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Engaging with Male perpetrators of Domestic Violence: An Exploration of the Experiences and Perspectives of Child Protection Social Workers

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Abstract

This research is concerned with examining the experiences and perspectives of child protection social workers in relation to engaging with male perpetrators of domestic violence. The main objective of this study is to ascertain if practitioners experience barriers or challenges that prohibit them from working with men who have a history of violence. In carrying out this research, a review of the literature relevant to this topic area was undertaken. Interviews were also conducted with child protection social workers, in order to obtain their views. The results of this study indicate that there are a number of barriers that practitioners can encounter in relation to engaging with men, in cases of domestic violence. The recommendations stemming from this study are that a national social work policy on domestic violence and that the establishment of inter-agency forums in every social services area would be positive step forward. It is considered that these two key measures would significantly assist in addressing the issue of domestic violence and in aiding practitioners in their engagement with perpetrators.

Keywords: Male perpetrators of domestic violence; barriers to engagement; the perspectives of child protection social workers

Introduction

As well as being a worrying problem within Irish society¹⁹, domestic violence²⁰ is also a significant issue within the realm of child protection. For women who are mothers, domestic violence can impact greatly on their parenting capacity (Stephens, 1999 cited in Holt *et al.*, 2008) and where such abuse is continuous the mother-child relationship can also suffer (Lloyd, 1995 cited in Holt, 2003). In addition to this, various studies reveal that there is undoubtedly a strong link between domestic violence and child abuse (Appel and Holden, 1998; Elderson, 1999; Hester, Pearson and Harwin, 2000; Holt *et al.*, 2008 cited in Buckley *et al.*, 2011). It is also noteworthy to mention that the impact on children who have observed or heard violence taking place is found to be similar to that of children who have been directly abused (The Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women, 1997:30 cited in Hogan and O' Reilly, 2007).

In the past, the child protection system has been criticised for failing to seriously consider domestic violence as an issue connected to child welfare. However in practice today, the profession has become increasingly more aware of the significance of domestic violence within the child protection arena (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Stanley *et al.*, 2010). This raised consciousness could be accredited to the messages from research articulating the risks posed to children, as well as the fact that exposure to domestic violence is now categorised as a form of emotional abuse under the guidelines set out in *Children First* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011).

Leaving this particular issue behind, criticisms have since moved to focus on the type of response that is provided by child protection agencies. One of the current criticisms facing practitioners is that where domestic violence is present, mothers tend to be held accountable even when they are not the alleged abuser (Dempster, 1994 cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999). Child protection workers have been condemned for working solely with the mother often in a scrutinizing and judgemental manner whilst in turn, they place little or no emphasis on confronting the male perpetrator (Humphreys, 2000; Milner, 1993; O' Hagan and

¹⁹ According to Mullender and Morley (1994), domestic violence perpetrated against women is one of the most common forms of family violence around the world. Furthermore COSC (2010) highlights that the information available on the prevalence of domestic violence in Ireland represents the global trend.

²⁰ Adopting the definition by Watson and Parsons (2005:52), domestic violence can be defined as: 'A pattern of physical, emotional or sexual behaviour between partners in an intimate relationship that causes, or risks causing, significant negative consequences for the person affected'. Whilst it is acknowledged that men can also be victims, this study will focus on violence perpetrated against women by men.

Dillenburg 1995; Stanley, 1997 cited in Humphreys and Stanley, 2006; Humphreys and Absler, 2011). *'The common practice is to put pressure on women to get violent and abusive men out of the home rather than to engage with men about their behaviour'* (Scourfield, 2006:442). In light of these criticisms, this study will aim to explore why some child protection workers are failing to engage with men even when they are the perpetrators of the domestic violence.

Statutory responses to domestic violence and child protection guidelines

Section three of the Child Care Act 1991 provides the HSE with a statutory duty to promote the welfare of children and to investigate any allegations of abuse. This duty extends into the realm of domestic violence because as previously noted exposure to domestic violence is a form of emotional abuse under the *Children First* guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). Although child protection workers have been condemned for allowing perpetrators of domestic violence to fade into the background, it appears that there is little guidance in the form of a comprehensive national policy or strategy document to guide social workers on this issue. Campbell *et al.* (2010) notes that there tends to be guidance on the professional response to women and children in a domestic violence situation, however guidance on the approach to be taken in responding to male perpetrators is limited. This appears evident in the new Health Service Executive (HSE) *Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook* (HSE, 2011). Although this document is intended to be used as a *'quick reference'* by practitioners, nevertheless there is limited guidance in regards to responding to perpetrators (HSE, 2011). Under the section *'Social Work Procedures and Practices'*, the majority of information covers the key factors that professionals should consider when responding to children and women in an abusive situation.

The HSE also have a new policy, the *HSE Policy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence*, which is a document that is concerned with implementing a co-ordinated HSE response in order to combat the issue of domestic violence. The policy sets out important core principles of practice as well as high level goals and actions, but it does not provide practitioners with a step by step guide in responding to domestic violence or in working with perpetrators (HSE, February 2010). It is noteworthy that a positive step towards implementing a specific social work policy on domestic violence has been taken by the HSE Dublin South West Social Work Children and Families Department. Within their department

they have developed *A Practice Document on Domestic Violence- A Guide Towards Working with Children and Families*, which outlines fourteen points which guide social workers in working with perpetrators (HSE, March 2010).

Lacking knowledge about the complexities of domestic violence

In identifying the blocks to good social work intervention, Holt (2008) acknowledged that limited understanding about the complexities of domestic violence may lead to practitioners undervaluing or discounting the seriousness of the problem. In a study of British child protection public inquiries, Munro (1998) found that social work practitioners frequently disregarded the mother's male partner when undertaking an assessment. Overall Munro found that the absence of an explicit knowledge base was a significant factor contributing to this oversight. For example she noted a lack of awareness by social workers in regards to the connection between domestic violence and child abuse (cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999). Raising a similar point, Postmus and Merritt (2010) highlight that a lack of sufficient knowledge frequently leads to child protection workers assuming that the safest response is to encourage the mother to remove herself and her children from the abusive situation. In contrast, the literature highlights that this in fact does not ensure safety and can actually lead to an escalation of the violence²¹ (Mills *et al.*, 2000; Brown, 2006 cited in Featherstone and Peckover, 2007).

Domestic violence education and training

Despite the need for comprehensive domestic violence training, challenges with formal education have been raised within the literature. Mc Williams and Mc Kiernan (1993:67) as well as Mullender (1996) based on her personal experience, believe that social work training courses take an '*ad hoc approach*' when it comes to domestic violence (cited in Mullender, 1996:90). Postmus and Merritt (2010) add that because domestic violence is not mandatory on many of the social work course curricula, practitioners are leaving college with a lack of knowledge about this complex issue. Scourfield (2006:444) also criticises both social work courses and agencies, highlighting that '*the skills and knowledge needed for engaging men are not seen as core learning needs*'. The HSE policy on domestic violence states that one of the principles which will be core to all work in the HSE is that those responding to domestic violence must have adequate, on-going training (HSE, February 2010). Although training

²¹ According to Harlow (1991) women who leave an abusive partner report violence fourteen times as often as women who are still residing with the perpetrator (cited in Mills *et al.*, 2000).

alone will not fully address the lack of engagement with perpetrators, it is certainly considered a vital step forward. This is indicated by a US²² study which found that following a domestic violence training course, in line with the initial training goals, participants reported that they were more likely to hold perpetrators accountable and less likely to place responsibility with the non-abusing parent (Saunders and Anderson, 2000).

Gendered practice within child protection work

Child protection social work has an established history of focusing on mothers which is well documented within the literature. This tradition is of relevance here as the focus often remains even when the mother is not the alleged abuser. This gender bias has led to varying explanations (O' Hagan and Dillenberger, 1995 cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999). For example, O' Hagan (1997:28) states that 'the structure, guidelines and procedures of the organisation may in fact make it extremely difficult for the worker not to avoid men' (cited in Scourfield, 2003:22). This point may resonate with the Irish system because as previously noted, there appears to be a lack of guidance provided to social workers in relation to engaging with male perpetrators.

A more dominant explanation for the gendered practice within social work is the legacy of patriarchal ideology. Christie (2001) highlights that in order to gain an understanding of the position of male service users in social work, it needs to be borne in mind that traditionally in Ireland within the family sphere, the man was typically held to be the wage earner. On the other hand, the woman was expected to fall into the role of homemaker and mother (cited in Scourfield, 2006; Thompson, 2001). In addition, a key component of patriarchal ideology is that parenting is essentially seen as mothering (Thompson, 2001). Christie (2001) highlights that patriarchal ideology has left a deep seated legacy within the Irish child protection system. The result of which is that women are seen as the primary caregiver and that men are 'not being considered the business of child protection workers', even in situations where they are the perpetrator of domestic violence (cited in Scourfield, 2006:441).

Hooper (1992b) states that child protection work is predominately focused on parental accountability more so than causality, where 'rather than looking to intervene with abusers;

²² Two hundred and twenty five practitioners took part in an evaluation of a two day domestic violence training course for child protection workers and supervisors.

officials look to strengthen the protection of the child by non-abusing parents' (cited in Scourfield, 2001:83). Therefore in cases where there is domestic violence being perpetrated by the man, the onus for protecting the children is placed with the mother. In a study undertaken by Scourfield (2001:84), he found that engaging with females is so engrained in child protection practice 'as to be, to an extent, unquestioned'. His study revealed that in domestic violence cases, social workers concentrated on the mother and that she was held accountable for protecting her children. Essentially, Scourfield's study found that '[w]orking with abusive men in anyway is not an option. The response is to put pressure on her to get him out' (2001:84).

At this point it is evident that men have the ability to minimise or even avoid responsibility for their abusive behaviour because practitioners are influenced by the differing connotations of fatherhood and motherhood. It has been held that fatherhood is not as widely structured to the extent that motherhood is (Milner, 1996:117; Johnson, 1988 cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999). Abbott and Wallace (1990) argue that the mothering role is well established and that it is assumed to be a role for life which comes with innate qualities such as love and nurturance. Milner (1996) highlights that child protection practitioners unintentionally collude with the minimisation of men's roles and in doing so also minimise or overlook their abusive behaviour. Mullender (1996) also highlights this minimisation stating that in Maynard's research none of the social workers took a stand against the male perpetrator 'confronting them about their actions, telling them that they could lose their children if they did not stop, as wives were told could happen' (Maynard, 1985:131 cited in Mullender, 1996:76)

The fear of engaging with violent men

In considering the blocks to appropriate social work intervention, Holt (2003) highlights that social workers' fear of violent men was a common theme to emerge from a number of British child protection inquiries. In a study of these cases, Munro (1998) found that social work practitioners had often disregarded the mother's male partner when undertaking their assessment. She highlighted that this was partly due to the fear of engaging with a potentially abusive man (cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999). In accordance with the latter, Stanley (1997) also states that the potential for violent men to frighten female social workers is a key factor which contributes to the 'invisible men that pervade the child protection system'. She adds

that worryingly it is the ‘very dangerousness’ surrounding these men that lead to them being overlooked by social workers (cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999:210).

Nonetheless the fear held by some practitioners cannot be underestimated as violence²³ against social workers is a concerning issue which has been highlighted in a recent study undertaken by Community Care in the UK, it was revealed that nine out of ten social workers have been subjected to some form of violence whilst at work. In families where there is alleged domestic abuse, practitioners have a responsibility to investigate the violence and in doing so the worker begins to thread on the abusers territory. If the worker engages directly with the perpetrator then he/she is entering into and thus threatening the abusers domain (Wilmot, 1998 cited in Littlechild and Bourke, 2006). At this point social workers are frequently met with blatant intimidation (Reder *et al.*, 1993 cited in Milner, 1996). Hanmer and Statham (1988) warn that if social workers are female, then there is a danger that they could be drawn into a control process comparable to that experienced by the victim (cited in Mullender, 1996). Child protection workers can experience fear resembling that felt by the victim and her children. Although this fear is induced by a similar means (through the dynamics of power and control); the perpetrator’s intention tends to differ. The aim is generally to deter practitioners from their investigations (Littlechild, 2000, 2002b cited in Littlechild and Bourke, 2006).

Indeed in the past, violent men have used intimidation and violence as a means of resisting the involvement of social work services (Reder *et al.*, 1993 cited in Milner, 1996). For example, this was evident in a number of the UK child protection inquiry cases. The inquiry reports into Ainlee Labonte’s death found that a ‘paralysis of action’ had resulted because professionals were afraid of the parents (Harris and Leather, 2011:3). In Ireland, the use of intimidation to keep social workers at arm’s length was also evident in the West of Ireland case (North Western Health Board, 1998 cited in Holt, 2003). The children within this case suffered systematic physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their father. The West of Ireland case report highlights that social workers were also in fear of Mr McColgan, who

²³ In line with the European Commission, violence against staff can be defined as any incident where an individual is ‘abused, threatened, or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health’ (Wynne *et al.*, 1997:2 cited in Harris and Leather, 2011:2).

refused staff entry into the family home. There was an issue of personal safety for the case worker involved and there was a direction not to carry out any home visits (Gibbons, 2011).

Methods and Methodology

Qualitative research is a comprehensive approach to the study of social phenomena. It is practical, natural, and it is grounded in peoples lived experiences (Marshall and Rossman, 2006:2). Guided by the aims of this research, a qualitative approach was adopted as it is considered to be ‘the best way of getting the insider’s perspective’, which is essentially what this study aimed to achieve (Punch, 2005:238). Furthermore for the purpose of this research an interpretivist perspective was also employed. The interpretive paradigm moves firmly away from the approach of scientifically measuring social phenomena. In contrast, this perspective strives to make sense of the social world as it stands from the view point of individual experience (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). This framework allowed the researcher the opportunity to unearth and gain an insight into the experiences of child protection workers in regards to working with male perpetrators (Carey, 2009). This was significant as this study aimed to explore if practitioners experience barriers or challenges to working with men who have a history of violence.

In researching this topic area, both primary and secondary research methods were used. The primary research was undertaken by carrying out interviews with child protection workers. This method was chosen as it enabled the researcher to gain a direct insight into the views and experiences of participants, which would not have been possible using secondary research alone.

Sampling and recruitment

Non-probability sampling in the form of purposive sampling was the method used in this study, as it enabled the researcher to deliberately choose participants who had known characteristics that were of value to the research. (Kane and O’ Reilly-De Brun, 2001:126). Participants were selected on the basis that they were currently working as child protection workers and that they also had experience of working with the issue of domestic violence. This sampling technique was deemed to be the most viable way of ensuring that the researcher obtained ‘information rich material’ from the participants (Kane and O’ Reilly-De Brun, 2001:34). The researcher sought to recruit the participants from two different child

protection departments. An information letter and a consent form were sent to each child protection worker in their departments. Each of the letters were enclosed with a stamped, self-addressed envelope and practitioners were asked to sign and return the consent form if they were interested in participating. Five participants replied in total and each of these respondents fitted the necessary criteria and were therefore included in this study. Their practice experience ranged from one and a half to ten years.

Interviews were used as the data collection tool as they are likely to capture rich insights into an individual's experiences, beliefs, attitudes and feelings (May, 2001:120). As Punch (2005:196) highlights it is 'one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others'. The interviews that were conducted were semi-structured. Overall five female child protection workers were interviewed, their practice experience ranged from one and a half years to ten years.

Ethical considerations

Firstly, in order to uphold the anonymity of participants, all identifiers were removed from the research, including the transcripts and the audiotapes. In addition the agencies or the region where the research was carried out are not identified within this project. Secondly, given the prevalence of domestic violence in Ireland²⁴, this study covers a sensitive topic, which could be experienced as a personal issue by any of the research participants. In light of this, measures were taken to ensure that the respondents were safeguarded as much as possible from any harm or distress, which may have resulted from the research. Following the interviews, contact information on confidential services offering support to families, friends and victims of domestic violence were given to each participant.

Limitations

Due to the limited timeframe afforded, it was only possible to carry out a small research project. Thus being a small scale, qualitative study including five practitioners, the findings are only applicable to the sample involved. Therefore, a limitation is that the results deriving from this study are not generalizable to the wider population of child protection workers.

In addition, although there are many strengths to using interviews as the data collection tool in social research, they can also impose limitations. Information that is gathered from

²⁴ One in seven women and one in sixteen men have been subjected to severe domestic violence at some stage in their lives (Watson and Parsons, 2005:24).

interviews (as in the case of this study) is based on what participants say rather than what they do. Denscombe (2003) argues that the two may not always match, in that what participants say is not always what they might think or do.

Key findings and analysis²⁵

The lack of practice guidelines informing the response to domestic violence

When participants were asked about the policies and procedures guiding the child protection response to domestic violence, the consistent reply was that they were not aware of any specific guidelines or procedures, in addition to their standard protocol. The social workers interviewed stated that they were guided by ‘various bits and pieces’ (Julie), namely the Child Care Act 1991, the Domestic Violence Act 1996, the Children First Guidelines, and the new HSE policy on domestic violence. In regard to the latter two, which both make reference to domestic violence, participants highlighted that they ‘are not specifically designed for social workers’ (Sarah) and that they do not offer a comprehensive guide on the response to be taken in the context of domestic violence.

Again when asked, participants indicated that they were not aware of any specific policies or guidelines informing their work with male perpetrators. The majority of participants highlighted that they are predominately guided towards responding to women and children. Making this point, Julie explained that they are ‘a kind of negative guideline’, elaborating she stated: ‘in a domestic violence situation...typical scenario would be that the lady is asked to leave with the children ... and some of the women have asked why do we have to leave. Why is it not the perpetrator...it is a good point’. Furthermore referring to the lack of guidance in regard to working with perpetrators, Jane highlighted: ‘Just thinking of it, just in relation to that one at the moment, I can’t see me meeting the male perpetrator... probably because there is no protocol for doing that’. This view is supported by O’ Hagan (1997:28) who states that the ‘structure, guidelines and procedures of the organisation’ may in fact make it difficult for practitioners ‘not to avoid men’ (cited in Scourfield, 2003:22).

The majority of interviewees said that they would benefit from clearer guidelines around responding to domestic violence and also in regard to working with male perpetrators: ‘It

²⁵ In order to uphold the anonymity of participants, participants names were replaced with pseudonyms.

would be nice to have more to cling on to I think, when you're in the middle of it all you know, definitely yeah' (Jane).

An imbalance between working with the victim and the perpetrator

Each participant in this sample asserted that they had experience of working with male perpetrators. It is noteworthy however; that all participants stated that in relation to domestic violence, the majority of their work revolves around the victim and her children. This was aptly communicated by Julie who stated 'no, guilty as charged, we work more with the women and children actually, then the male perpetrator'. A common theme which emerged to explain this imbalance was that when participants would endeavour to meet with perpetrators, they commonly found that they were 'very difficult to engage' (Mary). They highlighted that often the perpetrators would not accept or admit that their actions were wrong and that they would frequently seek to place blame on the victim. Lucy illustrated this point noting; 'I think they are kind of oblivious, a lot of the male perpetrators, that it's not them, it's the victim that needs to change'.

Men currently 'out of the picture'

A second reason for this disparity articulated by the participants, is that frequently when they become involved with the family the father is absent, often because there is a barring order in place or because the woman is residing in a refuge. In these cases participants highlighted that their focus then lies with supporting the mother and her children. During the interview, Jane became more conscious of this pattern stating; 'as I am talking on I am starting to see you know that if dads are gone we tend to leave them gone'. A number of participants cited the pressures of time and heavy workloads as a barrier to seeking to engage with perpetrators who are currently absent. Mary stated 'you are not going to spend your time chasing after him'. This finding correlates with international literature which highlights that many child protection systems are 'overworked and overwhelmed'. In turn, this is contributing to a narrower response being taken by some social workers in cases of domestic violence (Echlin and Marshall, 1995:179 cited in Holt, 2003:57).

Gendered practice

Again reflecting back, the participants in this study clearly articulated that within the context of domestic violence their work is mainly with the victim and not with the perpetrator.

Another reason for this which was echoed throughout the interviews by the majority of participants was that mothers were seen to be the primary caregiver and therefore the one responsible for their children in cases of domestic violence: 'I think what happens in child protection is that we move to the mother to protect the children and not engage the father, who is the perpetrator, the onus is on the mother, to look for her to support and protect the children, which is not necessarily right' (Lucy). This is consistent with the view put forward by Hooper (1992b) that child protection work is predominately focused on parental accountability more so than causality, where 'rather than looking to intervene with abusers; officials look to strengthen the protection of the child by non-abusing parents' (cited in Scourfield, 2001:83). In addition, this point also correlates with Christie's (2001) view that the legacy of patriarchal ideology means that within the child protection system women are seen as the primary caregiver and that men are not 'being considered the business of child protection workers', even when they are the perpetrators (cited in Scourfield, 2006:441).

College training

When participants were asked if their social work training had adequately prepared them for responding to domestic violence, the answer provided by Julie that 'social work education is very tenuous and so we know a little bit about an awful lot of things but not very specified' was one which was reiterated by the majority of participants. Interviewees spoke about the topic being 'touched on' (Lucy) but 'not being investigated as much as it should be' (Sarah). Participants also unanimously highlighted that they had received no specific college training or education, in relation to working with male perpetrators. This finding verifies the criticism held by Sourfield (2006:444) that social work courses do not see the knowledge and skills needed for engaging with men as 'core learning needs'.

Continuous professional development (CPD)

The majority of participants revealed that they had not undertaken any CPD in the area of domestic violence, since completing their formal social work education. In addition, these respondents were not aware of any such training being provided by the HSE. The remainder (Julie), revealed that she had attended a number of domestic violence courses since completing college. In accordance with the majority, she noted that 'there is nothing provided by the HSE, it's more that you have to do them in your own time and with your own cost'. The majority of participants who had not undertaken any CPD, voiced the need for more

domestic violence training; ‘we need something a bit more specific to that area’ (Sarah). The theory around domestic violence was also highlighted: ‘we are probably lacking the theoretical knowledge in around domestic violence...ah I think our skills base and our awareness to ah responding to domestic violence and the male perpetrator is lacking certainly in a lot of ways’ (Lucy).

The lack of college education on domestic violence, as well as the lack of specific continuous professional training undertaken by the majority of participants is an issue of concern. This is particularly the case when viewed in light of Munro’s (1998) findings. In a study of British child death inquiries, she found that the absence of an explicit knowledge base on domestic violence was a significant factor which contributed to practitioners over-looking the mother’s male partner, when undertaking their assessments (cited in Daniel and Taylor, 1999).

Fear as a barrier

When participants were asked if social workers experienced barriers to working with male perpetrators, a consistent response to emerge was that if significant fear was felt by a practitioner, then this could create an obstacle deterring them from engaging with a violent man. Participants spoke about the ‘danger’ (Sarah) and the fear of ‘intimidation’ (Lucy) that can stem from some domestic violence cases. It is noteworthy that many of the interviewees mentioned that the barrier to engagement, caused by fear would depend considerably on the ‘level of aggression or violence that was present’ (Sarah). Mary reiterated how feelings of fear can create a hurdle for practitioners, stating: ‘if you have your woman or children absolutely trashed to bits...your own fears would put down barriers for you’. Furthermore, Jane also spoke about how fear kept her from meeting with a perpetrator. Referring to an older ‘extremely serious case’, Jane noted that ‘he was extremely violent and you know... there was no way you’d be meeting with him’. These views are consistent with that of Stanley (1997) who recognised that violent men have the potential to frighten female social workers. Furthermore she added that it is the very ‘dangerousness’ surrounding these men that often lead to them being overlooked.

Conclusion

In summation, this study found that child protection workers encounter a number of individual, structural and societal barriers that can influence them away from engaging with

male perpetrators. It was revealed by the participants in this study that they are not guided towards working with violent men by any social work practice policy on domestic violence; which in turn is reinforcing the gendered nature of the work. Humphreys (1998:84) states that ‘shifting the lens of child protection to tackle men’s behaviour... requires a substantial shift in focus’ and highlights that this complex issue cannot be tackled by one practitioner alone. The literature highlights that inter-agency initiatives provide an opportunity for child protection departments to work in collaboration with other relevant agencies and organisations. When steered well, these forums can help to combat many of the challenges currently facing child protection workers in relation to working with perpetrators. For example, it would allow for issues such as fear and inexperience etc. to be addressed at a structural level. Essentially, it would seem that the inter-agency approach promoted within the HSE policy on domestic violence, needs to be seriously encouraged and supported by the government. This needs to happen if child protection agencies can truly begin to move towards achieving the rhetoric of supporting women and children, whilst also holding violent men accountable. A lack of education and training among participants on the issue of domestic violence and in relation to engaging with male perpetrators was also a key issue highlighted in this study. Again specific training in this area, particularly in relation to working with perpetrators is a recommendation suggested by the researcher. It is considered that such provision would provide practitioners with the knowledge and skills necessary to assist them in engaging effectively with violent men. Similarly, this step may also aid participants to overcome one of the barriers they identified, which was that perpetrators are often very difficult to engage with.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that a comprehensive national policy or practice guideline needs to be implemented in all child protection social work service departments. This policy should guide practitioners specifically around responding to domestic violence and also in relation to responding to male perpetrators.
2. To address the shortfalls in the provision of domestic violence education and training it is recommended that:
 - a. A comprehensive module specifically focusing on domestic violence should be incorporated into every social work training course, so that students are qualifying with a thorough knowledge and awareness about the complexities of this issue.

- b. Within the HSE policy on domestic violence under their core principles of good practice, the HSE states that those 'responding to domestic violence... must have appropriate training and on-going education' (HSE, February 2010:13). Therefore it is recommended that the HSE implement this core principle by providing regular in-service training on domestic violence, as well as training specifically designed towards working with male perpetrators.
3. It is proposed that all child protection departments should have established policy asserting that all practitioners must be accompanied by a member of An Garda Síochána, when meeting with a perpetrator. This is a recommendation which has also been proposed by Stanley and Humphreys (2006).

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