

Poverty, social inequality and domestic abuse: The impact on children

Implications for Social Work Practice



iStock.com/MStudioImages



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers

Foreword

A recent report by the Home Office stated that 'domestic abuse can happen to anyone, anywhere'¹.

While this is true, the research summarised here shows that it is women who are poor who are more likely to suffer domestic abuse, they suffer domestic abuse more often and are the victims of more types of abuse (physical violence, sexual abuse and coercive control). Mums who were the poorest and the youngest were most likely of all to suffer from domestic abuse.

The research drew on the experiences of some 5,000 children, their mums and some of their dads and explores many important specifics, for example, which mums are likely to experience domestic abuse and who is likely to report it; how children are affected by domestic abuse – their social and emotional development – and the risk of physical punishment; and how domestic abuse affects the mum/child relationship.

There are thus important implications for social work practice: for assessment, for understanding the needs of the

child, the impact on attachment and determining contact arrangements.

Both the size of the evidence base, and the very specific implications for social work practice make this a highly significant piece of research. Thanks to the Nuffield Foundation who funded this work, Professor John Devaney who made the connection with BASW, and the author of this report, Dr Valeria Skafida.

Luke Geoghegan
Head of Policy and Research, BASW



Summary

Using data from survey of just over 5000 children living in Scotland, this research examined how poverty and other factors (age, education) impact on mums experiencing domestic violence and the effects on their children. The research also looked at the involvement of police and social services in such situations.

Key findings

- The poorest mums were more likely to experience domestic abuse. The research divided the mums into five income groups (lowest income group to highest income group). 20% of mums in the lowest income group (incomes of less than £12,000) experienced domestic abuse compared to 7% in the highest income group. Mums in the lowest income group also experienced more types of abuse (physical violence, sexual abuse and coercive control) and more often, compared to those on the highest incomes (13% compared to 3%).



- Younger mums were more likely to report domestic abuse. 19% of mums aged under 20 had experienced abuse, compared to 8% among mothers aged 40 years or older when their child was born.
- Younger mums who were the poorest reported the highest levels of abuse. Among the youngest mums living on the lowest incomes, one in three reported experiencing domestic abuse, whereas for mums, who were not the poorest or the youngest, one in ten experienced domestic abuse.
- The research looked at how domestic abuse affected the social and emotional development of children aged 6 to 13. Children of mums who had experienced domestic abuse generally had poorer scores on different measures of social and emotional development. For example, where mums had experienced domestic abuse, the predicted probability (which is an adjusted likelihood calculated from more complex models) of children having high scores for 'externalising behaviours' (i.e. disobedience, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, stealing or fighting) was 21% compared to 14% where mothers did not report experiencing domestic abuse.
- The research found that a close relationship between a mum and her child was strongly associated with better social and emotional development for children. Among mums who experienced domestic abuse, some 17% of children with a strong mother-child relationship ranked high for 'externalising behaviours' (i.e. disobedience, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, stealing or fighting) compared to 49% of children with a weaker mother-child relationship.
- Trends were similar for 'internalising symptoms' (i.e. depressive disorders and anxiety). Among children who were living with domestic abuse, those with a stronger mother-child relationships had much higher scores for prosocial behaviours (i.e. altruism and reciprocity) than children with weaker relationships to their mums.

- The perpetration of domestic abuse against mums was associated with more frequent parental use of physical punishment of children. In homes where the mum's abusive partner had been present in children's lives since birth, 26% of children (predicted probability) had been smacked at age 2 by the mum's abusive partner compared to 16% of children where an abusive partner was not continuously present since birth.
- There was a notable difference in parental contact with social workers depending on the gender of children in the study. Among mums who reported domestic abuse, social worker contact was twice as common where the study-child was a boy (predicted probability of 16%) as opposed to a girl (predicted probability of 8%).

Reflections for practice: Mums and perpetrators of abuse

- When working with a young mum in poverty there is a high likelihood that she will be a victim of domestic abuse and it is important to create space to discuss this possibility.
- Young mums living in poverty are those most at risk of experiencing abuse, and of experiencing more types of abuse more often. Women in poverty experiencing abuse have far fewer opportunities to leave abusive relationships and are more vulnerable while in them.
- Mums living in poverty but with degree level educational qualifications are more likely to report experiencing domestic abuse than women in similar circumstances but with fewer educational qualifications. Though we do not know exactly why this is, it could be because these mothers are more likely to recognize abuse as such, and more likely to report it in the survey.
- Perpetrators often continue to abuse victims after the relationship has ended, so it is important to explore experiences and impacts of domestic abuse even where women do not apparently have an intimate partner in their lives.

Reflections for practice: the impacts of domestic abuse on children

- In most cases, a strong relationship between a mum and her child can protect children from the negative effects of domestic abuse. For example, a close relationship between mother and child is associated with more altruistic behaviours in children. It is important that social workers recognise this strength.
- Perpetrators of abuse often try to undermine the relationship between mothers and their children, and this can happen both during the relationships and after separation (through child contact for example). It is important that social workers recognise that mothers and children may need support in dealing with an abusive partner even after separation.
- Parenting while enduring domestic abuse can be extremely challenging. Sometimes, mums find coping mechanisms which can include intentionally 'distancing' children emotionally so as to protect children and themselves from further abuse. Thus, social workers should be aware that 'protective parenting' and 'mothering' strategies can look very different in the context of domestic abuse.
- Where a mum is experiencing abuse, it is likely that children are victimised in different ways, i.e. both directly (e.g. experiencing parental physical chastisement) and indirectly (e.g. by witnessing abuse). It is important that services recognise children as victims of domestic abuse both in their own right and support them in light of the various way in which children are likely to be affected.
- Where a mum has mentioned experiencing domestic abuse, social workers are more likely to be involved in children's lives if the child is a boy as opposed to a girl. This could be because social and emotional developmental difficulties differ between boys (i.e. more visible forms of poor behaviour) and girls (i.e. more depressive and 'silent' behavioural problems).

1.0 Introduction

A recent Home Office report states that 'domestic abuse can happen to anyone, anywhere'¹. While true, this account leaves out poverty entirely. The reality is that mothers living on the lowest incomes were more likely to experience domestic abuse, to experience more types of abuse and to experience this abuse more often. This research summary sets out recent findings around poverty, social inequality and domestic abuse, the implications for children, and explores what this might mean for social work practice.

The research used a longitudinal survey of families and children living in Scotland. This longitudinal study tracks the same sample of children and their families from infancy into adolescence, and the study collects information on children's lives regularly

throughout this period. The research used this data to explore social inequalities in domestic abuse experiences among mums of young children. Social inequalities means unequal experiences of domestic abuse and related outcomes for children which differ based on factors such as income, education, age or gender. To understand how children may be affected by living with domestic abuse, the research looked at the relationship between experiences of domestic abuse and children's social and emotional development, as well as children's own experiences of parental physical punishment. This report also presents findings around how parental contact with the police and with social services, in the context of domestic abuse, varies greatly depending on families' income. Implications for practise are discussed at the end of the report.



2.0 Literature review

2.1 Social inequalities in domestic abuse

One of the main aims of the research was to examine the social inequalities in domestic abuse experiences among mothers and young children. The research looked at the existing literature to see what work in this area might be relevant. In the literature, few studies use methods which make it possible to explore social inequalities in domestic abuse experiences among mothers of young children². Some relevant studies focus on abuse experienced across a lifetime, but this makes it difficult to know how many parents and how many children are affected by domestic abuse in any geographical context, including the UK²⁻⁴. International research does suggest that domestic abuse experiences are affected by different important socioeconomic factors³⁻⁵. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports a consistent association between domestic abuse and poverty using UK population survey data on adults, though this research does not tell us if children were present or how they were affected⁶.

2.2 Children's wellbeing in the context of domestic abuse

The research wanted to understand how domestic abuse affected children's social and emotional development and what aspects of children's lives can protect children from negative repercussions. Previous studies in this field have mostly used participants from clinical settings, or samples which are not representative of the broader community⁷. While domestic abuse may negatively affect some children, some children do not appear to be negatively affected⁸.

Studies have found that a close relationship between the mum and the child can protect children from the negative repercussions of living with domestic abuse^{7,9}. Factors explored in other studies include 'maternal warmth'⁷ or 'positive parenting'¹⁰ or 'parenting skills'⁹. These are often discussed as factors which have a protective effect on children's emotional and psychological

outcomes in the context of domestic abuse. Yet, perpetrators of abuse often try to actively undermine the mum-child relationship, by for example intentionally abusing the mum in front of children, undermining their authority as a mum, threatening to contact child protection services and more¹¹.

The research also explored the association between mum's experiences of domestic abuse and parental use of physical punishment with children. A review of the relevant literature has noted that domestic abuse often happens at the same time as child abuse and neglect¹². The survey used did not have questions about child abuse. What was explored was the relationship between domestic abuse and parental physical punishment and the research draws on others work around the 'continuum of violence'¹³ which describes how parental physical punishment can escalate and lead to increasingly more violent actions.

2.3 Family contact with services

The research also explored the relationships between mum's experiences of domestic abuse and family contact with the police and with social services and examines whether there are also social inequalities in police and social worker contact. There is recent evidence on the profound social inequalities which characterize children's social care system in the UK¹⁴. Prior research on police and social services responses for children and families experiencing domestic abuse shows that only a minority of police notifications triggered an initial social work assessment¹⁵. Social workers were found to be more likely to make an assessment if infants were present, or severe injuries were sustained by the victim, but whether there was social inequality in how these situations were handled by social workers was not considered in that research¹⁵.



3.0 Methodology

The research used data from a longitudinal surveyⁱ of just over 5000 children living in Scotland. Children, born in 2004-2005, were followed from infancy to adolescence. The survey asked questions from mothers, some fathers, and, from age 7 onwards, also from children themselves.

When children were 6 years old, a remaining sample of 3646 mums were asked 13 survey questions about different types of domestic abuse experienced at any point in the 6-year period since the child was born. Questions covered physical violence, sexual abuse, and coercive control. Follow-on questions also asked how often any abuse took place, and who had perpetrated the abuse. Using these questions, a measure of the frequency of abuse was created for those experiencing 'any' type of abuse (i.e. mums who answered 'yes' to any of the survey questions).

Questions about domestic abuse were only asked once in this survey. To understand what was happening over time, questions were used to identify mums and children who had been living with an abusive partner since the start of the survey. (For other families, the domestic abuse was perpetrated by an intimate partner no longer living in the household, or not continuously living in the

household, or different partners were implicated). When the research refers to 'domestic abuse' in this report, it means violence and abuse experienced by mums from a current or previous intimate partner or partners, who may or may not be co-habiting, or who have been co-habiting with the women in our study at any point since the child was born.

Children's social and emotional development was measured through the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire¹⁶.

To examine poverty, the research used a measure of income which is adjusted to take into account the number of adults and children in the household. This measure of income is comparable across households of different sizes. Families were divided into five equally sized income groups. The poorest families had an adjusted household income of just under £12,000. Those on the highest incomes had an adjusted income of just over £37,000 or more.

Different statistical models were then used to analyse the data and set out the evidence and findings in the rest of this report. Further details on data and methods are reported elsewhere¹⁷⁻²¹. Ethical approval for the research was given by the University of Edinburgh.

ⁱ <https://growingupinScotland.org.uk>

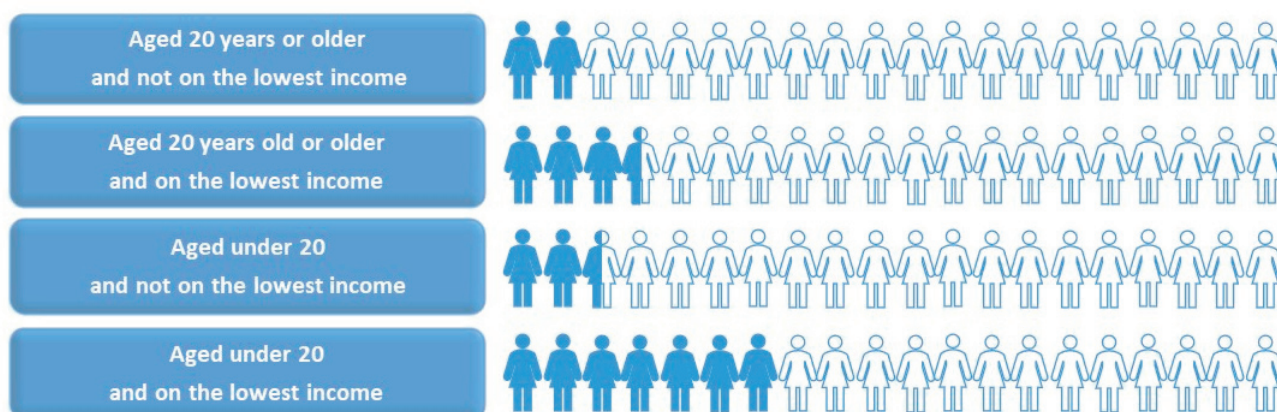
4.0 Findings & Discussion

4.1 Social inequalities in domestic abuse

Among *all* mums, 3.5% had experienced abuse from a 'current partner' at the time questions were asked. The remaining 10% experienced such abuse from a prior partner during a previous relationship since the child was born, or from an ex-partner.

Different forms of disadvantage intersect with each other in relation to domestic abuse victimisation. Among mothers who were *both* in the youngest age group, and on the lowest household income, 1 in 3 experienced abuse (predicted probability). This figure was 1 in 10 when focusing on mothers who were *neither* in the youngest age group *nor* in the lowest income group.

Mothers experiencing 'any' domestic abuse by age and income (predicted probability)



Notes: Growing Up in Scotland data, N: 3,655. Predicted probabilities from logistic regression. Controlling for maternal education; mother's ethnic background; number of children in the home; study child's gender.
Source: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260520980392>

Perpetrators often continue to abuse victims even after separation, and even if the abuser no longer lived in the household^{22,23}.

The experiences of domestic abuse varied between mums based on different characteristics, such as household income, age, education and social class. The starkest differences were by household income and the age of the mum. For example, 20% (predicted probability) of mums in the lowest household income group experienced domestic abuse, compared to 7% among those on the highest incomes. Also, mums on the lowest incomes were more likely to experience more types of abuse, more often compared to those on the highest incomes (predicted probability of 13% compared to 3%). Similar differences were found when comparing mums by age. Among mums who were up to 20 years old when their child was born 19% had experienced abuse, compared to 8% among mothers aged 40 years or older when their child was born.

4.2 Domestic abuse and children's social and emotional development

Children of mums who had experienced domestic abuse generally had poorer scores on different measures of social and emotional development across ages 6 to 13 years of age. For example, where mums had experienced domestic abuse, the predicted probability of children ranking high for externalising behaviours (i.e. disobedience, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, stealing or fighting) was 21% compared to 14% where mothers did not report experiencing domestic abuse.

A close relationship between mum and child (according to the mum's answers) was the characteristic most strongly associated with better social and emotional development for children. Focusing only on the families where domestic abuse was reported by the mother, 17% of children with a strong mother-child relationship ranked high for

externalising behaviours compared to 49% of children with a weaker mother-child relationship. Trends were similar for internalising symptoms (i.e. depressive disorders and anxiety). Among children who were living with domestic abuse, those with a stronger mother-child relationship had much higher scores for prosocial behaviours (i.e. altruism and reciprocity) than children with weaker relationships to their mothers.

Studies show that victims of abuse can adopt compensatory parenting strategies to protect their children²⁴, and that some of these strategies may include intentionally distancing children physically and emotionally to avoid triggering the perpetrator²⁵. These are important considerations when reflecting on theories of child attachment in the context of domestic abuse.

4.3 Parental physical punishment in the context of domestic abuse

Dads were asked one question about smacking when children were 2 years old and were not asked such questions again, while mums were asked five questions about smacking and slapping between children's ages 2 and 7. More questions on mothering practices lead to greater scrutiny of mothering, and this is a systematic problem which surveys of children suffer from. This is an important limitation in this research.

Across all children, 16% had at age two been smacked by their dad and 16% had been smacked by the mum. In homes where the mum's abusive partner had been present in children's lives since birth, 1 in 4 (predicted probability of 26%) children at age 2 had been smacked by the mum's abusive partner compared to 16% of children who had not been living with an abusive partner since birth.



Other research has found how smacking and slapping can escalate into increasingly more violent actions, and this phenomenon has been described as the 'continuum of violence'¹³. In this research the perpetration of domestic abuse towards mums is associated with children being physically punished by parents. This is mostly the case where children have been cohabiting with the mum's abusive partner continuously since birth (as opposed to families where a prior partner was abusive, or where there has been a relationship breakdown over time).

4.4 Contact with police and social workers in the context of domestic abuse

Among mums who reported domestic abuse, social worker contact was twice as common where the study-child was a boy (predicted probability of 16%) as opposed to a girl (8%). This difference could be related to the fact that boys were more likely to rank higher for externalising behaviours (i.e. disobedience, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, stealing or fighting) than girls²¹, and this *may* have affected social worker's decisions around whether or not involvement was necessary.



!Stock.com/SoiStock



iStock.com/Vagengym_Elena

5.0 Conclusions

Using a national longitudinal survey of families and children living in Scotland, there are stark social inequalities in mothers' experiences of domestic abuse, in children's outcomes, and in family contact with services. Younger mothers and those living on lower incomes were considerably more likely to experience any type of domestic abuse, and to experience more types of abuse, more often. These differences are large in size. Where mums were both young and also living on the lowest household incomes, they were disproportionately more likely to experience abuse, pointing to how dimensions of disadvantage intersect and overlap with each other.

When looking at children, the perpetration of abuse against mums is associated with poorer scores for social and emotional developmental among children across ages 6-13. This is true both for externalising behaviours in children, such as aggression and acting out, and for internalising behaviours such as depression and anxiety. A close relationship between children and their mums seems to shield children from the negative effects of domestic abuse to some

extent, and children with a closer relationship to their mums also had higher scores for prosocial behaviours such as acts of altruism and reciprocity. The perpetration of abuse against mums is also associated with more frequent use of parental punishment of children, suggesting that children living with domestic abuse are victimised in multiple ways.

The research also demonstrated social inequalities in terms of parental contact with the police and with social workers in the context of domestic abuse – though the data does not allow us to conclude if contact with services is directly related to domestic abuse. Social workers are twice as likely to be in contact with a family if the child is a boy rather than a girl. This could be because boys are more likely to externalise (aggression, fighting, acting out), while girls are more likely to internalise (depressive symptoms and anxiety), and the former is a more 'visible' form of developmental behavioural problems than the latter.

In the next section we reflect on the implications of these findings for social work practice.

6.0 Reflections for Policy

6.1 Unequal vulnerabilities

The Home Office recently commissioned a mapping exercise for England and Wales to evaluate the provision of services working with victims and survivors of domestic abuseⁱ. The report notes that ‘domestic abuse can happen to anyone, anywhere’ which suggests that everyone is equally vulnerable. What this research shows is that while domestic abuse *can* happen to anyone, the probability of being a victim of abuse differs greatly for different population groups. Mums living on the lowest household incomes were disproportionately more likely to report experiencing abuse, and to experience more types of abuse, more often. Thus, the idea that everyone is ‘equally vulnerable’ is not in line with evidence in this field and with the findings of this research^{6,26}. Experiences of domestic abuse are best understood by taking into account how dimensions of disadvantage overlap and interlock with each other, leading to the highly unequal likelihoods of experiencing domestic abuse and different opportunities to act or respond when faced with such circumstances.

6.2 Initiatives centred around victims leaving an abuser

In March 2023, the Home Office launched a pilot which provides a one-off lump sum payment to victims of domestic abuseⁱⁱ. The scheme will offer £250 to individuals seeking to leave an abuser, and £500 to those with children. This scheme recognises that leaving an abusive partner has important financial repercussions for victims/survivors. However, the financial support being offered is unlikely to be sufficient to cover the true costs of leaving an abuser. Despite decades of evolving public debate in relation to domestic abuse, the main policy response to domestic abuse focuses on removing victims from their own home. This is something that has been discussed in relation to parallel

developments in the Australian context in relation to an apparent cultural and institutional reluctance to remove men from ‘their’ homes²⁷. Leaving an abuser, especially when living in poverty, often results in women (and children where there are any) becoming homeless.

In Scotland, there are legal responses which can be used to suspend (temporarily or permanently) an abusive partner’s right to live in the home (where evidence of domestic abuse and threat of harm to self or children can be provided). Similar provisions exist and are continuously evolving in England and Walesⁱⁱⁱ. Legislative possibilities available to victims are improving, though there is still a need for better implementation of these, such as increasing conviction rates for breaching domestic abuse related protection orders^{iv}. Finally, the removal of perpetrators does not in itself guarantee safety for victims of abuse.

6.3 Semi-symbiosis of mother and child

Domestic abuse can negatively affect children by affecting the relationship between the mother and the child. A strong mother-child relationship can mitigate some of the negative effects of abuse on children’s social and emotional development. Maternal depression is linked to a greater probability of depressive behavioural disorders among children, though it is acknowledged that relying on mums’ reports of children’s wellbeing in such cases may introduce bias in these findings. For children to thrive, their mothers must thrive, and we know from other research that for mothers to thrive, their children must thrive²⁸.

The patchwork of services available to domestic abuse victims and survivors in different parts of the UK often fails to recognise this semi-symbiotic relationship between most mothers and their children, though there are some differences in approaches between Scotland and England. In Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid has played a key role in expanding service provision to

ⁱⁱ www.gov.uk/government/news/victims-fleeing-domestic-abuse-given-lifeline-payments

ⁱⁱⁱ Introduced in the ‘Call to End Violence against Women and Girls Action Plan (2014) and in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021

^{iv} www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-65468876
www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-62726384

children of mothers who are victims of domestic abuse and in promoting the mother-child relationship. Other research reflecting on the English context has noted that services are still compartmentalised and draw on two contrasting approaches: the voluntary sector is often informed by women's welfare and rights approaches, while statutory services in relation to child safeguarding often draw on child protection using 'risk' and investigation as tools for action²⁹. Research has previously shown that interventions which are triggered following the notification of domestic abuse tend to focus more on safeguarding children rather than providing family support^{29,30}.

Some academics and activists in this field have also called for courts to consider the ways in which court ordered child contact provides opportunities for perpetrators of domestic abuse to continue to control and abuse children and ex-partners³¹⁻³³. This is in line with the survey data in this research where many mums reported experiencing abuse from partners they were not actually living with. Since the relationship between mother and child is a key protective factor when it comes to children's own social and emotional development, courts need to account for how child contact arrangements can undermine this relationship and children's wellbeing.

6.4 Not equal in the eyes of services

In terms of parental contact with the police and social services the research found that social worker contact was twice as likely when the child in the study was a boy, as opposed to a girl. Several reasons could explain this finding. One reason could be that boys had a higher probability of externalising behaviours, such as acting out, fighting etc, while girls were more likely to manifest internalising behaviours, such as depression and anxiety²¹. Since externalising behaviours can be more 'visible' to a third person, perhaps this is the reason why social worker involvement is higher where boys are involved. There is a need for professionals involved with families, such as teachers,

health visitors, police officers and social workers to have a greater understanding about how children process trauma, and the different ways this can impact on their socio-emotional well-being for different children.

6.5 Poverty reduction measures to address the reality that women are more likely to be poor

Recent data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that 23% of families with children - and 27% of children - are living in poverty^v. Poverty can often trap women and children in harmful relationships. It can exacerbate the impacts of domestic abuse because it interferes with women's ability to leave abusive relationships and increases their vulnerability while in them.

Of particular relevance to this report is recognising that poverty and gender are closely related, and that the routes into and out of poverty across the life course disproportionately affect women³⁴. Women are more likely to experience persistent poverty and recurrent spells of poverty.

Poverty reduction measures should consider how payments to families may be unequally shared between family members. The child benefit claim system, for example, currently leaves parents to negotiate who will make the claim and be the recipient. Universal credit claimants who live together are expected to make one joint claim which is paid out to one claimant on behalf of the couple. Because economic abuse is often one of the many dimensions of domestic abuse and since 1 in 6 women in the UK has experienced economic abuse by a current or former partner^{vi}, welfare payments should be implemented so as to make it easier for women experiencing domestic abuse to have access to their own independent finances.

^v www.jrf.org.uk/data/overall-uk-poverty-rates

^{vi} <https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/what-is-economic-abuse/>

7.0 Reflections for Practice

Reflections in relation to mothers and perpetrators of abuse

- Since younger mums are more likely to report experiencing domestic abuse it is particularly important when working with this age group to explore women's experiences around relationships with current and former intimate partners. In the overall population about 1 in 3 of these mums experience abuse, so when it comes to the population that social workers are in touch with, it is possible that this proportion is even higher.
- Mums living in poverty are also more likely to experience abuse, and mums who are *both* young *and* living in poverty are disproportionately more likely to experience abuse and to experience more types of abuse, more often. Women living in poverty who are experiencing abuse have far fewer opportunities to leave abusive relationships and are more vulnerable while in them.
- Mums living in poverty but with educational qualifications are more likely to report experiencing domestic abuse than women in similar circumstances but with fewer educational qualifications. There is likely to be a bias in terms of mothers recognising abuse as such and reporting it when it happens. It is also generally known that women often don't recognise abuse as such when it is initially happening. This could inform the different strategies which social workers can adopt when exploring domestic abuse experiences with different population groups.
- Perpetrators often continue to abuse victims post-separation, and a large proportion of mums mothers report experiencing domestic abuse from an intimate partner they were not living with. It is important to explore experiences and impacts of domestic abuse even where women do not officially have an intimate partner in their lives, and having left an abusive relationship does not mean that perpetrators have stopped abusing victims



Reflections in relation to impacts of domestic abuse on children

- In most cases, a strong relationship between a mum and her child can protect children from the negative effects of domestic abuse. For example, a close relationship between mother and child is associated with more altruistic behaviours in children. It is important that the service response seeks to support this relationship through the services being offered, and does not inadvertently undermine it.
- Perpetrators of abuse can often use children in order to abuse their victims. They can do so by undermining the relationship between mums and their children and this can occur both during the relationships and after separation, for example through child contact. It is important that social workers recognise that mums and their children may need support in dealing with an abusive partner and in overcoming any strain this may have introduced in their relationships, even in cases where a mum has separated from the perpetrator.
- Parenting while enduring domestic abuse can be extremely challenging. Because the perpetrator can sometimes be triggered by a mother's affection towards her children, mothers parenting under these

circumstances find different mechanisms to cope. These can include intentionally 'distancing' children emotionally so as to protect children and themselves from further abuse. Consequently, social workers should be aware that protective parenting and mothering strategies can look very different in the context of domestic abuse to what might be expected based on commonly used theories of maternal attachment.

- Where a mum is experiencing abuse, it is likely that children are victimised in different ways. Victimization can be direct and include experiencing parental physical punishment, and it can be indirect, such as in cases where children hear or see the abuse, or are affected by the consequences that the abuse has on the abused parent. It is important that services recognise children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, and support them in light of the various way in which children are likely to be affected.
- Where a mum has mentioned experiencing domestic abuse, social workers are twice as likely to be involved in children's lives if the child is a boy as opposed to a girl. This could be because social and emotional developmental difficulties manifest differently in boys (i.e. more visible forms of poor behaviour) than

among girls (i.e. more depressive and 'silent' behavioural problems). Social workers could reflect on whether factors such as preconceptions of what poor social and emotional development 'looks like' and preconceptions around gendered behaviour may subconsciously affect how they engage with different cases being brought to their attention.



8.0 References

1. *Patchwork of Provision: how to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales*. (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022).
2. O'Reilly, R. Domestic violence against women in their childbearing years: A review of the literature. *Contemp. Nurse* **25**, 13–21 (2007).
3. Alhabib, S., Nur, U. & Jones, R. Domestic Violence Against Women: Systematic Review of Prevalence Studies. *J. Fam. Violence* **25**, 369–382 (2010).
4. Capaldi, D. M., Knoble, N. B., Shortt, J. W. & Kim, H. K. A Systematic Review of Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Violence. *Partn. Abuse* **3**, 231–280 (2012).
5. Afzal, N., Aziz, K. & Zulfiqar, S. Frequency of Preterm Birth in Females Presenting with History of Domestic Violence. *J. Islamabad Med. Dent. Coll.* **7**, 213–216 (2018).
6. Fahmy, E., Williamson, E. & Pantazis, C. *Evidence and policy review: Domestic violence and poverty - A Research Report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation*. https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/128551400/JRF_DV_POVERTY_REPORT_FINAL_COPY_.pdf (2016).
7. Fong, V. C., Hawes, D. & Allen, J. L. A Systematic Review of Risk and Protective Factors for Externalizing Problems in Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence. *Trauma Violence Abuse* **20**, 149–167 (2019).
8. Kitzmann, K. M., Gaylord, N. K., Holt, A. R. & Kenny, E. D. Child witnesses to domestic violence: A meta-analytic review. *J. Consult. Clin. Psychol.* **71**, 339–352 (2003).
9. Carter, B., Paranjothy, S., Davies, A. & Kemp, A. Mediators and Effect Modifiers of the Causal Pathway Between Child Exposure to Domestic Violence and Internalizing Behaviors Among Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Literature Review. *Trauma Violence Abuse* 152483802096596 (2020) doi:10.1177/1524838020965964.
10. Martinez-Torteya, C., Anne Bogat, G., Von Eye, A. & Levendosky, A. A. Resilience Among Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: The Role of Risk and Protective Factors: Child Resilience to Domestic Violence. *Child Dev.* **80**, 562–577 (2009).
11. Fogarty, A. et al. Mothers' Experiences of Parenting Within the Context of Intimate Partner Violence: Unique Challenges and Resilience. *J. Interpers. Violence* **36**, 10564–10587 (2021).
12. Chan, K. L., Chen, Q. & Chen, M. Prevalence and Correlates of the Co-Occurrence of Family Violence: A Meta-Analysis on Family Polyvictimization. *Trauma Violence Abuse* **22**, 289–305 (2021).
13. Heilmann, A., Kelly, Y. & Watt, R. G. *Equally Protected? A review of the evidence on the physical punishment of children*. <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/ufiles/Equally-Protected.pdf> (2015).
14. Bywaters, P. & Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team. *The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report*. www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CWIP-Overview-Final-V4.pdf (2020).
15. Stanley, N., Miller, P., Richardson, H. & Thomson, G. *Children and families experiencing domestic violence: Police and children's social services' responses*. https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/2947/1/children_experiencing_domestic_violence_report_wdf70355.pdf (2010).
16. Goodman, R. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note. *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry* **38**, 581–586 (1997).
17. Skafida, V., Morrison, F. & Devaney, J. Prevalence and Social Inequality in Experiences of Domestic Abuse Among Mothers of Young Children: A Study Using National Survey Data from Scotland. *J. Interpers. Violence* 088626052098039 (2021) doi:10.1177/0886260520980392.
18. Skafida, V., Morrison, F. & Devaney, J. Intimate partner violence and child maltreatment in Scotland – Insights from nationally representative longitudinal survey data. *Child Abuse Negl.* **132**, 105784 (2022).
19. Skafida, V., Morrison, F. & Devaney, J. Answer refused: Exploring how item

- non-response on domestic abuse questions in a social survey affects analysis and results. *Surv. Res. Methods* (2022).
20. Skafida, V., Devaney, J. & Morrison, F. *Children living with domestic abuse: Social inequalities in mother and child experiences and repercussions for children's wellbeing – Final Project Report*. www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/children-living-with-domestic-abuse-social-inequalities-in-mother (2023).
 21. Skafida, V. & Devaney, J. Risk and protective factors for children's psychopathology in the context of domestic violence – A study using nationally representative longitudinal survey data. *Child Abuse Negl.* **135**, 105991 (2023).
 22. Holt, S. Post-separation Fathering and Domestic Abuse: Challenges and Contradictions: Post-separation Fathering and Domestic Violence. *Child Abuse Rev.* **24**, 210–222 (2015).
 23. Spearman, K. J., Hardesty, J. L. & Campbell, J. Post-separation abuse: A concept analysis. *J. Adv. Nurs.* **79**, 1225–1246 (2023).
 24. Fusco, R. A. Socioemotional Problems in Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: Mediating Effects of Attachment and Family Supports. *J. Interpers. Violence* **32**, 2515–2532 (2017).
 25. Buchanan, F. & Moulding, N. T. Mothering during domestic abuse: Protective agency as a force for change. *Qual. Soc. Work* 147332502091774 (2020) doi:10.1177/1473325020917743.
 26. Ferguson, G., Featherstone, B. & Morris, K. Framed to fit? Challenging the domestic abuse 'story' in child protection. *Crit. Radic. Soc. Work* **8**, 25–40 (2020).
 27. Murray, S. "Why doesn't she just leave?": Belonging, disruption and domestic violence. *Womens Stud. Int. Forum* **31**, 65–72 (2008).
 28. Bourke-Taylor, H., Pallant, J. F., Law, M. & Howie, L. Predicting mental health among mothers of school-aged children with developmental disabilities: The relative contribution of child, maternal and environmental factors. *Res. Dev. Disabil.* **33**, 1732–1740 (2012).
 29. Robbins, R. & Cook, K. 'Don't Even Get Us Started on Social Workers': Domestic Violence, Social Work and Trust – An Anecdote from Research. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **48**, 1664–1681 (2018).
 30. Stanley, N., Miller, P., Richardson Foster, H. & Thomson, G. A Stop-Start Response: Social Services' Interventions with Children and Families Notified following Domestic Violence Incidents. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **41**, 296–313 (2011).
 31. Katz, E., Nikupeteri, A. & Laitinen, M. When Coercive Control Continues to Harm Children: Post-Separation Fathering, Stalking and Domestic Violence. *Child Abuse Rev.* **29**, 310–324 (2020).
 32. Morrison, F. 'All Over Now?' The Ongoing Relational Consequences of Domestic Abuse through Children's Contact Arrangements: Relational Consequences of Domestic Abuse through Contact. *Child Abuse Rev.* **24**, 274–284 (2015).
 33. Smith, E., Belton, E., Barnard, M., Fisher, H. L. & Taylor, J. Strengthening the Mother-Child Relationship Following Domestic Abuse: Service Evaluation: Strengthening the Mother-Child Relationship Following Domestic Abuse. *Child Abuse Rev.* **24**, 261–273 (2015).
 34. Bennett, F. & Daly, M. *Poverty through a Gender Lens: Evidence and Policy Review on Gender and Poverty*. www.spi.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Gender_and_poverty_Bennett_and_Daly_final_12_5_14_28_5_14.pdf (2014).

The author of this work is Dr Valeria Skafida
Dr Luke Geoghegan helped with the editing.

Acknowledgements

This report summarises the work of a three-year research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation (grant number WEL/43875) and conducted in collaboration with Prof John Devaney, University of Edinburgh, and Dr Fiona Morrison, University of Edinburgh.

Ethical approval for the research was given by the University of Edinburgh.

The views expressed in the report are those of the author and not necessarily of the Nuffield Foundation.

This report draws heavily on the final project report for this research:

Skafida V, Devaney J, Morrison F (2023) *Children living with domestic abuse: Social inequalities in mother and child experiences and repercussions for children's wellbeing – Final Project Report*. University of Edinburgh.

Available at:

www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/children-living-with-domestic-abuse-social-inequalities-in-mother

This research would not have been possible without the help of all the families who took part in the Growing Up in Scotland study and who dedicated, and continue to dedicate, their time to the study. Special thanks go to our advisory board members.

Additional thanks to Prof John Devaney who made the connection between Dr Skafida and BASW which resulted in this publication.

Poverty, social inequality and domestic abuse: The impact on children. Implications for Practice is one of a series of BASW Research Findings – publications showcasing new evidential research led by university academics, researchers and/or social work service users that offer both significant impact and have practical implications for social work practice. As a resource it does not necessarily reflect the views of BASW.

All photos posed by models.

How to cite:

Skaftida, V. (2023) *Poverty, social inequality and domestic abuse: The impact on children. Implications for Social Work Practice*. Birmingham: BASW.

© BASW 2023

Users are welcome to quote from this document provided that the source is correctly cited as above. Unattributed quotes are forbidden under copyright protection.

www.basw.co.uk



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers