The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse

John Devaney, Caroline Bradbury-Jones, Rebecca J. Macy, Carolina Øverlien, Stephanie Holt

Mothering in the context of domestic violence

Publication details
Simon Lapierre
Published online on: 18 Mar 2021


Please scroll down for document

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Introduction
Since the 1990s, concerns regarding abused women’s mothering have been raised alongside concerns regarding the situation of children living with domestic violence. Research, policies and practices in this area have focused on women’s ability (or inability) to protect and care for their children, and have generally failed to address their complex experiences as mothers in such circumstances. For a long time, women’s mothering has also been invisible in the feminist literature on violence against women (Krane & Davies, 2002). In 2001, Radford and Hester argued that

> Despite almost thirty years of research into and activism against violence against women, little has been written about mothering in the context of abuse, whether from the viewpoint of women’s experiences, of children’s experiences, or on the basis of review of social policy and academic discourses.

(Radford & Hester, 2001, p. 135)

Over the last two decades, a growing number of feminist scholars have investigated women’s experiences as mothers in the context of domestic violence (Krane & Davies, 2007; Radford & Hester, 2006). They have argued that these experiences need to be understood in relation to both the particular conditions created by men’s violence and the institution of motherhood (see Lapierre, 2008). Drawing upon Rich’s (1976) work, motherhood can be understood as a patriarchal institution that constrains, regulates and dominates women and their mothering. It ensures that women perform their mothering in particular ways, according to high (and often unrealistic) standards of ‘good’ mothering.

This chapter focuses on mothering and domestic violence, drawing primarily upon the work of feminist scholars in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. It is divided into five sections. The first section considers domestic violence as an attack on women’s mothering and mother-child relationships. The second section focuses on abused women’s experiences as mothers, looking at the difficulties and challenges they face, which often lead to self-blame and mother-blame. This section also highlights the multiple strategies women develop in order to protect and care for their children. The following section examines
how abused women’s mothering has been addressed in policies and practices in the domestic violence sector, child protection services and family courts. The final section identifies directions for future research in this area.

**Domestic violence as an attack on mothering and mother-child relationships**

Domestic violence perpetrators use various strategies in order to control their female partners (Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai, 2012; Morris, 2009; Stark, 2007), and some of these strategies specifically target their partners’ mothering and relationships with their children. Such attacks often start early in women’s experiences as mothers, and some women can even be forced into motherhood against their will. Indeed, women can become pregnant as a result of their partners’ control over contraception, sexual coercion and sexual violence (Campbell, Pugh, Campbell, & Visscher, 1995; Coggins & Bullock, 2003). In this regard, data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey revealed that almost 2.9 million American women experience rape-related pregnancies during their lifetime (Basile et al., 2018). Three-quarters (77.3%) of these women reported that the perpetrator had been a current or former intimate partner, and rape perpetrated by an intimate partner was more likely to lead to pregnancy, compared with rape perpetrated by an acquaintance or a stranger. Some women reported that their partners had tried to get them pregnant and stop them from using birth control, and had refused to use condoms.

Moreover, pregnancy has been identified as an important period in many women’s history of domestic violence (Izaguirre & Calvete, 2014). In a review of the literature in this area, Bailey (2010) noted that violence during pregnancy is associated with numerous negative outcomes, including low birth weight and preterm delivery. Men’s violent behaviours can also influence some women’s decision to terminate their pregnancies (Côté & Lapierre, 2014).

Men who use violence towards their partners are likely to also use violence towards their children (Bancroft, Silverman, & Ritchie, 2012; Mbilinyi, Edleson, Hagemeister, & Beeman, 2007), and to control all family members (Morris, 2009; Mullender et al., 2002; Stark, 2007). In this regard, Kelly (1994) pointed out the need to account for the perpetrators’ double level of intentionality, which means that acts directed towards children can also be intended to affect their mothers, just as acts directed towards women can also be intended to affect their children. Examples of this include abusing women in front of their children or abusing children in front of their mothers in order to control both, or making women watch, or participate in, the abuse of their children. Such strategies affect women’s and children’s safety and well-being, as well as mother-child relationships. They are likely to also undermine women’s confidence in their ability to protect their children, and send children the message that their mothers are not able to protect them.

In addition, abusive men use more subtle manipulation strategies in order to disrupt their children’s routine, criticize their partners’ education methods, and undermine their authority and confidence as mothers (Bancroft et al., 2012; Lapierre, 2010a; Radford & Hester, 2006). They also tend to blame their partners and portray them as ‘bad’ mothers (Heward-Belle, 2017; Lapierre, 2010a; Radford & Hester, 2006). In a study conducted with 17 men who had perpetrated domestic violence in Australia, Heward-Belle (2017) showed that men’s attacks on women’s mothering was a distinct tactic of coercive control, which had occurred alongside physical, psychological, sexual and financial abuse. Findings from this study also demonstrated that these men had used women’s mental health and women’s behaviours, particularly with regard to alcohol and drug use, to portray them as ‘bad’ or even ‘mad’ mothers. According to this author, ‘It
was obvious that many men understood and indeed exploited the power of women’s desires to be good mothers to meet their own needs’ (p. 384).

Furthermore, research evidence has shown that domestic violence, including attacks on women’s mothering and mother–child relationships, tends to continue in the post-separation period (Brownridge et al., 2008; Radford & Hester, 2006; Humphreys & Thiera, 2003; Lapierre, 2010a; Zeoli, Rivera, Sullivan, & Kubiak, 2013). In this context, abusive men can use their children to control their ex-partners, and violent incidents, including homicides, often take place during father–child contact arrangements (Coy, Scott, Tweedale, & Perks, 2015; Harrison, 2008; Holt, 2011; Saunders & Oglesby, 2016; Stanley, Chantler, & Robbins, 2019). In a study on post-separation violence, which was conducted with 19 women in the United States, Zeoli et al. (2013) pointed out that these women’s ex-partners ‘made use of opportunities presented to them by child custody and parenting time arrangement to further abuse mothers and children’ (p. 556).

Finally, these men can threaten to report their children’s situation to child protection services and use family court proceedings in order to control their ex-partners (Harrison, 2006, 2008; Radford & Hester, 2006). In this regard, Elizabeth (2017) recently proposed the concept of ‘custody stalking’, which refers to

\[\text{a malevolent course of conduct involving the use or threatened use of legal and other bureaucratic proceedings by fathers to obtain, or attempt to obtain, care time with their children far in excess of their involvement with them prior to separation.}\]

(p. 187)

Drawing upon interviews conducted with 12 women in New Zealand, she explains that custody stalking is a tactic used by violent and controlling men to ‘fracture the mother–child relationship and produce maternal loss’ (p. 189). She revealed three main narratives in relation to custody stalking: ‘payback for crashing his dream of a happy little family’ (p. 191), ‘retaliation for pursuing child support’ (p. 193), and ‘hurting me and winning’ (p. 195).

**Women’s experiences as mothers in the context of domestic violence**

While abused women perform their mothering in the adverse conditions that have been described earlier, their experiences are complex and can change over time. Women’s experiences also vary according to their social locations and access to resources (Barrios et al., 2020; Lippy, Jumarali, Nnawulezi, Williams, & Burk, 2020). In order to understand these experiences, it is essential to take into account, on the one hand, the difficulties and challenges they face, which often lead to mother-blame and self-blame. On the other hand, it is crucial to acknowledge the multiple strategies that women put in place in their attempts to protect and care for their children – and to be ‘good’ mothers.

**Difficulties and challenges**

Abused women have limited control over how they perform their mothering. In the context of domestic violence, women’s freedom and choices are limited, which means that their actions as mothers often take place within narrow boundaries that have been established by their partners (Lapierre, 2010a; Radford & Hester, 2006). Perpetrators can even limit women’s interactions and communication with their children (Humphreys, Mullender, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2006;
Mothering in context of domestic violence

Lapierre et al., 2018; Mullender et al., 2002). Moreover, the impacts of men’s violence on women’s physical and mental health are likely to make it more challenging for them to perform the hard and time-consuming work involved in looking after their children (Lapierre, 2010a; Radford & Hester, 2006).

At the same time, children living with domestic violence need additional protection and support, and may display behaviours that require more attention from their mothers (Lapierre, 2010a). Children’s needs vary according to their age, and findings from a study conducted with 16 women in Australia shed light on the particular challenges involved in looking after babies in the context of domestic violence (Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2013). They demonstrated that fear had significantly influenced these women’s relationships with, and responses to, their babies’ needs. Some children can also be manipulated by their fathers into blaming their mothers for the situation, and older children can even end up reproducing the perpetrators’ violent behaviours towards their mothers (Bancroft et al., 2012).

Even though there is no clear evidence regarding the negative impacts of domestic violence on children through its impacts on women’s mothering (Greeson et al., 2014) – and some studies suggest that abused women tend to compensate to overcome the impacts of violence on their children (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003) – the issues that have been noted put a strain on mother-child relationships (Katz, 2019; Lapierre, 2010a; Radford & Hester, 2006). In this regard, findings from a recent study, which was conducted with 59 children who had experienced domestic violence in Canada, showed that women’s and children’s victimizations had been inextricably linked, and that men’s violence had affected both their communication and their relationships (Lapierre et al., 2018). In this study, several children described difficult relationships with their mothers while going through domestic violence, even though they saw their mothers as significant individuals with whom they had close relationships.

In a study conducted with 15 women and 16 children in England, Katz (2019) identified five main factors that had influenced closeness, distance and strain in mother-child relationships in the context of coercive control. The first factor referred to the perpetrators’ behaviours towards their children. When their fathers had almost always displayed hostility and indifference towards them, children had very negative views of their fathers and very positive views of their mothers. The second factor was the perpetrators’ use of domestic violence, particularly the levels of coercive control and the frequency and severity of physical violence. On the one hand, lower levels of coercive control had allowed women and children to remain close to each other, whereas higher levels of coercive control had limited their interactions. On the other hand, children who had been exposed to the perpetrators’ regular use of physical violence towards their mothers had a clearer sense that these behaviours were wrong, and had closer relationships with their mothers. In contrast, children who had been less aware of their fathers’ use of physical violence had been closer to them. The third factor was the perpetrators’ undermining of mother-child relationships, which had led to more strenuous relationships. With regard to the fourth factor, women who had been harmed in ways that had left them less able to emotionally connect with their children had more strenuous relationships with them. Finally, children’s views of their parents, including who they wanted to talk to, spend time with and be close to, were identified as important factors influencing mother-child relationships.

Several difficulties and challenges remain when women leave their abusive partners. In addition to the violence and its impacts, women and children have to cope with multiple changes, which may include moving into a new home, a new school and a new community (Abrahams, 2007; Lapierre, 2010a). In this regard, findings from a study conducted with 25 women in the United States revealed that this process is influenced by the intersections of various factors that
shape women’s access to resources (Barrios et al., 2020). They demonstrated that racialized women face additional challenges when leaving their abusive partners, and the situation is even more complex when considering the intersections between gender, ethnicity and social class.

At the same time, women may have to go through family court proceedings, and they often feel that they are left on their own to manage father-child contact arrangements (Harrison, 2008; Zeoli et al., 2013). In a study conducted with 45 women and 52 children in the United Kingdom, Thiara and Humphreys (2017) referred to the ‘absent presence’ to acknowledge the fact that men’s violence continues to affect women’s and children’s lives in the post-separation period. While perpetrators continue to be present in their lives through father-child contact arrangements and harassing behaviours, these authors also argued that past trauma, erosion of self-esteem and the undermining of mother-child relationships ‘continue to create a shadow across the present relationship’ (p. 140). They demonstrated that, for women and children who have experienced domestic violence, the past continually surfaces in the present: ‘There was slippage in the language about the present and the past. Even though women were separated, they often spoke as though the past experience of domestic violence was ongoing’ (p. 140).

**Mother-blame and self-blame**

In the context of domestic violence, women often consider that they have not been ‘good’ or ‘good enough’ mothers (Lapierre, 2010a, 2010c; Moulding, Buchanan, & Wendt, 2015; Radford & Hester, 2001, 2006). In a recent study conducted in the United Kingdom, which involved 15 abused women who had been in contact with child protection services, Stewart (2020) reported that these women had internalized high expectations with regard to their mothering. These expectations included keeping children safe and meeting their basic needs, as well as doing their best to put children first, spending time with them, showing them that they are loved, nurturing their emotions, and being warm, caring and supportive with them. In another study conducted with 25 women in England, Lapierre (2010a) demonstrated that the particular conditions created by men’s violence are at odds with the high and often unrealistic expectations that the institution of motherhood places upon women as mothers. As a result,

> These women tend to experience an increased sense of responsibility in regard to their children, as well as a loss of control over their mothering. This creates a tension by which women are required to achieve more with less control over means and resources, which is likely to result in feelings of failure, self-blame and guilt. (Lapierre, 2010a, p. 1446)

The women who took part in this study reported that, even though they had generally managed to protect their children and care for their basic needs, they had felt guilty about their ‘failure’ to care for their children’s more emotional needs. In this regard, some women stated that they had ‘emotionally neglected’ their children.

Such feelings can be reinforced by the fact that mother-blame is a strategy commonly used by perpetrators to undermine their partners’ confidence as mothers. Moreover, women can be blamed by their children, even though research evidence has shown that children can also recognize the difficulties and challenges faced by their mothers (Buchanan, Wendt, & Moulding, 2015; Mullender et al., 2002). In an Australian study conducted with nine mothers and 16 individuals who had experienced domestic violence during their childhood, Moulding et al. (2015) noted that mother-blame and self-blame were common themes in the participants’ accounts.
These authors showed that mother-blame was rooted in contemporary discourses on motherhood, and linked in a cyclic way with both domestic violence and maternal protectiveness:

When women act protectively by remaining silent or taking the blame, they risk incurring mother-blame from children. More broadly, taking the blame in order to protect could also exacerbate the already unequal power relations between women and their violent partners, inadvertently providing men with self-justifications for blame and violence, and ongoing risks for women and children. Thus, the web of mother-blame that characterizes domestic violence more generally, together with more specific blame for ‘failure to protect’, could work to further entangle women and children in violence, undermining their choices, safety and mother-child relationships.

(p. 257)

Findings from another Australian study, which was conducted with 14 women and two men who had experienced domestic violence during their childhood, revealed complex interactions between children’s perceptions of their own needs and their understanding of their mothers’ vulnerability (Buchanan et al., 2015). These authors noted a shift in children’s views as they developed a deeper insight into the impacts of violence on their mothers and on themselves.

Strategies to protect and care for their children

Despite the difficulties and challenges that have been presented, research evidence has shown that abused women generally want to be ‘good’ mothers, and develop a wide range of strategies in order to protect and care for their children (Buchanan et al., 2013; Lapiere, 2010b; Nixon, Bonnycastle, & Ens, 2017; Radford & Hester, 2001, 2006; Wendt, Buchanan, & Moulding, 2015). In the study conducted with 25 women in England, Lapiere (2010b) identified diverse strategies, which included predicting the violent incidents through the monitoring of their partners’ moods and behaviours, and preventing such incidents by behaving in ways that would not upset their partners. During the incidents, women can keep children away, or avoid them overhearing the violence from another room or seeing the bruises or injuries caused by the violence. They can also challenge their partners’ behaviours and, in some circumstances, use violence towards their partners in order to protect their children. The women who took part in this study had also developed strategies to care for their children’s physical, emotional and educational needs. Finally, findings from this study revealed that children’s safety and well-being had been important factors in their decisions to both stay with their partners and leave their partners.

Based on findings from a study conducted with nine women in Australia, Wendt et al. (2015) also pointed out that these women’s protective strategies had included attempts to ‘please’ their partners and to preserve their partner’s image as a father in the eyes of their children. These authors argued that maternal protectiveness should be understood as a continuum:

More obvious and overt forms such as preventing physical harm of children were located at one end, with more subtle and covert ways at the other, such as emotional protection through creating routines for children to prevent the escalation of violence.

(p. 537)

Women also need to develop diverse strategies in the post-separation period, particularly when there is ongoing violence (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Lapiere, 2010b; Zeoli et al., 2013). In
this regard, findings from a study that investigated women’s responses to abuse perpetrated by their ex-partners, which was conducted with 19 women in the United States, revealed that their strategies had included setting boundaries to limit interactions with their ex-partners (Zeoli et al., 2013). These women had turned to family courts for assistance in setting such boundaries, even though they reported that courts had not responded in ways that had protected their children. Moreover, findings from a study that investigated the role of supported and supervised contact arrangements in the United Kingdom revealed that abused women had agreed to such father–child contact arrangements despite concerns for their children’s safety and for their own safety, due to fears that contestations would lead to courts imposing even less safe custody or contact arrangements (Harrison, 2008).

Furthermore, research evidence has shown that children generally see their mothers as their main source of protection and support, and often recognize the multiple strategies that have been developed by their mothers (Buchanan et al., 2015; Lapierre et al., 2018; Mullender et al., 2002; Overlien, 2014). Moreover, recent studies have revealed that these children can act to protect their mothers (Lapierre et al., 2018; Overlien, 2014), and Buchanan et al. (2015) talked about ‘mutual protectiveness’ involving women and children living with domestic violence. Children’s attempts to protect their mothers tend to provide them with feelings of pride and efficacy, which challenges discourses that see these behaviours as inherently damaging for children (Buchanan et al., 2015; Katz, 2016; Lapierre et al., 2018).

Policies and practices with mothers in the context of domestic violence

Shelter workers have been the first to raise concerns regarding the situation of children living with domestic violence, and to provide accommodation and support to both abused women and their children (Jaffe et al., 1990; Mullender et al., 1998). Over the last few decades, there has been a more general recognition of the negative impacts of children’s exposure to domestic violence, but this has led to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory responses, particularly in child protection services and family court proceedings. Hester (2010, 2011) referred to the ‘three planets’ to illustrate and explain the inconsistencies and contradictions in these different sectors: ‘In each of the three “planets” of domestic violence work, child protection, and child contact/visitation, there are distinct “cultural histories” underpinning practices and outcomes’ (Hester, 2010, p. 517). These responses have important implications for women’s mothering, which are addressed in this section.

Invisibility, surveillance and support in the domestic violence sector

Even though domestic violence shelters have always provided accommodation and support to both women and children, women’s complex experiences as mothers have not necessarily been addressed in shelter practices. In a case study that involved a combination of participant observation and interviews with five workers and 12 women in one shelter in Canada, Krane and Davies (2002) argued that women’s mothering had been largely invisible and taken for granted due to the dominant perspective that had been adopted in that shelter:

Feminist intervention in the shelter centered on the emancipation of women from oppressive, violent relations. Although this goal is both understandable and admirable,
failing to shape intervention to respond to women as mothers is to risk failing to end the violence in their lives. This practice begs the question of the place of mothering in rethinking feminist intervention in this arena.

(p. 187)

A few years later, Krane and Davies (2007) conducted another case study, which involved both participant observation and interviews with 11 workers in one domestic violence shelter. The findings suggested that while women’s mothering had remained largely invisible, their interactions with their children had become more visible and had been understood through ‘a lens of heightened sensitivity to abusive relationships that are marked by the unacceptable use of power and control’ (p. 24). The authors argued that this lens was distorted and that practices with women and children require a better understanding of the complexities and challenges of everyday mothering.

In a recent study conducted with 12 women in four domestic violence shelters in the United States, Fauci and Goodman (2019) demonstrated that these women had experienced ‘parenting surveillance’ through the workers’ monitoring, evaluating and controlling practices. The women who took part in this study described the negative impacts of such practices on their mothering, their mother-child relationships and their children’s well-being. These authors argued that, even though shelter practices are committed to supporting women’s autonomy and empowerment, this surveillance may echo the abusive dynamics from which they are attempting to escape. Moreover, the obligation to report to child protection services has particular implications for women from poor and marginalized communities, where ‘the threat of state intrusion into family life casts a long shadow, profoundly affecting individual and community safety, trust in social institutions, the quality of social relationships, and parental control’ (Goodman & Fauci, 2020, p. 217).

At the same time, there have been attempts to support women’s mothering and mother-child relationships (Anderson & Van Ee, 2018; Austin et al., 2019; Humphreys et al., 2006; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017). Based on a review of 19 programmes, Anderson and Van Ee (2018) concluded that programmes generate more successful recovery when women and children work both separately and jointly across sessions. However, Austin et al. (2019) argued that, given the limitations of the current research base, more research is required in order to identify which programmes or intervention components are the most effective to support women’s mothering in the context of domestic violence.

Child protection services and the ‘failing’ mothers

Over the last few decades, most Western countries have adopted policies that recognize children’s exposure to domestic violence as a form of child abuse or as a threat to children’s safety (Nixon et al., 2007; Rivett & Kelly, 2006; Stanley & Humphreys, 2015). Given that responses to children’s needs have been primarily seen as women’s responsibility (Scourfield, 2003), concerns regarding the situation of children living with domestic violence have been raised alongside concerns regarding their mothers’ ability (or inability) to protect and care for them (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Strega & Janzen, 2013). Based on a review of 13 academic studies that have been conducted in four different countries over several decades, Humphreys and Absler (2011) examined how domestic violence had been addressed in the history of child protection services, and identified ‘mother-blaming’ as the dominant response in this area. Their work revealed a repeating history where abused women have
been seen as ‘inadequate’ mothers who ‘fail to protect’ their children, while abusive men have been ignored.

In this context, abused women, and particularly those from poor and marginalized communities, tend to fear child protection services, and to experience their interventions as punitive (Goodman & Fauci, 2020; Hughes, Chau, & Poff, 2011; Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Lapierre, 2010c). In a study conducted with 64 women in Canada, only a few respondents mentioned that child protection services had been helpful to them (Hughes et al., 2011). Most respondents reported that they had been provided with little or no concrete assistance, and that they had been required to attend programmes that had not adequately addressed their situation. In the same sense, findings from a study conducted with 20 women in the United States showed that, while some respondents had found child protection interventions helpful, most women had felt misunderstood and unsupported by their child protection workers (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008). Some respondents even stated that child protection interventions had harmed them and their children. Moreover, research evidence has demonstrated that immigrant women face additional risks in such circumstances, given that child protection workers may not understand the cultural issues associated with domestic violence and the implications related to their immigration status (Earner, 2010).

Similar findings have emerged in studies conducted with shelter workers, who have reported tenuous collaborations with child protection services (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Mills et al., 2000). Based on a study that involved five focus groups with domestic violence workers in Australia, Douglas and Walsh (2010) reported that child protection workers tended to misunderstand domestic violence, which had led to inappropriate responses and negative outcomes for both women and children. According to these authors, ‘child protection workers appeared, first, to construct women as the one with the responsibility to care for children, and then to blame women for the domestic violence in the home and the consequent failure to protect their children’ (p. 493). Many workers who took part in this study also talked about the ‘ultimatum’ that had been given to abused women, who had to either leave their violent partners or have their children removed from their care.

Practices that frame these situations in terms of women’s ‘failure to protect’ are grounded in the assertion that women have a duty to protect their children from avoidable harm, and that those who fail to fulfil this duty are thus liable for the resulting harm to their children (Nixon et al., 2017; Strega et al., 2013). Such practices inevitably blame women for their partners’ violence and shift the focus away from men’s violence, allowing perpetrators to avoid accountability for their behaviours (Archer-Kuhn & Villiers, 2019; Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Strega et al., 2008). In this regard, Stewart (2020) rightly pointed out that ‘it is pertinent to remember that these mothers were being assessed due to someone else’s violence and behaviour; that they were being held accountable for something and someone they cannot, and should not be expected to, control’ (p. 18).

Overall, these research findings suggest that child protection workers cannot protect and support women and children living with domestic violence unless they adequately address the ongoing dynamics of power and control, the trauma of past abuse, as well as the difficulties and challenges involved in mothering under such circumstances (Bourassa et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2011; Humphreys, 2010; Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Stanley & Humphreys, 2015). Recent initiatives have provided promising frameworks for child protection practices in domestic violence cases, focusing on the perpetrators’ patterns of behaviours and promoting partnerships with abused women in order to achieve children’s safety and well-being (Humphreys et al., 2018; Mandel et al., 2017).
Family court proceedings and the ‘hostile’ or ‘alienating’ mothers

Despite the fact that the violence and its impacts often continue during the post-separation period, research evidence shows that domestic violence is not necessarily identified and taken into account in decisions regarding custody and contact arrangements (Harrison, 2008; Jaffe et al., 2003; Jeffries, 2016; Macdonald, 2016; Silberg & Dallam, 2019). This happens in a context where the priority is to maintain children’s contact with both parents (Harrison, 2008; Macdonald, 2016), and where domestic violence is often misunderstood, minimized and framed in terms of ‘high conflict’ (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Harrison, 2006; Jaffe et al., 2003). In this regard, findings from a study conducted with five women in Canada showed that ‘violence and control can be masked as poor communication and conflict when people experiencing high conflict and those experiencing physical violence are combined in the analysis’ (Archer-Kuhn, 2018, p. 224). As a result, men tend to be seen as ‘good enough’ fathers despite their violent behaviours (Eriksson & Hester, 2001; Harrison, 2008; Macdonald, 2016).

In a recent study conducted in the United States, which involved an analysis of 27 court cases, Silberg and Dallam (2019) reported that the judges had initially been highly suspicious of women’s and children’s allegations of abuse by fathers. As a result, 59% of perpetrators had been given sole custody of their children, and the rest had been given joint custody or unsupervised contact arrangements. In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, which involved an analysis of 70 custody evaluation reports, Macdonald (2016) reported that father-child contact had been considered desirable and inevitable in the vast majority of these cases, despite evidence of violence and concerns for the children’s safety and well-being. The author pointed out that this had also been the case when the children had expressed fears regarding contact with their fathers. Based on these findings, Macdonald (2016) argued that,

Despite policy developments, practice directives, and improved professional knowledge, in practice the presumption of contact continues to usurp this knowledge in all but exceptional cases. Therefore, although some progress related to recognition and understanding of domestic violence has undoubtedly been made, the unrelenting influence of deeply embedded ideologies regarding relationships with fathers continues to have the effect of marginalizing issues of safeguarding in the majority of cases.

(p. 847)

In this regard, it should be noted that shared parenting arrangements create significant challenges for women who have experienced domestic violence, even though they generally wish for their children to have a meaningful relationship with both parents (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Lapierre, 2010a; Radford & Hester, 2006). In their study conducted in the United States, Zeoli et al. (2013) explained that women who had turned to family courts for assistance in setting boundaries with their ex-partners reported that courts had not responded in ways that had protected their children. In the same sense, findings from a study of supported and supervised child contact centres in the United Kingdom, showed that accessing such resources had not significantly reduced the levels of post-separation violence and harassment (Harrison, 2008). Some women even described how violence had been perpetrated during contact sessions within the centres.

In a context where allegations of abuse have been treated with suspicions, and where the priority has been to maintain children’s contact with both parents, women who express concerns
or oppose father–child contact arrangements are likely to be seen as ‘hostile’ mothers (Harrison, 2006). Moreover, recent studies have revealed that, in such circumstances, women can be seen as ‘alienating’ mothers (Barnett, 2020; Lapierre et al., 2020; Neilson, 2018; Rathus, 2020). Children’s refusal to see their fathers is also likely to be interpreted as a consequence of their mothers’ alienating behaviours. Even though these women may have well-grounded reasons to express concerns or even oppose father–child contact arrangements, accusations of ‘parental alienation’ can result in women losing custody of their children. In this regard, Sheehy and Boyd (2020) argued that,

A mother who has experienced IPV may be terrified and re-traumatized at the prospect of having to cooperate with a violent father in relation to child rearing. Yet a powerful ideological expectation prevails – reinforced by legislation, lawyers, mediators, social workers and judges – that mothers should suppress their rational fears in relation to their children and ensure their relationship with fathers, no matter the quality of the relationship.

(p. 89)

In recent years, initiatives have been developed in order to improve family courts’ responses in cases with a history of domestic violence, including specialized and integrated domestic violence courts (Birnbaum, Sinai, Bala 2017; Koshan, 2018). These initiatives have the potential to improve practices and ensure a more coordinated responses to families living with domestic violence.

**Directions for future research**

While several studies explore women’s diverse experiences as mothers in the context of domestic violence, there is a need to address more fully the experiences of women from marginalized and poor communities, as well as the intersections between gender, ethnicity, social class and (dis)ability. Future research should also account for women’s complex experiences, including issues such as mental health problems, substance misuse and homelessness. Moreover, more attention needs to be given to children’s experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, large-scale quantitative studies could provide additional data on the challenges that women and children face in such circumstances, and on the strategies that mothers put in place in order to protect and care for their children.

Future research should also investigate policies and practices in shelters, child protection services and family courts. Researchers should continue to document persistent problems in policies and practices, and their impacts on women’s mothering and mother–child relationships. They should also be able to identify new trends at local, national and international levels. Finally, evaluative studies ought to be conducted in order to identify the most effective policies, programmes and practices to support women’s mothering and mother–child relationships in the context of domestic violence.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on mothering and domestic violence, accounting for women’s complex experiences as mothers in this context. It has been argued that these experiences need to be understood in relation to both the particular conditions created by men’s violence and the
Mothering in context of domestic violence

The patriarchal institution of motherhood, which constrains, regulates and dominates women and their mothering. In fact, as Heward-Belle (2017) rightly pointed out,

Assaulting women as mothers and their mothering is effective because of the hegemonic construction of the good mother and the institutional practices that result from this construction. Such practices produce and reproduce normative benchmarks against which women are unfairly judged and serve as fertile ground for domestically violent men to exploit.

(p. 385)

While addressing women’s mothering and mother-child relationships is important to improve women’s and children’s safety and well-being, it should not shift the focus away from men’s violence and control over women and children.

Critical findings

• Abused women’s experiences as mothers need to be understood in relation to both the particular conditions created by men’s violence and the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which constrains, regulates and dominates women and their mothering.
• Domestic violence ought to be considered as an attack on women’s mothering and mother-child relationships, as perpetrators use strategies that specifically target their partners’ mothering and relationships with their children.
• While abused women face several difficulties and challenges, they also develop multiple strategies in order to protect and care for their children.
• Mother-blame and self-blame emerge as important themes in women’s experiences as mothers in the context of domestic violence.
• The recognition of the negative impacts of children’s exposure to domestic violence in research, policies and practices has led to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory responses, particularly in child protection services and family court proceedings. In these contexts, abused women are likely to be seen either as ‘failing to protect’ their children or as ‘hostile’ or ‘alienating’ mothers.

Key implications for policy, practice and research

• Professionals in domestic violence shelters, child protection services and family courts need to better understand women’s complex experiences as mothers in the context of domestic violence.
• Professionals need to take into account both the difficulties and challenges they face in such circumstances and the multiple strategies they develop in order to protect and care for their children.
• Policies and practices should support women’s mothering and mother-child relationships, taking into account women’s social locations and access to resources.
• While addressing women’s mothering and mother-child relationships is important to improve women’s and children’s safety and well-being, it should not shift the focus away from men’s violence and control over women and children.
• Policies and practices should address the inconsistencies and contradictions that abused women face when going through child protection and family court proceedings.
References


Mothering in context of domestic violence


Mothering in context of domestic violence