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Supporting families in Scotland

Listening to Fathers - Men's experience of child protection in Central Scotland

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1 Executive Summary

This research report is the outcome of a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship undertaken by Circle's fathers' worker Nick Smithers and the University of Edinburgh School of Social Work. The purpose of the practitioner research project was to elicit the views of fathers who have been involved in child protection processes through their child/ren being placed in foster care or placed on the child protection register. A literature review indicates that fathers are marginalised from social services and child protection professionals are failing to engage fathers in processes affecting their children. Social work is identified as being influenced by second wave feminist theory with patriarchy surviving as an organisational construct within the profession. This report provides insight from fathers' narrative experiences across Central Scotland and seeks to understand these experiences in the theoretical context explored.

The report's findings suggest that professional responses to child protection concerns can marginalise fathers from services and more importantly from their parental role. This has serious implications for children's development and emotional well-being and is in contravention of their right to contact with both parents according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Themes emerge from the data around domestic violence, specifically the professional response to incidents of domestic violence. Respondents report being marginalised from child protection processes and facing barriers to contact with their children. Evidence suggests that a more sophisticated approach to assessing and intervening in cases of domestic abuse is required.

Some respondents describe experiences of being falsely accused of sexually abusing their children which resulted in long-term involvement with child protection professionals. A picture emerges of fathers being marginalised and becoming frustrated at the lack of communication with social workers and other professionals.

More widely, fathers describe the experience of being labelled by professionals who regard them with suspicion. Statutory conditions are applied to fathers after criminal charges are dropped, based on assumptions of guilt. The respondents' experiences indicate a lack of equity in dealings with child protection professionals influenced by gender bias.

Findings also indicate that the provision of fathers' support can have a beneficial effect on cases both from the point of view of the father and of the professionals involved. Entrenched positions characterised by suspicion and communication breakdown can be mediated and fathers' positions can be advocated for, resulting in enhanced outcomes for children and a reduction in the need for children to be taken into foster care.

The report concludes by making the following recommendations for practice:

- **Improved training for professionals involved in child protection work on issues of gender**

  A highlighted case study shows the impact of training in bringing about effective change. However, the quality of supervision will influence impact. Supervisors within

social work teams need to commit to supporting change. Other agencies involved in child protection, particularly health, will benefit from targeted training.

- **Social Work teams to appoint a designated worker who has the responsibility of holding allocated workers to account for their effort to include fathers**

  In order for change to be profound, a line of accountability is required which is directly observable. Having designated workers would be a method of implementing change provided responsibilities were robustly, externally monitored.

- **Wider provision of fathers' workers across Scotland in order to support professionals in engaging fathers and to advocate for fathers**

  The cost-effectiveness of fathers' support in reducing the need for children to be taken into care can be clearly evidenced through the outcomes of current projects. A more strategically considered allocation of funds in the statutory and third sector will allow for more heavily-evaluated preventative work to be implemented and have a long term positive impact.

- **Commitment to fund preventative work with fathers antenatally and with accredited parenting programmes**

  While parenting programmes are shown to be effective, they require to be targeted and designed for fathers in order to make the required impact across the country.

- **Commitment to refer fathers for specialised support at the earliest opportunity**

  Greater awareness through increased training for child protection staff and greater numbers of fathers' services will lead to earlier referral for fathers' support.

2 Introduction

Just over ten years ago, FSU, a family support charity operating in the Greater Pilton area of Edinburgh commissioned a small scale piece of research, *Dad's the Word* (Cavanagh and Smith, 2001), into the experiences of local fathers and the extent to which services were responsive to their needs. The research was commissioned to inform the development of a fathers' project and specifically, the employment of a fathers' support worker. *Dad's the Word* concluded that there were considerable numbers of fathers in the Greater Pilton area who would welcome support in their parenting but also that almost all local services operated what might, at best, be thought of as a gender blind approach, which failed to acknowledge or cater for any particular needs of fathers as parents. The facts that almost all staff in local services were women, that it was almost exclusively mothers who accessed services and that activities were geared towards mothers, could all act to exclude fathers from the support networks available. Against this backdrop, the FSU Fathers' Project was established, funded by the local authority via the government's early years, Surestart programme.

In 2005 FSU at a UK level encountered major financial problems and ceased operating. The Scottish wing of the operation however, continued with a new constitution and under the new title, Circle. The fathers' project continued as a central feature of its work.

The fathers' project offers one-to-one work with fathers around parenting issues, training and employment, domestic violence and drug and alcohol misuse and it links with other relevant projects. The service is underpinned by a flexible, needs-led approach and, in line with the wider Circle practice model, employs a solution-focussed method. Referrals are made to the project from local social workers, health visitors, children and family centres, schools and from fathers themselves.

Intervention is typically founded upon building a therapeutic relationship with the client. The worker can find himself mediating between the father and the social worker and also advocating on the father's behalf. Ultimately the fathers' worker has a responsibility to ensure the child/children's best interests are being met.

As well as working with fathers on an individual basis the project provides a range of accredited groupwork programmes, which support good parenting, empower families and enhance the lives of vulnerable children.

Ten years after the publication of *Dad's the Word,* Circle decided that it would be worthwhile to look back on some of the developments in the field of working with fathers. The fathers' worker had identified particular difficulties experienced by men caught up in the child protection system and the fraught relationships between men and social workers and this became the focus of this latest piece of work.

The project was undertaken as a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship between Circle and the social work subject area at the University of Edinburgh. The Knowledge Exchange Fellowship Scheme is designed to promote collaboration between voluntary, public and private sector organisations and the College of Humanities and Social Science at the University. The Scheme provides Fellows with an academic mentor and allows them access to University resources to work on a project of mutual interest. In this case, the focus of the Fellowship was to undertake a piece of practitioner research aimed at exploring fathers' experiences of the child protection system. The use of practitioner research has become an

important one in social work following *Changing Lives: The Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review* (Scottish Executive, 2006), which sought to promote greater dialogue and crossover between higher education and social work practice.

Practitioner research, through its practice relevance, may also aid the uptake and impact of research on practice. The findings of this study will be disseminated through different knowledge exchange events with the intention of bringing them to audiences of policy makers and practitioners.

As such, the report aims to contribute to the professional knowledge base in Scotland, and beyond, and to provide opportunities for the fathers' voices to be heard more widely. It presents the narratives of men who have had difficult relationships with child protection services, highlighting the need for fellow professionals to reflect on their practice in order to ensure that children's needs are met through involvement of both parents, wherever possible.

Through the interview process the importance of providing support for some of the participants is clear. We shall consider the role of such support and look at other examples of good practice which have had a positive impact on child protection practice and which increase the opportunity for positive outcomes for children, enhancing their opportunity for a healthy family life. The practitioner research was undertaken by Nick Smithers, the Circle fathers' worker, supported by Mark Smith, senior lecturer in social work at the University of Edinburgh.

3 Literature and Policy

Lewis (in Hobson 2002) charts the development of policy in Britain regarding fatherhood and provides an interesting context to understand the contemporary status and role of men in society. Locating a shift in policy emphasis in the 1980s Lewis describes the UK emphasis on the male breadwinner as unique in a European context but allied to an American cultural paradigm. The breadwinner identity is significant in the context of changing marriage and cohabitation patterns within family life which have created a problem for men with regard to the nature of their relationships and parenting role towards their children. In the 1980s when high unemployment blighted large parts of the UK, the breadwinner role was lost to many men, and largely negative stereotypes about their role in society generally, and in child-rearing in particular, began to take root. These stereotypes have both influenced psychologies of men as well as professional responses to, and expectations of, men. The New Labour Government elected in 1997 took some steps towards identifying a role for fathers, mostly as role models in a context of growing concern about youth crime among young males (Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002).

In the same year that *Dad's the Word* was published, Christie (2001) noted how fathers were systematically excluded from the child protection system. Social workers were noted to have unclear expectations about fathers' roles in caring for children.

Since then there have been a number of developments. On the positive side, there has been a burgeoning interest and an upsurge in research in fathers and fatherhood (see Lewis and Lamb, 2007). The advantages of fathers' involvement in bringing up children are now well-established (Lamb, 2003). The Fatherhood Institute has emerged as a hub of research and advocacy around fathers' issues.

At a policy level the Gender Equality Duty [GED] came into force in the UK in April 2007. This requires that public authorities and publicly-funded services promote gender equality and tackle sex discrimination. This ought to mean that they take steps to address the needs of both mothers and fathers to parent their children. It is questionable whether the full implications of the GED have yet been understood by public authorities.

In the past 6 years, unmarried fathers have now also gained Parental Rights and Responsibilities (if named by the mother on the birth certificate) and an unmarried father's right to be recognised as a relevant person, at a Children's Hearing, is now ensured (Nicholson, 2011). Above and beyond these changes the UNCRC, article 18, says that "State Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child." (1990).

Social work, however, has remained largely impervious to the growing awareness of the importance of fathers in children's lives.

Child care remains gendered numerically in that a substantial majority of social workers are women. It is also gendered discursively however, being heavily influenced by psychoanalytic and attachment perspectives, which can assert a privileged position for mothering (Orme, 2002).

More significantly perhaps, social work has been influenced by feminist theory, or at least by second wave feminism (Orme, 2003, Scourfield and Coffey, 2002). This locates many of women's problems at the door of patriarchy, where social relations and political and organisational structures are based around an assumption of the superiority of masculine traits and of the subordination of women to men. Social problems, including domestic and child abuse, are argued to be inevitable consequences of patriarchy.

The survival of patriarchy as an organising construct is especially strong in social work (Scourfield and Coffey, 2002). In the UK, the education and training of social workers has contributed to an oversimplification of discussions around gender (Orme, 2003). The Diploma in Social Work, the baseline qualification across the UK from 1990 until 2004, sought to address the topic within requirements that students demonstrate anti-discriminatory practice (ADP). This often became reduced to 'standpointism', whereby an issue could be claimed to be feminist 'because I said so' (Orme, 2003). In this climate, gender perspectives have struggled to move beyond the grand narrative of patriarchy.

Patriarchy has become a dominant theoretical construct influencing approaches to men in social work, particularly in relation to domestic violence, which has, understandably, risen up the policy and professional agenda over the past decade. It underpins the major approaches to working with those accused of domestic abuse, based around the Duluth model, a North American domestic violence programme. Programmes here in Scotland have adopted some of the basic precepts of the Duluth model, such as the need for men to be held accountable and to accept responsibility for their actions, but also some of its terminology, such as 'batterer' or 'perpetrator'. This reflects a primarily criminal justice perspective of domestic violence rather than a social and relational one.

The Duluth model has, in fact, been compellingly critiqued both on account of its underlying ideological precepts but also on account of its low success rates (Dutton and Corvo, 2007). It

nevertheless continues to exert an influence on practice far beyond any empirical assessment of its utility might justify. Moreover, May (2012), argues that the identification of domestic abuse as a criminal rather than a social problem has led to an accompanying reliance upon the institutions of crime control, contributing to the current over-use of imprisonment. It has also, according to Kim "crowded out more imaginative and potentially effective responses to violence" (2012: 14), particularly those accessible and appropriate to poor and marginalised communities that are disproportionate targets of state violence. Despite the anti-violence movement's commitment to social justice, the emancipation from gendered violence has become bound to the ceding of feminist power to the patriarchal and racially biased authority of the state.

Attempts to conceptualise gender through a lens of patriarchy deny 'the complex operation of power both within categories …., whatever their gender' (Orme, 2003, p139). Social problems such as domestic abuse are rarely one-dimensional but often reflect particular contextual or relational factors. This complexity, where power dynamics are multi-layered needs to be further explored if gender is to be understood and addressed in ways that are conducive to the development of children and families.

The construction of fathers in social work

Scourfield (2003), based on the findings of his ethnographic study within a Northern English social work team, identified prevalent professional discourses of masculinity: men as a threat (sexual abuse and/or violence), men as no use (not working but not participating in child care), men as absent (potential clients to social worker but render themselves deliberately invisible), men as no different to women (in the context of long standing family problems where violence is seen as bi-directional), men as better than women (this occurs relative to perceived deficiencies in mothers' parenting capacity). "Responses to fathers can be one dimensional, epitomizing a rather binary classification of them as 'bad' and mothers as 'good', or at least better than the father" (Lonne et al. 2008: 86). Fathers are effectively "missing in action". The authors believe that "fathers are important stakeholders in the protection of children and should be involved, along with the mothers and other family members" (p86). Brown et al. (2009) recognise the complexities which lead to men being marginalised by child welfare services. They describe 'Ghost Fathers' - those fathers that Scourfield referred to as absent fathers – as fathers who are around but not engaged with social workers or other child protection professionals. Mandell (2002) notes how men can be characterised as aggressive when they attempt to question or challenge decisions made against them. She identifies this perceived aggression, however, as a last-ditch attempt to hold onto a sense of identity as a husband and father in situations where that identity is threatened by relationship break-up and court decisions denying them access to their children.

Featherstone (2004), from a feminist perspective, has argued that social work needs to begin to see fathers as a resource in families rather than the risk they are often perceived to be. Brown et al. (2009) remind us that the "precepts of good practice with mothers hold true for fathers". Ferguson and Hogan (2004) argue that men labelled dangerous can be worked with effectively and become good enough parents. Clapton (2009), having analysed social work publications, points out that fathers are either invisible or more likely framed as child abusers in social work texts and policy documents.

In subsequent work however, Featherstone (2009) describes a feeling of pessimism for increased engagement of fathers by social workers, based on a lack of adequate supervision for frontline child protection workers.

Of the studies which have sought to elicit the views of fathers to understand their perception of social services the message emerges of a marginalised group who feel disenfranchised from processes which impact on their family life (Dominelli et al, 2011; Gilligan et al 2012; Storhaug & Oien, 2012; Walker, 2012). These feelings of marginalisation might be understood within a wider critique of child protection as a system that is "close to bankrupt… which may be doing more harm than good…. and is shattering communities with dire consequences for civil society." (Lonne et al, 2008: 4)

The upshot of all of this is that children and family services in Scotland remain female dominated and focussed primarily on mother-child relations (Children In Scotland, 2010). At the same time, responses to complex social problems remain narrow, unimaginative and often punitive, and merely reproduce the kind of oppressive relationships they seek to challenge, reinforcing what increasingly seems like a turn towards the criminalisation of social problems (Kim, 2012).

It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to hear the accounts of men caught up in the child protection system. Their voices are largely submerged within current social work discourse.

4 Methodology

The data is drawn from interviews with eight fathers who have been involved with statutory social work in Scotland in that their child or children have either been placed on the Local Authority Child Protection Register and/or have been taken into the care of the local authority. The participants were drawn from fathers who were supported by Circle, or from partner agencies in Central Scotland. The men live within various localities in Edinburgh, West Lothian and Renfrewshire.

Interviews, which ranged in duration from one to one-and-a-half hours, were semi-structured and aimed to elicit a narrative of men's experiences from first contact with social work up to the time of the interview. Although not all participants were known to the author, case notes and other paperwork such as court documents were checked in order to verify key objective points of the narratives as recorded.

Interviews took place variously at Circle offices or on some occasions in the respondent's home environment. In several cases, feelings of mistrust and antipathy towards social work professionals were evident and had to be overcome. (One respondent in particular was unwilling to participate due to the status of the author as a registered social worker.)

The purpose of the interview approach was to elicit a chronological narrative account of the men's experiences which would allow comparative analysis. It was also deemed important to leave the space free for expression of experience without asking any leading questions about gender issues, although the participants were aware that the focus of the research is fathers' experiences of child protection. Contact was maintained with all participants in order to keep them abreast of the progress of the project and to update on any specific and important developments. In one case, after the interview was complete, practical support was provided

to the respondent in dealing with a statutory child protection matter before referring on to another fathers' support project.

The narratives were transcribed, generating 125 pages of data and analysed by the author before being cross-checked with the academic support when themes were formally identified.

Table 1 identifies pseudonyms of the eight men in the sample as well as providing demographic information for each. Following Cameron et al. (2012), it is felt important to provide deeper context for the stories of each man and to provide an overarching perspective on the family situations which can lead to social work involvement.

5 Findings

5.1 Perpetrators and Victims

As noted in the literature review the term perpetrator has become common parlance to describe men accused of domestic abuse. Referrals to the fathers' worker frequently cite anger management, aggressive tendencies or incidents of violence as the prevailing issue requiring a therapeutic intervention. Reports of domestic violence are typically responded to by police who have developed a swift approach of removing the alleged aggressor and if charges are laid then this often results in bail conditions which enforce the accused to have no contact with the victim.

Let us consider the case of **Michael** who was in a relationship with a woman who had a severe and enduring alcohol problem. After their relationship had previously broken down Michael had gone to live and work in Turkey for seven months but had returned after hearing concerning stories about his ex-partner. On return he had attempted to support her to overcome her alcoholism and she had become pregnant.

> *"When she became pregnant she sort of realised she had a baby in her belly and I was making this point all the time...but she was still an alcoholic and would do anything to get a drink...she was always lying and deceitful but in my eyes I had to feed her every day... she wasn't eating...that was a stressful [8 months] but I knew that if I was to tell her...I dinnae want anything to dae with ye, I know in my heart that she wouldnae have bothered about the baby in her own belly."*

Throughout this period of time and after the birth of Michael's son John, Sharon (ex-partner) was involved with social workers and painting Michael as an abusive alcoholic.

> *"I thought I would be transparent with them and just explain my whole situation where I came from what I did for my previous kids which I grew up with for 14 years of my previous relationship and brung my kids up properly and they're both well balanced children...I thought the social worker would have looked into that and looked at me as in "this isnae true what Sharon is saying". But my experience is the social work didn't even look up anything. Not one thing about me. Not one little thing, that's what I didnae like about it."*

Table 1 Father pseudonyms; demographic and family information

Pseudonym	Age	Children & living arrangements	Relationship status	Employment status	Reason for social work involvement
Michael	36	Two children (15 & 16) live with ex-partner. Single dad to son age 2 (different mother)	Separated	Unemployed	Mother (alcohol addict) accused Michael of domestic violence. Prior social work involvement with mother and older child to different father.
Alex	34	Two sons (11&12) living with ex-wife. Current intact family: step-daughter (13), daughter (10), son (3)	Married	Unemployed (signed off with depression)	Allegation of sexually assaulting step-daughter
Martin	23	Son (3) and daughter (3mths) live with parents-in-law	Married	Unemployed	Concerns about neglect/abuse. Parental mental health
Kevin	41	Five children (9, 10, 12, 17, 18). 17 yr old son lives with Kevin; others live with Mum and new partner	Separated	Unemployed (in child care training)	15 (17) yr old son sexually assaulted 10 (12) yr old son.
Eddie	42	Son (12) - shared custody	Separated	Unemployed (signed off due to stress)	Initially concerns about maternal neglect and physical abuse
Gareth	22	One daughter (1) in foster care another step-daughter (3) in foster care.	Separated	Unemployed	Alleged domestic violence incident; children removed. Previous social work involvement with mother and older daughter.
Donald	41	Two daughters (20 & 18) live independently; son (11) lives part-time with Donald in temp accommodation (awaiting re-housing due to disability), part-time with older sister.	Divorced	Unemployed (disabled)	Donald was single parent to his children for 3 years. Social work got involved after he struck his daughter (now 18, then 15) and she phoned police.
Joe	37	One daughter (8) one son (5) - shared custody.	Separated	Unemployed	Ex-partner accused Joe of sexually abusing their daughter

After Michael had been to the social work office with a film he'd taken of Sharon inebriated and aggressive while John was in her care, social workers accompanied him back to the flat and removed John, taking him to a place of safety as Sharon was incapacitated. Michael however was charged with assault as Sharon had a bruise on her face which she accused Michael of being responsible for and he was unable to see John for five to six weeks.

"After three weeks they gave the son back to Sharon...according to social work Sharon was fine and everything was rosy in the camp and it was me that was the cause of it all."

Michael had to go to quite extreme lengths to retain contact with John in his vital formative months of life. Michael referred himself for fathers' support with Circle. There then followed a period of prolonged involvement with social work and the child protection system, which saw Sharon falling victim to her alcohol addiction and John placed officially with his maternal grandparents. After requesting a parenting assessment be carried out on himself, an independent assessor was commissioned and finally Michael was assessed and things changed dramatically. We shall return to Michael's story later.

Gareth had been working long shifts, as the manager of a local bar, in order to provide financial support for his young family, two year old step-daughter (Rebecca) and new born daughter (Lara).

"[The relationship] was actually quite good but like a couple of wee arguments, nothing major just wee daft arguments over nothing. Then a year and a half ago she fell pregnant with Lara and after Lara was born in July, I left my job a week later to support her with the 2 kids and then after that it just wasn't working basically."

Gareth's partner (Valerie), who had been brought up in a chaotic household and had been frequently in foster care, had stopped taking her prescribed anti-depressant medication after leaving hospital and was suffering postnatal depression. After her support worker left her post and was replaced she found it increasingly difficult to cope and the relationship began to suffer.

"It was just like, I think it was mainly, the main issue was trust. If I was to go out I'd be accused of going with other lassies and that... and the same for her...it was vice versa."

Things came to a head.

"Well on that day that all this stuff's supposed to have happened she went oot at about half one to take Rebecca to nursery and she said she'd be back at half three for a health visitors appointment but she never returned until 11 o'clock at night... then her phone went and it was her ex and she'd been sitting with him all day. So I was like 'ken what, away you go' ...[I] turned round and put a hole in the door, I've admitted that from day one, I've always admitted that and then I walked oot intae the room then about five or ten minutes later the police came."

Gareth was charged with breach of the peace, vandalism, threatening a police officer and assault. He was arrested and appeared in court the following day.

"I would have pled guilty to vandalism but they weren't willing to accept anything except plead guilty to it all or plead not guilty, so I had to plead not guilty."

For the following three and a half months Gareth was denied any contact with his daughter and calls to the social worker were not returned despite repeatedly attempting to contact him and representing himself at Children's Hearings. Again this is a vital developmental time for Lara and the loss is felt keenly by Gareth.

Gareth referred himself for fathers' support at Circle and with support managed to develop a constructive dialogue with the social worker and gain contact with his daughter and latterly his step-daughter. As plans have progressed for the two children, Valerie has struggled to maintain consistently satisfactory contact with the girls. At the present time Gareth is being assessed as potential main carer of his daughter and step-daughter.

Both the above cases are characterised by an incident of domestic abuse being reported to the police resulting in charges being brought against the alleged perpetrator and a long period of time awaiting a court date, during which time contact with the child reduces substantially. Both men referred themselves to the fathers' project having heard about the service elsewhere. These two fathers felt ostracised by social work before the involvement and advocacy of a fathers' worker.

These men expressed a sense of relief at being listened to when the initial contact took place with the fathers' worker and described the attitude of the social worker as suspicious about their desire to parent their children. It is worth noting that the gender of the social worker is not significant in these cases with both male and a female treating them as abusive, manipulative and controlling. The idea that a father would genuinely wish to take on parental responsibility for their child under such circumstances was regarded with suspicion.

Michael describes how he felt at the time when John was in Sharon's care:

> *"I felt he was getting malnourished, he wasn't getting looked after properly and this was just an effect of sitting with alcoholics getting drunk, who's looking after my son I dinnae know, I was panicking through all this all thoughts going through my head I couldnae sleep, crying at night realising that I needed to do something about this because the social work are nae doing nothing about it."*

Michael went to great lengths to prove to social work that he was not an abusive man as he had been simplistically portrayed. He describes the impact of the parenting assessment:

> *"I feel that's going really, really well. I feel if people tell you you're bad for long enough you start to doubt yourself, I knew that I wasnae but I was just saying I could have done things different. Now I feel that someone's... actually finding things out that'll actually benefit what I'm saying."*

The situation for Michael changed dramatically after the assessment was complete but it remains of deep concern that it took so many months for Michael to be taken seriously as a parent. This is despite the fact that he has two children aged 15 and 16 to his previous partner who are thriving, and with whom he enjoys a very good relationship, as well as with their mother. Michael repeatedly urged the social worker to verify what he was telling them but this was ignored until he forced the issue at a Children's Hearing by requesting a parenting assessment, to which the Children's Panel agreed. Up to this point Michael's voice was absent from reports and assessments; he describes being dismissed as manipulative and 'clever' as if this were in fact a negative attribute. At the time of writing John is thriving in Michael's full-time care.

Michael and Gareth have both required patience to overcome barriers which excluded them from fulfilling their parental responsibility, in their personal lives and in their encounter with inflexible and possibly prejudiced, institutional attitudes. Where they expected support they

encountered negative assumptions and deliberate attempts to freeze them out of their children's lives. Gareth describes a conversation with the social worker before a children's hearing:

> *"He said that I was just a risk to her, that it was in their best interests not to see me. He said 'I'm nae saying you'll never get to see them again' but it was a matter of time in his words it could be six months it could be six years...I think it was the panel in January, the one when he turned round and said to me 'go away and think whether you actually want to be in their lives or no'"*

This encounter betrays a troubling institutional attitude whereby if the father is a 'perpetrator of abuse' he is perceived as being no great loss in the life of the child. As well as denying the parental rights of the father, this obstructs the rights of the child to have a relationship with their parent.

5.2 Allegations and Probability

When allegations of abuse are made against a father the task for social workers discerning the best course of action is complex. The strictures of practice policy and the known impact of abuse on children dictate that the initial response is to ensure the safety of the child/children and isolate them from the alleged abuser. It is what happens next that is relevant to this study. The following cases raise important practice issues.

Joe came home from work expecting his wife, daughter and son to be in the house but on finding it deserted he tried to contact his wife and waited. At 7pm the police and social work knocked on the door:

> *"They said they had an accusation of abuse or potential risk of abuse or something to that effect reported to them. They weren't specific about who was accused of what...and then I was told that the children and their mother would not be coming home that evening. I was asked if I could prepare some clothes for my young son, at that time he was nine and a half months old and my daughter as well...I was quite insistent ...and they said I was accused of something which I was very shocked about..."*

Joe was accused of sexually abusing his daughter. Initially he felt that the case would be investigated with rigour and fairness.

> *"I must say that I was very naïve, I thought that I had mentioned these things to her [social worker], so she is a good person... she will do what is the right thing to do..."*

Joe had to move out of the family home and have supervised contact with his children for two hours a week. The contact was a particularly difficult experience made more so by the attitude taken by the allocated social worker:

> *"[The social worker] complained that I'd brought too much food for my children, given them too much choice as to what they could have to eat for snacks or what have you, if it's a late afternoon snack rather than lunch she'd complain about that as well....[she] actually stood during contact, would stand with her arms crossed and folded looking at [my daughter] at all times not taking her eyes off [her], she would sometimes glare across to see what [my son] was doing but she would always be looking at [my daughter] almost every moment and never at all coming across as relaxed."*

In this case it appears that the prejudice of the social worker may have been betrayed by her manner during the contact, which clearly did not allow for a pleasant experience for the children. This became apparent when a social care worker took on the role after which the atmosphere during the sessions was more relaxed.

> *"The way that I was monitored was based on the most poor stereotypes of disconnected, and basically, an alienated parent, a father who is typically not involved or interested in his children. So in a sense my children were led to see me, specifically when [social worker] was doing the supervising of the contact, they were made to feel that I represented a genuine risk to them by her manner and the way she did the supervising of the contact."*

Ultimately it transpired in court that the allegation against Joe was malicious and concocted by his wife who was seeking a divorce. The social worker and police involved were heavily criticised by the Sheriff. The transcript of the interview with the child showed that the social worker had asked over twenty leading questions to the child about whether her father had touched her inappropriately. This contradicts training and expertise and would render any evidence unsafe. Despite the child repeatedly stating that her father had never harmed her, or touched her in the way suggested, the social worker had the child examined by a doctor for signs of sexual abuse, which was very traumatic for her, and again showed no sign of abuse whatsoever. At the present time custody of the children is shared between his ex-wife and himself. Joe agreed to this after consulting his daughter and respecting her view that she wished to be able to live with both parents.

Eddie found himself accused of sexually abusing his son. The allegation was made to social work out of hours service by an anonymous source. Again this happened in the context of a relationship breakdown and with a specific situation where Eddie had raised legitimate concerns about the care of his son and particularly about the capacity of his son's maternal grandmother. Eddie is an assertive person and someone who was not willing to accept things as they were presented to him and with genuine concerns about his son's welfare he pushed for action from the social work department. The allegation appears to have been made in response to his highlighting of concerns about the care of his son to the local department. Eddie's three year old son had told him that his 'bad gran' hurt him.

> *"I took matters up with his mother via a solicitor at the time and I was told that yes her mother was hitting my boy and so was she. I even received a letter from my solicitor saying yes they were hitting my wee boy of three and a half years old which was completely unacceptable to me... a couple of weeks later my wee boy told my auntie and my cousin the same sort of stuff which was reported back to me. I put this together and I ended up going back to social work at the request of my lawyer which to be honest was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life and I absolutely regret ever daeing it."*

For Eddie the relationship with social work was fraught and antagonistic from the beginning. Where Eddie would report his concerns expecting some kind of investigation he perceived a lackadaisical response to his concerns. The situation developed with the focus turning on himself as a troublemaker and as abusive, in the sense that he was making malicious allegations and therefore his behaviour constituted emotional abuse of his son. Unfortunately Eddie's vociferous and vocal presentation, which was borne of his concern at the lack of action from the children's services, served to fit with a stereotyped understanding

of him as an aggressive and abusive man. So, for example, when Eddie was in conversation with the social work area manager, remonstrating about the lack of investigation:

> *"I told him quite clearly on the phone that I would hold him responsible if anything happened to my son to which he replied 'could you repeat that Mr ***** I do believe you just threatened to harm your child'"*

This was recorded and appears to demonstrate a wilful misrepresentation of Eddie's complaint. Eddie used Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation to have official documentation released pertaining to his son's case and this raises further questions about the statutory response. Records Eddie received later brought to his attention the fact that child protection meetings were taking place without his knowledge, eight in total.

While this was going on and Eddie was the focus of a child protection investigation, a FoI request at a later date brought to Eddie's attention that there was good reason for the authorities to be concerned by the level of care that his son was receiving at home.

> *"Not only was my son telling me he was being hurt he was telling his nursery, he was telling his school, he was telling the police, he was telling anybody that would listen. I think it was something like he told 28 different statements to 18 different professionals that his Granny was hurting him. The records also show that as early as 2002, before I knew there was anything going on, Granny turning up at nursery saying she cannae cope with [my son], she couldn't control him she couldn't cope with his behaviour, he was very angry, she couldnae cope, she was crying, that his mother couldnae cope."*

Eddie's use of the FoI powers brought further concerning information to light:

> *"[There] were nine statements made to my son's nursery and one of them goes like this..."Mummy did it with a burny iron"...[my son] had [an] iron burn on the back of his left hand, he had a burn on his neck and he had a big bruise on his forehead and when the nursery workers had seen this in 2003 they had said to [my son] "what have you done?" and he said his mummy did it, his mummy did it and he pointed to his arm and he pointed to his neck, "Mummy did it with the burny iron" and on top of that he pointed to his forehead and he said "Mummy did it, Mummy hit me" Now this matter was reported to his social work department and they did nothing..."*

Eddie was pressurising the social work department throughout this time to investigate his concerns. Eddie remained excluded from proceedings for months and had to use the FoI, as described, to find out what had been going on in meetings while he was treated as a risk and the department had taken at face value the allegation of sexual abuse. The allegation itself had initially been made anonymously on a Sunday in a phone call to the social work out-of-hours service; the grandmother had then phoned the Department on the Monday to inform them that her daughter had made the allegation before repeating the allegation in detail. The second description of the abuse differed in several key ways to the initial call, nevertheless Eddie went a period of months with either no, or minimal contact with his son. Later in the sheriff court, the mother admitted that the allegation was malicious.

Eddie's case raises serious questions about social work practice. For the purpose of this study it is important to retain focus on the issue of gender and particularly to consider whether Eddie was treated differently as a father. It is the author's view that Eddie fitted a

framework of understanding of a risky, abusive man to which the professionals clung in the face of compelling evidence which corroborated his concerns.

Maliciously alleging sexual abuse is a particularly damaging and abusive act, which in these two cases was not deemed worthy of investigation or any kind of action by the child protection professionals. Eddie's son was left in the care of his mother and grandmother despite the large number of reports from the nursery and other professionals that the child was explicitly reporting physical abuse. The grandmother had a history of psychiatric problems with symptoms including violent behaviour for which she had previously been hospitalised. Eddie experienced intimidation from associates of his ex-partner during this time. He lost a well-paying job due to stress and suffers ill health as a result of his experiences. His tenacity appears to have been held against him by defensive child protection professionals who have attributed his assertiveness as befitting an abusive male rather than a concerned parent. As Eddie describes, regarding gender:

> *"A majority of the social workers were female and I just believe there was quite a lot of empathy going on which was not afforded to me, when in fact I was the guy getting abused, I was the guy getting petrol poured all over his car, I was the guy who was getting attacked."*

Eddie invites us to consider the case with the genders switched:

> *"If we switch the sexes round here and look at it that I was the female and someone was attacking me and setting fire to my property and making such allegations which were all false and nonsense about me and abusing my kiddy, this would not have panned out this way... It seems to me that if you're female all you have to do is deny it, maybe cry you know and it's accepted when... maybe us guys don't do ourselves any justice because we don't cry."*

Another of our respondents has experienced an enduring and harrowing experience as a result of false allegation of sexual abuse. **Alex** was kept from the family home for three years due to concerns from the social work department that he had sexually abused his step-daughter. The allegation was initially made by a neighbour from whom Alex had sought advice after his step-daughter had disclosed having been sexually abused by a mutual acquaintance. The neighbour reported her conversation to the police and Alex was arrested the next day. There followed a period of five years' involvement with social services during which time the perpetrator of abuse against Alex's step-daughter pled guilty in court to the abuse and was jailed. The neighbour who reported Alex to the police was in a relationship with the abuser unbeknownst to Alex. Despite this knowledge, child protection services enforced a prohibition on Alex staying in the family home and denied his children a normal family life. He describes a conversation with a professional:

> *"They said 'the allegation is against you, you are a danger to your children, you're not allowed to be in the same household as them, you're not allowed to see them'"*

Alex describes the impact of social work involvement:

> *"It's been a huge impact, psychologically, I'm suffering depression, I have been suffering depression for many years but now, nothing like what it is now. I've lost three years of*

being with my family, for my children who are quite young it's a significant amount of time."

Alex and his family have been living as a family for a year and attempting to find normality, denied them through a combination of a malicious false allegation and an incompetent statutory response.

Having taken a dispassionate view of the evidence in this case it seems to the author that the child protection services had acted in an emotional manner and lacked a rational, evidence-based approach. It is quite possible that the righteous impulse to protect children and adult victims of abuse can lead to a response which is not supported by a full appraisal of the available evidence. The unintended consequence of these actions is a negative impact on family life and children's emotional development; the state unwittingly becomes the abuser.

5.3 Communication Breakdown

The data as a whole is imbued with a sense of men not being listened to by professionals and of being marginalised from processes which impact on their family life. Reports can be written without the need to meet with or consult the father once he has been labelled a perpetrator or troublemaker. Double standards are highlighted as a recurring issue. Describing his child's social worker **Martin** said:

"It's like he'll say one thing and we'll be back with him and then we'll work with him and he'll still nae get back tae us... at the start if we didnae go along with it, it would make him think that we had something to hide. We've never had anything to hide so we've just been honest and we've said just do whatever checks you want because we never did nothing wrong... They've said if we take it to court [his child] would be taken off [kinship carers] and put into temporary foster care until the court battle is over because during the court battle they says that we can just go to their house and pick him up and just leave with him. Which we wouldnae think..we wouldnae dae that anyway.."

Martin and his wife had co-operated with social work from the beginning of their involvement. Martin admits that he and his wife were vulnerable through suffering mental health problems and welcomed support in looking after their children - the reasons for initial social work involvement. The young parents were concerned about bruises which appeared on their firstborn's body and called in the GP at the height of winter. The Doctor assured them that there was not an urgent matter, but if they were worried, to take the baby to the hospital. Martin and his wife decided to make the arduous journey to the hospital in the snow taking a sealed envelope from the Doctor. The situation at hospital developed differently to how they had expected and became a full-blown child protection investigation. At the time Martin was carrying out the main care of his baby and his wife was struggling with postnatal depression. He felt the need for guidance and support to ensure that he was doing the right thing but felt pushed in to going along with social work advice.

"I was taking over [child's] bottle, changing the nappies and things like that. That's how maybe, that's how I thought I had caused the bruising maybe, mishandled or something. Accidental holding his ribs too hard or something like that when I was changing his bum and also social work said the reason they were so hard in on us...was because of baby P dilemma. This is because if they'd given him back and [child] had died or whatever because one of us hadn't looked after him properly then they'd be to blame."

Risk averse practice led by heightened media focus on child protection may have influenced an over-cautious and nervous practitioner response in this case. There was a professional lack of willingness to engage and support vulnerable parents, or to recognise a caring instinct in a young father carrying out a role more commonly associated with the mother.

> *"We understood that they were just looking out for [child's] best interests but so were we, so were we. They kept going on that they were looking out for his best interests but we were the ones that noticed the bruising, we were the ones that chose to bring him to hospital, we had the choice to leave it a couple of days and see if the bruising would go away but we chose to just run him to hospital*."

If the clock was turned back the young couple would have never made that trip where after extensive medical checks, including being checked for sexual abuse, no evidence was found beyond some topical bruising, which was why the young parents had called in the doctor and taken the option to have a second opinion, not the behaviour of abusive parents. Currently Martin's two children are looked after by his wife's parents.

Donald tells of his involvement with social work, and the difficulty he had being listened to as a single parent when he experienced, what he described, as a breakdown:

> *"It was a mental health issue but it wasn't treated as a health issue it was social, criminal. I was treated like I was doing something wrong. Even though the children have to be protected you're not allowed to see them at school, you're not allowed to be on your own with them. If you want to see them there has to be someone else there."*

Donald found himself having to justify his actions and parenting style as a single father:

> *"Once you are in the system you are treated like you must be doing something wrong, it's all the negatives, criminal, reckless side of things that gets looked at, there wasn't anything there that was reckless or criminal it just seems to get interpreted in that way. Nobody says oh he's on his own he's gone through all that stress but he's managed to find a way of getting that little lad into school every morning*."

His frustration at the outset led to his presentation being interpreted as aggressive:

"If you talk angrily, if you get emotional and you're talking angrily to someone about something, not losing the plot with them, but through frustration and your body language gets tensed up then this is perceived that this is what you're like all the time. You know, that the kid's going to ask for an extra spoon of ice cream and you're going to get all tensed up. But it's not the case, it's not the case at all."

Donald struggled to be listened to for many months and to get the correct support he required. As it transpires, Donald was exhibiting the early symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis. He continues to be the main carer for his 12 year old son.

Kevin found that he had social work involvement in his family after his son aged 15 sexually abused his 11 year old brother. At the time the incident took place, Kevin and his wife had separated and were in the midst of a divorce and custody battle, which Kevin felt set the scene for the social work position - he described a sense of collusion between the social worker and his ex-wife. Kevin felt that he was held responsible by the social worker for what

happened, despite living elsewhere. He struggled to gain a satisfactory contact arrangement with his children.

> *"She was a female listening to another female. I felt because I was the guy it was like 'who are you?' Because I was the father and I was there all the time it could have been my fault and that's what I got from [social worker]. I felt, is there not a way that there could be a male social worker speak to me instead of **... I felt that I was speaking to a woman, [I was] moaning about a woman and it was like you're just a guy. I felt I was up against a brick wall from day one."*

Kevin felt that outdated views on family life impacted on the social work approach to his case and the communication that he had with the professionals managing the case:

> *"I think if there's a family breakdown they should get rid of the old school 'better with the mum'. There should be a meeting where everyone's involved and look at everything over time then say the kids are better off with X instead of the 'since the beginning of time kids are better off with their mum.' The mum figure in this book died with Mary Poppins, that person doesn't exist now, for me that should be a big thing for the future. There'll be a lot of fathers who'll lose out and I don't mean lose the kids because I've been there - they could quite easily kill themselves. I was on the edge of thinking about suicide but because my kids are everything I'm still here to tell the story."*

5.4 Innocent by Law, Guilt by Association

There is a curious and frustrating tension which exists between the legal absolute of innocent before proven guilty and the assessment of probability which is the keystone of risk assessment in child protection. In criminal law the defendant must be shown beyond any reasonable doubt to have committed the crime before they are found guilty, whereas in civil law the decision is based on a balance of probabilities. In the cases which have been described above some of the men found that despite being admonished, discharged or found not guilty, they continued to be seen as guilty by child protection professionals. This causes immense frustration at what could be perceived as an impossible challenge in proving themselves innocent or, at least, not a risk to their children.

Alex was cleared in a criminal court and later in a civil court but was treated as guilty for some time by child protection professionals. Having read the files, the author was struck by the lack of objective fact which could be held as evidence of wrongdoing; in fact on the contrary there were various inaccuracies and opinions presented as objective fact which once preserved in the case file were impossible to remove and continued to haunt Alex and his family.

Indeed this is a common problem that has been observed by the fathers' project through the years. Michael was told by the social worker that he looked bad on paper and that he had a sketchy past, which indicated to the worker that the allegations from the mother were likely to be true. After he had been cleared in court of charges brought against him the suspicion remained explicitly upon him and he had months of painstaking assessment to get to the point where he was deemed a fit and safe parent, this despite having thriving children with whom he has a strong bond from a previous relationship.

After his appearance in court Gareth was told by his daughter's social worker that the domestic violence charge would always be held against him despite the assault charge being dropped.

The immense frustration felt by all the men interviewed in their dealings with child protection workers has been immeasurably increased by this fog of suspicion, which can seem impossible to escape despite a lack of evidence. The lack of engagement from the professionals due to the apparently immoveable assumption of risk from these fathers does a huge disservice to the children involved.

5.5 Fathers' Support

Some of the men interviewed described the change that occurred once they had been referred or referred themselves for support from the father's project. Kevin describes the change that occurred in his case after the father's worker became involved:

> *"With that meeting with the four of us round that table was just a completely different [atmosphere]...certainly after that meeting things did improve with [sw] it was like 'lets start working with Kev' I got listened to a bit more. Before she was like 'you're telling me the kids are saying this but I'm speaking to them and they're not saying this' She was saying I'm wrong without saying I'm wrong."*

The fathers' support made a significant difference to a seemingly intractable situation for Donald:

> *"It's been really good that [Circle] got involved as a single dads' project because in the long term it's put me back on the right track for finding out what's.... the right thing for me. ...and again coming from social work it's a completely different point of view where they're not really there for single dads."*

The cases of Michael and Gareth changed dramatically for the better after they had presented for support at the fathers' project. It is the author's experience that this relief can be felt equally by the social worker and other child protection professionals. The fathers' support role of mediation can decisively improve communication between parties who have found themselves in entrenched positions and are struggling to overcome the barriers preventing constructive dialogue.

It is the author's view that for the men interviewed who had not had a fathers' worker during the child protection process (Eddie, Joe and Martin), the concerns may have been satisfactorily resolved at an earlier stage and in Martin's case the children would have been looked after by their parents.

5.6 Cognitive Dissonance, Professional Blinkers, Prejudicial Practice

Through the practice of Fathers' Support one can recognise patterns in the presentation of the men who seek support. Although there are frequently quite different explicit reasons for the support need as indicated above, the sense of being scapegoated, labelled and marginalised often prevails. As a professional, one has to work with the client to consider the wider context of the child protection concern and to support the client to recognise and accept personal responsibility for their actions. What one is looking to see and hear is an

awareness of the child's best interests being paramount and the central consideration. This usually involves compromise in a case where parents are in disagreement, or all out conflict, over the child's best interests. What is required from the professionals involved is balance, fairness and a clear communication to all relevant parties. Collusion is an ongoing danger for the fathers' worker which requires overt vigilance and an ultimately reflexive approach with constructive use of support and supervision to maintain a critical distance. The danger of collusion is also very real for the other professionals involved who may be more typically involved with the mother. Collusion becomes more likely when practice policy dictates inherent bias which has happened in some of the cases described here.

As Gareth describes a conversation with his social worker about the original domestic violence incident:

> *"He asked me what actually happened that day and I told him and I said 'I've no been convicted of the assault charge' and he said 'no matter what that'll always be used against ye.' He said 'the best thing you can do is go into the panel and say I'm sorry for assaulting Val, I know it was wrong it's happened, I'm sorry for daeing it' I turned round and said ' I'm no admitting something that I've never done' and he went 'well it'll always be used against you' He'd no spent any time talking to me, I had one meeting with him."*

In this case Gareth was incorrectly labelled as a dangerous perpetrator, based on one incident and a complaint from a vulnerable mother. This is despite the fact that Gareth had been previously regarded as a protective factor. The police response and the social work endorsement of it resulted in this young dad being excluded from his daughter's and step-daughter's life at a vital developmental time. It required enormous commitment and dedication on Gareth's part to overcome the barriers which were placed before him. It required Gareth to refer himself for fathers' support and for a professional intervention before the social worker would even meet with Gareth to discuss contact.

The sense of being labelled as dangerous by the authorities is echoed throughout the testimonies of the fathers interviewed. The likelihood of biased perception towards men from the child protection system has to be considered a probability simply based on the research evidence (Scourfield 2003, Featherstone, 2009, Mandell, 2002, Clapton 2009, Cameron et al, 2012).

Michael described a conversation with his social worker:

> *"She told me 'You don't look good on paper' I said to her 'No Hen, but you wrote the paper'"*

Michael has managed to elucidate the key problem here. The social worker had adopted a position at the outset of the case, which made it difficult to apply a rational judgement based on all available evidence. This is also the case for Eddie and Alex who seem to have fitted a biased gender construct held by the professionals they encountered and who consequently failed to protect the children involved from those who would do them harm. Reports were produced in Michael's case almost entirely from the viewpoint of the mother. This is justified professionally through a dominant professional rationalisation which dictates that women must be believed when they disclose domestic abuse. It seems that although, throughout social work training, students are required to pay heed to anti-oppressive practice and foster a reflexive approach, once in practice, bias against men is commonplace.

6 Discussion

The cases presented here contain powerful messages, which for those working directly supporting fathers will not be surprising. When considering domestic violence the male worker can feel vulnerable for fear of being accused of collusion with the abusive behaviour. The cases reported here are not unusual in the experience of the fathers' worker and the theoretical context should give some indication as to why that is the case.

A Canadian study of fathers and child welfare (Cameron et al 2012:8) identified that the stories told by the respondents "were much more complex and nuanced than the typical characterisations of these men". This observation reflects the author's experience of limited or stereotypical expectations of fathers belying emotional depth. If the emotional depth and complexity of the men is met with a blind eye and a deaf ear then it is little wonder that the reaction is one of frustration, which can be interpreted as aggression, thus fitting a stereotypical view of a problematic male client, or in the case of domestic abuse, a perpetrator of domestic violence.

The ongoing tendency to treat domestic violence in simplistic terms is rationalised in our society where women have been victims of abuse systematically and have felt trapped in appalling circumstances. Unfortunately the complexity of abuse does not lend itself to such simple analysis relying, as it does, on a feminist understanding of patriarchal abuse.

As Dutton and Corvo (2006: 464) describe: 'It is not that perpetrators described by the patriarchal view of domestic violence do not exist, it is that they represent a small segment of the range and patterns of perpetration. It would be the theoretical equivalent of viewing anyone who used any illegal drugs or any amount of alcohol above acceptable social levels as a long term heroin or crack addict.'

The fact that intimate family abuse is very complex and requires a nuanced response is further backed by the macro-study of Allen (2010). Allen recognises that although intimate partner violence occurs with men and women as victims a sophisticated framework is required in which to understand and assess violence between genders in order to intervene effectively, with the least damaging impact on children. The lack of an effective typology of intimate partner violence leads to situations that have been described above.

It remains clear that the absolute marginalisation of the father is dangerous and must be avoided in all but the most clear-cut cases of abuse or patriarchal terrorism (Allen, 2011). The case for dedicated fathers' workers, embedded within localities, in order to support the work of the child protection services is strong and their support reduces an incredibly difficult burden upon the allocated social worker. The intervention ought to be therapeutic and least invasive while holding abusive behaviour to account. As a recent report from the Centre for Social Justice (2012:3) makes clear, the current approach is not working: 'Power, control and patriarchy are explanatory factors in many contexts of domestic abuse, but there are many others that are also significant, including poverty, substance misuse, psychological vulnerabilities rooted in people's past experiences (such as insecurity, jealousy, and dysfunctional ways of resolving conflict), and the dynamics that play out between two people in a relationship. Therefore, as domestic abuse is about far more than power, control and patriarchy, effective solutions need to be drawn from a much fuller understanding of the problem.'

In the case of allegations of sexual abuse the data presented reflects the fact that this is a highly emotive issue which can lead to a biased approach where stereotypical views based on gender are present. It is understandable that the professional dealing with the allegation will err on the side of caution. It remains imperative however, that they approach the issue in an even-handed manner lest further harm be done to a child through unnecessary professional intervention and separation from an innocent parent. An evidence-based approach utilising guidelines such as provided by Lowenstein (2012), which provide a framework for assessing sexual abuse allegations, is beneficial, whilst remaining aware that malicious allegations do take place and must be considered, particularly when a partner is the one making the allegation. Again, the marginalisation and ostracising of the father ought to be guarded against and can at least be mediated by the allocation of a fathers' worker.

The expansion of the father support model would have a beneficial impact in ensuring that men involved with child protection services were engaged in the process and supported to meet their parental responsibilities. The case study highlighted gives an example which demonstrates that innovative approaches which place responsibility on the professional to engage fathers will produce positive results. Elsewhere accredited parenting programmes such as Dads 2B and Mellow Dads[1] have also had great success in engaging fathers. These successes demonstrate unequivocally that if the professional approach is well thought out, and appropriately targeted, fathers are willing to engage.

Good Practice Case Study - Breaking Down Barriers - Islington Local Authority

Gavin Swann is a senior social worker in Islington who recognised that the authority was failing to engage fathers. He designed and instigated the Breaking Down Barriers project. Through the project allocated workers have to demonstrate that they have made efforts to include fathers in child protection processes. "We had 12 social workers involved, both men and women, and we met every six weeks. In between those six weeks we experimented with different methods of dealing with fathers. We changed all our referral processes and initial assessments so that each one required a name and a phone number for the father. Each core assessment required the father to have been seen and invited to a child protection conference; if not there had to be a reason why."

http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/15/04/2011/116687/tackling-social-workers-anti-men-attitudes.htm

The project has seen an initial rise of engagement of fathers from 8% to 20% in two years and has led to fundamental organisational change in the approach to fathers.

7 Conclusion

The narrative evidence presented in this report gives voice to those who have too often remained without a voice. All absent fathers have been castigated and men have often found themselves the victim of negative labelling. While societal gender roles have gone through

[1] For further information see http://makinggenderequalityreal.org.uk

rapid changes in the economic sphere and within the family, statistics for the Scottish man make grim reading. Unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, prison and suicide are dominant themes and experiences. The majority of men however, struggle to be good fathers and partners, sometimes in the face of formidable institutional barriers. The stereotypical views of men held by professionals within the child protection sector are reflected in policy which can marginalise men from family life in the face of complex systemic problems.

The stories presented here will not surprise those who have been working with fathers or those fathers who have found themselves subject to investigation. Of course we are mindful of the fact that there are many examples of good practice and excellent practitioners throughout the early years and child protection sector of Scotland. However, of the experiences of the men described here, that which is arguably the most damaging and unacceptable is not being listened to. We have attempted to place these experiences in a societal, policy and practice context and highlight that, in an era when social work students are inculcated with the imperative of anti-oppressive practice, it is unfortunate that approximately half the population can be labelled as inherently dangerous or less able parents by dint of their gender.

It is the contention of the author that in order to provide lasting positive change for vulnerable families in Scotland there must be a dedicated effort made to ensure that fathers are engaged in processes designed to support families and protect children. This should involve preventative work from ante-natal stage for fathers continuing throughout their child/children's developing years, if required.

Men have been invisible to social work and child protection professionals for far too long. There is now a growing body of evidence which illuminates practice issues, describes father's experiences and suggests projects and interventions which will effectively make a positive change. Social work and children's services professionals require support to be able to effectively make the required changes but fundamentally there is the need for a cultural change, which recognises that fathers are equally as important as mothers, and recognises that men are emotional beings who want to be good parents and ultimately who love their children.

In order to be able to make decisions based on probability we require support and an open-minded assessment of the available facts. If there is a situation where we can identify a pattern of institutional bias affecting good decision-making, then we are obliged to do something about it. This is an issue that demands more critical social work responses than heretofore. According to Kim (2012) "The strengthening of social work's critical analysis of both its harmful and ameliorative roles in efforts towards positive social change can contribute to the further building of institutions, policies and practices that contest rather than reproduce oppressive relations of power in its many intersecting forms." The concern is that in its approach to men and to fathers, social work merely substitutes what it perceives to be one form of oppression with another.

8 Report Recommendations

- **Improved training for professionals involved in child protection work on issues of gender**

  The case study shows the impact of training in bringing about effective change, however, as Featherstone (2009) indicates, the quality of supervision will influence impact. Supervisors within social work teams need to commit to supporting change. Other agencies involved in child protection, particularly health, will benefit from targeted training.

- **Social Work teams to designate a worker who has the responsibility for holding allocated social workers to account for their effort to include fathers**

  In order for change to be profound, a line of accountability is required which is directly observable. Designated 'champions' would be able to monitor inclusive practice.

- **Wider provision of fathers' workers across Scotland in order to support professionals in engaging fathers and to advocate for fathers**

  The cost-effectiveness of fathers' support in reducing the need for children to be taken into care can be clearly evidenced through the outcomes of current projects. A more strategic allocation of funds in the statutory and third sector will allow for more heavily-evaluated preventative work to be implemented and have a long term positive impact.

- **Commitment to fund preventative work with fathers antenatally and with accredited parenting programmes**

  While parenting programmes are shown to be effective they require to be targeted and designed for fathers in order to make the required impact across the country.

- **Commitment to refer fathers for specialised support at the earliest opportunity**

  Greater awareness through increased training for child protection staff and greater numbers of dedicated fathers' services will lead to earlier referral for fathers' support.

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