emergence of such constituencies).

However, within government documents it is the ever expanding research literature on fathers, which is often situated within a paradigm that relates outcomes for children to father involvement, which is drawn upon to provide what is often a very sketchy rationale for service providers to engage in such work. The research literature on fathering, which, as we explore further below, has had little engagement with a wider more gender-informed literature, is drawn upon very selectively and in a way that obscures the complexities of partnering and parenting relationships. For example, the work of leading, long-standing researchers such as Lamb (1997) emphasizes the crucial importance of locating father involvement contextually. The relationship between the adult parents and their ability to work out their respective roles are vital in establishing a healthy emotional ecology in order for children to flourish. Most importantly hostility between parents (which can encompass a range of practices) is strongly correlated with poor outcomes for children. It is thus problematic to suggest that father involvement per se is good for children as father involvement is itself strongly correlated with mother involvement.
and, moreover, encouraging father involvement in the context of, at worst, violent relationships could be deeply counterproductive for women and children. However, the nuances of Lamb’s messages are lost in government statements such as those found within the NSF which suggest unilaterally that father involvement fosters good outcomes for children.

Moreover, this exhortation to ‘involve fathers’ as it promotes good outcomes for children within the NSF reflects an apparent inability on the part of policy makers to recognize that the category of ‘father’ and that of ‘domestic violence perpetrator’ may not be discrete. To give a very concrete example, it has already been noted that the research evidence would suggest that violence can begin or escalate during pregnancy and health workers have been strongly encouraged to assess for this as part of their practice (DoH, 2005). However, the NSF with its encouragement to involve fathers at every stage, including encouraging their attendance at antenatal appointments, offers no acknowledgement that this may pose real tensions on the ground for practitioners. We are aware of practitioners devising strategies to manage this, such as placing the contact numbers for refuges and help lines in women’s toilets, or on urine sample bottles, so that women can access such information confidentially. However, this seems to be occurring, as indicated, in the absence of any official acknowledgement that a policy of encouraging father involvement can pose tensions in practice. Moreover, as Peckover (2002) found in a study of health visiting, those workers who do engage with a discourse around father involvement are actively hostile to this discourse when there is known domestic violence. Clearly, in the current climate (explored further below) such practices are understandable, but it does reflect a serious issue which is that, in the absence of professional engagement with such men, women who are being abused themselves are held responsible for managing difficult and often threatening situations for themselves and their children.

It is important to recognize that there are some limited initiatives that seek to engage with violent men as fathers (Radford et al., 2006) and there is also some very relevant research in this area (Harne, 2004, 2005). In the next section we explore this literature in order to highlight some important lessons and gaps before moving on to advance our own rationale for the importance of this work and the theoretical premises we feel it should be based upon.
Violent men as fathers: What do we know and what is going on?

Harne (2004, 2005) notes that whilst there has been previous research with violent men (Hearn, 1998), there has been no UK research that specifically interrogated their views of themselves as fathers and the meanings they ascribe to their violence and abuse in this context. This appears to reflect a multiplicity of political and theoretical gaps. Whilst there has been an explosion of feminist and pro-feminist scholarship in the area of men and masculinities in the last decades (see Kimmel et al., 2005) which has looked at many aspects of men’s lives and practices including violence, until recently less attention has been paid to their practices as fathers (Lupton and Barclay, 1998). This lack of attention historically may reflect the concerns that many pro-feminist men have had about the emergence of a fathers’ movement which has often been constructed in terms of fathers’ rights and appeared to espouse anti-feminist and anti-woman sentiments.

In contrast, scholarship, often emanating from developmental psychologists, on fathers and fatherhood has blossomed in the last decades but has seldom engaged with the men and masculinities literature (Marsiglio and Pleck, 2005). This may reflect disciplinary boundary enforcement practices, but it does mean that issues around gender, power and violence have often been inadequately dealt with in this literature. It is, therefore, all the more concerning that it appears to be this literature that is being drawn upon often in highly selective ways by New Labour when exhorting service providers to ‘engage fathers’ as indicated previously.

Harne’s research was with twenty fathers who had been identified as domestically violent and were separated or divorced from their partners. Most of them had contact with their children in the post-separation context. The sample was drawn from men who volunteered to be interviewed and were attending perpetrator programmes in different geographical areas of England. The men were invited to conceptualize their relationships with their children when they were still living with them and their experiences and views about contact in the post-separation context. Fathers were also questioned about their understandings of child abuse and whether they perceived their relationships as abusive. Men’s perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as fathers and their involvement in childcare whilst living with their partners were also explored.
Harne argues from her research findings that there is no simple relationship between the level of men’s involvement in childcare activities and less abusive practices towards children with many men reporting considerable levels of childcare involvement. This finding is, she notes, in contrast with that of other researchers and will be discussed further below. She also found that there were considerable levels of tension between partners around household tasks and childcare. Some men felt resentful if they felt they were doing too much and this itself could lead to more violence. Some men blamed children for their own abusive behaviour. Children could fail to conform to their father’s expectations in relation to appropriate behaviour, such as doing homework, going to sleep and so on. Some fathers recognized what they were doing was deliberate rather than provoked. They displayed a lack of awareness of the need to prioritize the child’s own needs or understand the child’s own point of view. An important issue that emerged in relation to contact was that many wanted contact because children could provide them with ‘unconditional love’.

Harne suggests that some of her findings pose a challenge to previous research and writings. For example, she notes previous research evidence that a low level of involvement in childcare appeared to be matched by a low level of emotional commitment to children and a high level of abuse and neglect which persisted post-separation during contact (Radford et al., 1999). Harne further notes that over the years there have been suggestions, not based upon empirical research, that men’s familial abuse of children is directly related to the gender division of labour in heterosexual nuclear families, and if fathers are more involved in the care of their children, then abuse is less likely to occur. As indicated above she found men reporting considerable levels of childcare involvement (and an unrelated group of women interviewed confirmed this in relation to the violent men in their lives) and indeed suggests that it was an avenue by which men could assert more control over women and children. For example, one man took over complete control of the care of the baby in order, it is suggested, to further undermine and isolate his partner. A sobering twist on the calls by some men’s organizations recently for measures to support more father involvement with their children is provided by the account of another violent man who blamed his wife for not taking on more household tasks so that he felt he had to do those and thus ‘didn’t have a lot of time for the love side of things’ with his son (quoted in Harne, 2004: 5).
However, Harne fails to situate her findings more generally within broader understandings of trends in partnering and parenting today. For example, the finding that childcare and household tasks were a source of conflict and tension between partners feeds into a more general picture of considerable tension within individual households around the division of labour in a context of changing work patterns and aspirations on the part of women (Lewis, 2002).

She also suggests that the perception of children as sources of unconditional love reflected the men’s highly romanticized views of children. Again, whilst noting the specific purchase for men and its implications for violent and abusive behaviour, it is important to locate this finding within the wider sociological literature. Jenks (1996) suggests that in conditions of instability, such as those found within contemporary adult relationships or where other sources of attachment such as class have weakened, children can become the repository for feelings of stability which cannot be attained elsewhere. Children in such circumstances become lost as people in their own right and become ciphers for adults’ feelings. For many mothers when other sources of legitimation are not available or are rejected by them, this too can and has happened historically (Featherstone, 1999).

Not surprisingly Harne found the men made appeals to ‘rights’ discourses in relation to contact with their children (see also Day Sclater and Yates, 1999). This is a discourse in which men in divorce and separation disputes routinely invest (Featherstone, 2004). The discourse around ‘rights’ is one that feminists and, in our experience, welfare professionals are often profoundly critical of (for the latter the notion of parental responsibility is central). Writers such as Eriksson and Hester (2001) have suggested that in a context where marriage can no longer provide a reliable avenue for men to control women, conflicts over contact with children have become the terrain for the pursuit of such control and thus appeals to rights are part of men’s ongoing attempts to continue dominance over women and children.

It can, however, also be understood within a broader project around how some men ‘do masculinity’ in contemporary contexts as a ‘rights’ discourse can provide a way of reconstructing and translating private feelings of profound anxiety and vulnerability into face saving public exercises (Day Sclater and Yates, 1999).

It is important to take on board Harne’s observations, based as they are on empirical research, particularly given the dearth of such
research. However, we would suggest that her findings lend themselves to multiple readings and need to be located within broader and complex analyses of the difficulties many men appear to be having in re-authoring their lives in conditions of gender and cultural instability and change. In particular it seems to us that the research opens up very important issues about the meanings attached to children by men in contemporary contexts.

Alongside Harne’s research it is worth signposting that a number of practice developments have emerged in particular arenas which do engage with men who are violent, around their identities and practices as fathers (Radford et al., 2006). Projects in other countries such as Norway are also being drawn on by reformers here (Rakil, 2006). Moreover, research and therapeutic work has been carried out with children whose fathers have been violent in order to explore their meanings and perceptions (Peled, 2000).

Radford et al.’s project is important in that it is located in the UK context outlined above and specifically engages with child protection agencies in aiding them to do ‘safety planning’ with women and children which integrally includes working with men. It thus specifically offers a service that can engage with some of the concerns outlined in previous sections in relation to gaps and deficiencies in practice. It does, however, relate to a particular geographical area and whilst there are perpetrator programmes throughout the UK, these have a range of limitations. They are usually court mandated, thus restrictive in terms of only working with those who have already been categorized as perpetrators. Moreover, work on fathering issues is not always part of their curriculum. This is in contrast to Rakil’s project in Norway, for example, where men can refer themselves or be referred at any stage of their behaviour and it is not court mandated. In the UK one organization, Fathers Direct, an organization that has as one of its aims that of making services more responsive to the needs of fathers, does offer training for workers in the many fathers’ projects that are now to be found throughout the UK. They do recognize the need to work with men who may be at a range of stages including struggling to prevent themselves from behaving violently (Milner, 2004). However, they recognize that their training is taking place in a policy and practice vacuum. There are few resources to back up workers who do such training and want to integrate it into their everyday practice. There is often nowhere they can refer men to or nobody to back
them up in doing the work. In a policy context referred to earlier, such as that signalled by *Every Child Matters*, the lack of attention to early intervention with ‘domestically violent fathers’ is surprising and regrettable.

**Where do we go from here and how?**

In the earlier part of this article we suggested that the mainstreaming of domestic violence in child protection arenas was having a limited, if not problematic impact, in practice with considerable numbers of referrals or notifications from the police either not being acted upon and/or receiving a perfunctory response. We are also aware from research done in Canada that compatible policy and practice developments can lead to overly punitive responses to women (Jaffe et al., 2003; Davies and Krane, 2006). For example, they may be accused of failing to protect their children if domestic violence is ongoing and the man remains in the household whether against their will or not. We see this as an extreme example of what Scourfield (2003) found in his research in the UK which is that women are often expected and left to manage violent men’s behaviour and the consequences of such behaviour. Indeed Scourfield has called for practice to be re-oriented towards engaging directly with such men. We agree with him and want to look further at *why* and *how* in the next section.

It is relatively uncontroversial to call for perpetrator programmes for men who are domestically violent and who have been convicted of offences. However, we are calling for a project that is situated within a commitment to early intervention and is not restrictive in terms of requiring a court mandate. We are also suggesting a move away from the current situation which emphasizes screening and assessment but results in no services.

In particular we think that there are a number of points where asking for help in relation to domestic violence can be seen as a ‘fateful moment’ from which the possibilities of ‘life planning’ could follow for all concerned. According to Webb (2006) drawing from Giddens (1991) fateful moments are ‘critical moments at which consequential decisions have to be taken or courses of action initiated by people that may leave them feeling helpless, resulting in the need for support’ (p. 15). The response to such ‘fateful moments’, for example in terms
of police call-outs, currently, according to the research evidence offered above, seems to suggest that women are often left feeling helpless and, worse, that their need for support is either ignored, or responded to perfunctorily or punitively. Children’s own feelings are also ignored. We want to argue that rather than simply attempting to rectify this by offering appropriate support directed at women and children (although we fully support this obviously) a crucial part of the intervention must be to find ways of engaging men about their behaviour (Milner, 2004) and that a way in is to engage with them as fathers.

Naming such men as fathers has a number of pragmatic and theoretical advantages. First, in contexts designed around children’s welfare, such men will not get attention unless it is seen that this may be associated with better outcomes for children. Furthermore, as we have indicated considerable numbers are involved with children with no intervention currently. Naming them as fathers directs attention to this. But we also would speculate that engaging with them as fathers may open up possibilities for change. We say this tentatively as we recognize from Harne’s research that claiming an identity as a father can be central to the pursuit of highly problematic controlling behaviour towards women and children. But we would argue that it can also help key into inchoate desires around behaving respectfully and non-violently in a context where dominant discourses around fathering are at the very least subject to debate, if not some change (Featherstone, 2003). It can, therefore, offer a way in, not for all but for some. In research done by one of us with a fathers’ project it was notable how many young fathers talked of wanting to ‘do it differently’ from the way they had been fathered (Featherstone, 2004). That a number were struggling to ‘do it differently’ spoke both to the paternal legacy of hurt, anger, loss and lack of confidence they lived with daily, but also to the lack of ongoing cultural back up they received. Men could express strong desires to negotiate respectfully with women around contact at one point, for example, and then hammer on their ex-partner’s door on a Saturday night when feeling alone and vulnerable. As Connell (1995), a leading writer on masculinities, has noted from his research, individual men can wish to both co-operate with the mothers of their children and undermine them. Therefore, a key challenge for welfare practitioners is to engage with the desire for co-operation and build upon it through practices that are challenging as well as respectful and that recognize men’s vulnerabilities as well as their violence (Frosh, 1994).
In this context it is vital that we engage with insights from the scholarship on men and masculinities in order to understand local contexts and cultures and their complex intersections with broader patterns. The work of Messerschmidt (2005) on masculinity and crime provides some important and pertinent insights in the context of our concerns. His work on the use of different kinds of violent behaviour by young men in a particular high school is very helpful as it draws attention to the need to situate life stories within specific gender regimes and particular constructions of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (see Connell, 1995 for an elaboration of this term). His work reflects the ‘ethnographic moment’ in masculinities research and in particular the interest in differences between boys and men’s use of violence and different types of violence. An important insight from his work is that involvement in crime generally and violent behaviour specifically is often a means of ‘doing masculinity’ particularly in contexts where other ways of ‘doing masculinity’ are either unavailable or not culturally legitimated. Claiming ‘rights’ may also be seen in this way.

So to summarize, what are we suggesting? We are arguing that, as part of offering better interventions to women and children, men as fathers need to be engaged with also. Thus we argue against the tendency to counterpose such services as happens particularly when it is suggested that funding programmes for violent men diverts attention away from services to women and children. We need to recognize that safety planning for women and children must include work with men and work with men must include safety planning for women and children and to fight for appropriate funding for all of it rather than collude with government rationing practices. We would suggest that the theoretical underpinning for this work should be informed by insights from the men and masculinities literature around how constructions of hegemonic masculinity interweave with local gender orders and are played out within the exigencies of particular life histories. We would argue that such work needs to be underpinned by ethical positions that recognize the importance of not condoning violence, but are able to appreciate the importance of engaging with the complexities of individual life histories and opens up possibilities for the re-authoring of their lives which Giddens (1992) suggests many men are struggling with under contemporary conditions of gender instability.
Conclusion

Domestic violence has at last arrived on the policy agenda. This is to be welcomed and in particular the recognition that it impacts upon children is overdue. However, we are drawing attention to a curious phenomenon, the disappearance of ‘domestically violent fathers’ in policy discourses. Everyday practices in services collude with this disappearance in ways that do not advance progressive and productive possibilities for abused women and children. We argue that it is imperative that such men are engaged with as part of better support for all concerned.

Note

1. The terminology is contested here and we are adopting the term domestic violence in recognition of its widespread usage particularly in policy and practice guidance. We are also writing primarily about male violence to women, although we fully recognize that this does not encompass the range of violent behaviours to be found between partners and intimates.

References


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