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SINGLE MOTHERS, SOCIAL POLICY AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

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Abstract

This paper summarises the findings from a study investigating aspects of single mothers' experiences of transition and adaptation to living as a single parent in South Australia in the 1990s. The qualitative research traced 36 respondents' decision making, and the events surrounding their entry into sole parent status and subsequent adaptation.

The research identified increased risks of social isolation, poverty and poor health for single mothers and children who had to contend with a violent ex-partner, compared with those who did not. The policy implications of the research indicate the need for gendered violence to be recognised as a significant driver of poverty, isolation and stress in single mother households, impacting adversely on both mothers and children.

Violence Against Women and Children

The research into single mothers' strategies and options around transition and adaptation began as a project oriented to their economic activity, without specific reference to violence. However, in speaking to single mothers it became clear that gendered violence had been a critical factor shaping the lives of the women who were so affected.

The women in this study were drawn from the group at highest risk of violence - single women who had previously had a partner. Just over half the sample (55 percent) had ever experienced physical or sexual assault by a former partner and/or other family member. Of the twenty survivors of violent assaults, ten had first been abused in childhood, and eight of these had also experienced violent adult relationships. Of the 29 separated mothers, seventy-two percent nominated violence

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) study into women's safety found that twenty-three percent of adult women who had ever partnered had experienced violent assault by a current partner or former partner. Single women who had previously been partnered were at highest risk of assault, with 42 percent reporting violence at some time during the relationship (ABS 1996:51). The Women's Safety survey also showed women who had an abusive current or ex-partner were twice as likely to have been abused as children. Just over thirty percent of women who had experienced violence from their current or previous partner, had also experienced abuse as children, whilst only 13 percent of women who had not experienced partner violence had experienced child abuse (ABS 1996: 60). Victimization by violence in family relationships is thus a common experience for women and can be likened to a form of terrorism in the home (Marcus 1994).

Much of the violence against women also involves children (Laing 2000). The ABS national survey found that pregnancy was a high risk time for violent attack by male partners. Forty-two percent of the women who had experienced violence by a former partner during the relationships and who were pregnant during the relationship, experienced violence during pregnancy. Twenty percent of these women experienced violence for the first time when they were pregnant (ABS 1996: 52). Children commonly witnessed domestic violence. Sixty-one percent of women who had experienced violence by a current partner during the relationship had children in their care, and over half these women reported their children had witnessed the violence. Forty-six percent of women who had experienced violence by a previous partner said their children had witnessed the violence (ABS 1996: 52). Recent research suggests that around one in four Australian children have witnessed their mother or stepmother being assaulted (Indermauer 2001).

Leaving the relationship is seen as a way for mothers to get away from the violence. Women nominate abuse and addiction issues as the second most common reason, after general communication breakdown, contributing to divorce (Wolcott and Hughes 1999). Mothers who stay in violent relationships face exposure of themselves and their children to continuing violence, whilst those who leave have to manage as single parents and a number of these have to continue to deal with post-separation violence, often for many years. This study sought to identify similarities and differences between single mothers who had to contend with violence compared to those who did not.

Methodology

The research sample was drawn from a range of sources in South Australia including 8 women from a parent community of a primary school in a low socio-economic region of metropolitan Adelaide, 6 clients from a sole parent resource centre, 2 students from Flinders University, 10 referrals from respondents and 10 mothers from Whyalla. Recruitment of respondents was undertaken by a combination of notices at venues which mothers attended, invitation by the researcher and referrals from respondents. Thirty percent of the respondents were aged between 25 and 34, whilst 60 percent were aged between 35 and 45. Just over half the sample had been a single parent for less than five years and 70 percent had one or two children.

The sample was grouped for analysis into mothers who gave birth alone (n=7), mothers who separated from non-violent relationships (n=11) and mothers who separated from violent relationships (n=18). The data was collected in the form of a reflexive open ended interview inviting respondents to provide details around their transition into a single parent family and subsequent adaptation to family and paid work arrangements. The research gathered and compared information

transition into a sole parent household and dealing with social stigma

parenting arrangements - residence/contact/parenting alone

access to non-market income - income support, child support and access to property proceeds and repartnering

access to paid work participation: access to alternative care, poverty traps, transport, the JET scheme, participation in education and training.

Half of the women in the sample had separated from violent relationships and across each aspect of separation and adaptation survivors were forced to deal with increased stress and difficulty compared to those who did not have to deal with violence.

Transition

The respondents in the study largely reflected conventional attitudes to marriage and family, with four out of five giving birth in partnered relationships, most of which were formal marriages. Those mothers with unplanned lone pregnancies viewed them as opportunities to have a child. They took into account their age, their support networks, skills and income earning capacities in deciding to proceed with their pregnancies. They consciously rejected the options of termination, or partnering with their child's father. The minority of mothers who planned a lone birth controlled the risk of an unhappy relationship by not partnering.

Separated mothers living in both violent and non-violent relationships sought to change the problematic aspects of their relationship in preference to ending it. Whereas women who had been married to employed non-violent men faced loss of social and financial status, these issues were not as significant for women who had never married, those who had financially supported their ex-

Separated mothers who had been partnered with non-violent men were more often able to plan the separation and make decisions with their ex-partner about who would move out, than mothers who lived in violent relationships. Mothers who were able to maintain residency in their home were advantaged by avoiding the financial, social and emotional costs of relocation. Women who separated from non-violent relationships were more often able to maintain residence in the home as they did not need to go into hiding. Mothers who left violent relationships and were forced to relocate, lost access to established neighbourhood and community supports, including schools and child care.

Mothers who separated from violent relationships had typically lived with violence for some time, with the forms of violence experienced including physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, financial and social abuse of mothers and children. Living with violence created mental health problems for both adult and child survivors including anxiety, depression and attempted suicide. The risks to their children were a common motivation for mothers to leave violent relationships. They commonly left a number of times and experienced pressure to return from sources including their ex-partner, family members, health services, the church, lack of money and lack of housing.

Perceptions of police and health services responses to women's calls for assistance varied, with some women reporting that their calls for help were not always treated seriously. Women's shelters were a widely used and valued resource providing accommodation, counselling, information and referrals to other services. Other important sources of support were family and friendship networks, where these had survived the pressure of violence. Barriers to using women's shelters included their security policies and other restrictions on clients' conduct. Mothers who left violent

relationships relied heavily on public housing. Long waiting periods for housing and lack of furnishings were common problems confronting women leaving shelters.

In summary, during the transition phase, single mothers leaving violent relationships were much more isolated from formal and informal material and emotional supports compared with mothers who gave birth alone or who separated from non-violent relationships. Survivors of violence were less able to plan and control outcomes for their family due to the lack of supports and the unpredictability of violence, along with the impact of violence on their own and their children's health.

Social stigma and blame compounded the isolation of survivors. All the mothers in the study recognised single motherhood as a stigmatised social identity which many experienced as shame, humiliation, failure and lack of privacy. Stigmatised perceptions of single mothers forced women to continually respond to pity, accusations, blame and social exclusion, expressed in schools, workplaces, courts, social security offices, on public transport and with friends and family. Social stigma increased the isolation of single mothers and their children in communities and inhibited help-seeking behaviour.

Negative stereotypes of single mothers were a form of social violence against them which reinforced the messages of verbal and emotional abuse commonly experienced by survivors of violent relationships and compounded feelings of low self-esteem and failure.

Post-separation parenting arrangements

Mothers who separated from violent relationships experienced relatively greater difficulty in

could not safely send their children into the care of their ex-partner and thus had no access to support or parental relief from their ex-partner. In contrast, women who had separated from non-violent relationships, and whose children saw their father regularly, reported co-operation between the parents to support their children's well-being.

When mothers gave birth alone, fathers commonly avoided any role in the child's life. However, separated mothers were typically located as the presumptive residual carers, continuing their role from before separation, providing care except when fathers wished to do so. Most residence arrangements for children to live with their mothers were made by agreement and without Family Court involvement. A small minority of separated parents shared care of a child. Stable shared care arrangements were associated with an absence of abuse, mothers' confidence in the father to provide adequate care, parental co-operation and geographic proximity.

Violence survivors feared for their own and their children's safety with many seeking to avoid or restrict future contact in the interests of their safety. Family Court proceedings in children's matters were more common amongst separations from violent relationships. Lack of access to legal aid, and fear that court action would result in further violence, were barriers to survivors using the Family Court system. When mothers did use the Family Court system, none was able to prevent their child's continuing exposure to abuse through court-ordered contact.

Nearly two thirds of respondents reported little or no contact between the children and their father with contact tending to decline over time. In the group of non-violent separations, only half reported continuing contact, but in all cases in which contact was occurring, the contact was regarded as positive and desirable. In the group of violent separations, just under half reported continuing

contact. Of those cases with continuing contact, half were regarded as positive and the remaining half experienced contact as opportunities for violent fathers to abuse mothers and their children. When abusive contact continued to occur, mothers had to continue to actively manage their ex-partners' violence.

Mothers who had separated from violent relationships found their parenting skills and relationships with their children improved dramatically without the anxiety and energy required to try to avoid violent attacks on themselves or their children. However the need for recovery from violence placed additional demands on these families after separation.

Whilst mothers who attended shelters had access to some counselling, children's access to services to help them recover from violence was more difficult. Barriers included a lack of appropriate accessible services, long waiting lists and, sometimes, professional attitudes of blame or disbelief towards mothers seeking help for their children. Schools which were able to assist children to gain access to counselling services to recover from the impact of violence, were effective because they were local and in regular contact with the family.

Income Support

All respondents had claimed income support at the time they became single mothers. Access to income support was an important dimension of women's ability to choose to end an unwanted or violent relationship or to give birth alone. Claiming income support was an active process involving disclosure and documentation of women's living arrangements, their sexual activities, their parenting arrangements, their earned income and child support claims.

Single mothers who were primarily dependent on income support experienced poverty, which they defined as lack of choice in housing, as well as struggling to afford other basic costs of living such as food, clothing, transport, electricity and gas services. Mothers nevertheless preferred financial deprivation to living in unwanted or violent relationships.

Child Support

Only two in five single mothers in the sample received child support, with little variation in rates of receipt between Stage One and Stage Two cases. In Stage One cases, where the courts set child maintenance rather than the child support percentage formula applying to post-1989 cases, mothers were more likely to receive only small amounts and to experience high arrears, due to the need for them to undertake expensive and stressful court action to increase amounts or collect arrears.

Regular child support payments improved families' standard of living and could form a substantial portion of family income when ex-partners earned high incomes. Mothers endorsed the system of collection and payment through the Child Support Agency as it removed the requirement for them to deal directly with the other parent.

The strategies mothers reported that the other parent used to avoid paying child support included (a) denying paternity, (b) going overseas or becoming uncontactable, (c) working intermittently or remaining unemployed, (d) working for cash payment, (e) becoming self employed and displacing personal income and costs to the business, as well as (f) threats of violence or family court action.

Survivors of violence were able to be exempted from claiming child support, however this resulted in increased poverty as a consequence of the threat of violence, and yielded huge financial benefits to

Property Division

The family home was the principal asset of most relationships in which assets had been jointly accumulated. Mothers who had been legally married were much more likely to have been buying a home than mothers who lived in de facto partnerships before separation.

Separation adversely affected single mothers' capacity to buy their own home. The proportion of mothers buying their home dropped by one third after separation.

The findings of this study echoed other recent research findings that mothers who separated from violent relationships were much less likely to gain a share of the marital property than others (Sheehan and Smyth 2000). In non-violent relationships, property division was more often agreed between the parties to minimise legal costs. In violent relationships mothers either made no claims on property to avoid provoking assaults, or simply accepted whatever was offered to them.

Violence was thus an effective strategy used by men to avoid child support and to retain all property and assets of the relationship. Both of these outcomes created deeper poverty for survivors. Placing debts in mothers' names was another means used by ex-partners to maintain financial control over them after separation. Recent amendments to Family Tax Benefit law also allow ex-partners to determine the amount of family payment the primary carer receives.

Attitudes to Repartnering

Experiences of violence also affected women's willingness to consider repartnering. Emotional support, compatibility with their children and a mutually respectful and equal relationship were the qualities women considered important in assessing any future relationship. The barriers to repartnering included loss of entitlement to independent income support, loss of autonomy

increased domestic and relationship demands and the risk of a violent or drug addicted partner. Survivors of violent relationships were acutely aware of the risks of forming another violent relationship, and were particularly wary of repartnering.

Access to Paid Work

The mothers in the study viewed paid work ahead of repartnering as the most likely avenue for long-term improvement in their financial circumstances, but here again single mothers who had survived violent ex-partners experienced increased barriers to paid work due to the compounding effects of poverty, social isolation and dislocation , the continuing stress of managing the threat of violence as well as the impact of past violence on their mental health and self-esteem.

Ninety percent of the sample had been in the paid workforce at some time in their lives, with eighty percent engaged in work or study at the time of interview. Perceptions of children's needs were the primary determinant of women's decisions about whether to work. Factors associated with workforce participation were (a) having access to a wide range of alternative care resources (b) having only one or two children, (c) having higher education (d) owning a car (e) not having a history of experiences of violent abuse.

.Survivors of violence were identified by JET[1] Advisers as often having disrupted education and fewer skills, low self esteem, and lack of trust in child care, thereby increasing the barriers to them finding work. Lack of jobs, lack of child care, lack of transport and poverty traps were other main barriers faced by single mothers seeking work.

Sources of care for children used by single mothers in the study included relatives, the other parent, friends and neighbours and formal child care services. Single mothers with access to all forms of alternative care were most advantaged in sharing the care for children. Survivors of violence were relatively disadvantaged in access to all forms of alternative care due to a complex range of factors. Living in abusive relationships often isolated women from friends and relatives. Leaving an abusive relationship often required survivors to move away from established support networks they had been able to form and prevented mothers from sharing care with the other parent. The poverty experienced by many survivors also limited their ability to afford formal child care services. The experiences of survivors also decreased their trust in child care services. Two children of respondents, who had themselves survived abuse as children and as adults, had been abused whilst in Family Day Care.

Lack of private transport limited single mothers' paid work participation due to the need for double journeys on public transport to take children to care or school, then attend a workplace. Survivors of violence were less able to afford a car.

Poverty traps were another factor which reduced single mothers' financial incentives to work, particularly when they lived in public housing. Survivors of violence were more likely to need public housing than other single mothers (Chung et al 2000).

Reasons for single mothers leaving paid work included lack of time with their child, lack of financial rewards, stress, exhaustion and isolation. Single mothers dealing with the impact of violence experienced more stress than those who did not have to manage their own and their children's responses to violence.

Discussion

The findings from the study highlight the compounding ways in which violence against women and children is a critical factor impacting on the population of single parents in Australia. The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children's (NCSMC) member organisation in South Australia, Spark Resource Centre, has consistently identified that between seventy and eighty percent of clients presenting at the Centre are survivors of violence. Their presenting problems include poverty, homelessness, being unable to protect themselves or their children from abuse during contact, children's behavioural problems arising from violence and feelings of rejection and stigma from wider society.

This study and the experiences of those who work with single parents indicate that many of the identified negative outcomes for children associated with single parent families are outcomes of poverty and experiences of exposure to traumatising violence, rather than the family structure itself. Single mother families provide an easily visible scapegoat for public lamentations about the breakdown of family values, the soaring costs of welfare dependency, and the lack of discipline for children in 'fatherless' families, yet the realities behind the rhetoric show that these are outcomes of men's violence against women and children.

This research suggests that social policies which aim to improve outcomes for single parent families should give greater emphasis to effectively protecting women and their children from violent ex-partners and assisting victims' physical, emotional and financial recovery. Being serious about reducing the incidence and impact of domestic violence and post-separation violence means further work towards enabling and sustaining law enforcement and other agency responses which confront

male abusers with negative consequences for their actions, whilst supporting non-offending family members to stay in their homes and neighbourhoods (Chung et al 2000).

It means revising the values of the 'best interests of the child' to reflect the child's basic human right to be safe and for its mother to be safe. Currently survivors of violence can be and are continuously re-exposed to violence through family court orders which privilege child contact ahead of safety (Rendell et al 2000, Rhoades 2000,Rhoades et al 1999, 2001). Legal cultures in the family and criminal courts are organised to reject allegations of abuse as an adversarial tactic and to enable perpetrators to continue their activities without consequence - this needs to change if we are serious about stopping abuse. Services to children who have survived violence are limited and characterised by long waiting lists. Again, supporting children's recovery from violence is critical to the social project of positive change.

Currently it is normal for adult survivors to miss out on child support and property division and for them to be largely restricted to claiming income support and living in poverty. The only way that these negative outcomes for single mothers and their children are likely to change is through reforms which financially compensate victims and support their protection and recovery.

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