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# Exploring mothers' experiences of separating from an abusive partner

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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at  
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**Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato**  
by  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

The University of Waikato  
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## **Dedication**

For my daughter, Grace-Maia

You are my sunshine

## **Abstract**

This research explored mothers' experiences of separating from an abusive partner. It focuses on the contextual factors which support or undermine women's ability to keep their children safe. Of particular interest was the extent to which dominant ideas about the importance of fathers in children's lives played a role in decision making about abusers' post-separation contact with their children.

Eight women who had separated from an abusive male partner were interviewed. Their experiences, thoughts and views are presented in case-studies. Each begins with a background of the woman's relationship with her former partner, the processes that led her to initiate separation and her post-separation experiences.

Separating from an abusive partner was found to present many challenges for mothers. Often, the women reported that they continued to be abused and to be subjected to the power and control tactics of their abuser. Women's accounts of their partner's behaviour suggested that the abusers' characteristics as a partner spilled over into their parenting. The abusers were generally reported to be inconsistent, authoritarian and/or irresponsible in their parenting. In this context, the women held significant fears for the safety and well-being of their children should the abuser have contact with them. Despite this, the majority of the women agreed to contact. Indeed, most of the mothers felt responsible for maintaining the father-child relationship and went to great lengths to facilitate contact, even though the contact often exposed both mother and child to further abuse. To this extent, dominant, uncritical beliefs about the importance of fathers seemed to be quite influential.

On the other hand, those women who had good family support were less likely to agree to unsafe contact. These participants' mothers were particularly important in recognising the dynamics and impact of the abuse. They played an important role in protecting the participants and their children, and prioritised safety over contact. These women experienced shorter periods of post-separation abuse. Women with support were less isolated, less likely to blame themselves and were able to begin the process of recovery earlier. Consequently, the welfare of their children was improved. This finding suggests that support of this kind may be one avenue that improves women's ability to keep their children safe and enhance their experiences after separating from an abusive a partner.

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## Chapter one: Introduction

Our society is currently giving mothers a powerful and crazy-making mixed message. First, it says to mothers, “If your children’s father is violent or abusive to you or to your children, you should leave him in order to keep your children from being exposed to his behaviour.” But then, if the mother does leave, the society many times appears to do an abrupt about-face, and say, “Now that you are spilt up from your abusive partner, you must expose your children to him. Only now you must send them alone with him, without you even being around anymore to keep an eye on whether they are okay. (Bancroft, 2009)

Violence in the home and its insidious effects on women and children are well documented (Levin & Mills, 2003). Destroying a sense of safety and security, the perpetration of violence in the home by a family member is the ultimate breach of trust.

Women who do not separate from abusive men are often thought of as weak, as contributing to the pattern of violence and as participating in their own oppression (Browne, 1993; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000). The leaving process is often prolonged which can result in multiple returns to the abuser. This is seen as an inability or reluctance to separate from their abuser (Lesser, 1990). In this way, blame is often attributed to the victim (Lapierre, 2008; Radford & Hester, 2001). Leaving represents a threat to the abuser’s control, putting women at significant risk. In extreme cases, the abuser attempts to re-establish control by making threats on her life (Fleury et al., 2000; Shalansky, Ericksen, & Henderson, 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1993). As a result of the abuse, she experiences high levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression and a heightened sense of fear (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004; Hand, Elizabeth, Martin, Rauwhero, Burton, Selby, & Falanitule, 2002; Jones, Hughes, & Unterstaller, 2001). These symptoms are consistent with that of trauma victims, having debilitating impacts on her psychological, physical, sexual and economic wellbeing (Flett, Kazantzis, Long, MacDonald, & Millar, 2004).

Associated with the abuse that she may endure after separation is her concern about the impact of the violence on her children (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Humphreys, 1995). They too, have felt, seen or heard their father’s abuse of their mother and in



some cases may have been direct targets of his aggression (Appel & Holden, 1998). The overlap between violence in the home and child abuse leads to consideration of these children's developmental outcomes, and, indeed, the children's future contact with their non-resident father.

There are many myths surrounding violence against women. A common one is that violence stops once separation takes place. Contrary to this assumption, research shows that abuse does not end post-separation and, in fact, increases the risk factors for re-abuse (Fleury et al., 2000; Kurz, 1996; Shalansky et al., 1999). Carlson, Harris & Holden (1999) found that the probability of re-abuse was greater if the victim shared biological children with her abuser, suggesting co-parenting and visitation may both increase the risk of re-abuse.

Abused women are faced with dominant societal beliefs about the necessity for a child to have contact with their father (Radford & Hester, 2001). This view is reinforced by growing pressure to engage fathers in their children's everyday life (Dunn, 2004; Waller & Swisher, 2006). Also compounding the issue is the body of literature on the importance of father involvement in child development and the detrimental impacts of poor father-child relationships (Braver & Griffin, 2000).

To facilitate the father's role in parenting, women will often continue to have contact with their abusers and, in some cases, they express a need for contact to continue as long as it is safe (Edleson & Williams, 2007). Further research is needed to explore the relationship that abused women want their children to have with fathers and how they can best be supported in their choices while at the same time protecting and maintaining their safety and well-being.

### **Aims of the present study**

Despite the volume of research with battered women since the 1970's, studies on domestic violence have seldom ventured beyond the point of physical separation, with most research focusing on violence pre-separation (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Brownridge, 2006). Research on how custody and access issues are affecting abused women is also limited (Shalansky et al., 1999). At the same time, woman battering is rarely mentioned in the divorce literature, with only a few exceptions (Kurz, 1996; Molina, 1999).

The present research attempts to address this gap in the literature by focusing on challenges faced by women who separate from an abusive partner and defines the concept of leaving as a process that includes the after effects of the separation.

Additionally, Grauwiler (2008) identified female victims' voices as absent from the literature, particularly those women who remain in their communities and in contact with their partners. This thesis concentrates on those at the coal face: abused mothers, their experiences, their views and their voices.

The purpose of the research is to explore mothers' experiences of separating from an abusive partner. I am particularly interested in the contextual factors which support or undermine women's ability to keep their children safe. These include the role of past violence, the abusers' behaviour post-separation, the support available to women and the role of widely-held ideas about the family and fathers.

### **Positioning the researcher**

My interest in this research area stems from my own experiences, challenges and concerns around child contact with my abusive former partner. My daughter was born when I was 24. By then I had experienced three years of abuse from her father. When she was eight months old I decided to enrol in graduate studies. I saw graduate study as a way that I could explore my abusive relationship and what I had done wrong. Instead, education provided me with much more than I had ever expected. I have gained understanding and alternative lenses through which I have been able to make sense of the violence, particularly in its creation and continuation.

That does not mean that we have escaped abuse over the last four years. Nonetheless, I have gained tremendous ground in pulling myself up and out of what was a dark and gloomy hole, building and strengthening my skills and abilities as a capable woman and, just as importantly, a competent mother. In part, my change in attitude, thinking and actions can be attributed to both a professional mentor and a book entitled 'The Batterer as Parent', by Lundy Bancroft and Jay Silverman (2002). These sources, alongside my study and an ever-growing support network, have provided me with understanding, information, hope, challenge and confrontation. They have provided an education which has helped me resist the dominant discourses I have faced in my personal life.

Filling my kete with resources and knowledge, however, has not made the road to recovery for my daughter and I free from struggles. As a result of the decisions I have made around child contact, I have faced criticism and condemnation from those who do not hold my abuser accountable for his behaviour. Hence, I am caught between the pressure from dominant discourses (fraught with mother-blaming rhetoric) and ideology that assert ‘children need their fathers at any cost’, and the mounting evidence that abusive fathers have far reaching risks and detrimental impacts on children when contact is not carried out safely.

I consider the birth of my daughter to have been the most pivotal point of change for me. I have been, and continue to be, determined that she will have every opportunity to live a healthy, safe and prosperous life. This drive and desire to provide the best possible environment for her has, however, often been compromised by the impacts and outcomes of contact for us both. This is testament to the power of dominant discourses around father-child contact and the tendency for abusers to remain unaccountable for their violence.

My understanding and familiarity with this issue provides a living experience in which I draw upon to write this thesis.

### **Outline of the thesis**

The following outline is a summary of each chapter of the thesis.

The purpose of this first chapter, the introduction, was to briefly describe the issue that I have chosen to research. I am transparent about my interest in the area and I identify the purpose and aims of the research.

Chapter two builds an argument for why I carried out the study. It summarises what is already known about the area, presenting a critical review of both local and international literature relevant to child contact after separation from an abusive partner.

Chapter three, the methodology, provides a rationale and discussion of the way I approached the research process. The method describes how I recruited my participants, the ways in which I interacted with the women, how I gathered their stories and ethical considerations in conducting a study of this type. Lastly, the chapter outlines the framework I used to analyse the data.

Chapter four presents individual case studies for the participants. This chapter is what I consider to be the ‘results’. These are the women’s stories; their voices, their thoughts and experiences. Analysis of the women’s stories begins here with each case study structured around three key themes: the woman’s relationship with her abuser, processes that led to separation and post-separation experiences.

In chapter five, cross case analysis and discussion, I bring together the themes across the case-studies. The discussion interprets the challenges faced by the women in relation to the literature introduced in chapter two.

Finally, in chapter six, the thesis concludes. Here, I summarise the key findings, discuss achievements of the thesis and recommend areas for further study.

## **Chapter two: Literature review**

This literature review provides a rationale for carrying out this research. It focuses on the topic of men's violence against women, particularly on areas relevant to battered mothers after they separate from abusive men.

Firstly, I begin at the societal level, exploring the factors that allow the perpetuation of abusive behaviour. These factors include historical views, dominant cultural norms, values, attitudes and beliefs. I explore gender roles, patriarchy and ideals about the family. I then examine the attitudes and behaviour of domestic violence perpetrators. These play a crucial role in determining the context in which women attempt to re-establish their lives and negotiate parenting post-separation. After describing characteristics of abusers, I discuss how these are reflected in their parenting and the impact on children. I then discuss mothering through domestic violence, the impacts of the violence on women, their responses to the violence and their fears for their children. Finally, I describe forms of support for battered women, including the remedies provided by the state for victims of violence.

### **Examining the broader context**

To better understand the perpetration of violence against women, this review begins with a brief examination of our history, colonisation, and the imposition of patriarchy, “ a term that is useful as an indicator of how relations of power within Western countries are balanced in favour or men” (Mills, 2001, p. 20). I argue that the patriarchal values and attitudes promoted by early European colonialism have contributed towards the prevalence of domestic violence today. The values, attitudes and beliefs described provide an insight into the creation of widely-held ideas about family and fathers.

#### **The colonisation of Aotearoa**

When the missionaries and early settlers arrived in Aotearoa, they brought with them a specific set of cultural understandings. In addition to the introduction of disease, theft of land and suppression of Te Reo Māori, colonisation brought about the imposition of a foreign world view that redefined gender roles and dominated pre-

existing values of traditional Māori society. This process has had, and continues to have, devastating impacts on Māori. Our history of colonisation provides an important context from which to understand domestic violence today in New Zealand today (Balzer, Haimona, Henare, & Matchitt, 1997).

For Māori, individuals are viewed as members of a collective, belonging to whānau, hapū, and iwi. The principle of collectivism and interconnectedness were seen as links between the physical and spiritual worlds, in which both men and women played an essential part. Kruger, Pitman, Grennell, McDonald, Mariu, Pomare, Mita, Maihi & Lawsom-TeAho (2004) define this link, whakapapa, as “the continuum of life that includes kinship and history” (p. 18). In this way, women were valued and protected by the collective as vital links between the past, the present and the future.

Māori lived communally and were reliant on each other to “keep the affairs of the group buoyant and operational” (Jenkins, 1986, as cited in Mikaere, 1994). It was the responsibility of all those on the kāinga (the home unit) - grandmothers, aunts, male elders and other females - to raise the children. The whānau was a primary source of support and gender roles were not rigid. It was the collective responsibility and the centrality of whānau for Māori that provided the framework and mechanisms to maintain social order and balance in gender relations. In this way, assault on a woman was regarded as an assault on her whānau (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1990) and therefore, reparation was sought by the collective, not the individual (Milroy, 1996).

Colonisation undermined these mechanisms by forcing a re-organisation of Māori social structures. Massive land loss during the nineteenth century, the consequential undermining of their economic base during the twentieth century, together with a move towards a more industrial economy, forced whānau to move to urban centres for work where they were moulded into nuclear family arrangements (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1997). The urbanisation of Māori, along with the Native Land Act 1909, that required Māori to undergo legal marriage ceremonies, “signalled a renewed determination on the part of the state to both redefine and intrude into the whānau” (Mikaere, 1999, p. 42). These constraints on the structure of whānau aligned with the agenda of the missionaries who were charged with ‘christianising’ and ‘civilising’ Māori (Jenkins & Matthews, 1998).

A key role of 'christianising' Māori was in the way women were positioned in society and the family. The dominant view among the settlers in general and the missionaries in particular was that men and women were fundamentally different in nature, and needed to be segregated into public and private domains respectively. Within the private or domestic domain, women's primary responsibility was for the emotional and physical care of her husband, children and the household. Hareven (1991) describes traditional Western women's roles;

A house is not only the home centre, the retreat and shelter for all the family, it is also the workshop for the mother. It is not only where she is to live, to love, but where she is to care and labour. Her hours, days, weeks, months and years are spent within its bounds. (p. 268)

The description of traditional Western women's roles, as economically dependent and responsible for nurturance needs to be seen in contrast to man's role which Hareven (1991) defines as;

The husband was expected to be the main breadwinner and worker outside the home. (p. 259)

This family formation promoted the husband to the head of the household while reducing the status of Māori women, who previously enjoyed flexibility in performing a wide range of roles, including that of leadership (Mikaere, 1999). This prescribed view of a woman's 'function' contributed to a division in labour and served to foster men's sense of entitlement (Balzer & McNeill, 1988).

In addition to the roles of men and women, Van Every (1992) states that children were viewed from a Western perspective as, "the property of parents who are the natural providers of the best care," protection, and socialisation (p. 66), very much a contrast to Māori perspectives on children and child rearing (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1979, 1997). These ideas of men's entitlement and the ownership of children are heavily implicated in domestic violence (Hearn, 2002).

### **The 'ideal family'**

More modern ideals about 'the good family' were arguably formed during the 1950s (Edgell & Docka, 2007). Sewell (1992) identifies the 'ideal family' as a cultural schema, or a set of interrelated ideas and symbols that are facilitated by

configurations of resources. This schema provides a language and a lens through which Western societies construct and make meaning of family life and personal experiences (Boonzaier, 2008; Edgell & Docka, 2007; Wood, 2001).

The dominant family ideal, comprising a first-marriage, heterosexual couple and their biological children (Canetto, 1996; Edgell & Docka, 2007; Holtzman, 2008) has been labelled in similar terms in other parts of the Western world as the traditional family, the nuclear family, and, in the United States, Smith (1993) identified it as the Standard North American Family. This prevalent family definition has, since industrialisation, been assumed to be the most common, most natural and most healthy (Canetto, 1996).

This family ideal is legitimated and facilitated through a wide range of institutional, legal and economic arrangements (Edgell & Docka, 2007). One example of how this reproduction is manifested is by what is known as the ‘marriage culture’, whereby cohabitating unmarried adults (especially those who have children), childless couples or same-sex couples are considered unfortunate situations, and, moreover, irresponsible and immoral choices (Edgell & Docka, 2007). Similarly, there is often disapproval of parents who separate. These states, or situations, continue to be endorsed as ‘unfortunate’ and ‘criminal’ by legal institutions who favour biological relationships over non-biological relationships (Holtzman, 2008). Family members, in legal terms, are usually identified as being related by blood ties, marriage or adoption, deeming any relationship outside of these connections as illegitimate. Further to this, are the economic requirements of the traditional family home. To be effective, the home demands both physical and material resources. These resources are more easily achieved with a moderate income (Edgell & Docka, 2007), consequently excluding lower-income families from gaining the traditional family status of ‘normal and healthy’.

### **Contemporary New Zealand families**

Contrary to popular belief, families which conform to the ‘ideal’ two-parent nuclear family have long been a minority. In fact, some researchers argue it was never as universal as was thought. It was instead a “historical fluke” (Coontz, 1992). Traditional ideas have come increasingly under attack as New Zealand has shifted to a great diversity of family forms. The reality is that rates of separation and divorce, single-parenting, and re-marriage are increasing. More and more women enter paid



employment outside the home and at least some men are taking more responsibility for childcare (Statistics New Zealand, 2005).

These social changes have prompted a broader conceptual understanding of the term family, where the inclusion of non-biological and non-legal relationships also defines relatedness (Holtzman, 2008). For many, this broadened sense of family includes step families and parents with non-biological children who are emotionally attached or are connected through shared experiences (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1997).

Despite its relative rarity, the presumed 'ideal' of the father-headed, first-marriage, nuclear family still features strongly in rhetoric about the family. This is seen, for example, in the way expansively defined families are seen by some religious groups as indicative of moral decline and social disorder (Lineham, 2004). It is also seen in the rhetoric of fathers' rights groups (Mitchell, 2003). Such views are often strengthened by research which suggest that children in single-parent households – that parent generally being the mother – do less well than children in 'intact' families. For example, it has been suggested that compared to children in two-parent families, children in single parent families do less well in education, are at higher risk of developing anxiety disorders and more likely to come to notice for criminal behaviour (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2007). Generally, such research has been interpreted as reflecting a causal relationship: the loss of a relationship with their fathers is often assumed to be a causal factor in such negative outcomes for the children of sole-mother families.

This line of reasoning has come under heavy critique. Firstly, it has been argued that the negative outcomes discussed are more likely to be attributable to the relative poverty of woman-led families. In fact, when researchers control for income level, the disparity between the outcomes for children of single parent families and those of children of two-parent families can often disappear (Burnett & Farkas, 2009; Han, Huang, & Garfinkel, 2003). Secondly, the way the correlational research is popularly interpreted makes the assumption that the children would have been better off if the family had remained intact. However, it is quite possible that the opposite is the case: that these children would have been even worse off if their fathers had remained in the family. This is a real possibility when one considers the now well-documented deleterious effects of exposure to domestic violence on children (discussed below). Seen in this light, a mother's decision to separate from the father

of her children, will, in many cases, *improve* the chances of positive outcomes for her children (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Despite such critiques, the correlational research referred to has helped drive a moral panic about the 'breakdown of the family' and the presumed plight of so-called fatherless children (Wright & Jagger, 1999). Both concerns, if accepted uncritically, tend to support the idea that children should have contact with their fathers post-separation, even if the father has been abusive. Fatherlessness, rather than the abuse, is often viewed as problematic. Concerns about fatherlessness can also be used to question a woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship. Instead of being viewed as an effort to protect her children, leaving is often seen as harming her children (Mann, 2008).

## **The abuser as partner**

At a macro level, dominant ideologies about the family and the importance of fathers pose significant challenges to mothers who separate from an abuser. However, at the micro level, the challenges of mothering in the context of domestic violence can only be fully appreciated if one has a good understanding of the tactics of the abuser. Thus, in this section, I will outline the most significant attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the abuser in relation to his adult victim. This is followed by a section in which I discuss research demonstrating that much of the abuser's characteristics as partner spill over into his behaviours as parent.

As Heise (1993) has observed, violence against women is, among other things, an abuse of their human rights. This is a corollary of the belief system characteristic of abusers that they have special rights and privileges by virtue of being male. Such assumed privileges inevitably infringe the human rights of partners and children.

An abuser's sense of entitlement is central to understanding his way of thinking, his actions and his patterns of behaviour. His sense of entitlement provides a standard by which to protect his 'special status'. When his standard is breached, he imposes penalties, and feels justified in doing so. Men with a sense of entitlement, therefore, are often demanding and have unreasonable expectations with regard to family life. In this way, abusers expect their physical, emotional and sexual needs to be met at

the expense of the needs of the rest of the family; in other words, these men see their needs as paramount. At the same time, they characterise their partners as selfish, useless, unworthy of attention and unruly. Her 'unruliness' in this way underlies his perception of her as controlling and manipulative, therefore positioning himself as the victim in the relationship (Bancroft, 2002; Mid-Valley Women's Crisis Service, 2007; Union of Fathers, 2006).

Displays of entitlement do not always feature in contexts outside the home. Abusers are often seen by outsiders as charming, well intentioned, caring men. The Jekyll and Hyde nature of the abuser places women in a no win situation. With his integrity publicly intact, the abuser is often able to cultivate an environment where his victim is seen as aggressive, neurotic, dysfunctional and much like a dictator, not only by him, but by outsiders, too. This acts for women as a double edged sword, nurturing self-blame, self-doubt, guilt and confusion. The assessment of his parenting by outsiders, in this way, may be a reflection only of his ability to behave well under observation, rather than his ability to focus on the needs of the children (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Beliefs and attitudes influence the way we behave. The significance of entitlement plays out in the abuser's behavioural characteristics. At the forefront of his behaviour is a pattern of control over his partner. The Duluth Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993, p. 3) outlines eight types of control tactics (see appendix five). They are the use of intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimising, denying and blaming; using children; using male privilege; using economic abuse; and using coercion and threats. In part, these tactics derive their power from the abuser's physical and sexual violence or the threat of this violence, whether the threat is made explicitly or is implied. The tactics also derive their power from widely held beliefs about men and women. Such beliefs can be invoked to give legitimacy to the abuser's sense of entitlement and to his controlling tactics. This coercive pattern of control intensifies as the level of commitment to the relationship gathers momentum, for example, moving in together, getting married, pregnancy and the birth of a child (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Women's resistance to these controlling behaviours infringes on the abuser's expectation of care and is met with criticism, intimidation and objection.

Coercive controlling violence has multiple effects on its victims (discussed in the following sections). Particularly noteworthy with regard to parenting, however, is the inherent damage the abuser causes to the mother-child relationship. The abuser's treatment of the children's mother must then be taken into account when assessing his contribution and abilities as a parent. It is also vital that decision makers do not assume that the violence is no longer relevant once the couple separate. In fact, the violence, both physical and psychological, may increase at separation as men intensify their efforts to regain control (Brownridge, 2006; Fleury et al., 2000; Johnson & Hotton, 2003; Koziol-McLain, Webster, McFarlane, Block, Ulrich, Glass, & Campbell, 2006).

## **The abuser as parent**

Bancroft & Silverman (2002) believe that the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the abuser, or batterer, provide the grounding for the abuser's parenting style. Researchers have identified a tendency for abusers to employ an authoritarian parenting style (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Peled, 2000); like his partner, the abuser's children are part of his domain of authority. From this perspective, it is not surprising that researchers have consistently found a substantial overlap between violence against women and violence against children, even if the extent of that overlap is still unclear. For example, Appel & Holden (1998) reviewed 17 studies employing a range of methods and adopting various definitions of violence, but all involving samples of battered women. Estimates of the co-occurrence of domestic violence and physical child abuse ranged from 11% to 100%.

While the perpetrator of domestic violence who also physically abuses his children is an obvious risk to those children, there are other aspects of the abuser's behaviour as a parent which need comment. For example, research has noted that abusers typically have a low level of involvement in childcare and that this appears to be matched by a low level of emotional commitment to children and a high level of abuse and neglect (Holden & Ritchie, 1991) which persisted post-separation during contact (Radford & Sayer, 1999). Perhaps this is reflective of the abuser's common view that the work of caring for the children is a responsibility that falls solely or mainly on the mother. Bancroft & Silverman's (2002) definition of entitlement

echoes this sentiment with this addition; the abuser's belief in his special rights and privileges is "without accompanying reciprocal responsibilities" (p. 7). In other words, these 'special rights' also denote 'special father status' without the sacrifices made and difficulties faced by the victim parent.

Possibly the most crushing element of his violence, however, is his ability to undermine the mother-child relationship. This is because the mother-child relationship is crucial in developing the children's resilience and in supporting their recovery from trauma.

The abuser's characteristics are often transmitted to the children through role-modelling and reinforcement. His conduct provides a framework that teaches children (inadvertently or directly) to disrespect their mother and, by extension, women in general. This fosters several undesirable and unhelpful beliefs in children, such as the belief that women are crazy, stupid, unstable, and deserve the abuse. Children of abused women often see their mother in a position of powerlessness, unable to defend herself and her children. When she does retaliate or resist the violence, she may be the target of the children's anger for upsetting the abuser and causing further dis-ease in the house. From situations like these, children may form the belief that their mother is to blame for the violence (Bancroft, 2002; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Peled, Jaffe, & Edleson, 1995).

These experiences also typically inform children's belief that the abuser is powerful, supreme, strong, competent and in control. This is supported by the abuser's ability to portray his partner in a negative light and her version of events as inaccurate, effectively escaping criticism for his behaviour. In addition, his rigid views of men's and women's roles affirm the notion that women are to fulfil care-taking roles and men, disciplinarian and decision-making roles. Children of these men learn that simply being a man attracts significantly higher levels of kudos. Other beliefs associated with the idea that men are superior may also be learnt.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973, 1978) suggests that aggression is learnt through observation and imitation and can result in children's maladaptive models of problem solving and conflict resolution. This learnt behaviour also shapes the belief that violence can be used to resolve conflicts or be used to get one's own way.

As a result of the abuser's sense of entitlement, the relationships with his children are often centred on his needs. The birth of a child prompts little change in the abuser's lifestyle (Adams, 1991). His needs take precedence over the child's. Jacobson & Gottman (1998) note that these men are intolerant of crying babies, partly due to their expectation that the whole household is to respond appropriately if he is tired or grumpy. Generally, the feelings and experiences of his children are likely to be met with insensitivity (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). This selfish orientation requires the abuser's children to comply with his rigid and unrealistic expectations, just like the expectations he has of his partner. The abuser's self-centeredness may lead to role reversal whereby the abuser treats the children much like a supportive friend. He may worry them with concerns about work, money and his health or vent about the emotional hurt that their mother causes him by her resistance towards his violence. The children's emotional age is also not considered by the abuser, loading them with responsibilities beyond their years. The expectation that his interests should take precedence over those of his children is also evident in non-resident abusive fathers, as Bancroft & Silverman (2002) point out:

We frequently observe a post-separation dynamic in which a batterer uses litigation to pressure for increased visitation, or even for custody, only to leave the children watching television or in the care of relatives most of the time. (p. 35)

Rothman, Mandel & Silverman (2007), studied abusers' perceptions of the effect of their violence on children. Their study revealed a number of ways that biological fathers felt their violence negatively impacted on their children. These negative impacts extended to the abusers' relationship with their children, the children's mental health, the children's relationship with their mothers, and the children's school performance. Social fathers (married or unmarried stepfathers) were less likely to report these negative impacts. Biological fathers, more so than social fathers, also worried about the long-term effects of their abuse on their children. They worried that their daughters would be abused later in life and that their sons may become abusive. However, the awareness, concern and worry that these fathers had about the impacts of their violence on their children and their partner's ability to parent had *no* impact on their intentions to address the violence. They *did not* report seeking professional help or taking other protective action. The findings of this

research echo the concept of entitlement. Recognising and acknowledging the impacts of abuse requires selflessness, a characteristic inconsistent with the abuser's profile.

The abuser's sense of entitlement and controlling behaviour are multi-faceted. His abuse permeates the household environment. There is little that he leaves untouched. In particular, there are now well-documented impacts on children exposed to domestic violence. It is to these impacts that the discussion now turns.

## **The impact (post separation) of children's exposure to domestic violence**

Quite apart from the risk of becoming the direct targets (intentional or not) of their father's violence, the overwhelming majority of children of abused women hear, see and feel the abuse that their mothers experience (Peled, 2000). Where children do not witness the abuse directly, they typically see the effects of the abuse. A growing number of studies attest to the deleterious effects on children of being exposed to domestic violence. These effects include: post-traumatic stress symptoms, mood disorders, self blame, depression, social isolation, elevated levels of anxiety, lowered self-worth, nightmares, sleep disturbances, bedwetting, abusive behaviour towards the mother, protectiveness of the mother, stomach aches, diarrhoea, difficulties in school, lower verbal intellectual functioning, lower than average reading ages, higher levels of aggression (including abuse of siblings), increased conflict with peers, conduct problems, and elevated risk of delinquent behaviour (Bedi & Goddard, 2007; Edleson, 1999; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford, & Goodman, 2009; Ney, Moore, McPhee, & Trought, 1986; Russell, Springer, & Greenfield, 2010). Unsurprisingly, some of these problems have been found to increase following post-separation contact with the abuser (Shalansky et al., 1999).

Of particular relevance to the issue of post-separation contact with an abusive father is the impact of abuse on children's relationships with their fathers. Such relationships are often marked by ambivalence, described in the literature as a source of confusion. Children experience opposing feelings; on the one hand they have a strong desire and yearning for affection from their fathers, and, on the other, have to

deal with their own trauma arising from the abuse perpetrated by their fathers (Israel & Stover, 2009; Peled, 2000).

Father involvement in children's lives has received increased attention over recent years. This body of literature suggests that father involvement is highly correlated with improved child outcomes (Braver & Griffin, 2000; Lewis & Lamb, 2003). However, it should be noted that most of this research pays scant attention to domestic violence; it would be a mistake to assume that findings showing positive effects for father involvement arising from research with non-abusive fathers can be generalised to children whose fathers are perpetrators of violence. Some researchers argue that outcomes of father involvement is determined by the quality of the relationship between father and child (Lamb, 1997; Pleck, 1997), while other researchers have concentrated on living situations (present, absent or non-resident fathers (Fagan, Palkovitz, Roy, & Farrie, 2009)) and marital status (Waller & Swisher, 2006) as determinants of father involvement. Given the focus of this section (child outcomes for children of non-resident abusive fathers) I will concentrate on what the literature describes as the cornerstone of father involvement: relationship quality.

However, determining the quality of the relationship and bond between abusers and their children is complicated. To begin, I will draw on attachment theory literature that posits the primary motivator in humans is a relationship or an attachment to another human being (Bowlby, 1977). The attachment that is formed between child and caregiver thus fulfils a need for basic survival.

Considering the abuser's tendencies for selfishness and unreliability, forming an attachment to an abusive care-giver can be problematic for his children. A threatened attachment does not necessarily lead to a distant or fearful relationship. In fact, children may seek close proximity to the attachment figure, even if that person is abusive. This is particularly so for children who have experienced intermittent fear and kindness, where attachment bonds can become stronger. That is, one of the effects of abuse is to "create a potent longing in the victim for kindness and understanding and for relief from the fear or terror experienced" (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002, p. 40). In this case, children may become clingy to avoid rejection. This phenomenon, known as 'traumatic bonding', was originally proposed by Dutton and Painter (1981). In these circumstances, children may express a preference for the abusive parent over the non-abusive parent (Bancroft, 1998).



## **Battered Women**

There are crucial characteristics of the abuser's behaviour in the relationship with his partner that remain significant in post-separation. Because they often fail to recognise this, professionals of various kinds (e.g. social workers, psychologists, lawyers, judges) may effectively re-victimise women, failing to appreciate the constraints under which battered women must operate as parents and blaming them for what has happened to the children.

The context in which women manage the impacts of their abuser's behaviour and their concern for their children is constant and energy-depleting. Here, I provide an outline of how women attempt to protect their children and create violence-free homes within an environment characterised by constraints, challenges, difficulties, blame and ill-health. I will discuss the health impacts on women, their responses and their concern for their children.

Violence against women is associated with a wide range of psychological, physical and sexual health consequences and is a significant determinant of women's ill-health. In one New Zealand study, a staggering three out of four women reported suffering abuse at the hands of an intimate partner (Koziol-McLain, Rameka, Giddings, Fyfe, & Gardiner, 2007).

International literature suggests that a significant proportion of abused women may exhibit post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) symptoms. As defined by Green (1990), there are certain generic experiences which make an event traumatic. These experiences are (but not limited to) threat to one's life or bodily integrity; severe physical harm or injury; receipt of intentional injury or harm; witnessing or learning of violence to a loved one, and; causing death or severe harm to another.

A New Zealand population-based study reported that women who had experienced moderate physical violence were two and a half times more likely to report symptoms of emotional distress and suicidal thoughts in their lifetime when compared to women who had not experienced physical violence by a partner. Furthermore, women who had experienced severe physical violence were almost four times more likely to report these effects (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004).

These findings are consistent with international research that reports on the impact of violence on women's health. In a study on the ongoing exposure to abusive ex-partners Shalansky, Ericksen & Henderson (1999) documented that women suffer significant weight loss, insomnia, chronic diarrhoea, headaches, amenorrhoea, increased anxiety and physical exhaustion. This research described four key components in the experiences of six women with varying contact and day-to-day care arrangements: safety - living with ongoing danger; stress - living with the imposed restrictions of the law and the legal system; formal systems of support and the need to heal and move forward in life.

The symptoms that abused women suffer as a result of men's violence also reflect on their increased usage of health care services. Fanslow & Robinson (2004) found that women who had experienced severe violence were more than twice likely to have been hospitalised within the previous 12 months when compared to women who had not experienced any physical violence. Women with a lifetime experience of intimate partner violence were also significantly more likely to have consulted a healthcare provider within the previous 4 weeks.

Given that abused women experience higher levels of distress than women who have not experienced violence in an intimate relationship, there is also more likelihood to misuse alcohol and other drugs as a way to self-medicate fluctuations in mood, numb feelings of anxiety and depression, and escape some of the distress resulting from the abuse (McWhirter, 2007). The overlap between substance misuse and domestic violence in New Zealand requires more attention as it is an important element in considering the problems for children which arise from living with substance-misusing care-givers. Without research and policy initiatives that address this occurrence, substance mis-use can be used to argue a mother's inability to care for her child(ren) effectively.

### **Mothering in the context of abuse**

Despite women being seen as central in the welfare of their children (Krane & Davies, 2002; Scourfield & Coffey, 2002), little attention has been given to the issues of mothering in the context of domestic violence. Radford & Hester (2001) note research showing that "after separation, many women who have lived through domestic violence enjoy parenting and are very emotionally supportive toward their children" (pp. 144-145). They go on to say that parental stress after separation is

more likely due to distressed children as a result of having lived with and witnessed abuse, rather than the mother's inability to cope. In fact, despite living with the impact and consequences of domestic violence, women protect and nurture their children in ways that are often underestimated (Van Horn & Lieberman, 2002).

In interviews with abused women about their experiences of mothering, Humphreys (1995) identified two themes in the women's worries about their children and their responses to those worries. The first theme was about keeping the children safe. The women Humphreys interviewed endeavoured to keep their children safe through constant vigilance, education and role-modelling safe practices, adjusting their own lives (by leaving the abusive relationship), having plans that address short-term and long-term adversities and, crucially, putting themselves between danger (from the abusive adult male) and their children.

A second theme was women's attempts to create order out of chaos. Humphreys (1995) summarised the challenges the women faced;

Within lives of disorder, battered women sought to give purpose, reason, and order to their lives and the lives of their children. These women frequently described the tremendous responsibility they felt to create a meaningful life for their children. (p. 138)

A significant source of disorder in the lives of abused women and their children is the abusive male adult. Women in Humphreys' research also referred to life circumstances, a severe lack of resources and, at times, the mother's and/or their child(ren)'s behaviour.

In acknowledging the impacts and constraints on women as victims of violence and abuse, my intention is to provide a context for the extraordinary lengths that women will go to in order to protect themselves and their children. It is *not* my intention, however, to highlight these impacts as deficiencies in mothering. Mothers' concerns for their children have not always been viewed as reasonable or legitimate. In fact, abused women's mothering has often been criticised in the academic literature (Lapierre, 2008). Post-separation research has tended to adopt a deficit model of mothering or mother-blaming discourses in which there exists an underlying assumption that mothers usually exaggerate, overreact or distort their concerns about the father's parenting (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Radford & Hester, 2001).

Humphreys (1995), too, noted that mothers' responses to domestic violence have been reported as influencing the magnitude of the effect of violence upon their children.

Problems displayed by children who have been exposed to violence are frequently seen as resulting from 'deficiencies' in women's mothering. Consequently, abused mothers are likely to be seen as 'failing' as mothers regardless of their actions. Lapierre (2008) says:

...scholarship has been overwhelmingly concerned with the negative impacts for children of their exposure to domestic violence, and with women's mothering as a determining factor in how children are affected by the violence, has led to an emphasis on women's 'deficiencies' and 'failures' as mothers. (p. 456)

Edleson (1999) believes that the focus on the negative impacts of violence on children and abused women is a consequence of the availability of mothers and their children for study. That is, most post-separation parenting is done by women. In contrast, scant attention has been given to abusers as parents; the work of Bancroft and Silverman (2002) is the main exception. Thus, research examining the (post-separation) problems common among children exposed to the domestic violence tends to focus on mothers' presumed deficiencies, rather than the factors that created those problems in the first place, that is, men's violent behaviour. This has important implications for child welfare policies and practices, and for the attention paid to the role of abusive men as fathers.

In summary, Mullender, Hague, Imam, Kelly, Malos & Regan (2002) write:

Domestic violence creates an environment deeply uncondusive to achieving even 'good enough' mothering. That so many women do resolve this impossible conundrum is testimony to their spirit, endurance and determination. That many are unable to surmount the obstacles constantly and consistently should surprise no one. (p. 157)

## **Supports available to battered women**

In this final section, I turn to consideration of the support available to mothers separating from an abusive partner. This is important to consider because such support may ameliorate some of the challenges faced by mothers separating from an abusive partner. Such support may come from family and friends, from various social service agencies, and, potentially, from the exercise of the statutory powers of the state.

Research suggests that women are far more likely to seek help from family and friends than from formal helping agencies, the Police or the Family Court (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Morris, 1997). Fanslow & Robinson's recent study on help-seeking behaviours reported by a representative sample of women victims of intimate partner violence in New Zealand found that the majority of women (76.7%) had told someone about the violence they had experienced. Of those women who did talk to someone about their experience of violence, 58.3% had told family or friends only, 36.1% had told both family or friends and formal services; and 5.6 % had told formal services only. But while these findings suggest that most women are talking to others about their experiences of violence, it is important to note that 40% of women who had disclosed violence felt that the person they told had not tried to help (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). Similarly, the case studies included in the investigation of women's experiences of protection orders by Robertson et al. (2007) included examples of both helpful and unhelpful family and friends. These findings point toward the importance of family and friends in women's efforts to seek help. However, factors that lead women to seek support, what it is about the support that is helpful, and what enables other women to do it alone still require further research attention.

Beyond the immediate circle of family and friends, help may also be sought from church leaders and social services. Unsurprisingly, studies of women's utilisation of these potential sources of help have also revealed variable results. For example, the response of pastors, priests and other religious leaders has often drawn criticism for prioritising preservation of the relationship over women's safety and well-being (Bowker, 1982). On the other hand, well-trained or perceptive religious leaders have been found to be important resources for battered women seeking help (Neergaard, Lee, Anderson, & Gengler, 2007; Potter, 2007; Rotunda, Williamson, & Penfold,

2004). Among social services, the most positively evaluated sources of help have been shelter or refuge services and their associated women's advocacy programmes. For example, a series of studies by Cris Sullivan and colleagues in the United States has produced strong evidence for the efficacy of specialist battered women's advocacy programmes (Bybee & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Sullivan, Campbell, Angelique, Eby, & Davidson, 1994; Sullivan & Davidson, 1991; Sullivan, Tan, Basta, & Rumpitz, 1992). Similar local studies seem to be lacking although the evaluators of the Hamilton Abuse Intervention Pilot Project consistently reported women assessing women's advocacy services very positively (Dominick, 1995; Robertson & Busch, 1992; Robertson, Busch, Glover, & Furness, 1992). Similarly, in the 2006 *New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey*, the small number of interviewees who sought help from agencies whose services focused on victims of violence against women (Rape Crisis, HELP (Sexual Abuse Centre) and Women's Refuge) were generally positive about the help they received (Mayhew & Reilly, 2008). The same cannot be said for generic social services which local researchers have often criticised for their inadequate response to victims of domestic violence (Carrington, 2007; Robertson et al., 2007). Finally, no account of supports available to battered women would be complete without consideration of the role of the state. Below I briefly review local research relating to key institutions and legislation relevant to the current study: the criminal justice system, the Domestic Violence Act and the Care of Children Act.

**The Criminal Justice System:** At the forefront of the state's response to violence against women and their children are the Police. They are responsible for protecting victims of violence and for the enforcement of protection orders. Guiding their responses is the Family Violence Policy. Formally known as the Domestic Dispute Policy, the Family Violence Policy was developed during 1985 and 1986 and was rolled out nationally in 1987. The policy followed an international trend that saw a move toward criminalising domestic violence and limiting Police discretion. At the heart of the policy are pro-arrest provisions that instruct Police Officers to arrest offenders where there is sufficient evidence of an offence having been committed, without the need for the victim to lay a formal complaint. Policies such as these acknowledged that some victims may be too afraid to press charges and Police taking the onus off the victim would alleviate the decision to arrest the offender (Police Commissioner, 1996). However, internationally, pro-arrest and mandatory arrest

policies have been criticised. Some groups argue that pro-arrest policies disempower victims further by taking away their right to choose if they want offenders arrested (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). Other studies claim that pro-arrest policies actually increase violence (Sherman, 1992b). Moreover, the prosecution of domestic violence offences has often proved problematic, resulting in low conviction rates while often exposing women to further violence (Robertson, 1999; Robertson et al., 2007; Statistics New Zealand, 2010).

Whatever the merits of the pro-arrest policy, there continue to be significant barriers to women calling the Police (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). This is hardly surprising as various local studies have shown that the criminal justice system is often ineffective in protecting women from further assault (Fenrich & Contesse, 2009; Lesorgen, 2001; Mackenzie, 2008; Robertson et al., 2007). This may be particularly so for Maori women (Hook, 2009). Even the development of specialist domestic violence courts seem not to have improved outcomes for women (Knaggs, Leahy, & Soboleva, 2008; Morgan, Coombes, Te Hiwi, & McGray, 2007; Robertson et al., 2007).

### **Protection orders and the Domestic Violence Act 1995**

Partly in recognition of the limitations of the criminal justice system, the New Zealand Parliament passed legislation in 1980 providing for non-molestation and related orders to be available within the civil jurisdiction (Family Proceedings Act, 1980, ss176-179). Since 1995, these remedies have come under the Domestic Violence Act. Principal among these is the protection order.

Applications for protection orders are made to the Family Court and are accompanied by an affidavit, or a sworn statement detailing why protection is required. Applications are usually made without notice to the respondent and are typically considered by the judge the same day. If the application is granted, the protection order is served on the respondent. The protection order imposes no-violence and non-contact conditions on the respondent. Children under the age of 17 living with the applicant are automatically covered by the protection order. Therefore, the respondent cannot have contact with the children while the non-contact conditions are in place, unless the court stipulates otherwise. If these conditions are breached then the respondent has committed an offence and may be arrested (breaches of orders are criminal acts and are dealt with by the District

Court). The respondent has the opportunity to defend the temporary order before it becomes final three months after the protection order is issued. A notice of defence filed by a lawyer on the respondent's behalf can result in a defended hearing (Domestic Violence Act, 1995).

The Domestic Violence Act has been an important innovation for women seeking protection from an abusive partner. However, after an initial increase, the number of applications made has steadily decreased over the last few years (e.g. from 6520 in 1999 to 4422 in 2008) (Ministry of Justice, 2010). Various problems have been identified including a lack of information and knowledge about how to apply for a protection order, unhelpful attitudes held by lawyers, the cost of applying for an order (despite the availability of legal aid) and evidence that the threshold for granting orders has been raised by the judiciary (Fenrich & Contesse, 2009; Hann, 2004; Lesorgen, 2001; Pond & Morgan, 2008; Robertson et al., 2007; Towns & Scott, 2006). Moreover, the enforcement of protection orders has been found to be inconsistent and often ineffective, leading to a widespread loss of faith in the efficacy of protection orders (Fenrich & Contesse, 2009; Hann, 2004; Lesorgen, 2001; Robertson et al., 2007).

### **The Care of Children Act and the Family Court**

The legislation most relevant to my study is the Care of Children Act, 2004. In the event of a disagreement over the arrangements for the children post-separation, either parent (although this is not limited to the parents) can apply to the Family Court for a parenting order using the provisions of the Care of Children Act 2004. The main purpose of the Act is to promote children's welfare and best interests and facilitate their development by ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place for their guardianship and care.

Replacing the Guardianship Act, the Care of Children Act which came into force on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 made five main changes to the law. These five changes included: placing more emphasis on the rights of the child, encouraging co-operative parenting, recognising that children are cared for in a range of family types, providing transparency in court processes and giving more options for courts when orders were breached. Particularly relevant in the present context are those provisions relating to domestic violence (Care of Children Act, 2005, ss 58-62). In brief, these provisions require that a parent who has used violence against the child and/or the other parent



will not be given unsupervised contact with the child unless “the court is satisfied that the child will be safe” (s. 60(4)).

The latter provisions (which were originally enacted in the Guardianship Amendment Act of 1995) were widely applauded by women’s advocates as a significant advance in protecting women and children from an abusive partner/parent. Undoubtedly, these provisions made a difference as judges were, in effect, required to prioritise safety over contact with an abusive parent. However, it is also clear that uncritical acceptance of the idea that children need their fathers, the advocacy of Father’s Rights groups, a strong preference within the court for negotiated agreements, flawed models of risk assessment and an aversion on the part of some judges to order supervised access have combined to significantly undermine the intent of the legislation to the extent that many women are reluctant to make applications to the Family Court (Busch, 2005; Davis, 2004; Fenrich & Contesse, 2009; Hann, 2004; Pond & Morgan, 2008; Robertson et al., 2007).

## **Summary**

To explore mothers’ experiences of separating from an abusive partner, I have provided a critical review of literature in the following areas: the role of widely-held ideas about the family and fathers, the role of the abuser as partner and parent, the impact of children’s exposure to domestic violence, battered women, mothering through domestic violence and the supports available to help. This review aids in the investigation of how contextual factors may support or undermine mothers’ ability to keep their children safe after separating from an abusive partner. The following chapter provides a discussion of my approach to gathering and analysing the women’s stories.

## **Chapter three: Methodology**

Issues relating to domestic violence are highly contested: perpetrators of domestic violence, causal factors, who is held accountable and who should be, who is most likely affected and ways in which to promote change. A number of theories offer various perspectives on these issues. Therefore, it is important for me to explain the theories and perspectives to which I subscribe. I will acknowledge specifically my approach to the research process, outline the ways in which I recruited and interacted with the women who participated, consider the ethical issues in conducting research with this group and describe how I analysed the information from the women's perspectives.

### **A feminist qualitative approach**

Feminist approaches to research focus on the experiences of women's lives and their oppression. This type of research seeks to respect, understand, and empower women. Campbell & Wasco (2000) define feminist approaches to research as the "guiding philosophy on the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and the process by which research is created (methodology)" (p. 778).

On the nature of knowledge, feminist researchers reject the notion of objectivity, assuming instead that the view of the world is necessarily subjective. I approached this research knowing that my experiences, values, beliefs and emotions would influence and play a part in the research process. Therefore, my aim in engaging with women who have experienced mothering through domestic violence is to understand how they construct and interpret their realities. To me, these women's voices, experiences and perspectives are all legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge, from which we can all learn. The way I have chosen to present these women's experiences is by way of case study analysis (Creswell, 2007). Case study construction will be discussed in the analysis section.

This thesis embraces subjectivity and attempts to capture women's lived experiences. Here, the process by which to gather the women's stories is critical and must embody an ethic of respect, collaboration, and caring. Feminist researchers utilise a variety of

methodologies. However, qualitative methods are favoured because the “emphasis of this work is understanding the language people use in constructing their social realities” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 782).

## **Recruitment**

My first challenge was to determine the criteria for recruiting participants. It was clear that I would need to talk to mothers who had experienced violence, but how to recruit such women was not straightforward. Initially I had thought that I would recruit mothers who had been granted a protection order. In the eyes of the law, the violence against these women and their children had been ‘proven’. However, I wanted to acknowledge mothers who had experienced a pattern of power and control during their relationships and had not sought formal help. In making this decision, I enabled potential participants to define the violence against them and describe its impacts. A woman’s right to define the impact of domestic violence on her life was seen by Davies, Lyon & Monti-Catania (1998) as the starting point for respectful engagement with her experiences.

The only other requirement for participants was that they had been separated from their children’s father for at least a year. This decision was based on the recognition that separation from a violent partner is not clear cut. Many women who attempt to leave a violent relationship are either coerced back into the relationship, or have few options but to return to the same environment in which they had been abused. I wanted to talk to mothers who could reasonably be assumed to be past this point.

### **Beginning the search for participants**

I began the search for women to participate in my research by contacting a range of groups in the community that worked in the areas of parenting and domestic violence fields. These agencies included Barnardos, Northern Family Works, Hamilton Abuse Intervention Project, Parentline, Te Whakaruruhau, Link House, Preventing Violence in the Home and Auckland Women’s Centre. I met with at least one female representative from each organisation to discuss my research and invited their input about people who had valuable knowledge and experience in their fields. I met with team leaders, presented ideas for my research to two women’s groups and prepared a research proposal as required by another agency. I supplied all of these

agencies with information sheets and recruitment posters. A recruitment poster and information sheet was also displayed in the Psychology Department at the University of Waikato.

The network of agencies proved very helpful. Key staff members from these agencies who worked one-on-one with consumers of their services were able to facilitate contact between myself and potential participants. Two women gave permission for a staff member to release their phone details to me. I then made contact with the women and discussed my research over the phone. Another woman contacted me directly. A staff member from one of the agencies volunteered to be part of the research.

Two participants were recruited through my professional networks. On a trip to the supermarket, I bumped into a woman from university who shares similar research interests. I sent the information sheet to her via email and she later became a participant. This woman forwarded the information to her networks and as a result another woman contacted me via email to say she was interested in taking part.

The remaining three participants were contacted through my personal networks. One participant offered to act as a 'practice interviewee' and later became so interested in the study that she offered to officially participate. In approaching the other two women I sought advice. Because I knew these women, I did not want them to feel in anyway obliged to participate. I told them both briefly about the research and asked if they would like to read over the information sheets. I sent them both the information via email and emphasised that I would only follow up if they expressed an interest to participate. One of the women replied immediately wanting to set up an interview time and the other woman approached me in person.

### **The women**

I had hoped to find up to 10 women, varying in age, ethnicity, number of children and child contact arrangements. Although nine women were interviewed, the final group of participants consisted of eight women only. This number reflects a certain degree of difficulty in reaching and retaining this group as research participants. Some of the key staff members commented on how hard it was to identify women who had been separated for over a year that were still utilising their services. This perhaps is a reflection of both the services available and the needs of women. Most

of the services in the community cater for women 'in crisis', or, in other words, women who need emergency safe housing. Similarly, the women who seek help are in crisis also. One staff member made the comment that once the women make it to a 'transition' stage (supporting women to make sustainable changes), they often 'wash their hands of it' and do not wish to look back. This observation could also reflect the need to support women beyond crisis periods.

The eight women who consented to participate ranged in age from 21 to 50 years old. Between them, the eight women had 17 children. Two participants identified as Māori, while the rest were Pākehā. The minimum length of relationship was four years; the longest lasted 20 years. One woman had been separated from her abusive former partner just two years; at the other end of the scale, another woman had been separated for twenty-four years. Three of the women had applied for a protection order from the Family Court. They were all granted temporary, without notice orders, protection orders. One woman had her child removed from her care by Child, Youth and Family (CYFs). Five out of the eight women had some sort of involvement with the Family Court to determine day-to-day care and contact arrangements. All of these women had been psychologically abused; however, they all reported varying degrees of physical, economic and sexual abuse.

It is noteworthy that six of the eight women were 21 years of age or under when they began these relationships. Both Leigh and Amber were 15, Helen and Wyn were 16, Tia was 18 and Rhonda was 21. Leigh and Helen's partners were in their 40's at the time. A New Zealand study identified five stages of growth for a small group of abused women (Giles & Curren, 2007). The majority of their participants embarked on the initial phase, falling for love, between the ages of 16 and 23 and described this as their first relationship. This is also true of the six women mentioned above.

### **Establishing a rapport**

I felt it was important to give the women an opportunity to meet with me before the interview so that they could ask questions about the research. I was able to emphasise the value of their experience and voice and show them the interview schedule. Importantly, the meeting gave them a final opportunity to decide if they still wished to participate. This pre-interview meeting provided a safe environment to facilitate a relationship that was open, trusting, friendly, and understanding. I wanted to reduce any power imbalances that could result from traditional

perceptions of the researcher-participant relationship. Half of the women I interviewed opted to meet with me pre-interview while the others preferred to proceed directly to an interview. The initial meetings were mostly spent sharing personal experiences and circumstances. Devault (1990) suggests that both parties should invest their personal identities by sharing experiences and information to create non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and participants. I feel that establishing a connection with these women prior to the interview significantly enhanced the richness of the data collected.

### **Collecting the women's stories**

Consistent with a feminist approach to this research, I chose to gather the women's stories and experiences via individual face-to-face in-depth interviews. Interview methodology has been widely used in the research of violence against women because of its ability to amplify the participants' voices. I hoped that this technique would allow me to collect the data respectfully, with warmth, understanding and compassion. The participants' reactions and the depth of their sharing suggested that this was achieved.

Eight interviews were carried out to collect the women's stories. The length of the interviews ranged from 51 minutes to 2 hours and 42 minutes. The location of the pre-interview meeting and the interview itself was determined by the participant. Three interviews were held at women's houses, two were held in a pre-booked room at university and another was held at a woman's workplace. I hosted two interviews in my home. Kai was provided for the women at all of the pre-meetings and interviews.

The interview guide was semi-structured and generally followed a chronological timeline. It began with a discussion on how the woman met her partner and progressed onto their relationship before the children arrived, onto his qualities as a father, his relationships with his children, his post-separation behaviour and the childcare arrangements. This way, I hoped the women could share their stories without the constraints of a heavily structured interview schedule, but within a framework that could be analysed in sections. The women who agreed to a pre-interview meeting had access to the interview guide (see appendices) prior to the interview so that they knew ahead of time what topics would be covered.

I contacted all of the women after the interview to ensure that they had support should they have felt any distress through re-visiting past events, and talking about current child contact experiences. Although none of the women reported any distress at this stage, they had disclosed and shared intimate feelings, memories, thoughts and experiences. I felt it was important to assure them that their interview transcripts were safe and that I was able to add, delete, discuss further or modify their transcripts.

The interviews were digitally recorded using a MP3 player. Once I had transcribed the interview recording, I sent the transcript to the women via post or email for approval and to check for accuracy. Sending the transcript to the women was part of acknowledging that taking part in this research was not easy and for some women the impacts of participating may not have been anticipated. At every stage of the information gathering process I wanted to give the women the opportunity to withdraw, for whatever reason. Some of the women commented on how strange it was to read their transcript, to have it in front of them in black and white. For one woman, I believe the experience of reading her traumatic experiences was too much. For her, continuing the research process would have been uncomfortable and unsafe. Her information has not been included in this study. The remaining eight participants approved their transcripts via email or over the phone.

## **Ethical issues**

The procedures described here were reviewed and approved by the Department of Psychology Research and Ethics Committee acting under the delegated authority of the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee.

### **Preserving well-being and preventing harm**

The abundance of research on women's experiences of interpersonal violence has prompted much discussion on ethical issues in conducting research with this group. The design of this research considered the work of Walker, Newman, Koss & Bernstein (1997) on the impact of victimisation research on participants. These researchers asked 500 women aged 18-45 to complete a questionnaire that included sensitive items about early childhood and adult forms of victimisation. Their findings showed that most participants found the experience to be positive. While

there was a small number who were more upset than they had anticipated, “the vast majority felt that they would have completed the survey even if they had known in advance how they would feel” (Walker et al., 1997, p. 407).

Similarly, Hlavka, Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez (2007) in their article on interviewing women about interpersonal violence explored the notion that “prior victimisation creates distress in research participants by re-exposing them to their traumatic experiences” (p. 895). The researchers concluded that inquiries into such sensitive areas may be less traumatic than previously supposed and encouraged researchers to design their methods to facilitate positive outcomes for all research participants by providing women with “multiple avenues” for disclosure (e.g., intense interviewer training sessions, follow-up services, detailed informed consent forms, and special debriefing sessions) (Hlavka et al., 2007). Findings suggest “that participants want to talk with interviewers about a range of traumatic experiences, but for some (and particularly those who have been revictimised) it needs to be on their own time and on their own terms” (Hlavka et al., 2007, p. 914).

I believe that my approach to the research process reflected these recommendations. For some of the women I interviewed, I was the only person to whom they had disclosed their fears and concerns about child contact. I felt that having had similar experiences myself helped facilitate a positive outcome for each woman. In three cases, I felt that further contact with the women would be helpful. I did this by way of ongoing contact via phone or email until I was satisfied that the woman’s wellbeing was intact again.

### **Gaining the women’s consent**

Before the interview (at the pre-interview for half of the women), participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the purpose of the research, what topics would be covered, what would happen to their information and ways in which I, as the researcher, would keep the women safe throughout the research process. These precautions were detailed in the consent form (see appendices) and are described below.

**Privacy and confidentiality:** To protect the women’s anonymity, I assured them that I would use pseudonyms throughout the writing of my thesis and in any future publications. The interviews would be recorded and would only be accessed by me.



While the recordings and transcribed documents would be kept secure, my supervisors would be privy to the themes arising from the transcripts.

**Right to pass and/or withdraw:** I made the women aware that they were not obliged to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with and that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time before I wrote up the findings. Withdrawal from the research would not penalise the woman in any way. Their voice recordings and transcripts would be destroyed and a koha would be gifted to them for their time and involvement in the research.

**Ongoing contact:** I gave my contact details to each of the women to enable communication on the progress of the research project at any time. A copy of the summary of findings was also promised to the women once the research was complete.

## **Analysis**

The women's stories are presented in a case study format in the following chapter. This form of analysis was chosen to provide a detailed understanding and context of what the women's post-separation experiences. Patton (1997) argues that case studies are particularly useful to understand a problem or situation in depth: "a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon of interest"(p. 288). The use of case studies also allowed me to identify similarities and differences across cases for more focused and, therefore, effective analysis.

### **Case study construction**

The case study structure was developed from my research objective, interview guide and the overall purpose of the research. Each transcript was read through several times and was colour coded in relation to the themes. The themes in the case studies are ordered based on the relevance to the woman. Where necessary, I added contextual information to maintain the flow of the women's stories. Transcripts were re-read once the case-study took shape to check that no significant information was missed. The second stage of analysis, across cases, takes place in chapter five, where a picture of the women as a group is provided. The cross case analysis further

identifies themes and pattern which are then discussed in light of the literature relevant to this topic.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have discussed feminist approaches to qualitative research and provided a rationale for using this approach. I have described how I recruited the women and gave a brief description of the women as a group. I then outlined the importance of establishing a rapport, how I collected the women's stories and why I had chosen interviewing as my method of collection. I have considered ethical issues in collecting the women's stories, particularly exploring how prior victimisation plays a role in research participation. Finally, I described how I analysed the women's stories. In the following chapter, I present the case-studies.

## Chapter four: The case studies

Each case study begins with an account of the woman's relationship with her abuser: what she had come to learn about her abuser before separation, her experiences of violence and abuse, and her observations of his interactions with the children. I then go on to describe the processes that led to separation. These sections illustrate what it was to mother through domestic violence, what the violence and abuse did to the women and their children, and the factors that influenced the decision to leave. Post-separation experiences are then described. Finally, salient points of the case-study are summarised.

### Case study one: Amber

#### Background

Amber is a 26 year old Pākehā woman. She has a 7 year old daughter, Julia. Amber was in a relationship with Julia's father, Osovale, for 6 years. The relationship began when Amber was 15 years old. Osovale was one year older than Amber. Amber has been separated from Osovale for 5 years. She has a permanent protection order against him.

The first thing Amber learnt about Osovale was that his mother had a "restraining order" against him. Amber did not know what to think about the order. Osovale's mother, according to Amber, was "a bit nutty". Amber concluded that this was why she had taken the order out against Osovale. Amber told her mother about the restraining order, and, as a result, she was not enthusiastic about Amber's relationship with Osovale.

Amber moved out of home to live with Osovale when she was 17. Osovale had a history of drug use and Amber said their lifestyle was organised around "partying". When Amber was 18, she discovered she was pregnant. During Amber's pregnancy, Osovale was rarely home. When he did return home, Amber would ask him where he had been, but she told me that Osovale had a way of not answering questions. He would tell Amber to "shut up" and "stop being stupid". When Amber's mother asked what Julia had done during the weekend, Amber would tell her mother that

both her and Osovale stayed at home and watched DVDs. She was ashamed that she did not know where Osovale had been and that she was at home, alone.

When Julia was born, Osovale's life still revolved around partying and drugs. Amber, especially did not like Osovale being high around Julia. But if she said anything to Osovale, he would just get angry. Amber did not want Julia to be in an environment like that. To shelter Julia, Amber used baby-sitters a lot.

### **Processes that led to separation**

Amber describes her relationship with Osovale as emotionally abusive. She said he was "manipulative". Osovale would swing between being loving toward Amber and making her feel good, to being nasty. Amber told me that this behaviour made her feel like she was "going crazy" and that it was her being "a horrible bitch" that caused problems in the relationship. When Amber felt it was her at fault, she would go and talk to someone about it and realise that it was not her fault.

When Julia was two, Amber tried to break away from Osovale. She moved in with her parents. However, Osovale complicated Amber's efforts to end the relationship. A month later, he made the hour long drive to Amber's parents' house, pleading with Amber to give him another chance.

Amber, Osovale and Julia moved in to a house, not too far from Amber's parents' house. They lived there for six months. During this time, Amber was depressed. She wanted to leave, but by this stage, even Amber's parents were impressed by Osovale's efforts to make the relationship work: "My parents were even behind him at that stage, they didn't know anything".

It got to the point where Amber had had enough. She had quietly packed her bags and told Osovale that she was "not in the relationship". She left, and went and stayed at her parents' house. That night, Osovale would not stop ringing Amber, saying, "You know, you better come over, because I'm really depressed, and I think I'm going to do something stupid".

Amber asked her father to check on Osovale. He did, and when he arrived, Osovale had photos of Amber and knives scattered over the coffee table.

The next day, Amber informed Osovale that she had given notice on the house and that he had two weeks to move out. He did not put up a fight and returned to his home town.

Osovale's threats to hurt himself prompted Amber to tell her parents about what the relationship had really been like. Amber's mother found Amber a lawyer and went along with her to organise a protection order. Amber told me that sharing the details of Osovale's behaviour in front of her mother was horrible. "I actually felt sorry for her [Amber's mother], because she looked so sad about it...I felt responsible and I felt like an idiot".

Amber was granted a temporary, without notice, protection order.

Amber stayed at her parents' house for a short period and then returned to the city with Julia and moved in with a friend.

### **Post-separation**

Amber believes Osovale's abuse really started at the point of separation.

Amber told me that Osovale disliked baby-sitting Julia, which meant Amber could not go anywhere, or do anything by herself. She said Osovale hated the idea of her going out and having fun. When Amber did manage to get a sitter, Osovale would say, "Why didn't you ask me?" In retrospect, Amber believes that Osovale was more concerned about controlling her and "getting to her" than about spending time and caring for Julia.

Amber would arrange contact directly with Osovale. This was not very satisfactory. He lived in a series of flats without adequate furniture: Julia usually had to sleep in his bed. He would typically return Julia without the spare clothes Amber sent her with. Amber was concerned about his use of alcohol and drugs. He sometimes went off to other places with Julia without telling Amber who found that she could not contact him if she needed to.

On several occasions when Amber was dropping Julia off at Osovale's house, Osovale would use physical force to prevent Amber from leaving. He locked doors, blocked doorways and grabbed Amber around the arms. Amber remembers one incidence where she was so frustrated at Osovale's behaviour that she threw her phone on the floor in protest. Julia began to cry. Osovale yelled at Amber. "What

are you bloody doing?...You're crazy, you don't do that stuff in front of Julia!...Stop being a psycho!" Osovale bailed Amber up in a locked room (presumably Julia was unsupervised in the house). Amber kept trying to stand up after Osovale repeatedly pushed her onto the bed, demanding that they talk about contact. Amber made another attempt at getting up when Osovale pushed her so hard her head smacked against the window sill, and it began to bleed. Amber remembers Osovale's face. He was so angry. Osovale's face was what scared Amber the most. She responded, "ok, ok, ok".

Despite Osovale's behaviour toward Amber, and the unreliable, irregular contact that Julia had with her father, Amber tried not to let this interfere with the relationship she wanted Julia to have with her father. She told me that she knew Osovale loved Julia and that Julia loved him.

Although Amber had separated from Osovale, she knew she could not have another boyfriend, or see anyone else, "He would do something [to them]...he's big and he's capable". Even during the relationship, Amber was careful not to let Osovale know that she had "guy friends". With this knowledge, Amber remained isolated, vulnerable and alone. On one hand, Amber did not want to be around Osovale, and on the other hand, he was all she had. In the times Amber felt this way, she would contact Osovale. Amber would later regret doing so, because Osovale would blackmail Amber saying, "I'll ring them up and tell them that you've had me over here...and the protection order will be gone like that!"

When Julia was five, Amber did meet a new partner, Dean. Osovale threatened Amber and Dean via text message, saying he knew where they lived and that he was going to come and shoot Dean. Amber rung Osovale's mother, hoping she would be able to calm him down. His mother rung back five minutes later and said she had found a sawn-off shot gun under his bed and had removed it. Out of fear for their safety, Amber and Dean planned a move to a city eight hours away.

Just prior to the weekend they were due to move, Osovale rang and asked Amber if he could have Julia for the weekend. This was the first time, over a long period, that Osovale had phoned wanting to see Julia. Osovale's timing put Amber under a considerable amount of stress. She did not want to tell him that they were moving or where they were moving to. When Amber did ring to tell Osovale of their move,

Amber says he was very angry. Amber suggested Osovale see Amber one weekend every month. Osovale responded by yelling and making threats.

Amber and Dean went to a lawyer. They were advised to make an application to the Family Court for a parenting order, which they did. Amber sought conditions in the parenting order. These were that Osovale was to have a fixed home address, that Julia was to have her own bed, that Osovale was to provide Julia with clothes at his house, that the house was to be drug and alcohol free, that Osovale was to inform Amber if Julia was going to be staying somewhere else, and that Osovale was to have his mobile phone charged and switched on at all times in the event that Amber should need to get hold of him. As Amber put it, “All I wanted him to do is clean up and get his life sorted out so Julia can have a father”.

Julia was assigned a lawyer who visited her at school. Amber was really against this. She did not like how it looked to Julia’s teachers, but Amber did not feel like she had any power in this decision-making process. Julia told the lawyer that she loved her dad and that he took her to the movies. Amber believes that Julia’s response is a result of her hard work in keeping Julia protected from Osovale’s erratic and abusive behaviour.

At the hearing for the parenting order, Amber was shocked and a bit shaken when she saw Osovale. She had not expected him to be there. Osovale brought along his new partner. Amber told me that Osovale had made up stories and “blatantly lied” about her character. “[He made] me look like a terrible mother, and that he was actually trying really hard [to change], and I was no better than him.” (Much later, Amber asked Osovale why he lied during the hearing. He said, “Because you wanted to go to court, you wanted to do it this way and I’m just playing the game”.)

Amber got the parenting order, with the conditions she sought. However, she believes the parenting order was pointless. Osovale did not adhere to the conditions of the parenting order. He continued to provide sub-standard care for Julia and was still unreliable and unpredictable: sometimes he would fail to pick Julia up at the arranged time. He still yelled and screamed at Amber over the phone. Amber was frustrated, “I just wanted the basics” but there did not appear to be any simple solution.

I had to think of Julia and she always wanted to see him, so I had to put that first, before me being pissed off at him...[I] would take what I could get, because I really wanted him to have a relationship with his daughter.

Amber told me that Osovale believed it was his right to see Julia.

He wants all these rights, but he doesn't want any of the responsibility...that's all I ever wanted him to show me...to put Julia on top of his priority list and put some kind of effort into it, [but] he never did.

For a long time, Amber maintained that having Julia in Osovale's life was beneficial for both of them.

In some way, I still felt that he was a human being underneath it all, and that he could change, I guess, and that maybe Julia was one thing that kept him from being in jail.

However, Amber's expectations of Osovale, as a father, continued to be compromised. After one weekend with her father, Julia told Amber about an incident when Osovale's girlfriend was driving the car because he was too drunk. The pair began to fight when Osovale got angry at his girlfriend for driving too fast over some speed bumps. Osovale told her to slow down and then punched her when she did not. She came to a grinding stop. She told Osovale to get out of the car and pushed Julia out. Julia was not yet out of the car properly, when she sped off.

Amber cried when she heard what had happened and phoned Osovale. He responded, saying that it was not dangerous, but instead, that it was "character building". Amber was furious that Osovale had put Julia into this position. Julia refused to go back to her father's girlfriend's house. Amber says, "At least now Julia knows, she knows".

Despite the parenting order, Osovale has had little contact with Julia over recent months. Amber has also reached a point where she has no more energy to put into facilitating the relationship between Osovale and Julia, especially when Osovale has made so little investment into parenting Julia in a positive way.



Every now and then I get a little bit sad, like when she talks about him and stuff, which is hardly ever anymore, [I] think, oh what a shame, because he could have been a good dad, because he did love her and stuff, oh well, you know, he made the choices.

Amber worries about the future, particularly about how Julia will view her role in the relationship, or lack of a relationship, with her father.

I always wonder...when Julia is old enough to make her own decisions... is she going to be pissed off at me for not making more of an effort or is she going to be glad that I kept her away from that man? The thing is, she's not going to know what kind of man he was, unless she goes and finds out for herself. Even if she does that, it's going to take her a while to figure out that he's not a good person.

### **Summary**

Amber's experiences after separating from Osovale were characterised by his continued abuse of her and his possessive behaviour. He was still able to maintain his control over Amber by using his relationship to Julia as a tool, and making her feel responsible for his behaviour.

Osovale's behaviour reached a point where Amber felt compelled to reveal the abuse to her parents and, as a result, Amber's mother helped her to get a protection order. Amber felt embarrassed and ashamed about sharing the details of the abuse, adding to her isolation. There were very few times that the protection order was enforced. This was perhaps a reflection of Amber's 'not make a fuss' character and her efforts to avoid an outburst from Osovale.

Amber felt that Julia benefited from a relationship with her father and constantly advocated for her safety and wellbeing when in her father's care and. Many times, however, Amber's efforts to protect Julia were undermined.

## Case study two: Helen

### Background

Helen is a 31 year old Pākehā woman. She has a 12 year old son, Trey. Helen met Trey's father, Keith, when she was 16 years old. He was 42. In retrospect, Helen believes that Keith was manipulative in his intentions right from the start. He asked Helen a few times about her age, asking "Are you sure you're 16?" Helen now believes Keith repeatedly questioned Helen's age to avoid prosecution. At that time, Helen describes herself as "a messed up young girl".

Helen had already left home before she met Keith but was unable to claim the Independent Youth Benefit (IYB) and subsequently relied on Keith to support her. Keith received a benefit and tended to use all his money for alcohol, drugs and gambling. Consequently, the couple spent time sleeping rough on the streets.

Helen remembers people telling her that she should not be with Keith, but these comments spurred Helen on. She was determined to make the relationship work. Helen told me that she felt this way throughout the relationship.

Within weeks, Keith was playing mind games on Helen. He would purposely hide things from her, leaving her confused. Keith would also get really angry. The first time Helen experienced Keith's "real anger" was when the couple had eaten out at a restaurant and run out without paying. Helen told Keith's sister. Keith became very angry at Helen for "opening her mouth and narking" to his sister. Helen told me that she felt intimidated and scared by the way Keith reacted.

The physical violence began within the first year of the relationship. Helen remembers being intoxicated and "winding Keith up". He retaliated by punching her at least five times in the face. After each blow, Helen remembers feeling "amazed that someone could hit that hard".

Helen told me of another physically violent incidence, while in the company of two friends. Keith was drinking, but on this occasion, he had also taken sleeping tablets and other prescription pills. Helen, also drunk, had had enough of Keith's binging. She described these benders as "nightmare time". Helen removed Keith's pills, so he could not have anymore. Keith flew into a rage. He repeatedly hit Helen, punching

her in the face, pulling her ring off her finger and snapping her necklace off. The couple who were staying with Helen and Keith became very upset and wanted to call the Police. The female visitor pleaded with Helen give Keith's pills back. In the end, the visitors gave the pills back to Keith to diffuse the situation.

Helen also disclosed that Keith had perpetrated sexual violence against her, "He has literally has made me feel sick, like feel like vomiting, some of the stuff...I should have never known about that shit, you know, I was very sexually aware from way too young".

The experience of being in a relationship with a violent man has had long-term psychological effects on Helen. She describes the psychological abuse as far more damaging to her health than the physical abuse. The effect on her self-esteem was "devastating", she says, "[I] really did not think that I was worth anything".

### **Processes that led to separation**

By the time Helen was pregnant with Trey, she wanted out of the relationship. Keith continued to abuse Helen during her pregnancy: she was punched in the face periodically, but the psychological abuse, Helen says, happened on a daily basis. She remembers living in a terrace house. Keith would get drunk and terrorise Helen, keeping her up all night, calling her names and putting her down. He would say things like "You've got no charisma...You think you're something special?" Helen became sleep deprived and exhausted.

Helen's neighbour was very concerned at what she could hear through the dividing wall and Helen spoke to her about the abuse. Up until this point, Helen had kept Keith's violence a secret. She felt that if she were to tell someone, she would have no choice but to leave Keith. Talking to her neighbour proved to be a "big moment" for Helen. The neighbour confirmed for Helen that Keith's behaviour was not right. Helen told her neighbour that she wanted to leave Keith, but that she was concerned about the timing because Christmas was coming up. The response from Helen's neighbour was very helpful for Helen, "It might not be the right time for you or something, you don't have to do it right now". Helen saw this response as supportive and understanding.

Helen loved becoming a mother. She told me having her son helped her not to let Keith "get to me as much". She also developed some good protection strategies in

the first eleven months of Trey's life in an effort to shelter him from the abuse. By this stage, however, Helen "wished everyday that the relationship would end", but she could not see a way out. Keith was very controlling. Keith did not allow Helen to drive the car she paid for. He would "go nuts" if Trey so much as got a mosquito bite. Above all, Keith, several times, threatened to take Trey "up north" where Helen would never find him.

Keith continued to drink heavily. He would leave Helen at home with no car or landline phone. Sometimes, Helen's mother would collect Helen and Trey, and they would stay the night at their family home. Helen would pray that Keith would get picked up by the Police.

### **Post-separation**

The relationship ended abruptly when Keith arrived home after a drinking session, with his shirt hanging by a thread, covered in blood. He had been in a fight. He took an axe and put it in the boot of the car and said, "I'm going to deal to that bastard". As he left, Helen went to the neighbour's house to use the phone and rang her mother: "Hi, I thought we might come out". Just before Helen's mother arrived to pick up Helen and Trey, Keith arrived home again. Helen had happened to pack her precious photo albums and had her dog ready to get into the car. Helen's mother asked, "Keith, what's happened?" Keith replied by telling Helen's mother to "fuck off". Helen said, "He completely lost it". Well informed about domestic violence, Helen's mother ignored Keith and bundled Helen, Trey and the dog into the car.

On the drive to Helen's parents' house, Helen told her mother that she was not going back. For some time, Helen and Trey remained at the family home. However, Keith harassed the family. He left message after message on their answer machine, threatening to burn down Helen's parents' house with all of her family in it.

Keith visited Trey a few times at the family home. Helen told me that during those times, Keith did not treat her any better. He would call Helen names and put her down, saying that she was "a loser". Helen's mother offered to take over all contact arrangements, so that she no longer had to deal with Keith. Helen was grateful for the offer. Helen's mother made it clear that Keith's contact with Trey was to be

arranged with her and that his treatment of Helen would not be tolerated. From that time onward Helen's mother supervised contact.

However, Keith decided that he was leaving town and moving elsewhere. After Keith moved, he made a few phone calls organising a time with Helen's parents to see Trey, but he never showed up.

Helen believes that having Keith around as a role-model for Trey would have been detrimental.

I just never wanted my boy to turn into the kind of man [that Keith was]. I didn't want Keith to have any influence on Trey... I knew that he [Trey] would be screwed over if he [Kevin did]...there was nothing positive [about Keith].

Helen attributes her post-separation experiences to her mother's strength of character and ability to stand in for Helen as the contact negotiator and mediator. As a result of Helen having the support of her family, especially her mother, her availability to Keith was greatly reduced. This saw his efforts to continue his abuse of Helen decline.

However, years later, Keith made an application to the Family Court for contact. He failed to turn up to court at one stage during the process, so Helen made an application to have the case thrown out. Her application was successful. Keith has had little further contact with Trey or Helen since this time.

## **Summary**

Helen's post-separation experiences, particularly her ability to keep Trey safe, were largely enhanced by her mother's support. Keith's greatest opportunity to maintain control over Helen was in his contact with Trey, however, his efforts were met with resistance from Helen's family, particularly her mother. Helen's mother intervened by taking over contact negotiations, which saw Keith's access to Helen dramatically reduced. In this way, Keith was unable to bully or abuse Helen.

## Case study three: Leigh

### Background

Leigh is a 24 year old Pākehā woman. During her five year relationship with Graham, Leigh had a son, Gavin, who is now 4 years old. Leigh is currently in another live-in relationship and is pregnant. She has a protection order against Graham.

Leigh met Graham when she was 15. Graham was 45 years old at that time. The couple had met through Graham's daughter, who was a friend of Leigh. Graham gave the young girls drugs and alcohol and took them to parties during the weekend. Leigh said it got to the point where Graham expected sex in return for the drugs he supplied.

Leigh describes the first three years with Graham as "really good". Graham "spoilt her rotten." He continued giving her drugs and bought her gifts. In retrospect, Leigh believes an outsider would have thought differently about the way Graham treated her. Leigh used the word "control" to describe Graham's behaviour; she just did not see it that way at the time. Graham oversaw who Leigh had at the house and when she went out. When Graham went out, Leigh was not allowed to leave the house and Graham would enforce his wishes by having his friends keep an eye on Leigh.

At 18, Leigh fell pregnant, but lost the baby. The experience left the pair devastated. Graham's response to his son's death marked a significant shift in the way Leigh thought about Graham. She found out that Graham had a history of using drugs intravenously (with needles) and wondered then what she had got herself into.

For Leigh, the one thing she had control over was cutting herself, usually up her thighs, where no one could see. Leigh would chain the bathroom door closed. Graham caught Leigh once, smashed the door in and threw her through the glass shower door.

Leigh fell pregnant again shortly after her first son passed away. She views this period of her life as very isolating. Her mother left New Zealand to live with her partner and her sister moved to another city. Leigh's friends, who had warned her

about Graham, had distanced themselves from her. Leigh used drugs heavily during her pregnancy and was at the point of suicide. On one occasion Leigh's midwife was so concerned about her disposition that she rang an ambulance and Leigh was referred to a psychiatric unit. On her release she went back to Graham because she had no other family in the region. Graham's treatment of Leigh worsened. He took advantage of Leigh's state, telling her that he was all she had;

Right from the start I kind of looked at it like, I felt like I really didn't have a choice. Once I got pregnant the first time and lost the baby and then found out I was pregnant again with Gavin...I was kind of like well, ok, this is where I am now, this is my life, and this is where I must stay. I made my bed, I slept in it.

Leigh attributes her state of mind during this period to the drugs Graham gave her, the loss of her son, and the isolating and vulnerable position she was in. Graham was 30 years Leigh's senior which also contributed to the power imbalance. Graham's role in Leigh's psychological state, however, intensified as her pregnancy went on;

[He] kind of locked me in doors. I wasn't allowed to go out, I had to have everything done, um, I ended up really, really sick in the last few months, when I was pregnant with Gavin. I think it was a lot psychologically.

Graham's violence against Leigh during her pregnancy with Gavin was severe. She told me he tried to push her through a range slider and spiked her drinks. Graham would threaten Leigh, saying that if he ever caught her using amphetamines while she was pregnant with his child, he would kill her. In the eighth month of the pregnancy, Graham pushed Leigh over a balcony in front of Leigh's uncle. Leigh's uncle became her only ally and later supported her to get a protection order.

### **Processes that led to separation**

When Graham fell ill as a result of his drug taking, he went into hospital for some weeks. He demanded Leigh live with his parents. While living there, Leigh gave birth to their second son, Gavin. But when Graham got out of hospital, he would not let Leigh care for Gavin. If Graham was out, he would instruct his mother to care for Gavin, not Leigh.

Along Leigh's journey, she had learnt to blame herself. Not only did she receive this message from Graham, but she has also learnt this from those who directly and indirectly support Graham's behaviour. Graham's parents made a significant contribution to making Leigh feel incompetent, isolated and to blame for everything. Graham's family had a history of siding with him: Leigh told me that earlier in the relationship, when she had tried to get away from Graham, that they would coerce her into staying with him.

Whenever I tried to get out of the relationship, his family would always try and draw me back or say, "Oh, sort your shit out and come home." You know, "Stop being an idiot." Um, they always tried to make it look like it was all me, that I was losing it. He was always the good guy.

Leigh said that, to Graham's family, everything was Leigh's fault. In fact, part of Leigh's motivation to apply for a protection order was because she knew that Graham's parents did not think of her favourably and feared that they would try and take Gavin away from her.

I knew his parents were very cunning, and his family were very cunning. I knew that if I didn't get that protection order...they would try and take Gavin off me.

Graham had even managed to make Leigh look like a "useless mother" in the eyes of her own father.

My dad, and all them, didn't believe all the domestic violence that went on because they didn't see him as that sort of person.

Leigh had felt, for some time, that Graham's behaviour was affecting both her and her son's quality of life. But, Graham had convinced his family and Leigh's family that she was incompetent and unreliable.

I tried to escape [when Leigh knew it wasn't right], but when I had Gavin, he [Graham] kind of said to me, "You're not leaving with my child", "If you leave, you leave without my child" and that's what in the four years we were together, that's what kept bringing me back to him...he was kind of using Gavin as a tool to keep [me]...because he knew that if he had Gavin, I'd come



back because I wouldn't go anywhere without him [Gavin].

It was on learning that Graham was still using drugs, after he had promised not to, that motivated Leigh to leave him.

At the end of a long day trip, Graham wanted to quickly call into his cousin's house. Leigh pleaded with Graham to return home first, to get nappies and baby food for Gavin. Graham said he would only be a few minutes. Leigh saw Graham take something from under the car seat and take it inside. Leigh thought this was a bit strange and went inside after waiting in the car for 20 minutes. Graham and his cousin were as "high as kites" at the stove. Leigh returned to the car, put Gavin into his pushchair and walked for an hour until she reached Graham's parents' house. By this stage, Leigh was hysterical. She yelled at his parents, "I know what's going on, I know he's still doing it!" It was at this stage that Leigh, with the help of her uncle, applied for a protection order.

### **Post-separation**

Leigh ended up at her brother's house with Gavin. They had nowhere else to go. Eventually Graham showed up. Leigh did not call the Police because Graham was being polite. He claimed that he just wanted to see Gavin. It got to the point where Graham visited most nights and would not leave to go home. Graham's presence at her brother's house put Leigh in an awkward situation. Leigh had to ask Graham to stop coming over. Graham reacted with anger. "I thought we were back together!" "How can you do this to me again?" "Why do you pull this on me?" With Gavin in her arms, Leigh went to walk away from Graham. Graham grabbed Leigh by the arm. Leigh turned around, holding her fist up to Graham's face. "Don't you touch me", she screamed. Graham grabbed Leigh by the throat and held her up against the wall. To avoid Gavin being hurt, Leigh threw him onto the couch. Graham held his fist in Leigh's face and said, "It's alright for some, eh". Leigh could not believe Graham had the nerve to say that. Leigh screamed, "If you don't leave now, I'll call the Police". Graham left.

Graham continued to manipulate Leigh, telling her that everything was her fault, that she was the reason for him not seeing his son.

*Intervention by Child, Youth and Family*

When Gavin was 11 months old, Leigh was having difficulty finding somewhere safe to live. She felt like she might as well hand Gavin over to Graham. Out of desperation, Leigh packed up and moved out of the city to a small beachside town with Leigh's sister. On the second night they were there, three Police vehicles and two CYFs workers turned up. They uplifted Gavin and arrested Leigh the next day on the grounds of neglect. Leigh learnt later that these actions were as a result of allegations made to CYFs by Graham.

Gavin was taken into foster care and Leigh was required to go to a residential centre. The residential centre provided Leigh with support and advocacy: drug counselling, grief counselling and domestic violence support groups. When I asked Leigh how she viewed her time in residence, she replied;

I needed it. I mean, I'm not proud that Gavin got taken off me, but I know that if he didn't, I never would have got those support networks that I had and I never would have got as I am. I'd probably still be in that war.

When Gavin was in foster care, Leigh and Graham were granted access visits together. However, supervisors observed Gavin's reactions and behaviour closely and as a result re-thought contact arrangements.

...they reckon that that's what was traumatising Gavin, that's why Gavin was playing up at our access, because they pulled our access back because they reckon Gavin was too, too scared. Um, and what it was is because Gavin had witnessed so much that it was the dad, once they pulled him out of the picture and I had access, everything was fine. He didn't like seeing us together.

Gavin's reaction to his father was severe. His behaviour, coupled with Child, Youth and Family (CYFs) learning that Leigh had a protection order, meant that the social workers stopped Graham from having contact with Gavin.

Even when Gavin was placed in the care of Leigh's dad, the impacts of Gavin's trauma could be seen.

...there was one access which, it was actually quite sad, Graham walked through the door and dad [Leigh's dad] was standing behind Gavin...Graham walked through

the door and Gavin screwed up his fist, screamed, like he was absolutely petrified, just gripped dad...he didn't want to see Graham.

It was during Gavin's time in care with Leigh's father that Leigh's family realised that Graham had managed to deceive them too. They realised what sort of person Graham was and that Leigh was not a "useless mother".

Once they actually had Gavin in their care and they saw how Gavin was when Graham was going to their house for access with Gavin, they saw how Graham was with Gavin there and they clicked...they said [to Leigh], "We're sorry, we didn't believe you. We can see [now] that dominating, controlling bullshit in him with Gavin."

While Leigh made gains at the residential centre, Graham persisted with his abusive behaviour. He even applied to have the protection order against him discharged. His application was later declined by the Family Court with help from Leigh's advocate from the residential centre.

#### *Gaining care of Gavin*

After a year, Leigh gained sole care of Gavin. She found then just how badly her son had been affected. If voices were raised or Gavin was growled at, he would clench himself up, crouch on the floor and scream hysterically.

It was another 6 months until Leigh could leave the residential centre with Gavin.

As Gavin was approaching three, Leigh met a new partner. Perhaps as a result of having another male figure around, Gavin started to ask Leigh more and more about his father, whom he had not seen since he was under the care of CYFs. Leigh said she felt like all she heard from Gavin was, "dad, dad, dad".

I felt stink, I actually felt like because of mine and Graham's bullshit, I was holding Gavin back. I just thought maybe I am being immature about this situation, maybe I need to step back and stop being such a bitch about it and let him see his son.

Gavin's persistence with the topic of dad led Leigh to re-evaluate his contact with his father. She decided to contact CYFs, as they had previously dealt with all of Graham's access. Leigh outlined her intentions of organising access for Gavin on

Father's Day with a case worker. Leigh also said that she had arranged witnesses for both Graham and herself as a precaution. CYFs responded by saying that it was Leigh's choice and to let them know how it went.

Leigh's father was supportive of Leigh's decision, too:

When I suggested contact, my dad said to me, "Good on you, at least you're doing the right thing, at least you're thinking of Gavin."

The contact for Gavin on Father's Day went well. Because Leigh was so pleased that Gavin finally had an opportunity to see his father again, she suggested to Graham that he join them for Gavin's birthday. "We're thinking of doing a beach theme, so that the family can see him as well", said Leigh. To her disappointment, however, Graham yelled

I don't want to sit around watching you and your partner playing happy fuckin' families...I want unsupervised access or nothing!

Leigh was disappointed. She felt that Graham had not changed at all.

It was head fucking. I didn't know how to deal with it. When Gavin was asking for dad, I was like well, what am I supposed to do? I didn't want Gavin to resent me in the future for cutting him off from his father...I did that with mum and I didn't know, years and years ago, that it wasn't mum's fault, it was dad's fault.

Leigh feels a huge responsibility for the relationship and contact that Gavin has with his father. Leigh's perception of her obligations places pressure on her and the relationship she has with her son. She is especially concerned about the future of that relationship. She is scared that Gavin will view her and her role in this situation negatively. As a result, she has feelings of guilt;

I didn't want him [Gavin] to miss out on [the father figure]. I didn't want to feel like I was being the asshole for cutting him off from his dad.

Leigh's fear of Gavin not having his father in his life sharply contrasts with the knowledge that Graham will never be the dad that Leigh wants for her son.

Leigh told me that she was going to make one last attempt at contacting Graham for Gavin. Leigh wants to make sure that Gavin knows she has done everything she can to facilitate contact. Leigh concluded our last conversation by saying, “Boys, especially, need their dads”. This highlights Leigh’s belief in the importance of having her son’s father in his life.

### **Summary**

Leigh’s perception of her role in Graham and Gavin’s relationship has caused her immense internal conflict. She blames herself for not recognising what kind of man Graham was. She blames herself for staying with him for so long. She blames herself for how Graham’s behaviour has impacted on her son. She blames herself for not being able to make Graham a better father. She blames herself for her son’s relationship with his father. The blame Leigh attributes to herself is not self-made: that is, it is a product of the violence and abuse she experienced, its impacts and the role of widely-held beliefs about fathers.

## Case study four: Mary

### Background

Mary is a 44 year old Pākehā woman. She has two children, Abby and Andy, from a previous marriage and had been separated for two years when she met Tane. Tane also has a daughter, Sam, from a previous relationship. During the 10 year relationship, the couple had a son together. His name is Tipene. Mary and Tane have been separated for the last four years.

Mary describes the beginning of her relationship with Tane as “messy”. Tane was still living with his ex-partner, but their relationship was on the rocks. Four months after Tane ended this relationship, he moved in with Mary and her children. Mary’s children thought it was “really cool” having Tane around. They did not have a strong relationship with their own father and Mary felt that her children looked up to Tane as a father figure.

However, Mary describes the early days of the relationship as very controlling and manipulative. Tane would create a tense atmosphere when he did not get his way. The whole household would feel like they were “walking around on eggshells”. He would sit in his chair in the lounge and not talk to anyone: no one dared to approach him. Mary told me Tane could keep this up for days.

Initially, Tane’s behaviour did not affect the children, but once he had been living with the family for a longer period, Mary found that Tane had unreasonable expectations of her children. Tane started to become very short with the children, ordering them around like soldiers and expecting them to respond to his demands instantly. Mary said it started with small things. She remembers the children coming home from school and dropping their school bags on the lounge floor. Tane did not like this and would throw the children’s bags outside. Mary found this quite inappropriate, but when she broached the topic with Tane, it would quickly escalate into an argument. Mary says she did not know how else to approach him about it. Even Tane’s sisters, however, would comment on the way Tane spoke to the children, but in spite of their acknowledgement and awareness of Tane’s behaviour, Mary felt the responsibility to do something about it fell on her.

Tane's treatment of Mary's children escalated to physical abuse and the children became scared of Tane. He would discipline the children with a smack across the head. Mary would stand in front of the children, protecting them, which would make Tane even more aggressive.

Mary told me that there were times that Tane would physically abuse her too.

...there was definitely physical abuse there, but it wasn't like hard out beating you up or anything.

Tane's daughter, Sam, would stay during the school holidays and came to live with the family during the last three years of Mary and Tane's relationship. The high expectations Tane had of Mary's children were not applied to Sam. As time went on, Mary found Tane's favouritism of Sam unfair, which caused tension between the couple.

Mary said, for a long time, she compromised her values and what she knew to be right.

...when I look back on it now, I think that I probably gave in to everything in the beginning... gave away everything that I believed in.

The impact of giving up the things Mary believed in had a detrimental impact on her wellbeing.

That took all my self-esteem, all my self-confidence. It basically shattered my world in the end.

Tane's self-centredness, his authoritative parenting of Mary's children, the mind games he played, and the arguments took their toll on Mary. She decided to seek help.

### **Processes that led to separation**

Seeking help, however, was not easy.

...the closest people in my life would have been my parents and I couldn't talk to them about it.

When I explored with Mary why she could not talk to her parents about her relationship difficulties, she told me that from their perspective, you do not “complain about being unhappy”.

Mum and dad come from a completely different era. They come from the era that you get together and you get married and you have babies and you live together forever.

Mary could not turn to friends either. She had learnt not to get too close to anyone after her best friend walked away during Mary’s marriage break down with her ex-husband.

Mary also felt pressured because she had already been married once. She felt that she needed to exhaust every option before ending the relationship with Tane.

I wanted to do everything I could to make the relationship work.

Mary was isolated. The people who could have provided support did not acknowledge the abuse that Mary and her children were suffering, nor see separation as a viable option.

Mary got to the point where “It was make or break”. She was really depressed, “going through the motions of life, but not participating in it”.

Mary insisted that she and Tane go to see a counsellor. Tane agreed and went along with Mary. He said very little during the session. The counsellor recommended that Tane go to anger management classes, which he attended for the first few sessions. Tane believed Mary should also attend, but when Mary declined, saying she did not have a violence problem, Tane stopped attending. Mary continued seeing the counsellor alone for two years. She views this time as a turning point. She slowly worked towards asking Tane to leave.

Conditions in the house were still on shaky ground. Mary had gone to lengths to show Tane she was no longer interested in being in a relationship with him, but Tane pretended like nothing was wrong, until, in the end, Mary asked Tane to shift out. Asking Tane to leave took a lot of strength on Mary’s part, but the road to recovery was still some time away.



When our relationship finally ended and I asked him to leave, he ... I didn't know who I was basically. I didn't know who I was any more.

### **Post-separation**

When Mary asked Tane to leave, he said, "You can tell me to go, but you can't tell me how to go!" There was a lot of "shouting and stomping and banging". Tane left his daughter, Sam, in Mary's care, which Sam complained bitterly about. At first, Abby and Andy, Mary's two older children, were angry with Tane. Mary said they were old enough to see what Tane's abuse had done to their mother.

Once Tane had finally shifted out, he kept visiting the house.

The majority of the time, when he came, he wanted to do something about us. He wanted me back. It wasn't about the kids.

Tane's visits often led to arguments. The children's contact with Tane was dependent on these visits, so to avoid arguments, Mary encouraged Tane to take the children places or watch them while they were at their sporting activities.

Mary told me that there had never been any legal arrangements for child contact and that contact was "basically between him and I". From Mary's perspective, Tane's attitude toward contact with the children was very relaxed, "His terms weren't all that demanding". Tane said to Mary, "When they want to see me, they can see me". This enabled the children to have contact with Tane on their own terms.

Sam stayed with Mary for six months after Tane moved out. Shortly after this time, Mary moved with her children to another city, an hour away from Tane. Tane soon followed Mary and her children, leaving Sam behind.

In the four years since Mary initiated separation, contact arrangements have stayed much the same, with the children driving contact with Tane. Mary told me her children need contact, particularly Tipene.

I think it's important that kids know who their parents are. Tane's got a really big family and he [Tipene] needs to know where he comes from and, you know, know all his family connections and stuff.

Mary says that although Tane has not changed, Abby and Andy know how he operates and have control over whether they want to be a part of that.

When he says something, he still wants it done straight away. But, like, they choose if they're going to go there or not.

Mary's two older children have more contact with Tane now than they did immediately after separation. Mary attributes the children's desire for contact to the fact that the contact is on their terms. However, this is not the case for Mary. Sometimes, she feels she has to do things that she should not really have to. For example, sometimes Tane requests that Mary and the children attend events with him. Tane puts the children under so much pressure that Mary feels that if she does not attend, the children will be unprotected. However, attending such events makes Mary feel like she is condoning and encouraging Tane's behaviour. Either way, Mary is put in an awkward position.

### **Summary**

As a result of the violence and abuse, Mary suffered major depression in the last five years of her relationship. Her children, too, were affected by the emotional and physical abuse they experienced. Mary was isolated and had little support. Mary's ex-partner's abuse continued after separation when he refused to accept the end of the relationship. His advances and persistence often led to arguments. Mary no longer wanted Tane's behaviour to affect the children, so her efforts to keep the peace were ongoing.

## Case study five: Rhonda

### Background

Rhonda is a 48 year old Pākehā woman. She met her ex-husband Walter when she was 21. Walter was eleven years older than Rhonda and married at the time. A year to 18 months later, Walter had ended the relationship with his wife and he and Rhonda moved in together. They resided in their home country until their move to New Zealand eleven years ago.

Most of the time Walter was a charming man, but in the first few years Rhonda experienced doubt and wondered why she was in the relationship. Walter would sometimes behave inappropriately in social situations making Rhonda feel awkward. On occasion, while socialising, Walter would have sudden outbursts, saying, “Oh, this is pissing me off” and he would walk away and leave. Rhonda would feel so embarrassed, ending up in tears. She said that these incidents happened every three to four months, and then things would go back to normal. Walter had no awareness of how it looked to anyone else or how it left Rhonda feeling. Walter would never acknowledge what he had done afterwards and refused to talk about it. He expected everyone else to move on, just like he did. Such behaviour left Rhonda confused, angry, and doubting her own judgment. Walter would say things like

“Oh you are paranoid” and, “Anyway your mother does this”. He would just turn it right back. Or “you made me do it”, kind of thing. “If you hadn’t done it, I wouldn’t have to do that”, all that sort of thing.

Walter would also get quite paranoid about people’s intentions. Rhonda remembers one occasion where a mutual friend had invited Walter to give a speech on the work that he did. Rhonda overheard Walter on the phone saying to their friend, “No, I’m not going to do it, how dare you take my name in vain!” When Rhonda asked him what had happened, he would respond by saying, “Don’t give me a hard time, you’re making a fuss over nothing”. Walter would often overreact over little things and later, explain it away.

Walter was mindful of exactly who was around when displaying this type of behaviour.

Sometimes he would do it in public, little bits, but not the full hog. Most of it is saved until there is no one else around. But with glimmers, you know, he would suddenly have a wobbly over something, say something a bit odd.

Six years into their relationship, this type of behaviour increased in frequency when Rhonda and Walter had a daughter, Ella. Walter was adamant that he only wanted one child. Rhonda had wanted at least six or seven children, but she accepted Walter's wishes and told herself that she was lucky to have one child, and left it at that. Rhonda described Walter's parenting with Ella as "OK". She said everything was fine when things were going his way and nothing was being demanded of him. However, when Ella cried at night, Walter would get "stressed out". Rhonda felt that Ella's needs inconvenienced Walter. He would start to shout, slam doors and stomp around. Rhonda would do everything she could to settle Ella, all in an effort to calm Walter down.

You are rushing around trying to hush a baby and...you try to appease him all the time so what you end up doing was doing everything and not...you know, holding my ground and having boundaries about what his input should have been...so I took on everything which was too much really.

Three after Ella was born, to Rhonda's surprise, she found she was pregnant again. Walter was outraged. "You've done this on purpose!" "How dare you to this to me without my permission!" "I feel cheated by you!" He threatened to leave during Rhonda's pregnancy, on numerous occasions. Unsurprisingly, this left Rhonda feeling awful. On reflection Rhonda said, "It is bloody cruel when you think about it".

Once her son was born, Rhonda ran herself ragged. Warren was an "easy" baby, but the couple shared a business together. Rhonda would have to get up early in the morning and would not stop until late at night. Walter never got up to the kids at night. He used to say to Rhonda, "You wanted them, you look after them!" For Rhonda, it was less hassle for her not to battle with him and to just get on with taking care of the children alone.

According to Rhonda, Walter was like another child, rather than a parent. Everything had to be centred on him. Rhonda remembers a time when the children were young watching a children's programme on the TV. Walter marched into the room and changed the channel to motor car racing. The children complained, "Dad, why'd you do that?" Walter replied, "Well, I don't like this, I don't like what you're watching". In these situations, Rhonda would have to play the mediator. She knew that Walter would lose his cool quickly and the children got really upset when he did that. Rhonda did not want the children to be the target of his so called "stress", so she would always distract the children to get them out of Walter's way.

When I asked Rhonda what she thought of Walter's parenting of the children she replied by saying that, "He got angry, but he wasn't kind of like a disciplinarian". As Warren got older, Walter would push cars around and do "boy" things with him. However, Walter spent more of his time with his son; Ella was very much ignored by her father. Rhonda told me about a time when Ella had her music playing on a tape in the car. The tape kept playing up, so Walter took it out of the tape player. Ella objected, saying, "Oh dad, turn it on again". Walter dealt with the situation by throwing Ella's tape out the window. Rhonda believes that Ella became quite scared when her dad did things like this.

Walter modelled to the children how an adult male should treat his wife. Walter would often put Rhonda down saying, "You're lazy" or "You're making a fuss". He would swing between being nice and charming, to thumping his fist down on a bench and "going mad". Rhonda found it harder and harder to ignore Walter's selfishness: she felt miserable.

### **Processes that led to separation**

Something that featured quite heavily in Rhonda's reflections on her thoughts and decisions in her relationship with Walter was the value of commitment. Rhonda felt that making a decision to be with someone and sticking with them was something she had learnt in her upbringing. She describes commitment as her motivation to stay with Walter. However, Rhonda felt that Walter's behaviour was not quite right, but having recognised this did not mean a solution or help was readily available. She recalls

...the area we lived in, none of our friends were separated, it was all quite traditional family life and

nobody went to counselling, not that we knew of anyway, that was always kept under wraps.

Even when Rhonda talked to her friends, there was a dismissive element to their responses, as if it were automatically filed into the “too hard box”.

I remember talking about some of this stuff with my friends, and they would be like “Well that’s weird, really weird” but that is as far as it ever got.

The feeling of being alone without support was confirmed in Rhonda’s description of her parents’ reactions, when she revealed to them exactly what Walter was like during their relationship. Rhonda’s dad especially has been upset that Rhonda had never said anything about the troubled relationship. She explained

...well you never asked. Nobody said, “Well what’s going on there?” or “Does Walter say that stuff often?”

All of these messages confirmed that separation was not the “right” thing to do and, ultimately, that staying together was best for the children. The commitment Rhonda had made to Walter created a powerful potion of confusion and second guessing.

The whole self doubt thing all the time, I was in denial about how serious it was the whole time really and feeling that I had to keep doing the right thing and one day he’d...I think I also thought well I can heal him if I keep doing the right thing and I love him, you know, one day he’ll suddenly say, turn around and change, which now seems really naïve.

When Ella and Warren were 10 and 7, the family immigrated to New Zealand. Rhonda became increasingly dissatisfied with Walter’s behaviour. Up until Rhonda left Walter (three years after they arrived in the country), she had been bound by the belief that keeping the family together was best for the children. However, Walter’s ongoing self-centeredness really challenged Rhonda’s thinking about exactly what the children were being exposed to with a parent like Walter as a role-model.

It was not until Rhonda had settled into New Zealand that she began to realise how little support she had had in her home country. Rhonda perceived help services to

be more accessible and accessing them as socially acceptable here; her renewed way of thinking gave her courage to talk to someone.

...I actually didn't feel I had any support to go to... [here, in New Zealand] there were more people splitting up, so it kind of became well, within the normal premises of life. There were also counsellors and people like that in relationships...they would be quite openly out there, you know. And I thought, well, hang on, I will go along and talk to someone and see...and then it all becomes 'oh really' the light finally shone.

However, Rhonda still had to contend with messages that Walter was not responsible for the situation. When Walter's mother had visited from overseas, Rhonda told her that she was thinking of leaving because of Walter's controlling behaviour

She was just like, "Oh well, I don't believe that, obviously there's another explanation." She was in complete denial about it.

This type of reaction only intensified Rhonda's feelings of confusion, self-doubt and isolation; clearly adding to the pressure of making the decision to leave.

Walter's behaviour had begun to escalate to a level that tipped Rhonda over the edge. The age of her children really began to play on her mind, with Ella at 13 and Warren at 10;

...suddenly [I] came to the point [asking], "Do I really want this for them for the next 10 years?" Because it's not good. Do something now otherwise it is going to go on for the next 10 years...where they are going to be totally screwed. It is becoming such an unhealthy home environment to live in.

### **Post-separation**

Once Rhonda had made the decision to leave, she knew she could not rely on Walter to tell the children in a sensible and calm manner. Her stomach churned at the thought of the kids wanting to stay with him. Telling the children, however, did not end up being an issue. Instead, Walter reacted badly and he refused to leave. Consequently, Rhonda, Ella and Warren had to move out. Rhonda considered getting a solicitor involved, but the thought of the time delay put her off

How could we live together knowing that? He would have been absolutely vile to live with knowing that I was doing that. So I thought the only way to do it is for me, if it was going to happen, is for me to go, just pick up and go with nothing...we took vital things but I didn't sort of pack the house up and go, we just sort of went, chucked a few things in a case and went.

Walter visited the children a few times a week at their new accommodation. After the first couple of months however, his behaviour changed. Walter was suspicious that Rhonda was seeing someone else. He would turn up at the house at 5:30 in the morning and bang on the door. He used excuses like, "I just wanted to see the kids before school".

Rhonda did not feel like she could sit down and organise contact times with Walter. Both she and the children had to wait and see how Walter would react. It got to the point where Rhonda would have to sit at home waiting for Walter because he would not commit to a time. If Rhonda asked what time he would pick up the children or when he would return them, he would tell Rhonda to stop being so controlling.

Approximately four years after the separation, Rhonda and her children moved to a different city. Walter soon followed and moved into a house at the end of their street. Rhonda told me "You can't go out the end of our road without seeing his house, so he's there all the time".

Walter's dismissive treatment of Ella continued. This really concerned Rhonda.

She never felt respected by him or loved really. She was loved by him if she was doing something that pleased him, you know? Or making a big effort for him and he always used to accuse her of not making an effort, it was her fault, you know, she never made an effort with him, she was this, she was that, you know? She didn't love him, that's what he used to say, you know, to, about a 10-year-old girl. He'd play victim. He wouldn't have awareness about the effect of it at all, no. She had to fight, she had to not really be herself to please him. She had to, sort of, be manipulative in order to please him.

Ella's response to her father was to have as little to do with him as possible



She didn't want to see him at all, she just didn't want to see him. I mean, if he came round, she'd sort of talk to him, but she was really like blasé by this time about him.

For Warren, Rhonda believes contact with Walter resulted in anxiety, confusion and stress. One week Walter could phone the house five or six times and then suddenly stop for a month or longer. Walter's inconsistency worried Warren; Rhonda said Warren felt concerned for his father and she knew that, even at his young age, Warren felt guilty and partly responsible for his father's wellbeing.

Rhonda believes Walter's behaviour has had a devastating impact on her children. His conditional love and unpredictability caused the children to blame themselves. This pattern of emotional abuse was something Rhonda felt she could not control

Ultimately he's their father and ultimately I didn't feel like I had the power to stop them [seeing him] anyway, to make that decision for them I suppose. Now, looking back on it, I would have done if I could.

Earlier she had told me that when she separated, she had wanted the children to have no contact with Walter

...but I didn't know how to make it happen, and I still agree now, it would have been better for them not to have any contact at all with him.

Rhonda's ideas about the unbreakable bonds of family and commitment also appeared to play a role in what she thought she could and could not do in terms of decision making for the children. Rhonda's mother suggested that she apply for custody of the children so that she had more input into the time that the children spent with their father. However, Rhonda felt differently

I felt if I went for, applied for custody obviously courts because they are pro-contact, they would have also awarded him custody and it would have been regular and I, in my heart of hearts felt that being forced to have regular contact with him with someone like that, who treats you like that, or you never know how they're going to treat you would be...didn't want it.

Feeling unsupported and powerless showed itself again to be crucial in how Rhonda felt about making an application to the Family Court.

It has been 8 years since Rhonda left Walter. Ella is now 21 and Warren, 18. The children's contact has continued, but Rhonda no longer negotiates it.

I've said to them, I'm not having, I don't want any contact, you're old enough now, if you want to see him [Walter] that's up to you, like if you want to walk into the gorse bush, you're going to get prickled, but I'm not walking in it, I'm not going to get prickled.

Rhonda says she continues to be affected by Walter's abuse, not directly, but indirectly through his treatment of the children.

### **Summary**

Feeling unsupported and powerless to protect her children from ongoing emotional abuse were two themes that played a role in Rhonda's post-separation experiences. The ongoing exposure to Walter, required to arrange the children's contact, also resulted in Rhonda's experiences of intimidation, blame and emotional abuse.

## Case study six: Shelley

### Background

Shelley is a 47 year old Pākehā woman. She is mother to four children, ranging in age from 14 to 6 years old (Matthew, Emily, Michelle and Sheena). She met her ex-husband, Carl, when she was 26 years old. Initially, Shelley saw Carl as a good, decent, personable man. However further discussion revealed their 18 year relationship be marked by physical, emotional and economic abuse. For Shelley the relationship always fell short; Carl was very self-centred.

Shelley told me of an overseas trip with Carl three or so years into the relationship. During an argument Carl punched Shelley in the head. Shelley was stunned, but Carl acted like nothing had happened. Shelley was afraid; she had no money and was in a foreign country. She had contemplated going to the New Zealand Embassy, but thought that was too over the top.

Shelley desperately wanted children. In retrospect, she recognised that this was one of the things that made her vulnerable.

I was looking for love, big mistake...I wanted a family like I hadn't grown up in, but I met this person who sold me an image.

Shelley describes Carl's treatment of her as cruel: he was someone who took advantage of her vulnerabilities.

When Michelle, Shelley's youngest at the time, was nearly one Shelley separated from Carl in the hope that he would realise that he needed to put the "family first". The experience of life alone with the children for six months proved difficult. Shelley's mother died and, as a result, Shelley ended up going back to Carl. Approaching the one year anniversary of her mother's death, Shelley fell pregnant. She was overjoyed, particularly because she had never managed to get pregnant without IVF (her older children were conceived this way). Carl was not at all happy and took the attitude that he was forced into having another child. Carl demanded Shelley terminate the pregnancy.

He [Carl] wanted me to have an abortion, he pressured me so badly that in the end. Oh Christ he was horrible.

Two weeks after the first mention of abortion, Shelley miscarried at home. Carl went off to bed, not saying a word, leaving Shelley in the bathroom alone. She went to bed and sobbed herself to sleep.

For Shelley, the impact of Carl's systematic put-downs and neglect during their relationship was shattering. Despite Carl's behaviour, Shelley hung on to the image Carl had portrayed at the beginning of their relationship. In this way, Shelley felt like she was living under an illusion and calls herself "dumb" for not seeing Carl for what he was.

Carl became a wealthy businessman in the time they were together, but made Shelley and their children live on a pittance. He spent a lot of time away on business. When Carl was home, Shelley would have to ask him to help out with the basics; simple things like helping to get the children's teeth brushed. He actively avoided helping with the children.

Helping with the babies when he was home was a major thing for him; he didn't like it. I had a caesarean and was physically in a bad way and was just left to it, basically.

In retrospect, Shelley feels that she was fulfilling the role of two parents. Clearly, Carl thought caring for the children was beneath him.

### **Processes that led to separation**

Carl's treatment of Shelley slowly eroded her self-worth and self-esteem. She felt shame, and blamed herself for the way things were.

He was very uncaring really, but I never got it. You know why? Because I didn't expect much for myself and I didn't...I guess...love myself enough to think I deserve better. That's the guts of it.

Shelley often felt concerned with Carl's treatment of the children, particularly his inconsistent behaviour towards Matthew, the only boy of the family (also Emily's twin). Shelley would ask Carl over and over again to kiss Matthew goodnight and tell him that he loved him

I mean when I look back, it's ridiculous to tell your husband to tell his son that he loves him, that's

ridiculous, and yet that's what it led to, that's the point it got to.

However, Shelley also knew that Carl respected Matthew far more than the girls.

He cares more about what Matthew thinks of him than what Emily does...he doesn't seem to be so concerned with what the girls think.

Carl's treatment of Shelley also became quite visible to the children, which concerned her. Shelley recalled getting her hair cut; one of the very few times she spent money on herself. She remembers Emily complimenting, "Oh mum, you look lovely". Emily turned to her father and said, "Doesn't mum look lovely?" Looking out the window, Carl said, "Yeah, yeah, she looks lovely". It was quite obvious to both Shelley and Emily that Carl was being sarcastic. Shelley had learnt to expect this from Carl. The difference that day was the message that her 12 year old daughter had received from her father about what he thought about her mother.

It was learning that Carl was having an affair that took a real toll on Shelley. During the interview, Shelley acknowledged that people could read the situation in a number of ways, but to her, "there was a whole emotional thing". Carl's pattern of rejection, isolation and intimidation had been punctuated with periodic physical assaults. Shelley felt that for Carl to leave her and their four children for another woman after all she had been through, was just the ultimate form of power and control; she was broken.

### **Post-separation**

For the ten months following the separation, Shelley and the children stayed in the family house.

Shelley kept a diary and recorded the 26 times that Carl saw the children. Only three of those occasions were problem free. Shelley felt that Carl did not prioritise the children's needs, nor think about the impact that the separation would have on them, let alone the introduction of a new partner. In an effort to impress his new partner, Shelley says, Carl was irritable with the children and would not tolerate misbehaviour.

Several times, Carl would drop Matthew off and leave him home alone if he stepped out of line. Shelley came home on one of these occasions and found Matthew

smashing things in the shed; he had been there for an hour while Carl took the three girls to the beach.

On another occasion, it was Emily, Shelley's eldest daughter who was "playing up" for Carl. He consequently punched Emily to the ground.

Emily has very separate problems because she was punched by him and she's never forgiven him and he's never apologised...I find that amazing that a father could punch his daughter to the ground, no matter what the situation is for him...

Since this event, Emily chooses to spend as little time with her father as possible. From Shelley's point of view, Emily feels that a relationship with her father requires her to accept his treatment of her.

...the others have all got a little niche that they're fitting in, in a fashion...but for Emily, it can't be, because she's right, he's not there for her, but she gets it, that's the difference, she gets it, that she would have to act like the others [Matthew, Michelle and Sheena]...I guess, it comes down to her not going along with this um, with what he's done.

Perhaps Emily feels that her father has not been held accountable for his violence and abuse towards her. It seems to me that there are two very contradictory messages for Emily: men or fathers have a right to abuse you without consequences and the need for having contact with your father outweighs the need of having safe and secure relationships with people who love and care for you.

Following this incident with Emily, Carl also bailed Shelley up in the shed and was pushing her around, yelling at her for all the fines he had incurred from the Inland Revenue Department. When Shelley demanded that Carl leave, he pushed Shelley and she fell. As she found her feet again Carl punched her in the face.

Shelley found herself in an unbearable situation. The physical assaults were decisive in her decision to move. Shelley describes her children's behaviour when they left their home town as "out of control". Windows in their new house were being broken and the Police were being called out to settle things down; Shelley's children were "giving her hell". Matthew proved particularly difficult to deal with. He consequently moved in with his father for six months. Shelley described him as

controlling and disrespectful, to the point where he physically assaulted her. Carl blamed Shelley for the children's behaviour, saying she made it hard for them by moving away. Carl failed to see that his abuse was the reason Shelley had moved.

Carl would ring to speak with the children on the odd occasion, but only to speak with Matthew;

He doesn't ring her [Emily], he rings his son, which says a whole lot about him, he doesn't respect women...he thinks he has to look good to Matthew. He's really dumb because I can tell, you know, the girls see a whole lot.

For Shelley, the children having contact with their father was never in doubt. In Shelley's mind, the idea of family and having a father reigned supreme. Shelley believes that her children have a right to have contact with their father;

...they need to know their dad, whether they're fulfilled or let down, but they need that expectation met, the expectation of the right to see their dad has to met, it's not a choice for me.

For Shelley, doing the right thing meant having her children's needs met. Part of their needs, as Shelley saw it, was for the children to have their father. Shelley's own childhood experiences played a role in how she viewed her children's needs;

He [Carl] was their dad, the only dad they know, just like my dad...I knew when I was a child he was never there for my mum, but I didn't condemn him for it because that was my dad, that was our life, that was our family, you know, what is, is...they need that need met.

The age of Shelley's children at the time of separation (12 year old twins, a 9 year old and a 4 year old) also motivated her drive to continue contact;

...these are older children, so this father is the father they've always known.

Shelley believed that Michelle, at 9 years old, really needed a dad;

...it was for me too about that age where I really needed a dad and looked up to him, a dad figure. It never worked out for me...I remember trying to reach out to my dad, but it never worked.

During the interview, Shelley highlighted her views of what the family unit provided for her children.

He's robbed them of um, of a financial, secure family unit, he's robbed them of a mum and dad together, he's robbed them of holidays, he's robbed them of you know, a house where we live, having their own rooms, he's taken everything they knew and all their securities, he's taken it and thrown it up in the air and it's all tumbled wherever it's fell...he's robbed his children of their family and there's no way he can ever make that right, so that's the price that we're now going to pay forever as far as I'm concerned.

Despite Carl's absence from the home, his parenting of the children and the small amount of money Shelley had to live on, the worst thing Carl ever did, in Shelley's mind, was leave. As well as the ideals Shelley had on family, she also experienced feelings of injustice. Not only had she not bargained for being a single parent to four children, she also hadn't asked to have restrictions placed onto the way she lived. Although Shelley and her children lived frugally when they lived with Carl, the impact of dealing alone with the costs of moving, finding adequate accommodation, schooling, transport and childcare has been difficult. Carl was little help when Shelley faced these challenges;

He knows that we've got no money from Child Support because he's not paying it, um, so we've got no money over the whole holidays and I can't give them a holiday.

For the initial six months after the move, the children went back to their home town for contact with their father, but Shelley had reservations about what the children had to take on, with Carl thinking only of his needs.

In order to meet her children's needs, restore some normality, and relieve her concerns about the way the children were being treated in Carl's care, Shelley wanted contact to take place in the children's new home town, without the distraction of his new partner. Carl had made it clear that he was not interested in contact taking place anywhere else but his home town. He was also adamant that his new partner would be part of this contact. To address these issues, Shelley made an application to the Family Court. This was Shelley's way of having a voice and protecting her children.



It was also a way of meeting what Shelley viewed as “the children’s need for contact”.

Shelley told me she was not always treated fairly during the Court process. She said the court did not consider Carl’s history of abuse, nor how his abuse had affected Shelley. Shelley felt criticised for not wanting to communicate with Carl.

Abuse is abuse. Should the abused party be to blame for their reaction to abuse? That’s my question. No they shouldn’t be. But no, the judge would have it that you actually need to get on, she actually said that, “You need to communicate”. Communicate with an abuser? No, I can’t. She didn’t understand that.

Shelley’s response to Carl was viewed by the court as “all quite abnormal”. Carl, in his affidavits, was quick to discredit Shelley by highlighting the children’s problem behaviour while in her care. He successfully presented a case that undermined Shelley’s parental authority, making her look incompetent and unstable. Shelley told me about the tone that the judge used when speaking to Shelley

To use her exact words...Carl loved this, “I shouldn’t believe everything my children tell me.”

Shelley’s criticisms of the Family Court also reflect her values of family and marriage. She believes that the Family Court needs to take a step back in time and go back to moral standings. She says children have no sense of family anymore; she doesn’t want her children lost, thinking that marriage is like going to buy a new TV.

At the end of the court process, it was decided that contact would take place in the children’s new home town, once a month, without Carl’s new partner. A supervised access centre is used as a point of exchange where the children are picked up and dropped off.

Shelley still feels intimidated by Carl when he arrives early at the point of exchange. Shelley says, although she tries not to let the children see, she begins to shake when she sees Carl.

## **Summary**

The role of Carl’s past abuse and his behaviour post-separation has had a huge impact on Shelley.

I am frightened of him now, I can't even explain it, the emotional stuff I've gone through, the betrayal, the being treated with no respect, the being hit to the ground and seeing my children and their states through all of this...I cannot explain it to you, but I cannot be around him, within myself I get a sick, churning feeling.

Shelley has concerns for her children, but ultimately feels powerless to keep them safe.

I did everything I could to protect them, but I could not protect them because he is their dad and he does have a right and I cannot stop him seeing them, so that's the bottom line, what do you do?

Shelley's beliefs about family and fathers also play a role in her children's contact with their father. Shelley's perceptions about the role of the Family Court also confirmed that the children's contact with their father was inevitable. She told me, "Every judge will let the father see the children no matter what the situation".

## Case study seven: Tia

### Background

Tia is a 37 year old Māori woman. She is a mother of three boys, now aged between 19 to 13 years old. When she was 18, Tia became involved with her friend's brother, Kane. Her oldest child, Matiu, was four months old at the time. She was in the relationship for 7 ½ years and had two more children, Reagan and Kora. Tia has a permanent protection order against Kane.

Tia was baby-sitting for her friend at a party when she met Kane. The party was held in a small country settlement, away from Tia's home in the city. Tia, being new to the community, did not go unnoticed.

Kane was in a relationship, but unbeknown to his fiancée, slept all night at the foot of Tia's bed, keeping her safe from any unwanted attention. Kane's fiancée found out about his efforts to protect Tia and got so jealous she broke off their engagement. As a result of Kane's actions, Tia, "the city girl", became disliked by many in the small rural community.

Although Kane remained friendly with his ex-fiancée, he followed Tia back to the city and began a relationship. They moved into Kane's uncle's house and stayed there for a year and a half. During this time, Tia learnt that Kane was a heavy drug and alcohol user. Kane had also begun physically and psychologically abusing Tia.

It was Kane's abuse of Tia's young son, Matiu that caused Tia the most upset. Matiu saw Kane as a father figure. He would run up to Kane and give him a hug around the leg. Sometimes Kane would react sensitively and affectionately, but other times, depending on his mood, Kane would close his fist and thump him on the head. On these occasions, Tia would call her sister to come and pick them both up. Tia would then yell, "Don't you ever hit my son!" Tia felt that she could take the abuse, but could not take her son being abused.

Tia decided that Matiu was safer living with her mother and that removing him from the situation would alleviate Kane's anger and emotional abuse. Sometimes Tia felt that Kane's abuse happened because Kane did not like the fact that Matiu was another man's baby.

Tia told me Kane was particularly abusive when he drank. Kane demanded money from Tia to fund his drinking. If she refused, or simply did not have any money to give him, she would get a “hiding”. When Kane drank beer, he would drink for days on end, urinate in the bed and expect Tia to clean it up. Tia felt like Kane was just another child to look after.

Tia told me of her memories of seeing the film *Once were Warriors*. As she watched, she told me, it was like watching her life on screen. When Kane beat Tia, she would have black eyes or broken arms, “You name it, he’d of done it”. Tia could not understand why no one protested while watching the film. She recalls Kane’s friends watching while he would beat her. They would do nothing. Tia told Kane’s friends that they were “gutless”. During the film, Tia stood up and yelled “Do something, you cowards!” Kane told Tia to “Sit back down”. In the end, Tia walked out of the movie theatre. It was too emotional. It was too much like her life.

Tia describes life with Kane as intensely violent. She told me being a woman with a “voice piece” (opinionated and spoke her mind) did not help at all. But as the relationship went on, Tia would try not to do anything to set Kane off.

I was constantly walking on egg shells, just to keep the peace, just to keep it calm, so that I didn’t get hit, so that he didn’t fly off the handle, so he had no reason to.

Two or so years into the relationship, Tia fell pregnant with her second son, Reagan. She describes this time as when “the shit hit the fan”. She decided to give up all forms of smoking, but during her pregnancy Kane forced Tia to smoke marijuana. He threatened to drag her by her hair in front of a room full of people if she refused. Tia knew that Kane would do it, so it was not worth the effort of saying no. To avoid the humiliation, Tia complied with Kane’s demands.

Tia was in and out of hospital with severe morning sickness. Kane did as he pleased during Tia’s pregnancy. Tia did not know where he was or what he was doing. He certainly could not be relied on to help. Between the burglaries Kane committed and an early morning visit from the Armed Defenders Squad, Tia went into labour 3 months early. Tia had begged Kane to stay at for the evening, feeling that something was not quite right. That night, her waters broke. Her labour developed rapidly and an ambulance had to be called. No sooner had they reached the hospital, Reagan

was born. As the midwife wiped the newborn off, Kane saw that his baby had red hair and blue eyes. The umbilical cord had not even been cut when Kane launched into Tia, repeatedly punching her in the face. The midwife called security.

Tia knew instantly what Kane had thought; she also could not understand why she had a baby with red hair and blue eyes.

I knew I hadn't jumped any fence, I knew I had no affair with anybody. I don't know when I was supposed to have this affair; he was constantly on me, to make sure that I wasn't looking at any other guy. If I even glanced wrong at somebody, I would get a punch, a fist in the face...that's why I had a fringe that came down like that [indicating an eye length fringe], so that he couldn't actually see who I was looking at and who I wasn't looking at...if I looked at anybody wrong, I would have got it from Kane.

The midwife asked Tia if she wanted to press charges, but Tia covered for Kane saying that he was emotional because he did not know he could hold his son.

Because Reagan was premature, he was admitted to intensive care. Tia stayed in hospital with Reagan that night. Surprisingly, considering his outburst, Kane celebrated the birth of his son by drinking in a van for two days in the hospital car park. However, on the second night, a drunken Kane stumbled up to the intensive care unit (ICU) and told Tia to come home; Tia was not prepared to leave her son, but feeling that Kane was on edge, she gave in.

Once they reached their house, Kane's behaviour became increasingly abusive. He berated Tia, saying she cared more about Reagan than him. Tia made it clear to Kane that she *did* care about her baby son more than him, explaining that Kane was a grown man and that her baby might not live. Kane's abusive behaviour escalated. He threatened to take Reagan out of the incubator at ICU. At this point, Kane's behaviour had intensified to such a degree that he hung Tia with a rope in a tree and left her there. She could not breathe.

Tia's sister-in-law came to her rescue. Tia stood on her shoulders, unravelling the rope from around her neck. The Police arrived and Tia told the Police that Kane had threatened to take Reagan out of his incubator, that he was drunk and *would* do it. She screamed:

I'm fine! Just go and save my son! Please don't underestimate him, just go to the hospital, save my son!

Tia rang the hospital and said they needed to remove her son immediately;

He's in the incubator...he's in the special unit...you need to remove him from that floor, you need to move him now...the father's coming, he's a strong man, he's very violent and he's under the influence of alcohol. You need to get my son out of that room!

When Kane arrived at the hospital, three male orderlies refused him entry into the ward. Kane got back into the lift and when the doors opened the Police were waiting there to arrest him.

Kane was jailed for six months as a result of his violence towards Tia and Reagan. Tia attributed this short prison sentence to the fact that she was still in a relationship with Kane, and because she tried to get him off the charges. Reagan remained in hospital for three months until he got to full body weight. Tia biked backward and forward to the hospital, "rain, hail or shine" to feed her baby. In addition to all these demands, Tia had to send Kane phone cards, money and tobacco. Tia told me it cost her more having Kane in jail than it did when he was out.

It occurred to Tia then that she should run away and hide where Kane could not find her, but the fear of what he might do overpowered her.

As soon as Reagan was released from hospital, Tia visited Kane in prison. Tia thought that if Kane could see their son, he would see what he was missing out on. She thought their son was what it would take for Kane to change. She believed that, inside, Kane was a good person. During the visit, Tia pointed out that Reagan's hair had darkened and that he looked like Kane; that she "didn't jump the fence". Kane responded to Tia by saying "Don't go there". Tia realised then, that no matter what she said or did, it was always going to be her fault. Kane did not see anything wrong in what he had done. "He didn't own it".

Even when Kane was in prison, he still controlled Tia and her movements by sending his friends over to "check up" on Tia. When Tia visited Kane, he would put "hickeys" all over her neck so men knew she was taken. Tia got the landline phone connected to ensure help was only a phone call away with Reagan at home. She

would regret this because of Kane's persistence in calling her incessantly from prison. Tia had to organise her life around Kane's phone calls. Every night between 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock, she would have Reagan and Matiu (when Matiu was not at Tia's mother's house) in bed. She would make sure no one was over visiting and the TV was off. Kane would become suspicious if he heard male voices and would not believe Tia when she said it was the television.

Tia describes the first month following Kane's release as "lovey dovey", but he became very controlling about contraception. He would beat Tia if he saw her taking the pill. Tia believes that Kane wanted Tia pregnant so that nobody else would look at her. Several months later, Tia fell pregnant with her third son, Kora.

### **Processes that led to separation**

Three months into her pregnancy with Kora, Tia was feeding Reagan in his high chair. Kane was adamant that he heard Tia calling his grandmother names. Kane flew at Tia, knocking Reagan's high chair over. She grabbed Reagan and pushed him under the table as he screamed. Tia knew she was in for a hiding. With steel capped boots, Kane kicked Tia in the stomach. He then proceeded to rip the house apart: there were holes in the walls and broken glass everywhere. Tia and Reagan were terrified. Kane left. Tia immediately called her sister. With her stomach aching, Tia crouched down in the corner of her bedroom in the dark with Reagan, "shaking like a leaf".

That was another point where it was really challenging for me. It was all part of his plan eh, to take everything, every little ounce of emotion, everything from me, to strip me of everything and just be his little puppet on a string. But I was too, um, in one way, too dumb and in another way, too powerful, because I wouldn't stay under his thumb.

Tia had bruises all over her face. Her sister arrived at the house. She took one look at Tia and said;

I'm not letting him get away with it anymore, I've had enough...if you don't lay the charges, I'm going to.

Tia went down to the station. The Police took photos of the physical evidence that Kane had caused. Tia made a statement and Kane was shortly arrested. Kane was later sentenced to another ten months in prison.

In retrospect, Tia finds it hard to accept that she did not learn from the early experiences with Kane. With Kane in prison, Tia had time to reflect on the severity and impact of his violence. His abuse had slowly eroded Tia's self-worth and fostered a sense of self-blame within her.

For seven and a half years, I lived with the thought that this is my life, this is obviously what I deserve, yeah, why I haven't left?

It was at this point that she had had enough and applied for a protection order and "full custody" of the children, both of which were granted.

By the time Kane got out of prison, Tia had built a solid network of people that she could call on if Kane became physically violent. Tia told me she stood up to Kane if he tried to hurt her, or their children.

I think the big stint that he did in jail, that 10 months, I learnt I was worth more than that, I learnt that my children deserved better than that and from that day on, I refused to bow down, no way. I was a lioness with my cubs.

Three months later, however, Kane went back to prison for other crimes he had committed. Tia decided to find a new house, a fresh start, when Kane could not find her.

### **Post-separation**

It was not long before Kane was back in contact with Tia. He had found out that Tia had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. She had only been there for a short time, when she received a phone call from Kane. He was due to be released from prison and Tia needed to get home. Kane picked Tia up from the hospital and they returned to her new home together. A month later, Tia learnt that Kane was interested in another woman. Tia told Kane it was over.

When I asked Tia about Kane's behaviour toward her after this point, she told me



He didn't care, he just replaced it with another chick...he didn't care about his children, nothing. He never came back to see his children, we were just around the corner from him, and he never came back to see the boys, never.

Tia told me Kane's family showed more interest in Reagan and Kora than Kane did, but she chose to "cut all ties" to Kane.

I didn't trust them [Kane's family]...I didn't feel that they could offer them [Reagan and Kora] anything, apart from the cycle of abuse, which I wanted to pull them out of.

Having no contact with Kane or his family, however, did not mean the effects of Kane's abuse on Tia had subsided.

You get so used to being controlled, like you're a puppet...if you do things out of the ordinary that you know that he wouldn't like, it's like you actually stop and think, shit, am I doing what he would want me to do?

When Kora was five, and Reagan, seven, contact with their father began again. Tia had been going through a "rough patch" when she learnt that Kane and his partner were due to have a baby. She decided that these were reasons enough for Kane to finally take some responsibility for Reagan and Kora. Up until this point, Tia had been their sole carer. Kane's new partner made it difficult for Tia to communicate with Kane, so Tia decided that on the last weekend of every month, she would drop Reagan and Kora to Kane's house for the weekend.

The "rough patch" Tia was going through continued. Matiu, at this point, was living permanently with Tia's mother, but she had little support caring for Reagan and Kora. Tia decided she had to take some time out for herself, before her boys were affected. She left her two sons in their father's care and moved to a city an hour away. Tia would pick Reagan and Kora up for the weekend every fortnight.

Kora had been in his father's care for six months when he returned to his mother's care. Reagan remained with his father for a further nine months, until one weekend when Tia collected him and found bruises on his face. When Tia asked Reagan what had happened, Reagan replied, "Dad picked me up by my hair mum, and lifted me off the ground".

Tia was devastated. Her decision to leave Reagan and Kora in Kane's care was out of a need to take care of herself. Tia also knew that Kane's partner's parents were around a lot of the time and Tia thought with their presence, her sons would be safe.

At the time of the interview, Tia's children had not had contact with their father since this incident.

### **Summary**

During the 7 ½ year relationship, Tia experienced severe levels of physical and psychological abuse. Her abuser presented a raft of challenges that often undermined her ability to keep her children safe. Her post-separation experiences illustrate a lack of support, and the risk for children exposed to abusive parents.

## Case study eight: Wyn

### Background

Wyn is a 43 year old Māori woman. She met Lance when she 16 years old. Lance was five years older than Wyn and a popular DJ in the town where they lived. Wyn had a daughter with Lance: her name is Ivy. They separated before Ivy turned one. They had spent five years together. Wyn subsequently had a son from another relationship.

Wyn described Lance as “really nice”, when he was sober. She fancied being the girlfriend of popular DJ, and says, at the time, that was what made him appealing.

However, Lance was an alcoholic. His previous two relationships were abusive and he isolated Wyn from the beginning of their relationship. He told Wyn that her friends were “no good” and pressured her to leave school.

Lance lived in a hotel block. When Wyn was 17 years old, she started staying overnight with Lance a few times during the week. Sometime, when it was agreed that Wyn would stay over, Lance would not be home. He would be down at the pub drinking with his friends. Wyn told me that she would avoid Lance and his friends when they were drinking because they talked about women disrespectfully.

It was at this stage, that Lance began to physically beat Wyn. She said Lance was very subtle. He was not verbally abusive in front of his friends: instead, he would wait until they were alone. Wyn hoped that Lance would change and thought he just needed some time to calm down.

Initially, Wyn’s parents were not supportive of Wyn’s relationship with Lance because of her young age, but eventually, Wyn was able to get Lance involved with her family. Her dad, especially, took a liking to him. Lance was out of a job and could not afford to stay at the hotel anymore, so he “moved himself in”.

At 18, Wyn fell pregnant. The pregnancy was a surprise because Lance had told Wyn that he was sterile. He accused Wyn of cheating on him, so he paid for a paternity test to be carried out. Wyn said that being pregnant did not change a thing. Her pregnancy did not stop Lance from drinking and it did not stop him from beating her.

## **Processes that led to separation**

Wyn's parents were not aware of Lance's physical abuse of Wyn until she was seven months pregnant when Lance assaulted her. During the assault, Wyn managed to get away from Lance and ran away. The Police caught up with Wyn and took her to her sister's house where she stayed for a night. Before Wyn was driven home the next morning by her sister with a "black eye and fat lip", Wyn's sister had informed their mother about what had happened. By the time, Wyn arrived home, Wyn's mother had thrown Lance out, his clothes and records scattered on the drive-way. Wyn was shocked. She knew from her mother's reaction that Lance's behaviour toward her would prevent him from ever living at the family home again. Lance moved back to his hotel accommodation. He continually phoned asking to speak with Wyn, but Wyn's mother made it very difficult for him. Wyn told me that from the moment her mother learnt about Lance's physical violence toward Wyn, she was like a "lioness".

Shortly after Lance moved out, Wyn had Baby Ivy. She was 19 years old. Wyn told me that it took a lot of coaxing for her mother to allow Lance back to the house, but eventually he was allowed to stay during the weekends. When I asked Wyn what had persuaded her mother to compromise, she told me she thought it was because of her "old fashioned" beliefs, "the idea of a nuclear family...that's normal".

During Lance's weekend stays, Wyn's mother was always present. Wyn continued to visit Lance during the week, but Wyn's mother was not happy about her visiting him and told Wyn she was not to take Ivy with her. When I asked Wyn about her visits to see Lance, she told me that she "thought things would get better".

I didn't want to be a mother with no, you know, with no father and I'd just had a baby, yeah, I thought well, we can try it again, you know, just to see.

On one occasion when Wyn visited Lance, she arrived to find he was not home. She cleaned up his room while she waited for him. When Lance arrived, he was "tiddly". Wyn does not know what set him off, but she told me "all hell broke loose". Lance grabbed Wyn, wrapped a lamp cord around her neck and threw her out the window. Lance's room was two stories high. Wyn held onto the edge of the window sill with the lamp cord still around her neck. Two of Lance's friends, in the room next door, heard the commotion. One looked out the window and saw her. They ran along the

hall and broke down the door to Lance's room. One heaved Wyn back to safety and the other beat Lance up. They yelled at Lance, "You're not worth it, you're not worth it, you should leave her alone". Wyn did not tell her mother what had happened. And that was the last time she visited Lance alone.

Lance's weekend visits also came to an end when Ivy was about six months old. He arrived at the family house late at night and was drunk. Wyn had put Ivy to bed in a single bed in her bedroom. Wyn had expected Lance to get into the double bed, but instead, he climbed into the single bed and almost smothered Ivy while she was sleeping. Wyn came in and when she realised what he had done, she dragged Lance down the hall way and out the front door. That was it, Lance was no longer allowed over for the weekends. At this stage, Wyn said, "I had a fair idea he wasn't really into kids anyway, you know, he'd only speak about me and him, not really the baby".

### **Post-separation**

Soon after Lance's weekend stays at the family house stopped, Wyn received papers to say that Lance was going for custody of Ivy (now called day-to-day care). Wyn was astonished and her mother, flabbergasted. Wyn told me Lance did virtually nothing with or for Ivy.

It didn't even look like he was interested in her. He knew that if he was able to get custody for Ivy, that he'd have me. I told mum, if he gets custody of her, I'm going back, there's no way I would have left her there.

Wyn's mother instructed her to get a lawyer. Wyn followed her mother's advice, but did not want to reveal to the lawyer that domestic violence had played a significant role in her relationship with Lance. She felt embarrassed and to blame for the violence she experienced, especially on the occasions where she had gone against her mother's wishes and visited Lance at his hotel room. However, these omissions were soon revealed to the lawyer by Wyn's mother. Like Lance's contact with Ivy, Wyn's mother had a great deal to do with the talks to Wyn's lawyer.

Wyn told me that she was required to see a counsellor with Lance. Lance missed the first and second appointments, so Wyn informed her lawyer. When Lance missed the third counsellor's appointment, Wyn's lawyer recommended that Wyn gain full custody of Ivy. The lawyer's application was later accepted by the court.

By the time Ivy was one, Wyn was in another relationship. Any time Lance wanted contact with Ivy he would have to get his parents to contact Wyn's mother.

She wasn't going to give him the chance to talk to me, you know, to try something to get me back.

Contact was never longer than a day and it only ever happened once a month.

Mum would always drop her [Ivy] off with the parents, she'd never leave Ivy with Lance, never. He wasn't the type to look after a child by himself, so it was either supervised by her or she'd spend the day with her other grand-parents and they'd supervise.

By the time Ivy was 4, it was clear that Wyn was going to staying with her new partner and she says that this prompted Lance to move to another city. Lance's contact with Ivy ceased from that point.

At intermediate school age, Ivy asked Wyn to contact Lance. Wyn tracked Lance down and asked if he would be interested in meeting up again. Lance agreed he would be, but he did not put a lot of effort into building a relationship with Ivy. Ivy was very shy and it was rare for Lance to phone her in the 3-4 years they had contact with each other. When they did talk over the phone, their conversations were short. Lance promised Ivy things, but he never kept to his word. Ivy would get very upset.

At the age of 23, Ivy decided she no longer wanted contact with her father. She told Wyn that when Lance did contact her, he was not interested in her or her children, only in how much money he could "scam" from her. When Wyn learnt of this, she rang Lance to tell him to leave Ivy alone. Lance yelled at Wyn, telling her, "I'll see her when I damn well want to". When Wyn accused Lance of only wanting money from Ivy, he responded by saying, "Well, I'm her father, I'm allowed to do that".

## **Summary**

Wyn's mother provided the support needed to keep Wyn and her daughter safe. This support reduced Wyn's exposure to Lance, reducing his opportunity to further manipulate and abuse Wyn. Ivy's contact with her father was carefully supervised by her maternal and paternal grand-parents. With Lance's ability to maintain control of Wyn reduced, contact with Ivy stopped.

## **Chapter five: Cross case analysis and discussion**

The following section synthesises and further explores the findings reported in the eight case studies. A comparative analysis has been undertaken and themes emerging from the collective results will be discussed in relation to relevant literature. The structure of this section loosely mirrors that used in the case-studies. These themes are: violence and abuse in the relationship, processes that led the women to separate, post-separation contact arrangements, factors that influenced contact arrangements, outcomes of the contact arrangements and impacts of contact on children.

### **Violence and abuse in the relationship**

All of the women experienced abuse in their relationships. This section covers the abuser's attitudes and behaviours and the processes that led the women to separate. The abuser's past behaviour is a predictor of future behaviour (Standards New Zealand, 2006) and can provide an indication of the type of behaviour that he is likely to display once the relationship has ended. Therefore, this section provides a context to the women's post-separation experiences which are discussed in the section titled Post-separation contact arrangements in this chapter.

#### **The abuser's attitudes and behaviours**

When the women talked about their experiences, they often used words such as "self-centred" and "selfish" to describe their partner's abusive behaviour, illustrating a level of entitlement on the part of the men. The following cross case analysis is described in relation to the Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993, p. 3) (see appendix five) and shows a clear pattern of controlling and abusive behaviours used by the women's partners to maintain control over them. All of the women's children were exposed to the violence and abuse perpetrated against their mothers.

#### *Physical and sexual abuse*

The use of physical violence by the women's partners reinforced the non-physical abuse that is later described. The physical violence perpetrated by the women's partners varied in severity and frequency. For Leigh, Tia and Wyn, the physical violence was severe and ongoing throughout their relationships. Leigh was pushed

over a balcony, thrown through a glass shower door, choked and punched. Tia was repeatedly punched minutes after giving birth to her son. On her return home, following the birth, she was hung in a tree and left for dead. When Tia was three months pregnant with her third son, she was kicked in the stomach with steel-capped boots. Wyn had a lamp cord wrapped around her neck before she was thrown out a window. Helen was subjected to moderate levels of physical violence that occurred intermittently during her relationship. Helen's partner's physical abuse included sleep interference and deliberate exhaustion. Shelley, Rhonda, Amber and Mary experienced fewer incidents of physical violence; however, the fear of physical violence, through the abuser's use of intimidation, was present for all of them.

Tia and Helen all experienced sexual violence at the hands of their partners during their relationships. Tia's partner denied her reproductive freedom by assaulting her if he caught her taking the contraceptive pill.

#### *Power and control tactics*

All the women feared their partners at some point during their relationship. Rhonda, Leigh, and Amber were made to feel afraid by the looks their partners used. Rhonda's ex-partner would thump his fists down on the bench. Mary and her children would not go near her partner when he was in one of his silent moods.

Rhonda and Tia's ex-partners would humiliate them in front of other people. Helen was called names and put down. As a result of their ex-partner's behaviour, Amber and Leigh felt that they were "going crazy".

Tia experienced isolation. Her partner controlled what she did, who she saw and where she went, even when he was in prison. Her partner was also possessive and jealous; he regularly accused her of having sexual relations with other men. Helen also experienced high levels of control; her ex-partner would not allow her to do anything without his permission. Wyn, too, was isolated from the beginning of her relationship. Her ex-partner would tell her to get rid of her friends and that they were no good. He also pressured Wyn to leave school. He, too, was possessive and jealous, accusing Wyn of cheating on him and paid for a test to determine paternity of Wyn's daughter.

All the women felt blamed for the abuse they experienced at the hands of their ex-partners. The extent to which Leigh accepted responsibility for her ex-partner's



violence was devastating; she felt that that was all she was good for. Tia, too, in her relationship thought that the violence was what she deserved and finds it difficult to understand why she did not learn from the early experiences with her ex-partner. The women's ex-partners minimised the extent of their violence and abuse or completely denied that it had happened.

Helen's ex-partner threatened to take their son away, where Helen could never find him.

Using male privilege was also common. Shelley, Rhonda, Tia, Amber and Wyn's ex-partners all had clearly defined roles about what they expected from the women. Care-taking and nurturing of the children was the women's job.

The partners of Tia, Shelley and Helen all used economic abuse. Throughout Tia's relationship, her partner took all her money, "If I didn't give him the money, he'd give me a hiding". She would have to get up early on pay day and buy all the necessities for the children before her partner had access to her money. Even during his time in prison, he would demand that Tia buy him cigarettes and phone calling cards. Shelley's case-study describes how Shelley and her children would shop at second hand stores while her husband was away overseas. Helen, too, had money stolen from her. When Helen bought a car, her partner would not allow her to drive it.

Amber experienced the use of coercion and threats when her partner threatened to commit suicide when she moved out. At the time, Amber asked her father to check on her partner. On his arrival he found photos of Amber and knives scattered throughout the house. Tia's ex-partner threatened to take their premature baby out of his incubator.

## **Processes that led the women to separate**

### **What the violence did to the women**

All of the women experienced impacts from the violence. The tactics used by the women's ex-partners were described by the women as having a destructive and devastating impact on their personal health and wellbeing. The experience of abuse is linked with a number of poor health outcomes, including psychological distress

and physical illness symptoms (Flett et al., 2004). Furthermore, research has found a clear correlation between exposure to interpersonal violence and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kilpatrick, Ruggiero, Acierno, Saunders, Resnick, & Best, 2003).

Of particular relevance to this thesis is the impact on women's ability to parent in an abusive environment. According to Levendosky & Graham-Bermann (2000), this has been largely neglected by researchers. The women's experiences in this research suggest that the psychological and physical distress, particularly the erosion of the women's self-esteem, had affected their parenting. Helen, Leigh, Shelley and Tia provided details in their interviews about the damaging effects their abusers had caused to their self-esteem. Mary suffered major depression two years before her partner moved out and for sometime after the separation. When Rhonda's children asked her why she had decided to leave their father, she said that she felt she could not look after them properly when she was so unhappy. Leigh, at times, felt her son would be better off with his father because she was unable to care for him.

### **The women's concerns for their children**

Shelley and Rhonda were particularly concerned about the negative emotional impact of their ex-partner's favouritism of one child over another. In both cases, the sons of these women were favoured by their father. Preferential treatment nurtured a sense of superiority and power in Shelley's son. It was apparent to Shelly and Rhonda that their daughters suffered emotionally as a result of the favoured father-son bond and this caused rifts between siblings. Rhonda said her daughter was more or less ignored by her father. Favouritism of a sibling is predicted to increase the psychological distress experienced by children (Hoffman & Edwards, 2004). Combined with the effects of exposure to domestic violence, the implications can be more concerning (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Perhaps favouritism is more concerning in the context of domestic violence because of the abuser's tendency to sow divisions within the family in order to prevent the formation of alliances and, thus, maintain a position of power (Peled, 2000).

Rhonda was also concerned that her children were subjected to a negative role model: that they were learning from their father how to manipulate and intimidate others. Helen, too, knew that her ex-partner's bullying and manipulation could not have a positive modelling influence on her son. Helen, Tia and Rhonda made

specific reference to their fears that their children might repeat the behaviour of the abuser. Tia had observed that most of the men in her ex-partner's family were violent and abusive and did not want her own sons to replicate this pattern.

The intergenerational transmission of violence perspective holds that abusers teach their children a value system that normalises and condones violence (Chapple, 2003). Learnt attitudes as a result of the abuser's role-modelling can be seen in the elevated tendency of children who are raised in homes with domestic violence to enter into relationships in which they are abusive or abused (Markowitz, 2001). Girls who are raised in homes with domestic violence are found to have lower self-esteem in adulthood (Downs & Miller, 1998). The abuser's ability to shift blame for his violence on to others increases the likelihood for girls, in particular, to blame themselves if abused by a partner as an adult. Boys who identify with their abusive fathers are likely to replicate their father's conduct when they reach adolescence or adulthood (Chapple, 2003). Such research suggests that the children of my participants may face significant challenges as they grow into adulthood. These are discussed further in the section on Impacts of contact on children.

Shelley, Amber, Mary and Wyn questioned their ex-partner's priorities when it came to their parenting. Amber struggled with her ex-partner's inability to care for their daughter at an acceptable standard. She felt that her ex-partner was more interested in controlling her than parenting and nurturing their daughter, a feeling shared by Leigh, Mary and Wyn.

In summary, it was the violence and abuse, and the women's concerns for their children, which led them to initiate separation. The reasons for the women's decision to separate are supported in previous research which has found that violence is a significant factor causing women to end their relationships (Kurz, 1996; Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). Women's concerns for their children are also cited as central to this decision (Humphreys, 1995).

## **Post-separation contact arrangements**

For most of the women, separation from the abuser was complicated by several factors: his unwillingness to accept the end of the relationship (Mary, Amber and

Wyn); his unpredictability (Rhonda and Leigh); and his inability to sit down and rationally work through child contact arrangements that met everybody's needs (Rhonda and Shelley). Shortly after separation, both Wyn's and Helen's mothers stepped in to support their daughters and their grand-children. This support alleviated the potential impact of their ex-partners abusive behaviour and also affected the contact arrangements for Wyn and Helen's children. The following section provides a description of the contact arrangements for each mother and an explanation of how the contact arrangements came about.

### **Description of the contact arrangements**

The children's contact arrangements fell into two categories; those who had little to no contact and those who did have contact with their fathers, whether it was on a regular or irregular basis.

Wyn and Helen's children had the least to do with their fathers. After the initial separation, Wyn and Helen's children had sporadic contact with their fathers. Wyn's daughter, Ivy, had contact with her father once a month for a short period. The contact was supervised by Wyn's mother or Ivy's father's parents. Ivy's father moved away and contact with his daughter stopped. Similarly, Helen's son, Trey, had few interactions with his father after Helen left Trey's father.

The contact for the children of the remaining six women was more frequent. Shelley, Mary and Rhonda's children had regular contact with their fathers. In the ten months before Shelley moved from the family home, her children had regular unsupervised contact with their father. Once Shelley moved, her eldest son Matthew lived with his father for six months. Shelley's three daughters travelled to visit their father and brother regularly. Shelley's son eventually moved to live with his mother and sisters. The children's father now travels to see the children once a month.

The contact for Mary and Rhonda's children varied. Rhonda said the children's father would sometimes see the children up to three to four times a week and at other times, he would not see them for a few weeks. This type of arrangement was similar for Mary's children. Mary's ex-partner would see the children depending on their extra-curricular activities and when they asked him. Sometimes he saw the children several times a week, then less the next week.

Amber, Tia and Leigh's children had less regular contact. When Amber's daughter had contact with her father, she would usually stay over for a night or two. However, the contact was unreliable on the part of Amber's ex-partner.

After the final separation from her partner, Tia's sons hardly ever saw their father. This changed a few years later when Tia was going through a "rough patch" and need to take some time out for herself. She believed that her ex-partner had neglected his responsibilities for long enough and she placed her sons in his care. Once Tia recovered, her youngest son returned to her care. When her older son visited one day, she discovered bruises on his face. He, too, then returned to Tia's care and contact for both the boys stopped. At the time of the interview it had been over 7 years since contact had ceased.

Leigh's ex-partner had sporadic contact with their son until Leigh left residential care. Since Leigh gained care of her son, she has organised contact with her son's father with the help of CYFs.

### **Explanation of how the contact arrangements came about**

The contact arrangements for the children of Helen and Wyn were arranged through the mothers of the women. In the few times that Helen's ex-partner visited the family home to see their son, his behaviour towards Helen was disrespectful. However, with the support of Helen's mother, it was soon apparent to Helen's ex-partner that his behaviour would not be tolerated. This resulted in Helen's ex-partner's requests for contact becoming less frequent. Wyn's ex-partner had to organise contact with Wyn's mother directly, too. Wyn's mother would never leave Ivy alone with her father, "He wasn't the type to look after a child by himself".

Rhonda and Mary both made contact arrangements directly with their former partners. Rhonda wanted to avoid the potential aggravation a conversation on contact arrangements would instigate. Mary's ex-partner had said, "When they want to see me, they can see me", and Mary felt that it would be best if contact frequency was based on the children's wishes.

Shelley was not happy with the outcomes of contact when the children travelled to visit their father. Shelley preferred for contact to take place in the children's new home town and, as a result, she took steps to get contact formalised through the

Family Court. Contact was then court ordered to take place in Shelley's new home town once a month. A changeover point for pick up and drop off was arranged.

Tia and Amber also made applications to the Family Court. At the time of Tia's application, her partner was in prison for his violence towards her. Tia gained day-to-day care of her children and her partner did not appeal this decision.

When Amber's ex-partner threatened her new partner, the new couple and Amber's daughter fled to a different city. Up until this point, Amber's daughter's contact with her father was arranged between Amber and her ex-partner, so she decided to consult a lawyer for advice on how contact should work given the situation. Amber's lawyer advised her to make an application to the Family Court for a parenting order. Amber went ahead with this and a parenting order was later finalised.

With assistance from CYFs, Leigh arranged contact for her son with his father once. Leigh made sure that she and her ex-partner had support people attend the contact session to avoid provocation.

## **Factors that influenced contact arrangements**

From the above, it should be clear that the case studies fall into two groups. In the first group are those women, Helen and Wyn, whose children had little or no contact with their fathers following separation. In the second group are those women (Shelley, Mary, Rhonda, Amber, Tia and Leigh) whose children had substantial contact with their fathers post-separation. This does not mean that the contact was regular. Often it was irregular and the amount of contact and the nature of contact varied over the months and years following separation.

The distinction between the no/little contact group and substantial contact group is a meaningful one, especially as it appears to be related to another important difference. That is, those women whose children had little contact with their fathers enjoyed extensive support in dealing with contact. In both cases, this support came from the women's mothers. In contrast, the women in the second group had to negotiate contact within a complex environment that included pressure from the abuser and a culture that did not acknowledge the abuse, its impact, nor the needs of women and

their children, and had to do so largely without any support from others. This contrast is discussed further below.

### **Women whose children had little to no contact with their fathers**

The support that Helen and Wyn received from their mothers determined the type of contact arrangements their children had with their fathers. This section looks at the elements of the support that the women's mothers provided. Analysing what it was about this support that led to lessened exposure to the abuser will be useful when discussing the factors that influenced contact arrangements for children who had more contact with their fathers.

Helen said her mother was well informed about domestic violence and controlling partners. As a result of this understanding, Helen's mother knew it was likely that Helen's ex-partner would continue his abuse of her after separation if he was able to. Wyn had a similar experience. After her mother learnt of the physical abuse Wyn had suffered, Wyn described her mother as a "true blue lioness", protecting her cubs. From the outset, the women's mothers acknowledged the impact of their daughter's ex-partner's violence and understood the likelihood of continued abuse if the women were left unsupported. Of primary importance to the mothers of Wyn and Helen was the safety and wellbeing of their daughters and grand children.

This led to the women's mothers taking on an advocacy roles. They stood unified with their daughters and acted as a protective barrier. Helen's mother did this by taking over all contact arrangements with Helen's ex-partner. Wyn's mother did this by intervening when Wyn's ex-partner repeatedly phoned the family home and by supporting Wyn when Ivy's father applied for day-to-day care of Ivy. Wyn's mother kept a close eye on Wyn and Ivy at all times. In this way, Wyn and Helen's mothers limited the access the abusers had to their daughters. This gave the abusers less opportunity to manipulate or intimidate the women when seeking contact with their children. Wyn said that her mother's role in contact never gave her ex-partner a chance to bully her or coerce her back into the relationship.

Wyn and Helen's mothers' support disabled the men's ability to isolate the women and also exposed the abuser's problematic behaviours. As described in the literature review, this was important because the abuser was no longer able to keep his integrity intact, nor position himself as the victim in the relationship. Exposing the abuser's

behaviour meant that the opportunity to blame the women for the situation was lessened.

The factors discussed above meant that the ex-partners' contact with their children greatly reduced. Helen's ex-partner's requests for contact tapered off when Helen was no longer accessible. Wyn's ex-partner's contact was already minimal and he did not pursue contact when he moved.

Overall, Wyn and Helen's mothers recognised and acknowledged the impacts of the abuse and violence perpetrated against their daughters. The response from the women's mothers restricted the abuser's access to the women and reduced his ability to continue abuse. As a result, Helen and Wyn were less isolated and their ex-partners were held accountable for the abuse and violence.

### **Women whose children had regular or irregular contact with their fathers**

The women whose children had contact with their fathers negotiated the arrangements within a complex environment that included pressure from the abuser and a culture that did not acknowledge the abuse, its impact, nor the needs of women and their children. Three women (Mary, Amber and Leigh) felt that the reasons behind their abuser's requests for child contact were not to care, nurture and strengthen their relationship with the children, but to have access to the women.

Much like during the relationship, the abuser was still able to isolate and instil fear in the women as a result of their ongoing exposure to him. Within this environment, it was difficult for the women to negotiate safe contact. For example, when Shelley's case got to court, the power her ex-partner had was evident. He used Shelley's mistrust of him as a way to discredit her. Shelley's ex-husband undermined her parental authority, making her look incompetent and unstable. Furthermore, Shelley's ex-partner would intimidate Shelley by arriving early at the children's changeover point for contact. Shelley had tried to avoid all contact with her ex-partner because of the way she reacted to him. She did not want the children to see her shake and become anxious. It was this kind of pressure that led Shelley to believe that contact and its outcomes were inevitable.

Amber felt pressure from her ex-partner because of the threats he made to appeal the protection order she had against him. Mary felt pressure from her ex-partner



because when he visited the children, he would try to coerce Mary back into the relationship. Rhonda too, felt pressure from her ex-partner because he would not commit to a time to visit the children. He would frequently arrive unannounced and not give Rhonda notice about when he would return the children. Leigh felt pressure from her partner because he undermined her ability to care for their son adequately. Leigh also felt pressure from her son, Gavin. Despite his negative reactions to his father, he would constantly ask to see him. This pressure led to Leigh feeling at fault or responsible for the lack of contact. The pressure that Tia felt was somewhat different, in that she carried sole responsibility for her children, without any help or consideration from her ex-partner.

It is important to note that the abusers' tactics described above were played out within a particular social and cultural context. That is, the power of these tactics was reinforced by a widely held set of beliefs about families and fathers. To varying degrees, the women had internalised these beliefs which added to the pressures they felt and strengthened the idea that contact (and its outcomes) were inevitable. The next paragraph explores what ideas, values, beliefs and cultural understandings were available to the women.

Many of the factors that influenced the contact arrangements for the six women are found within the constructs of the dominant western culture. To recap, dominant western societies view the loss of father-child contact as problematic. Mainstream family ideals contribute to the belief that men should be in control and that women are weak, incompetent and stupid. In this way, women who challenge and resist men's violence are perceived as the problem, in that they confront men's traditional privileges. Mainstream family culture has several implications for victims of domestic violence. Firstly, the culture does not support women who want to leave abusive relationships. Secondly, the culture undermines the women's right for safety. Thirdly, the culture minimises the impacts of the violence perpetrated by men. And lastly, the culture embraces a mother-blaming discourse.

In this context, child contact, for the six women was presumed inevitable. The women were influenced by ideas that children need their father, regardless of their knowledge about the impacts of the violence and abuse perpetrated against them. Shelley, particularly, had strong beliefs about family and the role that her ex-partner had in the lives of her children. She felt that, because her children had grown up

with their father, that it would be to their detriment if contact ceased altogether. Amber knew that her daughter loved her father and felt that her daughter would benefit by continuing contact. Similarly, Leigh felt her son needed his father in his life.

In many ways, the dominant culture, particularly its presumption of contact as inevitable, gave the abuser further opportunities to abuse the women. Rhonda felt that arranging child contact with her ex-partner was the only option she had to protect her children. “I think it’s about protection, I felt definitely, I had more ability to protect them from his, from him, on a long term basis, if we didn’t go through court”. This feeling was based on her perception of the Family Court.

I mean a father can go into the Family Court can’t they, especially someone who can be really charming...he’d come over and the judge would be thinking, why is she being such a bitch, she’s obviously being really vindictive.

Rhonda did not feel that her concerns for her children, nor the abuse that she experienced, would be taken into account if she approached the Family Court. The perceptions of the Family Court, particularly the value of ongoing father involvement, further isolated Rhonda and led to her attempts to negotiate safe child contact alone.

The women lacked support that acknowledged the abuser’s violence and abuse. Thus, the dominant cultural norms went unchallenged and the existing imbalance of power and control within the women’s relationships was able to continue. Unable to challenge and confront the men to the degree that the women who had support could, the children’s contact arrangements resulted in further exposure to the abuser. In turn, the women’s efforts to protect the children were compromised. Research that examined the processes by which women make custody decisions and manage co-parenting after divorce with abusive former husbands has found that women’s decisions were influenced by a complex combination of fears, pragmatic concerns, and family ideology (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). Their study supports research that says women will often remain in abusive relationships because they believe their children need a father, no matter how terrible he may be (Elbow, 1982).

In summary, the dominant discourse available to these six women enabled the abuser to continue his abuse. The effort women made to protect themselves was a lone

journey. The outcomes of this journey are discussed in the next section on outcomes of the contact arrangements.

## **Outcomes of the contact arrangements**

As I have shown, the two groups of women can be distinguished by the presence or lack of effective social support and advocacy. The groups can also be distinguished by the outcomes of the respective contact arrangements.

### **Outcomes for Helen and Wyn**

The abuser's restricted access to Helen and Wyn, as result of their mothers' intervention and support, meant the abuser had fewer avenues to intimidate and manipulate the women post-separation. As a result, both the women's abusers sought other means to continue their abuse. They did this by seeking advice from a lawyer and making an application to the Family Court for access to the children.

Wyn's partner gained a lawyer within six months of separation. Helen's ex-partner, however, started this process several years after separation. In this time, Helen's ex-partner made little effort to organise contact with his son and, as a result, his actions were somewhat of a surprise to Helen and her family.

The process for applying for contact is lengthy. Both men failed to see through the process. The case for Wyn's ex-partner's contact with their daughter was terminated early on during negotiations with their prospective lawyers. When Helen's ex-partner failed to turn up to Court in the final stages, Helen made an application to have the case thrown out. Her application was successful.

The outcomes in both of these cases suggest that the children were being used as a way to intimidate, scare and cause the women stress. This finding is consistent with Bancroft & Silverman's experience with abusive men. They suggest that after separation, children are used as weapons to retaliate against the children's mother (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

With the support of their mothers, exposure to the abuser was lessened for both Wyn and Helen. Reduced exposure to their abusers resulted in shorter periods of ongoing abuse, allowing recovery from the trauma to begin. This recovery also

extended to the children. Parenting ability was improved and the children's relationships with their mothers were able to thrive. These factors made recovery from the exposure to their abusive parent more achievable.

It is clear that, because of restricted access to the women, the abuser's ability to continue abuse was lessened. The women were less isolated, were blamed less, and the violence was recognised and acknowledged. Mother and grandmother presented a unified response to the abuser.

### **Outcomes for the other six women**

For the remaining six women, unsupervised child contact continued their exposure to the abuser. Child contact was negotiated in an environment where the abuser persisted in re-exerting control over the women. This pressure was underpinned by mainstream family culture in which women are often blamed and re-victimised. Therefore, the women's efforts to challenge and resist the abusive behaviour were often compromised and many of the women's fears for their children were realised.

Shelley's experience of the Family Court further isolated her and reinforced the power that her ex-partner had. He claimed that the children's challenging behaviour after separation was Shelley's fault. The court responded by focusing on Shelly's demeanour. Understandably, she was particularly fragile at this point. Shelley felt that the damage that the children's father had caused was never acknowledged by the court, nor was the impact the abuse had on Shelley taken into account.

Amber's ex-partner could not uphold the conditions agreed to in the parenting order. In fact, sometimes he would fail to pick up Amber's daughter at the agreed time. When Amber tried to call him, he either would not answer the phone or she would have to put up with verbal outbursts from him over the phone. Julia, Amber's daughter, was often caught up in her father's unsavoury lifestyle and arguments with his new partner. As a result, Julia felt unsafe and refused to see her father while his partner was around.

Despite her ex-partner's behaviour, Leigh felt responsible for the lack of contact her son had with his father. She worried that her son would resent her if she did not attempt to facilitate contact. Once Leigh gained care of her son and left the residential treatment centre, she worked with CYFs to organise contact with her ex-partner. Leigh's ex-partner could not control his verbal abuse toward Leigh when

she organised contact. She was called names, intimidated and he threatened to call contact off unless it was unsupervised.

Rhonda would have liked to sit down and work out regular contact with her ex-partner so that a pattern for the children could be established. However, getting her ex-partner to agree on something and stick to it, she said, was impossible. Initially, the visits from the children's father to their new home were relatively hassle-free. However, as time went on, his visits became a problem. He would turn up at 5:30 in the morning, saying he wanted to see the children before school. Rhonda did not accept his excuses, and felt that her ex-partner was really just checking on who was at the house.

Mary felt that organising child contact with her ex-partner would be easiest for the children. When Mary's ex-partner visited the children (he also left his daughter with Mary for six months after they separated) he would try to coerce Mary back into the relationship. When Mary refused his advances, arguments broke out.

When Tia placed her sons in the care of her ex-partner, she did so with the knowledge that there were always adults around. Tia felt that this would be a safe environment to leave her children in. However, at least one of Tia's children was physically assaulted while in their father's care. As soon as Tia saw evidence of the physical abuse, she took both her sons back into her care.

The children's contact with their father continued these women's exposure to their abuser. As a result, they remained isolated and felt responsible to continue the children's contact with their father. The abuse they experienced was often unaccounted for.

## **Impacts of contact on children**

Given the abuse experienced by their mother, both before and after separation, it follows that the children, too, will be affected (Edleson, 1999). There is evidence that suggests a large overlap between the perpetration of domestic violence and child abuse (Levin & Mills, 2003; Sheeran & Hampton, 1999). The abuse of the children's mother impacts on the children through their exposure to violence and abuse, through the abuser's use of the children as weapons, in the way the children are

parented by the abuser and in their future relationships with the abuser. The women's observations of their children's behaviour and responses to their father support findings that suggest the characteristics of the abuser spill over into his parenting. The next section discusses the children's behaviour and responses to their father post-separation.

#### *Challenging the Abuser*

Shelley's eldest daughter, Emily, and Rhonda's daughter, Ella, shared similar responses to contact with their fathers after separation. Both young women spent as little time as possible with their fathers. This can be seen as a form of resistance as set out in Anderson's Conceptual Model of Children's Resistance to Batterers' Oppression (Anderson & Danis, 2006). For Ella, spending time with her father meant she had to enter into her father's world of game playing, or conditional love, as Rhonda called it. For Emily, spending time with her father meant she had to accept her father's behaviour, both in the way he treated her mother and in the physical abuse she herself suffered. Challenging the abuser's behaviour in Emily's case, however, was a lonely affair. She could not stand the fact that her other siblings accepted their father and the things he had done. Emily's father has not been held accountable for his violence towards her, nor for the violence towards her mother. Both Shelley and Rhonda acknowledge that their daughters have 'learnt' what it is to have a relationship with their fathers. The women respect and understand their daughters' feelings and decisions.

#### *Replicating father's behaviour*

Shelley experienced the direct impact of the problem behaviour of her children. Matthew, Shelley's son, mirrored the behaviour of his father after Shelley moved city with her children. Shelley says he was very controlling. At times he would break down in tears and apologise repeatedly, saying he just could not help himself. The children were physically abusive toward Shelley. Holes were punched into the walls of their new home by the children. Windows were broken. The Police were called on several occasions to calm the children down.

#### *Taking on father's issues and role reversal*

It was evident that some of the women's children took on their father's woes. Rhonda's son would become anxious and stressed when his father's contact was inconsistent. Rhonda watched as her son became quite worried, almost as though he

felt responsible for his father. The children's father would often reverse the father-child role by unloading his issues onto them. Even when Rhonda's daughter, Ella, did not want to see her father, he pestered her until she paid him some attention. When Ella did acknowledge him, he would lecture her on how she never bothered to see him and that the reason for this was because Rhonda had poisoned her against him.

### *Children's internal struggle*

After ten or so years of no contact, Wyn's daughter, Ivy, asked Wyn to contact her father. Wyn managed to contact her ex-partner and told him his daughter wanted to contact him. Wyn said their relationship was strained. For years, Ivy's contact with her father had been characterised by broken promises, leaving Ivy devastated. When Ivy left home she told her mother she had had enough of her father because he did not visit her to spend time with her or her children but only to borrow money that he never paid back.

When Leigh's son, Gavin, was nearly two, he became hysterical when he visited his father. Leigh said it took a long time to get Gavin out of the habit of cowering. If voices were raised, Gavin would quickly become insecure, clench his body and scream. In recent times, however, Gavin has repeatedly asked to see his dad. The situation presented Leigh with the task of weighing up her son's past responses to his father and his wishes for contact. Leigh felt she needed to listen to her son's requests and contacted her ex-partner again.

## **Summary**

This chapter highlights themes and patterns across cases and discusses the findings in light of the literature reviewed in chapter two. Violence and abuse in the relationship and Processes that led the women to separate provide a context to the women's post-separation experiences. The sections following revealed two distinct groups; women whose children had little or no contact with their fathers following separation and women whose children had substantial contact with their fathers post-separation.

Further analysis revealed that the two groups and their outcomes correlated to levels of post-separation support. Women who had less support remained isolated,

enabling the abuser to continue his behaviour. The outcomes for this group included longer periods of post-separation abuse, compromised efforts to protect children and prolonged recovery from the abuse. In contrast, women who had support successfully confronted and challenged the abuser's behaviour, promoted the safety of their children and began the healing process quicker.

The thesis concludes in the following chapter where I will briefly outline the key findings of the research, highlight the strengths of the thesis and discuss areas for further study.



## Chapter six: Conclusion

In exploring mothers' experiences of separating from an abusive partner, this research focused on contextual factors that supported or undermined women's ability to keep their children safe.

There were revealed several key findings, all of which were underpinned by the role of the violence, abuse, and control that the women experienced during their relationships. Overall, the past violence played a key role in negatively influencing the mothers' post-separation experiences and undermining their ability to keep their children safe. It was a source of the women's concerns for their children, and also resulted in the women feeling that they were unable to parent as well as they desired. For the majority of women, this violence and abuse led them to initiating separation.

Even though all of the children resided with their mothers, the physical separation from the abusive parent did not ease the mothers' concerns for their children. Nor did it remove the abusers' ability to maintain control over the women. This finding challenges the notion that if the perpetrator of abuse is removed, mothers and children will be safe.

Separation was made difficult for the women for various reasons, including the abuser's unwillingness to accept the end of the relationship, his unpredictability, and his inability to sit down and rationally work through child contact arrangements that met the needs of the children and their mothers.

The children's contact arrangements with their father provided the greatest opportunity for further abuse of the children's mother. All of the women experienced ongoing abuse; for some, this included continued physical violence. In this way, it was difficult for the women to address the impacts of the abuse they suffered *during* their relationships. Instead, the ongoing exposure to their former partner's abuse had a compounding effect, which continued to contribute to their ill-health and disrupt the women's parenting abilities.

Most of the women wished to maintain their children's contact with their father, as long as it was safe. However, contact was negotiated within a culture that promoted the 'rights of the father', without regard for the violence and its impacts on the

mothers and their children. Women often felt responsible for maintaining the father-child relationship and went to considerable lengths to encourage contact, which often compromised their efforts to keep their children safe. The children's continued exposure to the abuser seemed to contribute to the continuation of a range of problems typically displayed by children exposed to domestic violence. This suggests that the characteristics of the abuser spilled over into his parenting post-separation. Therefore, the role of the dominant culture, that is, widely-held ideas about families, the roles of fathers, mothers, men, and women, was also found to undermine women's ability to keep their children safe.

A small proportion of women (Helen and Wyn) were quite successful in promoting their own safety and the safety of their children. Crucial here was the support provided by the women's mothers. The mothers of these two participants understood the dynamics of power and control (before and after separation), were able to negotiate child contact arrangements, held the abuser accountable for his abusive behaviour, prioritised the safety of the mothers and their children, and aided the children's recovery by supporting the relationship with the safe parent. As a result of having this type of support the women's exposure to the abuser was lessened, and post-separation abuse ended more quickly. These women also tended to blame themselves less and were able to recover and heal from the abuse. Ultimately, by ensuring the safety of their daughters, the participants' mothers were effective in improving the outcomes for the children.

## **Possibilities for future research**

The long-term safety and wellbeing of women and children who leave an abuser are reliant on the ability to heal from their exposure to, and impact of, the abuser's violence and abuse.

The current research found that mothers' ability to strongly advocate for themselves, and begin the road to recovery was enhanced when they were supported by family members. Future research needs to build on this knowledge by investigating what enabled some family members to provide support and not others. A more balanced picture would also include the help-seeking behaviours of mothers who have left abusive partners. As well as identifying barriers to asking for help, the concept of

safety, particularly psychological safety, needs further examination. If women do not perceive their psychological safety as threatened, then they are likely to muddle through post-separation issues on their own.

The needs of women who have separated from abusive partners also need to be brought to the attention of social services and other community agencies. They too, have a supportive role to play and a responsibility to provide helpful responses when sought out.

More research must also be done with abusive men as fathers. Efforts to change men's attitudes towards their children's mother, to provide parenting alternatives and help them to engage positively with their children must be part of a co-ordinated effort to combat violence and abuse.

## **Reflections, strengths and limitations**

The research process, for me, has been a huge learning experience; one that I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to undertake. I enjoyed the earlier research stages, particularly data collection and interacting with the participants. I think choosing a topic so closely aligned to my own personal experiences was a decision that influenced the way I engaged with the women. It felt rewarding and meaningful to give the women an opportunity to share and voice their thoughts. As a result, I collected detailed accounts of the women's experiences, which I believe is one of the strengths of this thesis. During my thesis journey, I was also motivated by the fact that women's experiences beyond the point of physical separation are relatively understudied, and that this research would contribute to the area within the domestic violence literature in New Zealand. The findings from the research cannot be generalised because of the small number of participants, which is often considered a research limitation. Non-the-less, the women's stories are consistent with my own experiences and that of a small number of studies overseas, suggesting that they are far from unique.

In summary, mothers face a range of challenges after separating from an abusive partner including; the impact of the violence and abuse suffered during their relationship, the violence and abuse that continues after separation, and arranging

child contact with a person who persists in maintaining control. All of this has to be negotiated within a prevailing culture that unquestionably says children need their fathers. This thesis shows that this message needs reviewing. Good support may be one mechanism that will help women resist both the abuser's tactics and the societal messages which condone them.

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## **Appendix two: Interview information sheet**

### **“Perceptions of post-separation perpetrator-parent child contact: What has shaped these over time?”**

#### **Information sheet for potential participants**

##### **What is the project about?**

The aim of my research is to gain an understanding of how survivors of coercive controlling violence perceive perpetrator-parent child contact. I would like to explore what has influenced these perceptions and investigate how these perceptions have changed over time. The research findings will provide a basis for understanding how to enhance the outcomes for victims of coercive controlling violence. I want to speak to women who, along with their children, have experienced coercive controlling violence, and been separated from their former partners for one year or more.

##### **What will I be asked in the interview?**

I am interested in hearing about what has informed your views on your former partner’s contact with your children. Your perceptions will have been shaped by a number of factors unique to your experiences. I am interested in your views on violence and the impacts on both you and your children. I am also interested in your views on the role of parents. The one hour interview allows you to have a voice and tell your story about your experiences regarding your former partner, your children and the violence you were exposed to.

The exact questions I will be asking will depend on your child contact arrangements, the period of time separated from your former partner (>1 year), the type of violence you experienced, and any other interventions that may have shaped your perceptions on perpetrator-parent child contact.

Mostly though, I am interested in learning about;

- Your definitions of violence,
- Your beliefs about the impacts of violence,
- Your beliefs and expectations of parents and their roles.

And;

- How these have been shaped or influenced,
- How these have changed over time.

If you have been separated from your violent/abusive former partner for one year or more, I would like to hear about what informed your decisions about child contact (or lack of) in this time.

If you have sought help from, or were supported by, family violence service providers or parenting organisations, I would like to hear about how this shaped or changed your perceptions on child contact.

If you have had state intervention to determine child contact or care arrangements, I would like to hear how this has influenced your perceptions on child contact.

If you have had no intervention or support from community service providers, I would like to hear what other factors have influenced your perceptions on child contact.

If there are any questions that you are uncomfortable with or don't want to answer, passing is more than acceptable.

If you would like support during the interview with me, you are welcome to bring someone with you.

### **What will happen to my information?**

The findings of the research will be used for my Masters thesis. All recorded material from the interview will be kept in secure and confidential and will be offered to you or destroyed after the research is finished. Later, I will use the information to publish articles in journals for lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and other domestic violence related practitioners and researchers. The information you give me will be stored for up to 5 years for the purpose of publishing academic articles.

### **What if I agree to participate and then change my mind?**

You may stop the interview at any time. You may withdraw from the research at any stage up until the time you approve your interview notes. If you change your mind after that, I will be able to withdraw your information **only** if I have not completed

interviewing all the participants. If you do withdraw from the project, any information recorded about you will be immediately returned or destroyed.

### **What will the researcher do to keep me safe as a participant in this research?**

- I will provide you with your interview notes for your approval.
- I will use pseudonyms (false names) and omit or disguise potentially identifying information such as place names, occupations and easily identifiable events.
- You may stop the interview at any time.
- Before you begin, I will ask you to sign a consent form acknowledging that you have been adequately informed about: a) the study, b) what you are being asked to do, c) what will happen to your information, and d) your right to withdraw without being disadvantaged or penalised.
- My research procedures will be subject to the approval of the University of Waikato's committee on ethical conduct of research. You have the right to complain if you feel your trust has been abused. You are able to contact Dr Robert Isler for any ethical issues in this study you feel need to be raised. Dr Isler can be contacted by phone 07 838 4466 ext. 8401, or email [r.isler@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:r.isler@waikato.ac.nz).
- At any time, you are very welcome to contact me to find out about my progress.

### **What do I need to do now?**

If you would like to participate in my Masters research, please phone me on [REDACTED], text me on [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED]. I am hoping to have 10 women participate in this study and will be selecting women to ensure inclusion of different ages, ethnicities, agencies accessed and number of children.

### **Who is the researcher?**

My name is Kate Robins. I am of Ngāti Tūwharetoa descent. I am a Masters student doing a thesis in Community Psychology at the University of Waikato. I am a single mother to my beautiful 3-year-old daughter. My interest in this topic stems from my own experiences of child contact decisions with my former partner.

## Appendix three: Interview guide

### Profile of participants

- Participant's age, number of her children, their ages and genders
- Length of time with former partner
- Former partner's relationship to children, ie: father, step father, father figure?
- Current living and contact arrangements
- Protection order in place? How long for?
- Occupation
- Agencies accessed

I have drawn a time line on the whiteboard and would like you to tell me about your perceptions/thoughts/views about the relationship between your children and their father. I'd like you to start from when you were together and take me through to the time you separated up until the present day. As we go through, we can mark major events, milestones and influences that have shaped your perceptions over time. I will then take a picture of the timeline for my records that you may have a copy of if you wish.

### Defining abuse, harm and violence

1. Firstly, can you tell me about the sort of relationship you had with your ex-partner? (*establish the types of violence she was exposed to and how she defines violence*).
  - a. Times that you felt afraid, threatened or intimidated by him?
  - b. Times that you were hit, slapped, punched, kicked by him?
  - c. Times that you felt you or your children were unsafe?
  - d. Times that you were forced to have sex?
  - e. Times that you were accused of flirting or having sex with other people?
2. What do you believe contributes to his violent behaviour?
3. In what ways do you think violence has impacted on you?
4. In what ways do you think violence has impacted on your children?
5. At what stage did his behaviour become unacceptable?

### Relationships with the children and roles as parents before separation

6. Tell me about the sort of dad he was before you separated (*identify his parenting style*).

- a. What activities would he do with the children?
  - b. What would he do to ensure the children were safe?
  - c. What did discipline look like in the house? Was disciplining a shared task?
  - d. How did the child(ren) respond to him?
7. Tell me how you think violence impacted on you and your partner's ability to parent.
8. What role do you believe a father should play in the lives of his children?

### **Separation**

9. Talk to me about the time of separation.
- a. How did you respond?
  - b. How did he respond?
  - c. How did the child(ren) respond?
  - d. What were the child contact arrangements? Who made these decisions? What influenced these decisions?
    - i. Role of whānau, friends, social services, state interventions, other influences?

### **Post-separation**

10. Tell me how contact has been since the time of your separation?
- a. Consistency, challenges, positives.
  - b. No contact, supervised contact.
  - c. Children's feedback.
  - d. Post-separation contact behaviour.
11. How do you think contact (or no contact) has impacted on your ability to parent?
12. What impacts do you think contact (or no contact) has on your child(ren)?
13. Have your attitudes towards his contact with the children changed since your separation?
- a. How have other milestones influenced your perceptions?
    - i. New intimate relationship?
    - ii. Birth of a baby?
    - iii. One year violence free?
    - iv. No contact?
    - v. Family Court?

## Appendix four: Consent form

University of Waikato  
Psychology Department  
**CONSENT FORM**

**PARTICIPANT'S COPY**

Research Project: Perceptions of post-separation perpetrator-parent child contact: What has shaped these over time?

Name of Researcher: Kathryn Robins

Name of Supervisor (if applicable): Neville Robertson and Jane Ritchie

I have received an information sheet about this research project or the researcher has explained the study to me. I have had the chance to ask any questions and discuss my participation with other people. Any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this research project and I understand that I may withdraw at any time. If I have any concerns about this project, I may contact the convenor of the Research and Ethics Committee (Dr Robert Isler, phone: 838 4466 ext. 8401, e-mail r.isler@waikato.ac.nz)

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

=====  
University of Waikato  
Psychology Department  
**CONSENT FORM**

**RESEARCHER'S COPY**

Research Project: Perceptions of post-separation perpetrator-parent child contact: What has shaped these over time?

Name of Researcher: Kathryn Robins

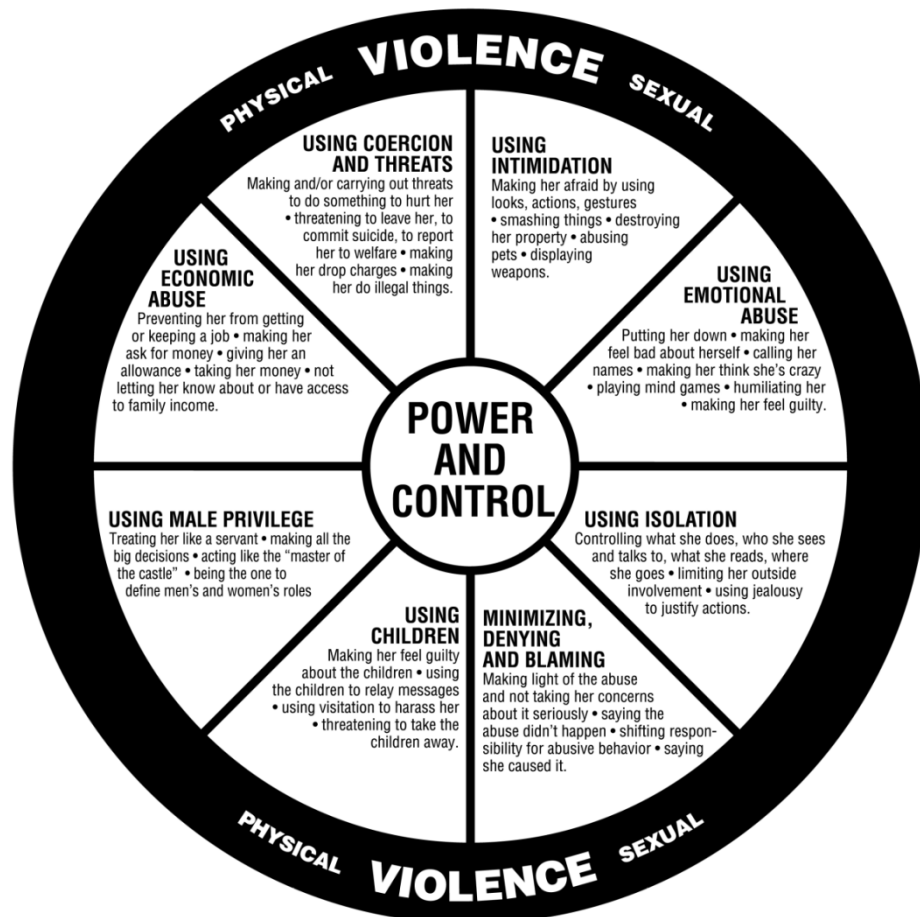
Name of Supervisor (if applicable): Neville Robertson and Jane Ritchie

I have received an information sheet about this research project or the researcher has explained the study to me. I have had the chance to ask any questions and discuss my participation with other people. Any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this research project and I understand that I may withdraw at any time. If I have any concerns about this project, I may contact the convenor of the Research and Ethics Committee.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix five: Power and Control Wheel



Pence, E., & Paymar, M. (1993). *Education groups for men who batter. The Duluth Model*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.