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Gendered processes in child protection: 'Mother blaming' and the erosion of men's accountability

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Abstract
The Inquiry Report of the Roscommon Child Care Case (HSE, 2010) was the first Inquiry Report into intra-familial child abuse and neglect in the Irish context to explicitly identify a gender dimension to its findings. This paper seeks to build on these observations and argues that an analysis of the gendering processes that underlie understandings of and responses to neglect, violence and abuse can make child protection policy and practice more effective. The absence of an analysis which places gender at the core of policy and practice in child protection and family support raises serious questions about the differentiated responses to women and men who are subject to and perpetrators of violence, rape and abuse. Constructions of femininity and masculinity within child protection which systematically excludes fathers and mitigate sexual abuse by mothers must be addressed in order to enhance the support offered to parents and the quality of protection available to children. In addition a discourse of 'mother-blaming' which renders women responsible for matters over which they have little control and the reinforcement of men's power when their abuse remains invisible in professional interventions are the unintended consequences of ignoring the gender dimension of work in this challenging field. The findings of this paper suggest that a gender lens may contribute to better practice in child protection and the greater likelihood that children will be protected and parents supported, each according to their need.

Key words: Gender processes, professional interventions, child protection, violence

The six children at the centre of the Roscommon Child Care Case were taken into care in 2004 against a backdrop of catastrophic failures by the Heath Service Executive to act to protect them over a fifteen year period. In January 2009 the mother of the six children was sentenced to seven years in prison following her conviction for incest, neglect and ill-treatment. Their father was sentenced to fourteen years for rape and sexual assault in March 2010. The HSE established the Roscommon Child Care Inquiry in February 2009 to investigate the case from a care management perspective. The Report of that Inquiry was presented to the HSE in July 2010.

The Chairperson of the Inquiry Team (Norah Gibbons of Barnardos) notes that 'from 1989 until 2004 when the children effectively rescued themselves, the services put in place to support the family, while well intentioned, failed to respond to the risks to which the children were exposed and as a consequence failed to appropriately address the needs of the children' (HSE, 2010, p. 5). The children were neglected and

emotionally, physically and sexually abused by their parents who were adept at resisting the efforts of professionals to work in a meaningful way while appearing to be co-operative on the surface. Resistance was particularly evident in the father's behaviour (HSE, 2010). Among the factors cited which led to the failure of services to respond effectively and on time were a local HSE reasoning that family support was appropriate when child protection should have been the over riding concern; ineffective assessment processes; ineffective interdisciplinary working; failure to learn from previous case reviews and poor knowledge of relevant childcare legislation (HSE, 2010, p. 95).

The findings in this case are remarkable for their similarity to reports from this region of Ireland and nationally, over the previous 20 years. In the Kilkenny Incest Case (McGuiness, 1993), the Kelly Fitzgerald Case in Mayo (Western Health Board, 1996) and the 'West of Ireland Farmer' Case in Sligo (North Western Health Board, 1998) the then Health Boards were involved with the families over a protracted period yet failed to protect the children, resulting in the death of 15 year old Kelly Fitzgerald and the horrific sexual, physical, emotional abuse and neglect of children in all of the other cases.

Feminist analysis and child protection

What then does a feminist analysis offer child protection practice when considering the above cases? The field of child protection in particular is challenging and multi-faceted; ideas about 'the family' are complex and gendered divisions and inequalities persist specifically in relation to care and violence. As an active mobiliser of ideas and as a political movement, feminism and the women's movement have had a profound effect on contemporary Irish society and contributed significantly to 'radical change in the social and political order' (Connolly, 2002, p. 49). Some of these challenges have had knock on effects in child protection. Featherstone (2001) suggests that feminist thinking has offered a very wide ranging and diverse critique of women's lives, of men's power and of institutions such as 'the family'. For example, feminism critiqued the 'public'/ 'private' split central to analyses of contemporary society. Over time this resulted in a significant shift in thinking. What were considered 'private' matters usually kept within the family - such as child abuse and violence against women - were increasingly taken up as 'public' concerns. Feminist thought critiqued the state which it viewed as a site of repression as well as a site for intervention. In doing so feminism exerted pressure on governments to take issues such as sexual violence seriously. It also challenged notions of femininity which equated maternal identity as the supreme identity available to women, and the consequences of this for the welfare of both women and children. Analysis of the situation of men and masculinity has later emerged in the Irish context. Work by, *inter alia*, Clare (2000), Ferguson and Hogan (2004), Hanlon (2009) and Rush (2009) challenges the hitherto invisible nature not only of male power and privilege but also the role of men as fathers, their experiences within child protection and care giving masculinities. Common to analysis of all these areas is that the path of women and men is different and marked in the main by inequalities for women. In her work on gender and child protection Featherstone (2006) highlights the role of feminist thinking in relation to the

1. persistence of complex gender differentiated investment in fathering and mothering,
2. relative neglect of fathers and violence and
3. lack of causative research on child abuse whether by fathers or mothers.

Feminisms that insist on men as a monolithic category who still have power over women are not helpful in developing understandings and practices in child protection. There are approaches developing in a variety of sites, such as family support work, which explore what is happening to women and to men in a world where fixed markers of femininity and masculinity are challenged (Featherstone 2004, p. 11). In a similar vein, Scourfield (2002) seeks to understand the persistence of gendered practices in child protection where women social workers exert power over individual women clients and where pejorative discourses of client masculinity dominate, yet women come under scrutiny often because of initial suspicion of men. These examples highlight the contribution of gender as an explanatory tool, inspired by feminist thinking and now adopted in a range of mainstream disciplines with insights for child protection. The themes of complex gender differentiated investment in mothering and fathering, the gendered construction of clients and the existence of gender regimes within families and social work teams are central to this analysis. The gendered nature of professional responses to child neglect and abuse, male violence and female perpetrated sexual abuse within families, as exemplified in the Roscommon Child Care Case and other relevant cases of interfamilial abuse, are the focus of the discussion below.

Gender as an analytic tool

Connell (2009, pp. 9-10) suggests that most discussions about gender start from a presumed biological divide between male and female and define gender as the social or psychological difference that corresponds to that divide, builds on it or is caused by it. While our images of gender are often dichotomous, the reality is not; human life and human character is more complex than two types. Such binary opposition does not allow for differences *among* women and *among* men. While power is strongly implicated in gender relations, discerning fixed patterns in any particular context, such as child protection, is problematic. For example, fathers tend to be ignored in child protection, whether they are an actual risk to their children or a resource. As a result of this gendered practice both their violence goes unchecked and their nurturing capacity is ignored. Scourfield (2002) notes that where there are concerns about a child's safety, social workers tend to concentrate on working with women, viewing them as primarily responsible for the welfare of children. His study of the gendered construction of clients (2006) in the social work office draws on the concept of 'occupational culture' to identify how gender stereotypes are inextricably linked to 'ways of thinking and talking about clients that are (and are not) acceptable in the culture of the team and the approaches to assessment and intervention that become taken for granted' (p. 328). While these are examples of complexities of gender relations, power and oppression do not disappear into a mishmash of relativism. According to Jackson (2006), the most significant aspect of gender is the way in which it structures inequalities. Gender is manifest in 'patterned inequalities in distributions of resources, divisions of labour and hierarchies of advantage and disadvantage, which situate men and women in a hierarchical relationship' (p. 110). The power relationships intrinsic to such a hierarchical gender order are reflected in what Connell (2000, p. 45) refers to as gender regimes - 'institutions in which definitions of masculinity and femininity are circulated and which create conditions in which specific patterns of gendered behaviour are enacted and enabled'. Well defined gender regimes are found in most organisations: most managers in social service organisations are men and most frontline social and

child care workers are women. Not all gender relations are direct interactions between women and men; they may be indirect and enacted also between women themselves and between men; for example, between female social workers and female clients. Women social workers tend to concentrate on working with mothers, viewing them as primarily responsible for the welfare of children, even when fathers are present and want to be involved. Neither are gender relations manifest in simple monolithic hierarchies with all men oppressing all women. Concepts such as 'gender relations', 'gender order' and 'gender regimes' (Connell 2009, pp. 72-3) are valuable tools in examining child protection practices as highlighted in the Roscommon Child Care Case under review. For example, Morris (2009, pp. 419-20) built on the concept of 'gender regime' in her work on Abusive Household Gender Regimes. Her research explores the interconnectedness of the abuse of women and the abuse of children in violent households. Morris suggests that conceiving of households as gender regimes sharpens the focus on the gender relations, where scripts premised upon male authority and the subordination of women and children are questioned to varying extents. Her analysis of the 'Abusive Household Gender Regime' describes how violence is systematically enacted within such households, creating a web of control that is difficult to escape. Such an abusive regime operated with devastating effect particularly in the McColgan family, the Roscommon family and in the Kilkenny family.

On a larger scale, organisations also form gender regimes. Morris (2009) suggests the concept of gender regimes also makes it possible to identify the particular ways in which gendered configurations within organisations (for example, the Health Services Executive) respond to violence in a similarly gendered pattern to the very households they seek to assist. Organisations may do this by circulating stereotypical discourses of femininity and masculinity. Morris identifies two such influential discourses: a discourse that 'erases men's accountability in families in which violence takes place, but inflates their importance as fathers, even when they are perpetrators of violence/abuse; and one that renders mothers responsible for all problems within families, including the violence of others, while minimising their significance as primary carers and supporters of children' (2009, p. 421).

Gender: the Roscommon child care case

In the Report of the Inquiry Team, there is a paragraph that addresses gender issues. It states:

> We are conscious that, in relation to the parents, most references in this Report relate to the mother. This is because considerable focus was placed on Mrs A by the staff involved in this case without reference to Mr A whom for the most part, was unemployed and at home. This is evident, for example, in the work of the Home Management Advisors and Home Helps, who dealt almost exclusively with the mother, even when Mr A was at home when they called. It is also evident that Mr A carefully monitored the activity of the WHB. He was there, for example, for the first visit of Child Care Worker 1, but left matters to his wife. Similarly, he was instrumental in ensuring that Child Care Worker 2 did not complete her work with one of the children when there was the potential of a disclosure being made. He had no engagement with the home helps at any stage, leaving them and Mrs A to undertake

> domestic duties; but he was always present when important matters were being discussed at Case Conferences (HSE, 2010, p. 82).

Given the implications of the above for practice, it is remarkable that it is the first Inquiry Report on child abuse in the Irish context to explicitly acknowledge a gender dimension to its findings. Child protection practice is extremely challenging. It is my contention that a considered approach to the impact of gender has critical insights for policy and practice in the context of the challenges posed by the above report. The salience of gender in *the Kilkenny Incest Investigation Report* (McGuiness, 1993) is alluded to in a summary of literature on the dynamics of child sexual abuse and domestic violence. In the *Kelly Fitzgerald Report* (Western Health Board, 1996), the *Inquiry Report of the West of Ireland Farmer Case* (North Western Health Board, 1998) or the *Monageer Inquiry* (Brosnan et al., 2009) there is no consideration of how the gendered responses of the professionals often have a devastating impact on the families, sometimes allowing abuse and violence to continue unchallenged. The *Kilkenny Incest Investigation* shows the father was extremely violent and controlling, subjecting his wife and his daughter to severe violence and vicious sexual and physical abuse over 15 years. It was noted in the findings that 'the hostility of the abuser may result in the direct intimidation of professionals. Such threats will be used to sabotage intervention by professionals' (1993, p. 87). The *Kelly Fitzgerald Report: A Child is Dead* (Western Health Board, 1996) describes the death of Kelly, 15 years old, at a London hospital following wilful neglect by her parents over many years, when she lived in Co. Mayo. When the state called her sister to give testimony in the prosecution of her parents for wilful neglect and occasioning actual bodily harm to Kelly, her father refused to grant consent to allow her to give evidence (Irish Independent, 2007). In this case both mother and father colluded to pose very real threats to two of their children.

In the 1998 *Report of the West of Ireland Farmer Case* the team reported on the systematic physical, sexual and emotional abuse of six children by their father for most of their childhood. It details threats by him to professionals who attempted to gain entry to the home. These included threats against the case worker who was then directed by senior staff not to undertake home visits. No arrangements were made however to monitor the children's safety. The Report acknowledges that adult victims of domestic violence can feel powerless to protect even themselves or find a way out of their situation and the non-abusing parent is often not able to protect their own children.

In the *Monageer Inquiry Report* (2009) the focus was on the deaths of two little girls and both their parents in County Wexford and the extent of social services involvement with the family prior to their deaths. The report states that 'the father emerged as the dominant personality in the family, made all the arrangements, cancelled appointments, answered the door and controlled the finances … the mother was docile, childlike, compliant and subservient to her husband's wishes' (p. 138).

The persistence of gendered divisions and inequalities in relation to violence and control are central to considerations of all of the above reports. Morris's (2009) 'Abusive Household Gender Regime' is useful in describing how violence is enacted in a systematic manner in such households. Such an abusive household regime may take the form of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. In doing so it manifests particular

configurations of gender dynamics that are already 'available' to members of a society because they are embedded within a society at many levels. Such violence is akin to a 'web' of control characterised by a network of systematically related barriers. Such barriers may be very difficult to escape (Yoshihama, 2005). The men featured in the above reports were rarely confronted about their violence nor were there any efforts to involve them in stopping their abusive behaviour. Two of the above reports do draw attention to the impact of intimidation and threats of violent behaviour on the capacity of professionals to make the best decisions and act effectively in the interests of children. Littlechild's (2005) research on the nature and effects of violence on child protection workers highlights how workers may experience similar disempowering factors in relation to abusive and violent family systems as do abused children, by non-reporting and accommodation of the violence or threats. While managers in this study believed that violence towards staff was often linked to the abuse of children, assessments do not usually consider this possibility. O'Hagan and Dillenberger (1995) state that child protection interventions do impinge on the power and control dynamics of abusive households and can therefore result in threats and intimidation of workers. I will return to this issue when considering the challenges of engaging with violent men later in this paper.

In summary, the absence of an analysis which places gender at the core of policy and practice in child protection and family support raises serious questions about the need for differentiated responses to women and men who are subject to and perpetrators of violence, rape and abuse. Such violence also impacts on the power and control dynamics of abusive households and may shape a range of disempowering responses among professionals working in this challenging field.

Abuse and neglect by both parents

In the Inquiry Report on the death of Kelly Fitzgerald and the Roscommon Child Care Case the children faced multiple adverse experiences as a result of maltreatment by both parents. Wilful neglect resulted in the death of Kelly Fitzgerald. The systematic abuse of the six children in Roscommon consisted of rape, sexual assault, incest, ill-treatment and neglect visited upon them by their parents who were both addicted to alcohol. Research by Dube et al. (2001) indicates that in comparison to no parental alcohol abuse, maternal, paternal or bi-parental alcohol abuse signifies a high likelihood of children experiencing a range of severe childhood maltreatment, ranging from physical abuse to emotional abuse to neglect and sexual abuse. Dube's research also indicates the extreme likelihood of intimate partner violence directed towards the mother when both parents are abusing alcohol and recommends that assessments take account of this (2001, p. 1636). A Canadian study on the relationship between substance abuse and child maltreatment showed that rates of physical and sexual abuse were significantly higher, with a more than twofold increased risk among those reporting parental substance abuse histories. This risk was significantly elevated for both parents compared to one parent only with a substance abuse problem (Walsh et al., 2003). Professionals involved with the Roscommon family did not appear to understand the devastating impact of the parent's alcohol abuse on the children's safety and welfare. The purchase of alcohol was tolerated by the Home Management staff while much of the attention regarding parental drinking was directed solely at the mother, and her addiction to prescription drugs was not appreciated by workers (HSE, 2010, p. 73)

Gendered processes in child protection: Child neglect

The Roscommon Report indicates that workers were not sufficiently alert to the squalor in which the children lived, the hunger they regularly experienced, the inadequacy of their clothing and bedding, being left alone or in the care of an under-age sibling; all indicators of neglect (HSE, 2010). Considerable focus was placed on Mrs A by the staff involved with the family to the exclusion of the father who was often at home when they called.

Child neglect is a persistent and endemic problem for children, is likely to co-exist alongside others forms of adversity and forms the largest numbers of referral to child protection workers (Howarth & Bishop, 2001). Neglect can lead to significantly poor outcomes for children in the short and long term. Daniel and Taylor (2006) suggest that policy and practice aimed at reducing child neglect can be more effective if it is explicitly informed by an analysis of the gender issues that underlie understandings of and responses to neglect.

Research on neglect is highly influenced by gendered assumptions as to parenting roles. Despite decades of theoretical challenge (for example, Rutter, 1981) to the automatic linking of motherhood and attachment the focus is still on the mother-child relationship. Feminist research has sought to challenge the research tradition that places women merely as a conduit for her child's development. Instead the emphasis has been to support diverse possibilities in relation to 'doing mothering' including listening to what mothers themselves think and want (Turney, 2005). Indeed Parker notes that expressions of ambivalence on the part of mothers in relation to mothering itself or particular children are offered little public space (1997, cited in Featherstone 2006, p. 307). Despite decades of women in paid work outside the home and government incentives to women to enter employment, women's maternal identity trumps. Thus, as Scourfield (2003) found in his research of social work practice in the UK and Howarth and Bishop's (2001) study of the Irish context, when it comes to child neglect it is presumed the mothers are at fault. While social workers do recognise the stresses upon women, the focus is on their failings as mothers rather than supporting their efforts to parent or addressing the potential of fathers.

The theoretical underpinning of research on neglect has been characterised by Turney (2001) as a breakdown in the relationship of care and by extension as a breakdown of 'mothering'. This is because of the social construction of care as women's work and the social reality that most care work is carried out by women. Such an identification of women as perpetrators of neglect requires a deep rooted assumption that fathers cannot be held responsible for neglect of children even by the ultimate neglect of being totally absent from the child's life (Daniel & Taylor, 2006). These authors suggest that a lack of gender analysis in policy and research has three significant implications for practice:

1. practitioners may fail to take account of the risks that fathers pose for their children
2. practitioners may overlook ways in which men may be a key asset to their children's development

3. practitioners may fail to appreciate the structural factors that can undermine a mother's ability to parent and may place excessive responsibility upon mothers to meet the needs of their children (Daniel & Taylor, 2006).

In the Roscommon Case the woman who was the mother of the six children was convicted of 10 counts of incest, sexual abuse and neglect of her six children. No charges of child neglect were brought against the father. He was convicted on 47 counts of rape and sexual assault. In the Irish context (Ferguson, 2001; Howarth & Bishop, 2001) there are considerable gaps with regard to the assessment of neglect and the promotion of welfare within the family and how gender impacts on our understandings of parenting and parental responsibility for the nurturing of children. Featherstone (2006) recommends that further research is needed on the role of fathers in families where there is child neglect; the tight coupling of nurturance and motherhood and the needs and responsibilities of mothers *and* fathers. While it is crucial to move from assumptions that only mothers are parents, it is also important to ensure that policy and practice explicitly addresses the needs and responsibilities of mothers *and* fathers. In summary, there is little evidence that assessments take into account the risk fathers may pose to their children, the needs and responsibilities of both mothers and fathers or the excessive responsibility placed on women to protect their children.

Gendered processes in child protection: Child abuse and domestic violence

In the Kilkenny, West of Ireland, and Roscommon Cases fathers were charged with rape and sexual assault of their children. In all cases the father was actively engaged in controlling access by professionals to the children and to the home. He adopted an aggressive, hostile and manipulative approach towards workers so as to hide the true nature of the abuse taking place in the home. Gibbons (2011) notes that child protection workers routinely disregarded the danger posed by violent men when assessing risk in all of these cases. Neither did they hold the violent abusing father accountable for his actions. Domestic violence was particularly evident in the Kilkenny and West of Ireland Farmer cases. In each of the aforementioned reports, Gibbons (2011) highlights the denial or minimization by caregivers of their own responsibility for the abuse. She notes that in all but the Monageer case, perpetrators, and in particular the fathers, denied and minimized their own role and sought to place blame on older children and on mothers. In the Roscommon Case, the father ruled his home by exercising considerable control over each member of the household and took a similar controlling stance in relation to the professionals working with the family, sabotaging the work with the children if it appeared to be getting close to the abuse he was perpetrating. Scourfield (2006, p. 441) states that abusive men are the cause of most child protection concerns, often directly as abusers or at least at one remove, perhaps as a threatening presence that affects the mothers parenting.

There are no Irish statistics to demonstrate the numbers of reports to child protection made in the context of domestic violence. Exposure to domestic violence is listed as a form of emotional abuse and is not classified separately as child abuse in the revised *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). Such baseline information is essential to developing a gender sensitive response to the needs of children, mothers and fathers within families. Issues of responsibility and accountability are also gendered in

such cases. Holt's (2003) research on social workers' responses to men's abuse of women highlights the contradiction inherent in child protection. Often the primary focus of concern is the child, and the need to support the child's main carer, the mother, is likely to remain largely ignored. The irony of practice which fails to respond to the specific needs of abused women is further compounded when mothers are held accountable for the care and protection of their children while the violent man who poses the significant threat to the children is ignored. Buckley's (2000, p. 257) research in the Irish context highlighted similar findings in relation to the action of violent men who seek to mitigate the circumstances of the violence and intimidate, divert and manipulate the professionals, deterring intervention in child protection cases. Recent research by Buckley et al. (2010) into services users' perceptions of the child protection services involving domestic violence notes that when women risked losing their children to protective custody by disclosing situations of violence they were met with ambivalence and a lack of understanding of the dangers and practical implications of leaving violent partners.

Radford and Hester (2006) found that women who are slow to leave their abusive partners are challenged about their 'failure to protect' but paradoxically when they express concerns about access by the children to their estranged fathers, they are labelled 'hostile' and 'implacable'. Furthermore child protection practices are inclined to exclude fathers. This has the effect of mitigating the abusive behaviour or of overlooking protective opportunities. This unequal responsibility-power relationship is strongly reinforced when professional interventions render mothers responsible for matters over which they have little or no control. Conversely, men's power is reinforced and their accountability diminished when men and their abuse remain invisible in professional interventions (Morris, 2009, p. 243). In conclusion, there is little evidence in any of the Inquiry Reports cited in this paper that professionals involved understood the dynamics of control within abusive households or held men accountable for their violence or their attempts to minimize or deny their responsibility for such violence within the family. The need for professionals to engage with fathers who are violent is the focus of the discussion below.

Gendered processes in child protection: Engaging with violent men

Clearly it is important to address men's violence within families alongside the equally important provisions to support their role as a resource to women and children. Scourfield (2006) states that abusive men are the cause of most child protection concerns. Nevertheless he notes that many of the men that child protection services encounter have something to offer children and that most children want contact with most fathers. Being able to distinguish the *risk* and the *resource* implications posed in this instance by men as fathers and partners is a significant challenge for child protection workers. This is a highly contested area of work which poses genuine challenges to individual workers and to institutions charged with the protection of children. Scourfield's (2003) study of the gendered construction of clients in the social work office identified discourses of masculinity which were mainly pejorative: 'men as a threat', 'men as no good', and 'men as irrelevant'. 'Men as a threat' was the dominant discourse. This is not surprising given the nature of referrals to child protection teams cited in Scourfield's (2006) research above. While staff practices and attitudes can limit engagement with violent men, there are also real problems with real men as clients, as is

starkly outlined in the reports cited in this paper. Men's violent behaviour or threatening demeanour seriously deters front-line staff from working with them. This is particularly important given that child protection workers are predominantly female. Buckley's (2000) work draws attention to clear patterns of behaviour among practitioners: violent men are avoided and their aggression is explained away through the use of 'mitigating circumstances'. She concludes that child protection work has not yet come to grips with the unsafe aspects of the job.

Featherstone (2004) notes that while fear of violence is the most commonly acknowledged barrier to working with men who are fathers and who are violent, women practitioners' own sense of anger and disappointment with men is also at play. Her research with frontline workers demonstrates that resistance to this work is based on the belief that men are being reproduced as victims when in reality they are often victimisers so it is dangerous to encourage their involvement in family life; that scarce resources are being taken away from women once again; and that men should take responsibility for such work as women have been taking responsibility for trying to change men's behaviour for too long. Men also struggle with how to respond to violent fathers as it means they must engage with questions about masculinity which can arouse defensiveness, guilt and anxiety. She suggests that it is important that questions regarding *why* it is necessary to engage with fathers who are violent are linked to discussions about *how* to engage such men. Asking such a 'why' question involves engaging with the complexities of gender relations which impact on us all as gendered beings (2004).

Gender must be made explicit in policy so that the gender inequalities outlined above can be addressed head-on. Following this, men must become core business in child protection so that practice is re-oriented from 'mother blaming' towards engaging directly with such men. The most important part of any intervention in this field has to be making these men accountable for their violence and changing their behaviour (Scourfield, 2006).

Connell's (2005) concept of 'marginalised masculinities' is relevant to discussion of men in child protection: many of these men come from extremes of poverty and are personally damaged, so interventions must respond to this. Following from this perspective Featherstone (2001) suggests that men and fathers can be deconstructed to enable a more nuanced version of fatherhood to emerge to counteract the pejorative discourses which are very influential in this field. She suggests that some men can be a resource in the care of their children. Secondly, there are men whose mental and physical health means that they are vulnerable themselves and may not be able to support their spouse or offer much to their children. Finally, there are men whose violent or abusive behaviour poses difficulties for women and children and service providers. Their needs must also be addressed, at a minimum to ensure the safety of spouses and children. Connell (2005) noted that men may wish to both co-operate with the mothers of their children and simultaneously to undermine them. It is a privilege of hegemonic masculinity not to be called to account for violence and abuse. It is also a one dimensional view of masculinity which does no service to the diversity of men's vulnerabilities and violence or to the safety of women and children. Whether acknowledged or not, fathers who are caring, dangerous, poor, occasional, violent,

strong, resourceful, and alcoholic and who have many other qualities, exist in the lives of women and children and they require a response (Brown et al., 2009).

Despite the misgivings about working with violent men expressed by participants in Featherstone's (2001) research, there is a powerful feminist rationale for also engaging men in ending violence against women. Flood (2011) suggests that since it is largely men who are violent against women, any strategy to end this must involve and address men and constructions of masculinity. Secondly, even as men gain a 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995) from gendered structures of inequality, they can also be motivated by other interests such as personal wellbeing, relationship interests, collective and community interests and principle. Thirdly, men have a stake in ending violence against women because while such violence maintains men's power over women, men pay a personal price for this; it fuels women's distrust of men and hurts the women whom many men love (Flood, 2011, p. 360). Such efforts must be guided by the feminist agenda and in partnership with women's organisations so that women and children's safety can be upheld.

Featherstone and Peckover (2007) suggest that it is valuable to engage with violent men as fathers because 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. While the authors recognise that claiming an identity as fathers can be central to pursuing highly problematic controlling behaviour towards women and children, they suggest it may help link into desires to 'do it differently', to behave respectfully and non-violently in a context where dominant discourses around fathering are at least open to debate. They insist that programmes to engage with violent fathers are not counter posed with services for women and children. Such work must recognise the importance of not condoning violence but also engage with the complexities of individual life stories and open up the possibility of change for men as fathers. Milner (2004) argues for a diverse toolkit in such work. There must be recognition that men may be at a range of stages including trying to *prevent* themselves from being violent. Such an approach can complement work with men who are already categorised as perpetrators. Ferguson & Hogan (2004) suggest that change is required across occupational cultures and institutional norms. They argue that putting women in charge of monitoring and controlling men's behaviour, especially in cases of violence, is counterproductive. Practices of engaging with violent fathers and supporting the safety of women and children were not evident in the Roscommon Case or indeed in any of the earlier case reports.

In summary, being able to distinguish the *risk* and the *resource* implications posed by men as fathers and partners is a challenge for child protection workers given that many of the men with whom they engage pose a significant threat to women as mothers and their children. This is a highly contested area of work which poses genuine challenges to individual workers and to institutions charged with the protection of children. Such institutions are often not geared to address the reality of violence and threats of violence against their staff. Programmes with men who are violent as fathers may be given attention if they are associated with better outcomes for children but such work must not be counter posed with services for women and children and must be focused on safety

for women and children. Finally, dominant discourses around fatherhood are at least open to debate which may help men to want 'to do it differently' as fathers.

Gendered processes in child protection: Female perpetrated child sexual abuse

When Mrs. A (the mother of the six children in the Roscommon Child Care case) was convicted of incest in 2009 and imprisoned, she was the first female convicted of incest in Ireland. Even when it is accepted that a woman has sexually abused a child, the harmful effects on the child victim are often minimised or denied by survivors themselves, and by professionals. Bunting's (2005) analysis of the literature suggests that five per cent of all sexual offences against children are committed by women. Society's denial and minimisation of women as sexual aggressors has a profound effect on the experience of the victims of women sexual abusers and can increase the trauma for survivors. In-depth Canadian research (Denov, 2003) has highlighted how, at a societal level, the issue of female offending, in particular sex offending, is met with a culture of denial which either minimises or dismisses it or focuses on the 'monstrous' aspects of these women. A UK survey of social workers and police officers (Hetherton & Beardsall, 1998) indicated that registration of cases as child sexual abuse were considered by both social workers and police officers to be more appropriate if the abuse had been carried out by a man rather than a woman.

It has been argued that female sexual abuse is less likely to be recognised because society finds it very difficult to equate a nurturing, passive view of femininity with violence and sexual aggression, particularly toward children (Hetherton, 1999; Saradjian, 1997; Denov, 2004). In her review of the literature on this area, Hetherton (1999) suggests that when faced with incontrovertible evidence that women do sexually abuse, the belief persists that other factors must be involved which are responsible for the abuse: that female abusers are psychotic, substance abusers, or were coerced by men. She argues that this serves to separate "abuse" from "femaleness" such that the idealized image of women as carers and nurturers is sustained. Saradjian's (1997) analysis reveals that although male coercion may be involved in some cases of sexual abuse by females, and psychological disturbance and substance abuse may be risk factors, women also abuse independently. The implication is that just as sexual abuse by "normal" men was considered inconceivable until it came to public recognition, so the same may apply to females who sexually abuse children (Hetherton, 1999). In the Roscommon Case the professionals accepted the views and opinions of the parents at face value and when a child did speak of inappropriate sexual behaviour and was referred to child guidance services, 'Mrs. A did all the talking' (HSE, 2010, p. 62). Only when the children were taken into care did the experiences of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of their mother and their father come to light.

Conclusion

Child protection work is complex and challenging. 'Good' practice can be limited by deficiencies in knowledge, skill and resources. An exploration of the gendered nature of child protection highlights the importance of engaging equally with both mothers and fathers in cases of child neglect. This is necessary to enhance the supportive roles available from fathers who want and need support to care for their children and to minimize the tendency to focus on the mother in a manner that is often unintentionally punitive rather than supportive. In cases of child protection the complex nature of

violence within intimate relationships means that the protection of women and children is central and requires a focus on a 'diverse toolkit' to work with men to stop their violence. The consequence of adopting narrow constructions of masculinity and femininity in child protection work is greater danger for children, whether from neglect, violence or sexual abuse, from either or both parents. So it is that a gender lens may contribute to better practice in child protection and the greater likelihood that children will be protected and parents supported, each according to their need.

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