

**Putting men's abuse of women on the childcare agenda :  
an innovative specialist domestic abuse project**

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

**Citation:**

PECKOVER, Sue and EVERSON, Angela (2014). Putting men's abuse of women on the childcare agenda : an innovative specialist domestic abuse project. Practice: Social Work in Action, 26 (3), 143-159. [Article]

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## **Putting Men's Abuse of Women on the Child Care Agenda: an innovative specialist domestic abuse project.**

### **Abstract**

The (name of project) is an innovative specialist domestic abuse service that undertakes intensive work with women affected by domestic abuse and their partners. This paper will describe the project and present findings from a small evaluation undertaken in 2010. Examples from (name of project) work with individual women, direct work with men, and the (name of project) contribution to multi-agency work are used to illustrate how and why the project is successful and the challenges in achieving this. An important theme arising from this work is the central importance of keeping focused upon the safety of women and children, and upon understanding, assessing and addressing the risks and responsibilities of the domestic violence behaviours. Importantly this turns professional attention towards men and their behavior and benefits women and children. Whilst the (name of project) is an example of innovation in service user led organisations it also demonstrates new directions for working with high risk families where domestic abuse is a feature.

**Key Words:** Domestic abuse; Social Work; Child Protection; Men; Risk

**6393 words**

## Introduction

In 1994 Audrey Mullender and colleagues' published a ground breaking book which drew attention towards children living with domestic violence (Mullender and Morley 1994). Supported by contemporary research (Abrahams 1994) and underpinned by **womens'** activism (see Hague and Malos 1993; Harne and Radford 2008) this marked the beginning of a ground swell of activity amongst policy makers, practitioners and researchers which for the first time began to take the issue of children and domestic abuse seriously. A number of measures were introduced which aimed to increase awareness, support and protection for children and young people affected by domestic abuse. **These included the requirement for police attending domestic violence incidents to inform children's social care of cases when children are present and/or living in the household, introduced as part of the 1999 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' guidance (Department of Health 1999; Humphreys and Stanley 2006). Recognition of the harm domestic abuse causes for children and young people led to a change to the legal definition; this is laid down in the 1989 Children Act (s. 31) extended in 2002 to include 'impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another' (Adoption and Children Act, s.120).**

Looking back there can be no doubt this was a key moment in how domestic violence and its impact on children and young people was conceptualized and understood in the UK. **Nearly twenty years later it's topicality as a policy and practice issue remains, although shortcomings in how it is being addressed are evident. These reflect the wider landscape in which this work is taking place and include for example fragmented and limited service provision and legal recourse for women and children affected by domestic abuse as well as inadequacies in professional and multi-agency responses (see for example, Stanley et al 2010; Hester 2011; Humphreys and Absler 2011; Towers and Walby 2012). Importantly though the sub-title of Mullender and Morley's book is 'Putting Men's Abuse of Women on the Child Care Agenda' this aspect of the problem – 'men's**

abuse’ – has not yet been adequately addressed. This is particularly so in mainstream child protection work where much of the professional focus is on mothers (Humphreys and Stanley 2006; Radford and Hester 2006; Lapierre 2008; Keeling and van Wormer 2012) with little consideration of men or the abuse they may be inflicting (Milner 1996; Scourfield 2003; Devaney 2009). Put more simply, men continue to ‘get away with it’ (Featherstone and Peckover 2007) and finding ways to address this remains a key challenge.

This paper describes a voluntary sector project based in (name of area), referred to as (name of project), which is working with men in order to safeguard and protect women and children who are experiencing domestic abuse. It draws upon the findings of a small study undertaken in 2010 which examined the work undertaken by (name of project); the paper illustrates how the project focuses upon and addresses male violence and how this links to better safeguarding for women and children. The paper begins with a summary of relevant UK literature in this practice field.

## **Background**

Domestic abuse<sup>1</sup>, at the time the (name of project) was established, was defined as ‘any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been, intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality’ (Home Office, 2005<sup>2</sup>). A wide range of scholarship has drawn attention towards the extent of domestic abuse and its impact on both women and children; this has highlighted the difficulties they face and their support and protection needs (see for example Hester

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘domestic abuse’ is used throughout this paper unless the context is referring specifically violent behaviour and/or assaults.

<sup>2</sup> In March 2013 the definition was expanded to include those aged 16 years and above, and coercive and controlling behaviours.

et al 2006; Radford and Hester 2006; Humphreys et al. 2008). Recently young people's experiences of abusive intimate relationships has also been identified (Barter et al. 2009; Wood et al. 2011). Whilst it is recognized that the harms experienced by children and young people who witness or overhear domestic abuse vary considerably depending upon risk and protective factors and resilience (Mullender et al. 2002; Hester et al. 2006; Gewirtz and Edleson 2007) the potentially serious impact of domestic abuse upon children is evident. For example analysis of serious case reviews indicates that domestic abuse features in families where children die or a subject to a serious incident (Brandon et al. 2008). Domestic abuse is now clearly framed as a safeguarding children issue (Humphreys and Stanley 2006; Department of Health 2009; HM Government 2013) although is an area of practice that remains challenging (see for example Humphreys and Stanley 2006; Devaney 2008; 2009; Stanley et al. 2010; Humphreys and Absler 2011).

Hester (2011) has pointed out that domestic abuse is addressed in different practice and professional worlds and that these display very different understandings about the problem and those involved. Child protection social work has largely viewed the problem through the lens of children's safety and welfare but there have been a number of challenges in practice; these have included for example responding to and assessing high numbers of referrals (see for example Stanley et al. 2010) and unpicking complexity particularly in longstanding cases involving domestic abuse and other parental issues such as substance abuse or mental health (Devaney 2008; Cleaver et al. 2007). Others have pointed towards shortcomings in understanding the dynamics of domestic abuse particularly the ways in which a perpetrator's coercive control impacts upon women and on the mother-child relationship; there has also been a failure to effectively challenge men's violence (Humphreys and Stanley 2006; Radford and Hester 2006; Lapierre 2008; Devaney 2009; Williamson 2010; Keeling and van Wormer 2012).

The lack of engagement with men in child protection work has been widely noted (Milner 1996; Scourfield 2003). This is particularly evident in cases involving domestic abuse where violent men are seemingly invisible to agencies; as a result professional attention turns towards mothers who are often blamed for deficits in parenting, living with domestic abuse and failing to protect their children (Scourfield 2003; Brandon et al. 2008; Lapierre 2008; Devaney 2009; Keeling and van Wormer 2012). Professionals may also avoid men because of fears for their own safety, particularly in the context of home visiting, and also through lack of preparation for this aspect of child protection work (Ferguson 2012).

Perpetrator programmes provide the main form of intervention with domestically violent men in the UK. These are either court-mandated for known offenders or community-based programmes offered by specialist services providers; whilst the latter has a wider referral remit the voluntary nature of such provision means they are not widely available (Coy et al 2009). Domestic violence perpetrator programmes are usually offered on a time limited basis and in a weekly group session, and although variations in service provision are evident they all aim to challenge and change the perpetrators behaviour usually through a range of pro-feminist, cognitive behavioural and therapeutic approaches (Phillips et al 2013). The provision of linked safety and support services for women is considered an essential requirement to ensuring these programmes are safe (see Respect 2010; Featherstone and Fraser 2011; Westmareland and Kelly 2012). Whilst evidence suggests perpetrator programmes can be effective in stopping men using violence and improving womens' feelings of safety (see for example Dobash et al., 2000; Burton et al., 1998; Gondolf 2002; Respect 2010) the research is limited. This largely reflects methodological differences in how the evaluations have been carried out and the different populations of men in the study samples. There has also been a limited focus upon the impact of such perpetrator programmes on the welfare of children and young people (Alderson et al 2013).

There has been limited research interest or service provision concerned with working with domestically violent fathers (Featherstone and Peckover 2007; Ashley et al. 2011; Harne 2011) (Ashley et al. 2011). One notable example is a community focused initiative undertaken in Hull and described by Stanley et al. (2012) which used a social marketing approach, and built upon men's identities as fathers as a means to address male violence. This was achieved through encouraging such men to enroll on a domestic violence perpetrators' programme; this took place over a period of time and was conducted on both an individual and group basis. This work engaged with men's identity as fathers as a motivator for change. Indeed understanding the intersecting identities of those men who are both fathers and perpetrators of domestic abuse is advocated by a number of authors who recognize the need to develop work with domestically abusive fathers (Devaney 2009; Featherstone and Fraser 2012; Stanley et al. 2012). However in a review of existing programme provision Featherstone and Fraser (2011, p. 13) note the need for a pragmatic approach to 'delivering interventions to fathers who are violent in a variety of settings and formats'. This is reflected in the work undertaken by the (name of project) (authors own 2010) which is described in the following section.

### **The (name of project)**

The (name of project) is a specialist service based in (name of area) that works with women who are affected by domestic violence, their partners and children. Developed by a voluntary sector project with a long history of delivering specialist domestic violence services to women (name of provider) (name of project) was established in 2007 to meet an identified need to support women affected by domestic abuse **who continued in the relationship with their partner**. It was initially

funded from a government grant to tackle social exclusion but since 2011 has received local authority funding. This work is undertaken by a small team of experienced and skilled specialist workers (social work, probation, DV services) and guided by a 'model of working'. Key to this is a woman-centred approach, firmly focused upon domestic abuse and the safety of women and children. This is achieved by close working between team members, and clarity about information sharing, confidentiality and risk assessment. (Name of project) is delivered through a combination of assertive outreach, paired work and intensive case work including, in cases where women continue in their relationship, direct individual work with male perpetrators. (Name of project) aims to provide a flexible and responsive service for clients in order to achieve their engagement and provision of practical and emotional support.

Through offering services to both women and their male partners the (name of project) has developed an innovative approach to working with families and one that contrasts sharply with much existing provision (see Ashley et al. 2011; Phillips et al 2013). In particular existing approaches to working with male perpetrators of domestic violence constitute group based perpetrator programmes (and are not widely available) whilst case based work with families affected by domestic abuse does not incorporate specialist provision for both partners (Devaney 2009; Featherstone and Fraser 2012; Stanley et al. 2012). Indeed as noted above often men and male violence is not attended to in professional interventions with families, particularly in child protection social work (Milner 1996; Scourfield 2003; Devaney 2009; Keeling and van Wormer 2012). Indeed the (name of project) was developed by (name of organisation) as a specific response to a local identified need ie the lack of specific specialist domestic violence services for women who remained in a relationship with abusive men and who were facing ongoing multi-agency involvement concerned with the protection of children. In such cases the absence of specialist service provision particularly work directed at men and male violence was a noticeable



gap and identified by (name of organization) as an unmet need which this project was designed to address. In 2010 a small study was undertaken to examine the work of the (name of project) (authors own 2010) and findings are presented within this paper.

## **The Study**

This research aimed to examine if and how the (name of project) supported women and families affected by domestic abuse; it also explored the views of service users and outside agencies on the benefits and challenges of this work. The study was both small-scale and time-limited, and undertaken towards the end of the initial funding for this project. There were a number of elements to the study and both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for data collection and analysis (Patton 1990). A structured data collection tool which focused on client service pathways (ie length of involvement, visits, referrals to other agencies etc) was completed by project staff for a purposively selected sample of cases (29 women and 11 male partners) referred to them. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 5 women service users and 2 male partners who had engaged with the (name of project); these explored their views about the perceived benefits of engaging with the project, any barriers or difficulties they faced in working with (name of project), and views about future service development. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with 6 professionals from local agencies who had experience of the services offered by the (name of project); these included police, children's social care, specialist and voluntary sector workers. These interviews focused upon their views of the service delivered by (name of project), its contribution to partnership working, and the perceived benefits for women and their families; their views were also sought about any barriers and difficulties in service delivery, client engagement or partnership working, and future service development. In addition semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 4 project staff to examine the processes of project work with clients, the perceived benefits

and challenges, and the organisational context for service delivery. The sample sizes for all elements of the study were constrained by time and funding limits of the project. Data from the interviews was audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed by the researcher; where consent was not given for audio-recording, notes were taken during the interview. Data analysis was guided by a thematic approach and involved repeated examination of the data to find patterns of meaning, from which themes and codes were refined and developed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

This study received ethical approval from the University (name) and was undertaken according to established ethical principles which include for example clearly explaining to all participants the purpose of the research, gaining informed consent and ensuring anonymity for all respondents. Of key importance throughout was ensuring women and children's safety and this informed the sampling strategy; for example selection and contacting of service users to participate in the study was undertaken by (name of project) staff who also facilitated client access to attend the interviews through provision of transport etc. For similar reasons the selection of cases for the intensive sample was selected by the (name of project) team who completed a fully anonymised audit tool for each case. These measures ensured the researcher had no access to any identifying details about the service users who participated in the study.

## **Findings**

Keeping the focus on domestic abuse and men's responsibility for this is a key principle of the work undertaken by the (name of project). How this is achieved in practice can be illustrated in a number of ways and includes naming the abuse and violence, challenging behaviour and attitudes, individually and in multi-professional contexts, and undertaking direct work with men. These

elements are discussed below using examples from (name of project) work with individual women, direct work with men, and the (name of project) contribution to multi-agency work.

### ***Individual work with women***

An important element of the (name of project) is individual direct work with women. The study findings suggest that how (name of project) workers understand domestic abuse and its impact upon the everyday lives of women and children is central to their successful engagement and work with women clients. As one of the workers explained

*And for many of the women, they won't engage with services because they want the relationship. In some of the cases we will be looking at, this is the case - they want the relationship they are either wanting to stay or to go back. They are wanting the relationship but hoping things will be different. And some of the agencies who work with women - 'you've got to leave him' message, when she doesn't want to. You get this sense of disengagement (project worker).*

The findings suggest (name of project) is highly successful in engaging and working with women, particularly those deemed 'hard to reach' by other agencies. One of the unique aspects of the (name of project) is that they work with **women who remain in a relationship with their abusive partner** and service users who participated in the study reported they valued not being judged because of the continuing relationship. Other factors identified as important were the flexible and responsive mode of service delivery, and the provision of practical and emotional support. This included help with accessing legal orders and housing measures to enhance their safety, emotional support such as building self-esteem and confidence and having someone to talk to, and practical

support such as help with accessing benefits, information and access to services, being accompanied to court and solicitors, arranging a holiday, and advocacy in relation to health and other appointments. The findings also suggest that many women and children felt safer as a result of (name of project) involvement. This was reported by participants:

*I feel a lot safer, definitely .... more confident (woman service user).*

*Feel safer, feel better since (Name of project) got involved (woman service user)*

*I felt we were going to be stuck in a rut – my mum thought I would be dead in a year  
(woman service user)*

Some women service users reported their children were ‘*happier*’ and ‘*more confident*’ since they had engaged with the (name of project). Whilst this suggests the project has positive benefits for some children and young people the extent of this was not the focus of this study (see Alderson et al 2013).

An important feature of the (name of project) is the lengthy and intensive involvement with families. Analysis of the cases in this study found (name of project) was involved with many clients for longer than 12 months, and that this involved many contacts; for example some clients in the case sample received more than 30 contacts. As one professional observed

*I think there are cases where workers from the (Name of project) project have been able to get in to families, make a connection, spend more TIME with them than social workers have had available. And get a feel for, an understanding of, what's happening in the family that's actually going to allow for some shift (professional).*

Such intensive involvement, which enables (Name of project) workers to spend more time with clients and get to know them well, was viewed positively by service users who appreciated the time (name of project) workers spent with them. This suggests that (name of project) provided skilled and timely support to women and families affected by domestic abuse.

Working with vulnerable and socially excluded clients where domestic violence is a feature is however very challenging and the (name of project) was not able to engage with all those referred to them. In the intensive sample of 29 cases, 6 women did not engage, despite considerable effort to contact and work with them. They were also unable to achieve benefits for some of their clients. Of the intensive sample of 23 cases included within the evaluation for 3 women engagement with (name of project) did not lead to an improvement in their own safety although the safety of their children was addressed through the involvement of children's social care and were no longer living in the family home. For other cases reviewed there was no improvement in a woman's safety or support experience because they disengaged from (name of project) or the service discontinued due to circumstantial changes.

### ***Working with men***

(Name of project) were able, in some instances, to undertake direct work with men. This is offered in cases where women are wishing to remain with their male partner and is undertaken by a male worker with extensive experience of working with perpetrators of domestic abuse. The processes of direct work with men is undertaken through careful paired working between project staff; this involves staff working individually and intensively with the man and woman separately, while at the same time closely co-operating with each other to ensure women's safety is not jeopardized and to avoid collusion. This work is shaped by a clear understanding that what is being offered is not individual or couple counseling, or anger management. A consistent focus upon the abusive behavior is threaded throughout the work, and the project has clear guidelines about risk assessment, safety, confidentiality, and information sharing.

Undertaking direct work with men was positively viewed by professionals who participated in this study.

*(Name of project) works effectively with men, challenging the man and the choices he makes (professional).*

In this study interviews were undertaken with two men who had engaged with (Name of project) and worked with the male worker. Their views about this process and the service they received were both very positive.

*I was referred to (Name of project) through social services. At first (at point of referral) was a bit wary – because I don't speak to people or open up to people. But (male worker) put me at ease straight away. Some of it were difficult – like how I was feeling. It was easy*

*enough – it never felt hard or that I wanted to give up. .... I never had anyone to talk to before. I was very comfortable talking to (male worker) (male service user).*

*Good service. .... They helped me with the relationship. Without them – I would probably be in jail – and not still in the relationship. Without (Name of project) I would have closed in on myself and carried on as I was (male service user).*

Neither of these two men discussed the specifics of the work undertaken with them by (name of project) which would have focused upon the domestic violence and challenged their abusive behavior; this may not be surprising given both the difficulties of discussing this and the relatively short research contact. The case analysis however provided further details about this work which in both cases had required a lengthy and intense intervention. (Name of project) had been involved with one family for 18 months, undertaking 26 contacts with the male partner and 5 joint visits, as well as working directly with the woman; in the other case (name of project) was involved for 11 months, and undertook 13 contacts with the male partner and 9 joint visits, as well as working with the woman. There was some evidence that the behaviour of both these men had improved; over a 12 month period there had been no police call-outs for domestic abuse and their women partners had not reported any abusive behavior to the (name of project) workers. There was also evidence that the (name of project) was able to provide practical support for both these men such as help with accessing services and benefits. Whilst this suggests that (name of project) had achieved some success in working with these men, and in particular reducing the risk of further harm from domestic violence, the lengthy nature of the intervention and the relatively short time scales for judging the extent of behavior change must be noted.

Working with such men is by no means straightforward and unsurprisingly there were difficulties in engaging men with the project. Of the intensive sample of cases analysed for this study, (name of project) attempted to work with 12 male partners, but were unable to engage with the male partner in 2 cases, and achieved only limited engagement in a further 2 cases; the reasons given for this include a reluctance by these men to acknowledge or take responsibility for the abusive behavior that is taking place. **Although (name of project) faced difficulties in engaging with some men this needs to be understood in the wider context of the project work.** Importantly the time and processes (name of project) spent trying to engage with men occurs alongside women's own engagement with the project and in many cases this provides an opportunity for women to receive support themselves and better understand their situation, their partner's behavior, and importantly where responsibility for this lies. Consequently even though (name of project) was unable to engage with or work with men, particularly in relation to challenging or changing their behavior, this process helped many women make decisions about their future. This is discussed in the following data extract from an interview with a professional from an outside agency.

*One particular client, lots of issues, lots of agency involvement. And the (name of project) project was one of them. Domestic violence, there was child protection issues with the child as well. And he did come, we did introduce him and he did say he would engage but he didn't. And we tried to introduce him again and we tried to do some work and he wouldn't. And eventually the woman accepted that there was not going to be any changes. And she is now moved on, and she is in a, she recognises it is not about looking after him, it is about looking after her. And again if they see that service is there and they are not choosing to pick it up, I think it is a, it's a clear indication that then that is his choice (professional).*



(Name of project) have developed an innovative approach to working with families, offering a service that engages with women and their male partners. Through adopting an epistemic position which understands the gendered nature of domestic abuse and avoids minimizing or colluding with this, the project has been able to demonstrate positive improvements in the safety and support of women and children. Central to this is the continued focus of (name of project) work on the domestic abuse that is taking place and men's responsibility for this. This is further illustrated in the (name of project) contribution to multi-professional work which is discussed below.

### **Multi-professional work**

Keeping the focus on domestic abuse and men's responsibility for this was also evident in (name of project) work in multi-professional contexts. Whilst this was a key principle of the work undertaken this was often in direct contrast to much mainstream multi-agency practice. This is highlighted in the following data extract from an interview with a team worker

*You go to child protection conferences, core groups, TAC (team around the child) meetings and the focus is on the women, the woman protecting the children, the woman making the changes, the woman doing this, the woman doing that. Sometimes the man is not even mentioned. So I think it was that recognition that unless you approach that at all, how likely is it that you will be able to make changes for improvement (project worker).*

(Name of project) focus upon the domestic abuse, naming the violence and abuse that is taking place and where responsibility for it lies. This involves challenging gendered practices in

child protection work and shifting the professional gaze towards men and their risks they pose. This process was clearly described by a number of professionals who took part in this study.

*At Child Protection Case conferences (Name of project) seemed to get a good balance because they were advocating for the woman but also being very honest about the situation and not glossing over the risks. These meetings are hard for women because often the blame is put on women. (Name of project) were very good at advocating for women and putting blame on the perpetrator (professional).*

For children, child protection processes and meetings are a crucial stage for reducing risks and enhancing their safety. The (name of project) team contribution to multi-agency child protection work was considered by some professionals to enhance the safeguarding of children. This was attributed to the knowledge and clarity they brought to such discussions about domestic violence risks, and is illustrated in the following data extract from a social care professional.

*It goes back to being very clear about identifying where the risks are, and they are very good at that. And so the plan can be developed out of that. And I think what, where they are involved close in with families, they are also able to highlight at an early stage if things are getting worse, if risks are increasing, if he is back in the home, whatever that may be. and they er pass information on about whatever is happening effectively (professional).*

Professionals who participated in the study observed that expert knowledge of domestic violence, clarity about the risks this poses for children and women and the changes that need to take place to reduce these risks and thus enhance safety, enabled the (name of project) workers to make

an important contribution to the development and implementation of child protection plans. An example of this is illustrated in the following data extract.

*What workers in the (Name of project) project are very good at doing is remaining sort of - keeping that engagement with parents, keeping that relationship with them, and being very clear about what the risks are. And how risky certain things are. And where responsibility for behaviours lie. And I mean a concrete example of that would be the amount of times people will try to say, to look at alcohol as a reason. Whereas workers in (Name of project) will be very clear that it is not a reason, it is effectively an excuse, it is used so they can blame something rather than themselves and take responsibility for it. And that's something that comes up quite often and I think that's once the victims get a grasp of that, once other professionals get a grasp of that. There is something quite easy about - oh we can look at your alcohol, we can do this- but actually we need to look at behaviour (professional).*

However as illustrated in the following quote this approach to domestic violence work is in sharp contrast to much mainstream professional work, where men are rarely engaged with or challenged.

*I'm quite shocked by the number of professionals from other agencies who have had to acknowledge, because of the way we work, that they are actually frightened of the men. And there is this sense at meetings that men are not to be challenged .... they are just not challenged about their behaviour. .... We are quite strong when we go to meetings talking about the problems, or the cause of the problems for children. So we don't sit for 40 minutes*

*listening as they say yes the children, they have had their immunisations, they have registered with a dentist (project worker).*

The (name of project) focus on men and domestic abuse is a persistent theme throughout the findings and in direct contrast to much professional practice where a lack of attention towards men and male violence, particularly in child protection work is apparent. Too often a holistic discourse diverts professional attention towards mothering or other presenting issues, and in so doing obscures and thus fails to address the underpinning male violence (Scourfield 2003; Keeling and van Wormer 2012). This is described in the following data extract from an interview with a (Name of project) project worker.

*The project was around always saying it is about safety, but acknowledging that if you don't bring the man into the room - not necessarily physically. But if he's not in there when you are looking at a support plan, when you are looking at a safety plan, when you are looking at child protection plans. If he is just left out there somewhere, and the only option you are giving to a woman is you are going to a refuge or the children are gone, or whatever. Without any sort of addressing, holding men accountable for their behaviour. .... I think we have achieved holding men accountable for their behaviour in that process. And I think that is a really important thing, and I don't think it is done often enough (project worker).*

## **Study Limitations**

**This paper reports a small study and limitations are acknowledged. These include the time limited nature of the study which took place at the end of initial funding for the (name of project);**

this shaped the study design and placed limitations upon the scope of the study such as the type of data collection tools that were utilized and the time frame for evaluating behaviour change for men who engaged with the project. The impact of the (name of project) upon children and young people was also not the focus of this study and this to some extent reflects wider concerns about the extent to which children and young people are considered in this type of specialist service provision (see Alderson et al 2013). These study limitations however reflect the real world nature of the (name of project) which was developed as an innovative but responsive piece of work to an identified local need and which was established amidst the context of funding and service provision constraints, particularly those facing the voluntary, specialist services sector (Duffy and Hyde 2011).

## **Discussion**

Domestic abuse is a widespread problem which affects the lives of many families with children (Humphreys and Stanley 2006). There have been considerable developments in policy and practice which aim to better support women and children affected by domestic abuse, most notably the Violence Against Women and Girls initiative which aims to streamline work in this area and importantly adopts a gendered approach to addressing this problem (Home Office 2012). Despite this however, shortcomings remain in policy and practice, most notably in cases involving child protection and complex longstanding cases where domestic abuse is inadequately addressed and women and children's safety and support needs are poorly if at all met (Cleaver et al 2007; Radford and Hester 2006; Devaney 2008; Stanley *et al* 2010; Humphreys and Absler 2011; Keeling and van Wormer 2012). Whilst some have called for a new approach to addressing this complex and multi-faceted problem (Farmer and Callan 2012) there are dangers in failing to recognize the gendered nature of domestic abuse particularly for frontline practitioners who work with children and families. One of these is the failure to engage with men or keep the focus of multi-agency work on

abusive men and their behavior (Milner 1996; Devaney 2009; Humphreys and Absler 2011; Scourfield 2003).

This paper has described the work of the (name of project) based at (name of area) an innovative specialist domestic abuse project that undertakes intensive work with women affected by domestic abuse and their partners. (Name of project) recognized the gendered orientation of much child protection work, and attempted to address this by shifting their focus towards men and their abusive behavior. One of the ways they achieved this was to ensure that 'domestic abuse' and men's behaviour had a central place on the practice agenda and was recognised and addressed, particularly within multi-agency contexts. Of key importance to the (name of project) model of working is the central focus on the safety of women and children, and understanding, assessing and addressing the risks and responsibilities of the domestic violence behaviours. (Name of project) was also successful at keeping the focus on, and addressing, domestic violence in multi-agency child protection work to ensure the safety of women and children.

The (name of project) has developed a means of working with families affected by domestic abuse which is both innovative and challenging. This is because it pro-actively works with families where there is domestic abuse and women remain in the relationship. In contrast to other programmes that provide services to domestically violent fathers, the (name of project) offers a case based approach designed to meet the individual needs of the woman and her partner; this is underpinned by a gendered approach to addressing male violence, assessing and acknowledging risks and being clear about where responsibility for these lie. As this paper has shown this requires a skilled and intensive intervention with clients and although the findings reported in this paper suggest the (name of project) is displaying some positive benefits for women and children they are

working with - and indeed some evidence of behaviour change for those few men who have engaged with the project – some further evaluative work is needed. Nevertheless the paper provides initial evidence about an important innovation developed by a voluntary sector organisation and designed to meet an identified gap in service provision.

## Conclusion

The (name of project) project was established by (name of provider) in response to an identified local need to provide tailored support to women involved in an abusive relationship and their partners. (Name of project) is an innovative project and illustrates the important role service user led organizations can play in developing services which meet clients' needs (Duffy and Hyde 2011). Whilst this paper reports a small study, the findings suggest (name of project) offers valued provision which demonstrates new directions for working with high risk families. Some of the learning from this project has been developed by (name of provider) in further work undertaken with LCSBs in (name of region); this has particularly focused upon improving multi-agency working in relation to safeguarding children and domestic abuse (see authors with colleagues 2013). The work of the (name of project) reported here however provides a number of important messages for practitioners and policy makers working within this field; these include the need for social workers and other professionals to better understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and its impact on women and children - central to this is the need to keep the focus upon men, their abusive behavior and the risks they pose towards women and children. This is important in both supporting women and children as well as in holding men accountable. Achieving this will require a shift in the professional gaze to ensure men are no longer invisible in child protection work; this will require

policy and practice development at national, local, agency and professional level to ensure men no longer just 'get away with it' (Featherstone and Peckover 2007).



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