Research Brief
How family violence impacts on mothers and mothering

Introduction

Family violence (FV) is globally recognised as a gendered issue with women the primary and predominant victims. As knowledge increases about the impacts of family violence, there is increasing attention to the long-term impacts on children as victims of family violence (Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016). There is also increasing knowledge about how mothers and their mothering practices are impacted by family violence and the undermining of mothering by perpetrators as a key aspect of gendered family violence.

This research briefs outlines existing evidence about the ways in which mothering is impacted by family violence.

The Range of Impacts on Mothers and Mothering from Family Violence

FV is now broadly understood as rooted in hierarchical gendered structures; women are primary and predominant victims, men predominate as perpetrators, and gendered stereotypes and inequalities sustain patterns of gendered violence (Ellsberg et al, 2015; Garcia-Moreno et al, 2006; Morris 2009). There is recognition that the relationship between women's motherhood status and family violence is complex but important; women with children experience the impacts of violence both against themselves and their children. Indeed, violence often commences during pregnancy and data shows a high prevalence during this period or in the period immediately following a child's birth (Taft 2002; WHO 2011). There is much greater attention to the negative impacts of domestic and family violence on children, whether or not they are direct targets of perpetrator abuse (Austin et al. 2019; Campo 2015; Kaspiew et al 2017).

There is considerable evidence that mothers make decisions about FV with their children's well-being as a key concern. Meyer (2011) found that women experiencing abuse may initially remain silent in order to protect their children, either from the loss of 'family' and 'security' but often in relation to direct threats against children if violence is disclosed. She argues that women's assessment about their children's safety and leaving is dynamic: different factors influence how women assess risk to themselves and their children at different times (see also Lapierre 2010). Bruton and Tyson (2017) identify that women are very aware that leaving an abusive relationship may put them at an increased risk of fatal violence: for women with children, their assessments about dangers to their children are critical in their relationship planning and decision making.

Initially, as knowledge expanded about how children were impacted in FV, research and policy responses focused primarily on the negative impacts on children. As Wendt et al. (2015) observe, one of the impacts of this approach has been an emphasis on the 'adequacy or not' of women's mothering (see also Ateah et al. 2019; Douglas & Walsh 2010a; 2010b). Such approaches however are increasingly recognised as failing to

support mothers or recognise the significant amount of work they are doing to keep their children safe. Critiques of child protection approaches where mothers are identified as not protective enough are emerging (Meyer 2010; 2011; 2018) as are challenges to negative assessments of insecure attachment when mothers and babies are impacted by FV (Buchanan et al. 2013; Buchanan 2017). In these critiques, the emphasis on 'normal' forms of mothering often fail to account for the efforts women are making to care for their children in dangerous and challenging situations. Recent research by Ateah et al. (2019) has suggested that there is no clear evidence that mothers experiencing FV are compromised in their mothering, although Kaspiew et al. (2019) argue the evidence is currently unclear and mixed.

Importantly now there is recognition nationally and internationally that abusive male partners may specifically seek to undermine mothers and their mothering as a form of family violence (Humphreys 2007; Miller 2010; Morris 1999; 2009; Radford & Hester 2006; Strega et al. 2008; Wendt et al. 2015). Research has begun to address the undermining of the mother/child relationship as one form of coercive control and violence that is common in abusive relationships (Callaghan et al. 2018). Thiara and Humphreys (2017) document the serious and sustained effects of men's violence on mothering, even when these men are no longer present in the home (see also Radford & Hester 2006). More recent analyses in Australia have examined how custody processes (Elizabeth 2015; Elizabeth et al. 2010) and child support payments (Natalier 2018) are used by abusive men to exercise ongoing coercion and control with impacts on both mothers and their children.

Drawing on her work with family violence perpetrators, Heward-Belle (2017) argues that social norms about what mothers *should do* may be playing a part in their patterns of abuse: 'gendered expectations governing mothering provide fertile ground, which domestically violent men can exploit' (2017: 375). Her research revealed an array of coercive, violent tactics that directly assaulted women's mothering; these abusive tactics were often embedded in attacking *everyday expectations* about what mothers do. LaPierre's (2010) work with mothers who have experienced FV, similarly found that women's activities were focused on 'being a good mother' even when their own health and capacity made this very difficult (see also Miller 2010).

As feminist scholars have consistently argued, citing on-going reductions of welfare and social support in neo-liberal states, maternal responsibility for children's well-being, in particular, has been increasingly individualised as dependency on social supports and structures for the work of mothering is withdrawn (Smith, 2011; Stephens 2012). The impacts on mothers who have been marginalised or are already marginalised through violence (Strega et al. 2008) have predictably been severe and harsh.

Everyday impacts on mothers: our recent research

In two of our recent projects, the particular challenges of mothering while experiencing violence were evident. Women with disability who report FV to police and services very often had their concerns dismissed (Maher et al. 2018); women held considerable fear of

not being believed or of being further victimised, especially if they relied on their abusive partner for care. When women know that child protection would become involved, they were even more reluctant to report or disclose. The women were well aware that existing negative assessments about the capacity of women with disability to mother, in conjunction with their experiences of FV meant they were at risk of having their children removed (Maher et al 2018; see also Frohmader et al. 2015). For a number of these women, their fears in fact did become a reality as their children were removed.

For the mothers of adolescents who were using violence in the home in our second study (Fitz-Gibbon et al 2018), the impacts were different but also connected with conventional expectations about mothers and mothering. Mothers were most often the victims of adolescent family violence: they were also more often identified as responsible for their children's behaviour, more active in seeking services and more often held responsible for the adolescent's care even when the violence had not ceased. These findings echo those of other studies internationally (Condry & Miles 2013, Clarke et al. 2017; Holt 2016).

In both studies, mothers faced distinct challenges arising from the violence they were experiencing and the expectations we have about mothers and what they should do. Their exposure to violence was potentially increased by their status as mothers and by negative service and policy assumptions in relation to mothering in the context of FV.

Conclusion

There is much greater awareness today of how mothering is undermined in family violence and there are increasing calls for the development of innovative responses seeking to support maternal/child relationships as part of an effective FV service response (Ateah et al. 2019; Humphreys et al. 2006; Jenney et al. 2014). At the same time, more evidence is emerging of the work mothers do, in situations of FV, to keep their children safe. It is important that these two sets of evidence are held in view as we respond to mothers experiencing violence. If discourses of blame or threat are used, they may increase risks for women and children and create barriers to appropriate and effective assistance and support.

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