

Multiple Perspectives on Father
Engagement In The Context of
Domestic Violence

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Declaration

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Abstract

Background: Domestic violence (DV) is a serious human rights violation and a public health concern that impacts individuals, families, and communities around the world. While the impact of domestic violence on women, children and their relationships has been increasingly identified, effective intervention responses to abusive men as fathers are less developed. The experience of domestic abuse is acknowledged as being highly gendered, with women being disproportionately affected, and DV perpetrated primarily by men. While there has been a focus in recent years to understand what interventions are most effective in reducing male perpetration of abuse, recognising that men who use violence and abuse in the context of their relationships are often also fathers who remain a continued presence in their children's lives, has received little attention. This thesis sought to address this gap in the knowledge base and explore father engagement in the context of domestic violence from multiple perspectives drawing on the experiences of adult and child victim-survivors, domestically abusive fathers and a wide range of statutory and non-statutory professionals.

Methods: Guided by a robust review of the international literature, the aims and objectives of this doctoral thesis were achieved by employing a qualitative approach underpinned and predominantly influenced by social constructionist theory embedded in a case study design. A total of 45 participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule, including eight victim-survivor mothers, six victim-survivor children and young people, three domestically abusive fathers and twenty-eight professionals across Probation Services, Court Services, Tusla and Specialist domestic violence services. Robust and comprehensive consideration of the ethical issues inherent in social research underscored this research design.

Findings: The data was analysed by utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings from the analysis were delineated across three chapters drawing on the related literature. Among a host of challenges identified by professionals was the use of abusive tactics against professionals by perpetrators of domestic violence. For victim-survivors in addition to their experience, perpetrators of domestic violence not being held to account for their behaviour was among their greatest challenges. In considering 'what works' professionals, victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence converged on the importance of interprofessional working and holding perpetrators of domestic violence to account, amongst other findings.

Conclusions: The analysis yielded four main themes which capture promising and impactful practice alongside the complexity and challenges of working with domestically abusive men and their families across professional systems. It affirms the strong case for father engagement, the pivotal role of children and young people as motivators of change and the critical need for policy, practice and programmes to support an approach to abusive men that ultimately holds them accountable for their behaviour. To this end, this thesis concludes by urging attention to the wider systemic challenges required for the aspiration of father engagement in this context to be realised. This wider attention demands a bridging of the policy divide across domestic violence and father engagement.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of many people throughout the journey.

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CHAPTER ONE Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a serious human rights violation and a public health concern that impacts individuals, families, and communities around the world (World Health Organisation, 2020; Devaney, Bradbury-Jones, Macy, Øverlien & Holt, 2021) and yet while the impact of domestic violence on women, children and their relationships has been increasingly identified, effective intervention responses are less developed (Stanley, Miller, Richardson-Foster & Thomson 2011). The experience is acknowledged as being highly gendered (Cunningham & Anderson, 2023; Graham, Jun, Kim, Power, Devaney, Frederick & Betz, 2024), with women being disproportionately affected, perpetrated primarily by men. While there has been a focus in recent years to understand what interventions are most effective in reducing male perpetration of abuse (Morrison, Hawker, Cluss, Miller, Fleming, Bicehouse, George, Burke, Wright & Chang, 2021), recognising that men who use violence and abuse in the context of their relationships are often also fathers who remain a continued presence in their children's lives, has received little attention (Humphreys, Diemer, Bornemisza, Spiteri, Kaspiew & Horsfall, 2019). Studies of fatherhood have largely neglected the men who perpetrate domestic violence while studies of domestic violence have largely neglected to focus on these men through the lens of fatherhood. Conversely, professional responses tend to focus their intervention on women as victim-survivors and as mothers (Witt & Diaz, 2019) rather than engaging with fathers and exploring the parenting capacity of fathers who are domestically violent (Heward-Belle, Laing, Humphreys and Toivonen, 2018; Nygren, Walsh, Ellingsen & Christie, 2019). Specifically, professional responses that target engagement with fathers as perpetrators of domestic violence are relatively new (Hine, Meyer, McDermott & Eggins, 2022) and are a departure from historical interventions focused primarily on

victim-survivors¹. While there is evidence that father engagement is a growing phenomenon, it is well documented that engaging fathers regarding their abusive behaviour is challenging (Lilley-Walker, Hester & Turner, 2018) and requires significantly more understanding; with Pfitzner, Humphreys & Hegarty (2017, p. 545) cautioning against ‘if you build it, he will come’ approaches when it comes to father engagement. This current study seeks to address that void in the empirical knowledge base by exploring multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence. These multiple perspectives include professionals, mothers, children and young people and fathers who have perpetrated abuse.

1.2 A Case for Father Engagement

Scott and Crooks asserted in 2004 that men are disproportionately responsible for physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment, but are ignored in research and intervention. They also suggested that providing services to fathers who have perpetrated abuse has been identified as key to preventing future abuse and to achieving more positive outcomes for children and families (Scott & Crooks, 2006). Many studies have also pointed to the benefits of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives (see Lamb 2010). It is further suggested that children whose fathers are positively engaged in their lives are more likely to excel emotionally, socially and academically (Baker, Kainz, & Reynolds, 2018). Baker, Vernon-Feagans and Family Life Project Investigators (2015) found a direct correlation between the amount of time fathers talk to their children, with applied problem-solving scores and vocabulary development in kindergarten age children. Further to their review of 44 studies relating to fatherhood and engagement, Henry, Julion, Bounds and Sumo (2020) suggested that curricula and training that apprises school personnel of effective strategies to interact positively with fathers are needed.

¹ [39543_DVPP.ps, page 1 @ Preflight \(39543_DVPP_39543_DVPP \) \(projectmirabal.co.uk\)](#)

Studies on father engagement in parent interventions tend to report low levels of participation by fathers in the programmes and associated evaluations (Stahlschmidt, Threlfall, Seay, Lewis & Kohl, 2013; Panter-Brick, Burgess, Eggerman, McAllister, Pruett & Leckman, 2014). Brandon, Philip and Clifton (2019) conducted a mixed methods study of the perspectives of fathers on their involvement in the child protection system and with their children in England. This study, drawing from 35 fathers, found that while fathers remained a presence in their children's lives, there was little intervention with men and expectations were low and gendered.

Researchers have suggested a number of reasons why fathers may not engage with services or are not engaged with by services as often as mothers. They may not be identified by their children's mothers thus not allowing the opportunity to engage. They may avoid staff, view parenting as solely the mother's role, or find that interventions do not suit their needs. They may not identify with the service, the staff or the approach. Evidence from case reviews by Brandon, Bailey, Belderson, Gardner, Sidebotham, Dodsworth and Black (2009), suggests that social workers can neglect to identify and locate fathers, fail to systematically gather or record information about fathers and have a tendency to categorise men as either risk or resource for children, rather than recognise the possibility that they can be simultaneously both of these things. Further to this study, Brandon et al., (2019, p. 447) "positioned perceptions of fathers in the child protection system dynamically, in six ways, along a shifting continuum of risk or resource for the child". Fathers may also be viewed as a risk to professionals. According to Humphreys, Isobe and Kertesz (2024), this fear can be detrimental if it leads to avoidance, minimisation of the abuse or alignment with the account of the perpetrator of domestic violence. The attitude of professionals has also been identified as a barrier or facilitator to engagement with fathers. In their study involving 31 semi-structured interviews with 15 social workers during their work on 12 Child Protection cases, Grönte, Mattsson and Plantin (2024) stressed the importance of maintaining a non-judgemental attitude when engaging with domestically abusive fathers.

There are a number of identified factors leading to why father engagement is poor. The impact of this poor engagement can result in limited identification of potential supports available from the father and his extended family as well as risks. Tsantefski, Young, Wilde and O'Leary (2021) assert that in addition to the involvement of a range of stakeholders, a shift away from working solely with mothers towards working with the whole family is required in the context of child protection. This echoes the position of Humphreys and Campo (2017), with Mc Connell, Barnard and Taylor (2017) asserting that father engagement contributes additional benefits that include increased awareness of risk and possible shifts in fathering techniques, which may influence child wellbeing. Considering the views outlined, father engagement may potentially contribute to preventing future abuse and to achieving more positive outcomes for children and families by expanding the resources available to children (Scott & Crooks, 2006).

In the absence of father engagement, mothers can be expected to not only be responsible for the care of her children, but to assume the responsibility for safety against their father's abuse. Workers are encouraged to focus on mothers by concepts such as 'failure to protect' and its corollary, the 'protective parent' (Strega 2006). This approach has been found to increase pressure on the mother, fail to address the difficulties of the family, fail to challenge the abusive behaviour and to promote behaviour change of the abusive parent. Stewart (2021) explored how and why "failure to protect" and "the leave ultimatum" continue to be used. According to Stewart (2021) these are rooted in society's social constructions and gender expectations driven by patriarchy.

Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland and Tolman (2012) suggested evidence that fathers do not always understand the negative effects of their behaviour upon their children. More recently, Smith and Humphreys (2019), drawing on 69 in-depth qualitative interviews with men, women, and workers across four men's behaviour change programmes in Australia, found that most men in their study, at least at Time 1 interviews, demonstrated limited understanding of the harm caused to their children. In their study with men, Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan, Helps and Ralph (2024) found that 71% of

programme participants (n=57) 'strongly agreed' that their attendance on the programme was prompted by wanting to see or maintain relationship with their children. 69% of the programme participants (n=55) 'strongly agreed' that their attendance on the programme was prompted because they wanted to become a better father to their children.

The findings from the Engaging in Change project (2024) in combination with the belief that increased father engagement will lead to better outcomes for children, encourages further exploration. The majority of research to date has focused on father engagement from a social work perspective. However, this present research will take a wider lens including children and young people, mothers, fathers and additional professionals that engage with fathers in the context of domestic violence. These professionals include those working in Probation Services, Programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence, Court Services, Family Support Services, Specialist domestic violence services (including Child Support staff, Supervised Access staff and Support Services staff) at varying frontline and management levels.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of this Doctoral Thesis

Early findings indicating fathering in this context as a possible instrument of change underpin the aim of this study- to explore multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence. This is achieved by employing a qualitative case study methodology that explores the phenomenon of father engagement from multiple perspectives. These perspectives include children and young people, mothers, fathers and a broad range of relevant professionals. The objectives set out below seek to provide a contextually rich understanding of this under-researched area.

1.3.1 Objectives

- To explore the experience of father engagement in the context of domestic violence.
- To identify potential risks and resources associated with father engagement in the context of domestic violence.
- To identify factors that minimise risk and maximise opportunities for father engagement in the context of domestic violence; and.
- To contribute to the conceptual and theoretical knowledge base on father engagement in the context of domestic violence

1.3.2 Research questions

- How is father engagement experienced in the context of domestic violence by the key stakeholders in this research?
- What supports professional engagement with domestically abusive fathers?
- What are the challenges/barriers to engaging with fathers who are domestically violent/ What doesn't work well?

1.4 The prevalence of domestic violence

In the absence of recent prevalence data, in Ireland it is estimated that 18% of women have experienced or are experiencing domestic violence (Making the Links 1995). In a pan European study conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency² (2014), almost one in three Irish women (31% or 470,157 women) have experienced some form of psychological violence by a partner, and 15% of Irish women (227,495 women) have experienced physical or

² The Fundamental Rights agency is currently conducting a subsequent prevalence study, results yet to be released.

sexual violence by a partner. Six percent have experienced sexual violence by a partner (EU-FRA 2014). SAFE Ireland³ reported in their 'Tracking the Shadow Pandemic' reports, (2020⁴ & 2021⁵) that from March to December 2020 over 5,895 women and over 1,085 children contacted a domestic violence service for the first time. On average over 2,000 women and 500 children received support from a domestic violence service every month. 57,277 helpline calls were answered, approximately 190 calls per day and 2,159 requests for refuge could not be met as there was no available space. More recently, Women's Aid, one of forty specialist domestic violence services in Ireland, reported that they had 28,638 contacts through their frontline services which involved 40,048 disclosures of abuse including 35,570 reports of domestic abuse against women and 4,478 reports of abuse of children.⁶ A 2018 analysis of prevalence data from 2000–2018 across 161 countries and areas, conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on behalf of the UN Interagency working group on violence against women, found that worldwide, nearly 1 in 3, or 30%, of women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both (WHO 2018)⁷. According to Whitten, Tzoumakis, Green and Dean (2024), the global pooled prevalence of childhood exposure to physical domestic and family violence as a victim or witness was 17.3% and 16.5%, respectively.

In relation to sexual violence, findings of the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) Sexual Violence Survey (2022)⁸ found that the proportion of adults who experienced sexual violence in their lifetime was 40%, with higher levels for women (52%) compared with men (28%); four times more women (21%) than men (5%) reported experiencing non-consensual sexual intercourse over their lifetime and 25% of women experienced sexual violence as an adult with a partner.

³ SAFE Ireland, formerly known as the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services is the representative organisation of 37 frontline domestic violence service providers for women and children in Ireland.

⁴ https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/#dfliip-df_8221/1/

⁵ https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/#dfliip-df_8398/1/

⁶ [Womens-Aid-Annual-Report-2023.pdf \(womensaid.ie\)](https://www.womensaid.ie/Womens-Aid-Annual-Report-2023.pdf)

⁷ [9789240026681-eng.pdf \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789240026681-eng)

⁸ [Sexual Violence Survey - CSO - Central Statistics Office](https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csofiles/publications/sexual-violence-survey-2022.pdf)

However, it has been suggested that these statistics may not accurately reflect the prevalence of abuse, as domestic violence is widely acknowledged to be one of the most under-reported and under investigated issues. One third of victims of partner violence (33%) contacted either the police or some other organisation, such as a victim support organisation, following the most serious incident of violence and in total, victims reported the most serious incident of partner violence to the police in only 14 % of cases (EU-FRA 2014).

1.5 Defining domestic violence

Domestic Violence, Domestic Abuse, Intimate Partner Violence, Coercive Control, Interpersonal Violence, Violence against Women, Domestic Terrorism, Gender-based violence, Family Conflict, are all terms used in association with our exploration of the issue. This variety of definitions reflects the variance in our perspectives of the issue. For example, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of all forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW)⁹, describes violence against women as:

“Gender-based violence, that is, violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty” (1993: Article 1 of the Convention).

Watson and Parsons’ report for the National Crime Council (2005, p. 23) on rates of domestic abuse amongst men and women in Ireland defines domestic abuse as:

“A pattern of physical, emotional or sexual behaviour between partners in an intimate relationship that causes, or risks causing, significant negative consequences for the person affected.”

⁹ [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women | OHCHR](#)

The comprehensive Task Force (1997, p. 27) definition of Domestic Violence and/or Sexual Violence has been generally accepted as the standard definition in use in Ireland: Domestic Violence refers to:

*“The use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence, in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by a spouse, partner, son, daughter or any other person who has a close or blood relationship with the victim. The term “domestic violence” goes beyond actual physical violence. It can also involve emotional abuse; the destruction of property; isolation from friends, family and other potential sources of support; threats to others including children; stalking; and control over access to money, personal items, food, transportation and the telephone.”*¹⁰

More recently, *Zero Tolerance, Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026*¹¹ stated:

“Domestic Violence (DV), often referred to as domestic abuse or intimate partner violence (IPV), is a human rights abuse and a form of gender-based violence with its roots in gender inequality. The Istanbul Convention defines domestic violence as all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim. The exertion of coercive control is a key component in this process” (p.11)

This definition is informed by the Council of Europe (Istanbul) Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (2011), article 3 (b) and section 39 of the Domestic Violence Act (2018), the offence of Coercive Control.

¹⁰ [Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women.pdf \(lenus.ie\)](#)

¹¹ [DOJ_DSGBV_Strategy.indd](#)

1.6 Language and Terminology

For the purpose of this doctoral thesis, the term ‘domestic violence’ will be employed throughout, unless direct quotation from empirical studies dictates otherwise. The decision to use the term ‘domestic violence’ is that it is the term most commonly used in practice in Ireland. In relation to the men or fathers who perpetrate domestic violence, the terms ‘perpetrators of domestic violence’, ‘perpetrators of abuse’ and ‘domestically abusive fathers’ are the terms that will be employed throughout this thesis, unless direct quotation dictates otherwise. The decision to use these terms rather than the commonly used terminology of ‘perpetrator’ is to distinguish between the behaviour and the person. This is appropriate to this thesis that seeks to identify potential resources and factors that maximise opportunities arising from father engagement in addition to identification of risk and factors that minimise these risks. The term ‘perpetrator programme’ will be used as it is the most commonly used term in practice in Ireland. The term victim-survivor will be employed throughout in relation to both women and children to acknowledge their individual and shared experiences and in respect to those who identify with either or both aspects.

1.7 The International legislative and Policy Context

Violence against women has been recognised by a range of international human rights instruments. *The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women*¹² was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on the 18th of December 1979. It entered into force as an international treaty on the 3rd of September 1981. While it does not explicitly mention violence against women and girls, General Recommendations 12, 19, and 35 clarify that the Convention, as per Article 2 on non-discrimination, extends to violence against women. The convention

¹² [Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women](#)

also makes detailed recommendations to States to address violence against women.

The *1993 World Conference on Human Rights*¹³ recognised violence against women as a human rights violation. The appointment of a Special Rapporteur on violence against women was called for in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

The *1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*¹⁴ was the first international instrument that explicitly addressed violence against women, providing a framework for national and international action. The following year, 1994, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development¹⁵ drew links between violence against women and reproductive health and rights.

The *1995 Beijing Platform for Action*¹⁶ identifies specific actions for governments to take to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Ending all forms of violence and harmful practices against women and girls is among the 12 areas for priority action identified by this instrument. In 2020, at the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, it was agreed to refocus on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in order to achieve full implementation. At that time, 80% of countries party to the declaration reported that action to implement and enforce laws relating to violence against women had been achieved in the previous five years, with 87% of countries reporting that they were introducing, or strengthening, services for victim-survivors of violence. In 2006 the Secretary-General's In-Depth Study¹⁷ on All Forms of Violence against Women was released, which was the first comprehensive report on the issue of violence against women.

The *Council of Europe (Istanbul) Convention* on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence¹⁸ (2011) became the second legally binding regional instrument on violence against women and girls.

¹³ [World Conference on Human Rights](#)

¹⁴ [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#)

¹⁵ [International Conference on Population and Development](#)

¹⁶ [Beijing Platform for Action](#)

¹⁷ [Secretary-General's In-Depth Study on All Forms of Violence against Women](#)

¹⁸ [Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

Ireland ratified the Istanbul convention on the 8th of March 2019 and became the 34th Council of Europe member state to do so. The convention consists of 81 articles across 12 chapters. The structure of the instrument is based on the "four Ps": Prevention, Protection and support of victims, Prosecution of offenders and Integrated Policies. The convention also establishes obligations in relation to the collection of data and supporting research in the field of violence against women (Art. 11) with a specific monitoring mechanism ("GREVIO")¹⁹, governed by Article 66, in order to ensure effective implementation of its provisions by its member state signatories²⁰. In November 2023 GREVIO published its first baseline evaluation report on Ireland²¹ (Council of Europe, 2023) and while the study commended some of the recent efforts by Ireland to address the issues of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, areas identified that require further attention include data collection, criminal law and prosecution, education, and funding for support services.

The UN General Assembly adopts biannual resolutions on the issue of violence against women. First adopted in 2012, the resolutions include trafficking in women and girls, the intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilations. These resolutions are renegotiated every two years, with the most recent reports submitted on these resolutions during the 75th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2020.

*The Victims' Rights Directive*²² required that EU countries had to implement its provisions into their national laws by the 16th of November 2015. This directive strengthens considerably the rights of victims and their families. It further strengthens the victims' procedural rights in criminal proceedings and

¹⁹ GREVIO is the body of independent experts responsible for monitoring the implementation by the parties of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

²⁰ GREVIO evaluates legislative and other measures taken by the parties, generates and publishes reports to give effect to the provisions of the convention. In cases where action is required to prevent a serious or persistent pattern of any acts of violence covered by the convention, GREVIO may initiate a special inquiry procedure. GREVIO may also adopt general recommendations on themes and concepts of the convention

²¹ [baseline evaluation report on Ireland](#)

²² [Victims' rights in the EU - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

establishes minimum standards on the supports, rights and protection of victims of crime. It ensures that persons who have fallen victim to crime are recognised and treated with respect; that they and their family members have access to information and those victims receive proper support, protection and access to justice. The Directive also requires that EU countries ensure appropriate training on victims' needs for those officials who are likely to come into contact with victims. The EU Victims Directive was adopted by Ireland on the 16th of November 2015 and legislated with the signing into law of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017.

The *EU Directive on Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*²³ was proposed in 2022. On 9 June 2023, the Council agreed on its position on the proposed directive to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and on the 6th of February 2024, the Council and the European Parliament agreed on this first-ever EU law on violence against women which came into effect in May 2024. The law requires all EU countries to criminalise female genital mutilation, forced marriage and cyber violence such as the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Member states have three years from the entry into force of the directive to transpose it into national law.

1.8 The Irish Legal and Policy Context

The following section will explore the Irish legislative and policy context as it relates to domestic violence. Beginning with the Irish Constitution, this section will track the journey of legislation pertinent to domestic violence and legislation specifically developed to address this issue. This section will then provide an overview of the policy context, concluding with a brief overview of service provision in this context.

²³ [Directive - EU - 2024/1385 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

1.8.1 The Irish Constitution

The Irish Constitution, the fundamental law of Ireland, establishes the courts, branches of the governments and sets out how those institutions operate. It also sets out the fundamental rights of its citizens (Articles 40-44 inclusive). Specifically articles 41 and 42 focus on rights relating to the family. Of particular interest to this research is what constitutes family, the positioning of children and the positioning of women.

Article 41 of the Irish Constitution declares the family to be “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society....a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.” Enacted in 1937, the contents reflect Irish society at this time, a time when the Catholic Church permeated all decision making in the State and in family life. The State guarantees in Article 41.2 to “protect the Family in its Constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State”. This reinforces the view of the family being the most important family construct. However, the concept of the family in the context of the Irish Constitution is based on marriage²⁴. This position in relation to family has since been revised with the inclusion of the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Act 2015.²⁵ However, more recently, the proposed Thirty-Ninth Amendment of the Constitution (The Family) Bill 2023 (bill no. 91 of 2023) which proposed to amend Article 41.1.1° to broaden the definition of family, was defeated by referendum in March 2024²⁶.

The Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act (2012) (previously bill no. 78 of 2012) amended the Constitution. Article 42A was added to the Constitution in 2015. It affirms children’s natural and

²⁴ Article 41.3 outlines the State’s position in support of marriage “to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.” Article 41.3.2 in its original form, advises against the undermining of marriage; “...no law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage”.

²⁵ The Thirty-fourth amendment to the Constitution included that “Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex”. Prior to this enactment, the Constitution was assumed to contain an implicit prohibition on same sex marriage in Ireland.

²⁶ If successful, the wording of the Constitution would now read “whether founded on marriage or on other durable relationships”. This bill also proposed the deletion of the words “on which the Family is founded” from Article 41.3.1°.

inviolable rights and the responsibility of the State to uphold these rights. In considering intervention to protect by the State, children have the right for their best interests to be of paramount consideration. The introduction of article 42A also dictates that children's rights apply to all court proceedings concerning guardianship, adoption, custody and access. Importantly, children also have the right to have their views ascertained and considered by the courts.²⁷

In relation to the positioning of women, article 41.2 of the Constitution asserts that 1° "In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved"; and 2° "The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home". The wording with regard to the positioning of women was recently challenged by the proposed Fortieth Amendment of the Constitution (Care) Bill 2023 (bill no. 92 of 2023). This proposal included the deletion of Article 41.2 from the Constitution and the insertion of a new Article 42B²⁸, as follows: "The State recognises that the provision of care, by members of a family to one another by reason of the bonds that exist among them, gives to Society a support without which the common good cannot be achieved, and shall strive to support such provision". Similarly, to the proposed thirty-ninth amendment, this amendment was also defeated by referendum in March 2024. Proposed amendments to the constitution appear to be increasing in frequency. The concept of family and the roles and rights of those therein continue to evolve, moving further from the concept contained in the Constitution of 1937.

1.8.2 Guardianship & Custody

The Guardianship of Infants Act (1964) was signed into law on the 25th of March 1964. This Act governs Irish law relating to guardianship and custody

²⁷ The courts are to have regard to a child's age and maturity when considering their views in accordance with this right.

²⁸ It would also renumber Articles 41.3 and 41.4 as 41.2 and 41.3 respectively.

and has been amended and revised since its inception in 1964 to incorporate subsequent legislative change.

Guardianship is both a collection of rights and duties that a parent (or non-parent) may have in respect of a child. A guardian has the right to be part of all significant decisions in a child’s life, for example, medical decisions, educational decisions etc. Access is the right of a child and a parent and/or guardian who do not live together to spend time together. This right can also be granted to relatives and others. The term custody related to the day-to-day care of the child. As presented in Table 1 below, there were 10,822 applications for guardianship, custody and access to the District Court²⁹ in 2022. This represents an 8% increase on the 10,016 in 2021, a 24% increase on the 8,747 in 2020 and a 14% decrease on the 12,582 in 2019.³⁰

Table 1 Guardianship, custody, access: District Court

Incoming		Resolved			
2022	2021	2022		2021	
		By court	Out of court	By court	Out of court
10,822	10,016	10,143	0	8,667	0

1.8.3 Domestic Violence and Related Legislation

Legislation to address domestic violence in Ireland commenced almost fifty years ago with the introduction of The Family Law (maintenance of spouses and children) Act (1976). This Act introduced barring orders as legal instruments to increase the measures of protection for victims. Prior to 1976, victims of domestic violence were reliant on criminal proceedings being progressed following a complaint to Gardaí in respect of their experiences.

²⁹ Most applications for guardianship, custody and access are made in the District Court. However, in some situations, relating to more complex cases, an application can be made in the Circuit Court or the High Court. Each court has its own rules on how to apply for a court order. The volume of applications beyond the District Court tend to be significantly lower, for example, applications to the Circuit Court in 2022 across judicial separation, Dissolution and Divorce amounted to 1459 applications.

³⁰ [pdf \(courts.ie\)](https://courts.ie)

They could also engage in the civil law system with a requirement that injunctions were sought in a court higher than the district court. The barring order offered a maximum of three months of protection, with an absence of protection while waiting for the order to be granted.

This was followed by The Family Law (maintenance of spouses and children) Act (1981), which introduced additional protection from the initiation of proceedings and lengthened the potential barring order to twelve months duration. The Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act 1989 also provided additional options to those experiencing abuse by introducing the potential of a decree of judicial separation. It also facilitated the removal from the family home of an abusive spouse and the possibility of transferal of ownership of the family home. The introduction of Section 5 of the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act (1990) allowed for the prosecution of rape within marriage. Prior to the amendment to the (1981) Act, Irish Law did not acknowledge the concept of rape within marriage. There have been four convictions of rape within marriage in Ireland since this legislation was enacted.

The introduction of the Domestic Violence Bill in 1995 and subsequent passing into law in 1996 was a source of opportunity for many individuals who had previously been unable to access additional protection. The 1996 Act provided for a number of interventions available to the courts including:

1. The protection of spouses, children, dependents and other domestic relationships where their welfare or safety is in jeopardy because of the conduct of another person in the domestic relationship.
2. An increase of powers for Gardaí to arrest without warrant.
3. Legal/judicial hearings to be held simultaneously with hearings for other orders regarding custody and access, maintenance, childcare orders and conduct leading to the loss of the family home (Horgan 1998b, p. 9):

The Act also made a number of legal instruments available to the courts. Categories of persons that would not benefit from the introduction of these legal instruments at that time were highlighted by the Report of the National Task Force on Violence against Women³¹ (1997, p. 60) and included unmarried parents with a child/ren in common who did not satisfy the requirement of cohabiting; adult siblings; or parents living with their adult children in the latter's home. Of significance at that time was the introduction of The Family Law (Divorce) Act (1996), which was enacted in 1997. This allowed couples to obtain a decree of divorce if they satisfied the required criteria.

The Domestic Violence (amendment) Act (2002) was passed in response to the finding that the granting of an interim barring order, in the absence of the respondent, was unconstitutional. The 2002 Act served to address this finding while also facilitating the granting of a protection order in this instance.

The Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act (2010) was enacted on the 1st of January 2011³². Also enacted in 2011, The Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2011) made provision for unmarried parents of children in common who do not cohabit or who may never have cohabited. These parents could now apply for and be granted a safety order if required. The act offered the same protection to both unmarried opposite-sex couples and same-sex couples who have not registered a civil partnership. The granting of this order was no longer dependent on the previously required minimum period of cohabitation.

The Children and Family Relationships Act (2015) was enacted on the 6th of April 2015. Part 10 of the act came into force on the 1st of July 2015, followed by parts 1,4-8, 12 and 13 on the 18th of January 2016. The remaining parts, 2 and 3 of the Act came into force on the 4th of May 2020 and established that the best interests of the child are paramount in decisions in relation to custody, guardianship and access. In addition to other provisions, it extended automatic guardianship to non-marital fathers who have lived with the child's

³¹ [Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women.pdf \(lenus.ie\)](#)

³² The Act provided that civil partners have largely the same rights as married couples in areas such as the family home, maintenance, succession, pensions and a range of other civil laws.

mother for at least 12 months, including 3 months following the child's birth. It also allows stepparents, civil partner and those cohabiting with the biological parent and those acting in loco parentis for a specified period, to apply for guardianship and custody. In addition, it enables wider family members to apply for access to the child.

The Domestic Violence Act 2018 was enacted on the 8th of May 2018³³ and came into force on January 1st, 2019. Coercive Control³⁴ and Forced Marriage³⁶ became offences upon enactment. To date there have been almost thirty Coercive Control convictions. Additional provisions contained in this legislation enable; access to an emergency barring order³⁷ for 8 working days for those ineligible for other barring orders. Emergency Barring Orders, Interim Barring Orders and Protection Orders may be sought at special sittings of the District Court³⁸ with the consent of the local judge. A victim is permitted to have a support worker in court to support him or her³⁹ and has protection against cross-examination by applicant or respondent.⁴⁰ The appointment of an expert to ascertain the views of a child⁴¹ where an order is sought and evidence by televisual link are both now possible.⁴²

³³ Heads of the new Domestic Violence Bill (General Scheme of the Consolidated Bill on Domestic Violence) were presented to the Dáil in July 2015. It was anticipated that this legislation be enacted in 2016 and would consolidate the provisions contained the previously described legislation; the Domestic Violence Act 1996, the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act 2002, the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010, the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011 and the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2013 and the Children and Family Relationships Act (2015).

³⁴ Previous to the enactment of the offence of Coercive Control, the idiom "Domestic Violence" has been applied to a particular context in which offences are committed. Most forms of domestic violence can be prosecuted in the criminal courts, for example murder, sexual crime, non-fatal offences defined in the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act (1997) and the majority of domestic violence prosecutions have been brought under the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997; assault offences (sections 2, 3 or 4), threats to kill (section 5), coercion (section 9), harassment (section 10), false imprisonment (section 15), or child abduction by a parent or guardian (section 16). However other forms of abuse that are commonly cited when defining domestic violence, have not until recently constituted an offence under Irish Law.

³⁵ Coercive Control is defined in Section 39 of the 2018 Act. It provides that a person commits an offence where he or she knowingly and persistently engages in behaviour that

(a) is controlling or coercive

(b) has a serious effect on a relevant person,

(c) a reasonable person would consider likely to have a serious effect on a relevant person.

³⁶ Section 38

³⁷ Section 9

³⁸ Section 24

³⁹ Section 26

⁴⁰ Section 16

⁴¹ Section 27

⁴² Section 25

Restrictions in relation to spectators in court during proceedings may be applied⁴³ and the Court Service will be required to give information to the victim on referrals to support services⁴⁴. The anonymity of the victim, dependants and of the perpetrator of abuse will be protected in criminal proceedings for breaches of orders, other than where the victim-survivor chooses to waive anonymity. The judge is required to give reasons for certain decisions⁴⁵ and crucially, when sentencing, the intimate relationship is considered an aggravating factor⁴⁶. Breach of an order made under the Act (2018) is addressed in sections 33 and 35. The Domestic Violence Act (2018) although largely welcomed in terms of the introduction of the offence of Coercive Control has also encountered criticism in respect of the “relevant person”⁴⁷ with some seeking expansion to relevant person(s) beyond an intimate context, for example, the UK Domestic Abuse Act (2021) specifically recognises the victimhood of children and young people in this context.⁴⁸ Also of interest to the issue of domestic violence is the enactment of the Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2020) Section 11(1) which provides for remote court hearings.

The Harassment, Harmful Communication and Related Offences Act (2020) was signed into law on the 28th of December 2020 and was commenced in early 2021. This law amends the law relating to harassment, the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act 1997, the Bail Act 1997 and the Domestic Violence Act 2018. The legislation provides for two new offences dealing with the non-consensual distribution of intimate images. The first offence addresses the taking, distribution, publication or threat to distribute intimate

⁴³ Section 34

⁴⁴ Section 28

⁴⁵ Section 17

⁴⁶ Section 40

⁴⁷ In this section, a person is a “relevant person” in respect of another person if he or she—

- (a) is the spouse or civil partner of that other person, or
- (b) is not the spouse or civil partner of that other person and is not related to that other person within a prohibited degree of relationship but is or was in an intimate relationship with that other person.

⁴⁸ Section 3 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 came into force on 31 January 2022 and specifically provides that a child (under 18 years old) who sees, hears, or experiences the effects of domestic abuse and is related to the victim or the suspect is also to be regarded as a victim.

images without consent, and with intent to cause harm to the victim and carries a maximum penalty of an unlimited fine and/or seven years' imprisonment. The second offence addresses the taking, distribution or publication of intimate images without consent without a requirement that the person intended to cause harm to the victim and will carry an offence of a maximum penalty of a €5,000 fine and/or 12 months' imprisonment.

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (2023) introduced domestic violence leave which entitles anyone experiencing or at risk of domestic violence to take five days leave in order to access supports. They will also be entitled to full pay during the period of leave. The introduction of this legislation has not only made statutory provision for victim-survivors of domestic violence but is increasing awareness and capacity to respond to victim-survivors within their work setting, supported by the corresponding integration of domestic violence employer policy across corporations, institutions and wider employment settings.

The Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (2023) was signed into law in July 2023 and was partially enacted in November 2023. It is now in force with Part five having come into effect in September 2024. This act provides a range of new criminal offences, in addition to tougher sentences for existing offences increasing the maximum sentence for assault causing harm, from five years to ten years. It also increases the scope of the existing harassment offence to include any conduct that seriously interferes with a person's peace and privacy, or causes alarm, distress or harm. It creates new standalone offences of stalking and non-fatal strangulation or non-fatal suffocation. The maximum sentence for stalking is up to ten years and the maximum sentence of up to life imprisonment for non-fatal strangulation or non-fatal suffocation causing serious harm. Part 5 of the act also introduces a provision that will allow for someone who has been subjected to stalking behaviour to apply to the District Court for a civil order to prohibit such behaviour continuing. Although relatively recently enacted in full, the Act has been welcomed particularly in terms of the creation of standalone offences, accompanying guidance and the toughening of sentences.

The consolidated Domestic Violence Act (2018) permits the issue of several domestic violence orders that aim to protect victims of domestic violence, as follows:

- Protection Orders, which prohibit the use by the respondent of violence or threats of violence against the applicant or a dependent person. Protection Orders are interim orders in that they are in effect until the full hearing for the Safety or Barring Order takes place. This is largely determined by the respective court's waiting list which can vary from next court sitting to 15 weeks⁴⁹. A Protection Order does not have the effect of removing the respondent from a particular property.
- Safety Orders allow an abusive person to remain in the home but may prevent them from using or threatening violence against the applicant or any dependent or molesting either or putting either one in fear. This may also include if the abuser is not living in the home. It prevents him or her from watching or being near the home and/or the order may also forbid an abuser from following or communicating (including electronically) with a victim or a dependent person. If made in the District Court, the order can last up to 5 years. If made in the Circuit Court, there is no time limitation.
- Barring Orders, exclude the respondent from the home shared with the applicant and may also prohibit the respondent from further violence or threats of violence against the applicant and any dependent, from watching or being near the applicant's home, or following or communicating (including electronically) with them or with a dependent person. If issued in the District Court can last up to 3 years. If issued in the Circuit Court, there is no time limitation.
- Interim Barring Order, which is an interlocutory form of the Barring Order and may be granted in exceptional circumstances on an ex parte⁵⁰ basis. The basis of the order is the existence of an immediate

⁴⁹ [pdf \(courts.ie\)](https://pdf.courts.ie) p.113

⁵⁰ Ex-parte is a Latin term for court proceedings for one party without the other being present.

risk of significant harm to the applicant or to a dependent person, and the insufficiency of a Protection Order. This order excludes the respondent from the shared home and may also prevent the respondent from watching, or being near, the home or following or from communicating (including electronically) with the victim or dependent person. It is a temporary order, put in place until a full barring order hearing takes place, which is dependent on the respective court's waiting list. Interim barring orders once made expire after a maximum of 8 days but may be renewed to last until the full hearing of the barring order itself.

- The Emergency Barring Order excludes the respondent from the home. The order may also prohibit the respondent from further violence or threats of violence against the applicant or a dependent, from watching or being near (electronically) with them or with a dependent person. It is a temporary order (can last for a maximum 8 working days. However, a new emergency barring order may not be made until 1 month after the first one expires, unless there are "exceptional" circumstances which justify the making of a second order). Applicants must satisfy a different property test to be eligible, that is, s/he can only apply for an Emergency Barring Order if s/he has never been either spouse or civil partner of the respondent and the applicant either has no legal interest in the shared home at all or has a legal interest in it which is less than that of the respondent.
- EBO's, as well as IBO's and Protection Orders (POs) may be sought at Special Sittings of District Court out of hours at request of Garda under Section 24.
- The Barring and Safety Order are available to spouses and former spouses, civil partners and former civil partners, and to most cohabitants. Breaches of these orders are enforceable by the Gardaí, who can arrest anyone suspected of such breaches. The Garda Síochána Act (2005) provides that, in addition to the detection

and investigation of crime, the Gardaí have responsibility for the vindication of human rights and the protection of individuals and their property.

As presented in Table 2, applications to the District Court under the domestic violence legislation increased slightly by 4% to 23,536 from 22,596 in 2021, up 2% on the 22,970 in 2020 and up 15% on the 20,501 in 2019.

Table 2 Domestic Violence: District Court

Incoming		Resolved	
2022	2021	2022	2021
23,536	22,596	20,830	21,096

The majority of orders are made in and granted by the District Court. However, in certain circumstances these applications can also be made to the Circuit Court. As demonstrated below in Table 3, the number of applications and orders made by the Circuit Court are significantly less than those of the District Court.

Table 3 Domestic Violence: Circuit Court -Outcomes

	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Orders made	48	40	38	38	59	51	40

Table 4 provides an overview of the applications made and outcomes of these orders from 2015 to 2022. Of note is the large discrepancy between the numbers of applications made and the numbers granted during this period.

Table 4 District Court Domestic Violence: Trends

	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Barring order applications	2933	2987	3577	3323	3343	2613	2658	2638
Barring orders granted	732	810	1159	1137	946	822	1329	859
Protection order applications	8719	8269	7649	7049	6390	5869	5365	5108
Protection orders granted	5815	6917	6592	5864	5515	5006	4627	4225
Safety order applications	9317	8918	8887	8061	7280	6368	6069	5626
Safety orders granted	2475	2461	2467	2688	2327	2255	3316	1917
Interim barring	1951	1917	1918	1643	1270	917	880	731

order applications								
Interim barring orders granted	951	1141	1251	1209	982	693	676	593
Other applications	616	505	915	418	289	195	255	271
Orders granted	223	291	376	184	147	151	107	263

Table 5 provides an overview of incidents of domestic abuse made known to An Garda Síochána during the period of 2019 to 2022. Of note is the 13% increase observed between 2021 and 2022.

*Table 5: Incidents of domestic abuse (Garda Annual Report 2022)**

	2019-2021	2022
Recorded Incidents	Average: 2,788/month	Average: 3,549/month

Difference between the 2021 and 2022 results: +4,931 (+13%)

Comment: This crime type is seen as potentially underreported, and an increase is seen as a “desirable correction”.

Table 6 details the trends for An Garda Síochána domestic abuse calls, charges for domestic violence and abuse orders breached, domestic

violence and abuse orders issued and an insight to the overall trends relating to charges created as a result of all domestic abuse incidents. Of note is the overall increase of 24% relating to charges created and the relatively small increase (2%) of charges brought for breaches of orders.

Table 6: Domestic Abuse data for 2022 compared with 2021

DA figures	2021	2022	% change
Domestic Abuse Calls	49,477	53,737	+9%
Charges for DVA Orders Breached	4,268	4,333	+2%
Charges Created -All DA Incidents	9,065	11,239	+24%
DVA Order issued	11,474	11,954	+4%

1.9 The Irish Policy Context

The pervasive nature of the issue of domestic violence dictates that the Irish policy context for domestic violence is very broad. This section provides an overview of the structure and most prominent and pertinent policies relevant to this present research.

Cuan⁵¹ is the National agency, established in statute under the Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Act (2023). Legislation to establish Cuan completed its journey through the Houses of the Oireachtas on 22 November and was signed into law by President Higgins on 28 November 2023. This agency, under the remit of the Department of Justice, is dedicated to tackling and reducing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). Cuan now subsumes the role previously held by Tusla,

⁵¹ [gov - About Cuan \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.gov.ie)

Child and family Agency from January 1st, 2014, in relation to the funding and coordination of specialist domestic violence services.

The main functions of Cuan include:

- Delivering excellent services to victims of DSGBV, including delivering on the number of safe and accessible accommodation spaces available, as well as ensuring that helpline and other supports are available to anyone requiring them.
- Putting in place a robust set of national service standards and governance arrangements to ensure adherence to the appropriate standards for such supports.
- Leading on consistent and ongoing research to inform DSGBV policy development, working with others such as the CSO who have data projects underway.
- Leading on awareness-raising campaigns designed to reduce the incidence of DSGBV in Irish society as well as ensuring that all victims know how to access the supports they require.
- Coordinating all government actions set out in the Third National Strategy⁵² and reporting on their delivery to the Minister for Justice. Political oversight of the strategy will be provided by the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality.

Of particular assistance to Cuan in coordinating all government actions set out by the Third National Strategy and beyond the scope of this strategy is section 43 of the Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Act (2023) which sets out the obligation of public services to cooperate with the agency.⁵³

⁵² [DOJ_DSGBV_Strategy.indd \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie)

⁵³ (1) A public service body shall—

(a) when requested by the Agency to do so, cooperate with the Agency for the purpose of the performance of a function of the Agency, and

(b) when requested by another public service body to do so, cooperate with that body for the purpose of the performance of a function of that body that relates to—

(i) increasing awareness and understanding of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, or
(ii) protecting or supporting victims and persons at risk of such violence.

Zero Tolerance Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence (2022-2026), published in June (2022) outlines Ireland's goals in relation to DSGBV. Utilising a theory of change approach, the strategy draws on the four Istanbul Convention pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination and is guided by implementation plans⁵⁴. To date, two implementation plans have been produced to promote and monitor individual and cross departmental progress on identified actions. The approach to the development of this most recent DSGBV strategy has been the fulfilled commitment and to co-design with the DSGBV sector. In addition, the Board of Cuan has been drawn from a range of DSGBV academics, advocates and practitioners to guide its function.

Primary responsibility for the implementation of the law on domestic violence has been assigned to An Garda Síochána. An Garda Síochána developed their domestic violence policy 1996, subsequently revised this policy in 2017 and have a dedicated Domestic Abuse Intervention and Policy Unit (DAIPU). An Garda Síochána defines domestic violence as “the physical, sexual, financial, emotional or psychological abuse of one person against another who is a family member or is or has been an intimate partner, regardless of gender or sexuality” (An Garda Síochána, 2022, p.4)⁵⁵ and has a pro arrest policy when dealing with incidents relating to domestic abuse. Each Garda division now has a divisional protective service unit (DPSU) leading investigation of specialised crime types, including sexual crime, child abuse and domestic abuse. In 2018, the Garda Information Services Centre (GISC) became responsible for the classification of incidents under HQ Directive 25/2018. In July 2021, An Garda Síochána introduced a mechanism to record the relationship between the Victim and the Offender which “has supported the identification of additional incidents where there was a domestic abuse element” (An Garda Síochána, 2022, p.8).⁵⁶

(2) In this section, “cooperate” includes sharing of documents and information (including statistical information).

⁵⁴ www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/228481/69e48889-49ea-49d6-8143-982f6cc28bac.pdf#page=null

www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289239/8397af6a-eb2e-48d7-a0df-cf72c91d103b.pdf#page=null

⁵⁵ [an-garda-siochana-domestic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-report-sept-22.pdf](https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289239/8397af6a-eb2e-48d7-a0df-cf72c91d103b.pdf#page=null)

⁵⁶ Ibid p. 8

The key role of the Probation Service is to provide effective interventions, with individuals subject to community sanctions, to reduce the risks associated with offending and to support their rehabilitation and reintegration. The aim of the Service is to reduce offending and victimisation, resulting in safer communities.⁵⁷ Their Probation Service Policy & Guidelines on Intimate Partner Domestic Abuse (2024)⁵⁸ provides detailed guidance in relation to working in the context of domestic violence. While it attends to engaging safely and effectively with perpetrators of domestic violence, it also takes a comprehensive approach to working safely with victim-survivors, across: contact with victims and victim safety; initiating victim contact; interviewing the victim; referencing victim information in reports/storing victim information, guided by key principles.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has primary responsibility to promote the safety and wellbeing of children and the effective functioning of families. Tusla practice is currently guided by their Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook 2.⁵⁹ However, the publication of refreshed Tusla guidance with a particular focus on domestic violence is expected imminently. Child welfare and protection policy is based on the legal framework provided primarily by the Child Care Act 1991 and the Children First Act 2015. The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 provides for the review and update of the Child Care Act 1991 and intends to capture positive policy and practice developments and address legislative gaps identified during the review process. Of particular interest to this research is that it proposes significant changes in relation to children,⁶⁰ for example, the strengthening of

⁵⁷ [Probation Service Strategy Statement 2021-23 \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie)

⁵⁸ Probation Services' revised domestic abuse policy, published in March 2024, is available to all Probation Service personnel via the Probation Service Intranet.

⁵⁹ [Tusla Child Protection Handbook2.pdf](#)

⁶⁰ Introduction of a guiding principles section to the Act, with the best interests of the child as the overriding principle

Introduction of a duty to cooperate between relevant bodies, such as Tusla, government departments, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and An Garda Síochána (AGS). This cooperation will include the sharing of information between relevant bodies and Tusla, and with each other, in accordance with the law and as necessary and proportionate

The voice of the child is to be strengthened both in court proceedings and in decisions taken outside the court setting by introducing a principle that children should be able to participate in the decision-making process

Amendments to Section 3 of the Child Care and to Children First Act 2015 related to assessments of reports of harm

the voice and decision making of the child within and outside the court setting.

The Children First Act⁶¹ was enacted on 19th November 2015 and commenced in full on the 11th of December, 2017⁶². Policy and guidance in relation to Child Protection is derived from this Act. The Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children⁶³, the companion guidance to the Children First Act (2015) was launched on the 2nd of October 2017 and amended in January 2019 by way of addendum to ensure that online safety is specifically accounted for in child safeguarding statements, as required under the Children First Act. This guidance sets out the legal obligations that have been placed on mandated persons by the Children First Act 2015 and contains guidance about making a mandated report. It also provides guidance for mandated persons required to assist Tusla in an assessment of a report of a mandated concern and contains guidance for organisations that provide services to children and young people about their legal requirements under the Children First Act 2015. It outlines how to conduct a risk assessment and prepare a Child Safeguarding Statement. It also contains details of best practice procedures in child safeguarding.

The HSE policy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (2010)⁶⁴ focuses on a strengths-based approach to addressing Domestic Violence and/or Sexual Violence and seeks to achieve this by delivering on eight key high-level goals and actions⁶⁵. The HSE Practice Guide on Domestic, Sexual

Amendments to existing rules for Supervision Orders, Interim Care Orders, Care Orders, Emergency Care Orders and Voluntary Care Agreements.

Amendments to Part VIIA to allow Tusla Early Years Inspectorate to immediately close unregistered early learning and childcare services, to temporarily suspend registered services where there are concerns about significant risk to children, to share information on enforcement action with parents, to place some additional enforcement measures on a legislative footing, and to introduce a “Fit Person” regulation.

⁶¹ <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2015/a3615.pdf>

⁶² The Act places a number of statutory obligations on specific groups of professionals and on particular organisations providing services to children. Through the provisions of the Act, it is intended to: raise awareness of child abuse and neglect; provide for mandatory reporting by key professionals; improve child safeguarding arrangements in organisations providing services to children and provide for cooperation and information-sharing between agencies when Tusla – Child and Family Agency, is undertaking child protection. Under the Children First Act (2015), certain classes of people who work with children have additional responsibilities.

⁶³ http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children_First_National_Guidance_2017.pdf

⁶⁴ [Layout 1 \(hse.ie\)](http://www.hse.ie)

⁶⁵ These actions include; to ensure that a comprehensive and appropriate Health Service response is delivered at all points of entry to the Health Service Executive, to promote primary prevention of

and Gender Based Violence For staff working with children and families⁶⁶. This guide is an important resource to the implementation of the HSE Policy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (2010).

1.10 Domestic Violence Services in Ireland

The 1970's marked the beginning of the women's movement in Ireland, of which domestic violence services emerged⁶⁷. These early services focussed primarily on the needs of women. The service provision landscape has evolved over the last fifty years to include dedicated services for children, young people and men in recognition of the impact of their experiences of domestic violence. Services for perpetrators of domestic violence have also emerged. The services available for each of these groups of victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse is set out below.

1.10.1 Services for Women and Children

Domestic violence services for women and children provide a range of accommodation and non-accommodation supports. Excluding Westmeath support service against domestic violence, all domestic violence services for women and children in Ireland are Safe Ireland members.

Safe Ireland⁶⁸ is the National Social Change Agency working on Domestic Violence in Ireland that has evolved from a network of services, founded in 1998 as the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services (NNWRSS). It governs two frontline specialist domestic violence services

violence and invest in early intervention, to provide best practice in all service provision to victims of Domestic Violence and/or Sexual Violence, to support Multi sectoral approaches, to ensure the safeguarding of children in situations of Domestic Violence and/or Sexual violence, to ensure data collection as a basis for driving high quality and more relevant service development, to monitor and evaluate service provision and to ensure Consumer involvement.

⁶⁶ [Layout 1 \(tusla.ie\)](https://www.tusla.ie)

⁶⁷ www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/162607/b8a9280f-6ced-4d07-a8d3-3f0eb457620d.pdf#page=null

⁶⁸ [Home | Safe Ireland - Creating Safety for Women and Children](#)

and works collaboratively with the remaining thirty-seven member services across communities in Ireland⁶⁹

There are currently twenty services operating twenty-one staffed refuges for women and children in Ireland. In 2022, Safe Ireland produced *Safe Place: Designing Centres for Domestic Violence Prevention and Response*.⁷⁰ This design guide was developed to support the anticipated deluge of refuge development further to Tusla's Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence (2022) guided by Article 23 of the Istanbul Convention. Ten services provide thirty-seven Safe Homes, and five services provide thirty-six transitional supported houses. One provider also manages forty-seven permanent homes for domestic violence victim-survivors. Thirty-four domestic violence services provide a helpline. Operational times and costs vary. However, there are a number of local/freephone helplines operating, some of which provide a twenty-four-hour response. Eighteen of these helplines are twenty-four-hour helplines. Each region has at least one helpline operating on a twenty-four-hour freephone or lo-call basis. There is currently one national freephone helpline provided by Women's Aid Dublin that has increased its service to twenty-four hours a day seven days per week.

Support Services provide a range of supports to women and children including practical, emotional and information support, accompaniment, referral, advocacy, education programmes and counselling. Support groups are held in refuges and support services around the country and range from informal practical skill programmes, established support group programmes, for example Power to Change, to bespoke programmes, for example in relation to healing from trauma.

⁶⁹ The role of Safe Ireland is; to work with frontline domestic violence services across Ireland to provide state of the art and sustainable responses to women and children; to identify and understand what drives and contributes to domestic violence against women in Ireland; to provide evidence-based guidance to government, the private sector, civil society and communities on how to strategically and effectively lead, co-ordinate, resource and support prevention efforts across Ireland and to inform and support the development of policy and legislation, prevention strategies, programming and advocacy that targets and seeks to reduce the drivers of domestic violence against women. The staff team of Safe Ireland comprises a CEO, management team, development and administrative team, associates for support and development; supported by a board of directors comprising of two categories; elected from the membership and recruited to the board in fulfilment of specific requirements to the board.

⁷⁰ https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/#dfiip-df_9589/1/

There are currently thirty-five services providing outreach support, a number of which have established outreach clinics, while others provide outreach on request in agreed locations. These services generally operate on an appointment basis, but some provide a drop-in service. The Dolphin House Support and Referral Service has been operating since March 2011 providing support and information for women as they seek additional protection through the family law courts. This service is facilitated by Women's Aid Dublin and Inchicore Outreach Centre. A significant percentage of specialist domestic violence services now operate this model in conjunction with their local court services, space permitting.

In 2023 there were approximately 500 staff, including managerial and administrative staff within the Safe Ireland membership, providing services to women and children in Ireland. These positions are funded by Local Authorities, Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime, Pobal, the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and predominantly core funding, which is now administered by Cuan, the National DSGBV agency.

Service user engagement is very well established within the sector and acknowledged as essential to the evaluation and growth of services. Methods of engagement including service user fora, interviews, focus groups, panels, proactive recruitment to boards of management etc. There is an ease to this engagement as it is supported by experience and expertise.

Historically men have not been part of the introduction or development of these services. Increasingly however, these specialist domestic violence services are engaging with fathers, particularly through their work with children. However, father engagement with domestic violence services for women and children remains limited. While some services are involved in the guidance and management of programmes for perpetrators of abuse and offer partner and child support, there is a distinct separation between the engagement with men and women.

The gendered analysis of domestic violence held by the majority of service providers has guided the development of services. These services are often perceived as services staffed by women for women with the majority of staff

being female. The lack of father engagement can also be attributable to the understanding that domestic violence is an area of high risk not only for women and their children but also for workers (Tsantefski et al., 2024).

1.10.2 Services for children and young people

Domestic Violence services have provided support to children and young people from the opening of the first refuge in Ireland in 1974. However, dedicated supports to children and young people have significantly grown in this sector over the last twenty years with the majority of specialist domestic violence services now providing direct services to children. These services have dedicated staff for children and young people. In addition to providing emotional and practical support, dedicated child support services provide a range of supports and interventions including childcare, preschool, TLC Kidz, Helping Hands, the DART Programme, play and art therapy, afterschool programmes, with two services facilitating supervised access.

The National Childhood Domestic Abuse Project was developed in 2019 by Barnardos in conjunction with Tusla. The objectives of the project include: to assist in increasing the visibility of childhood domestic violence and abuse; to support a collective and collaborative approach to identifying the needs of children; and to delivering effective services in response and to empower children's voices and explore ways for children to be heard. The Empower Kids Project (EKP) was initiated by Barnardos [Ireland] in 2020. The project has engaged with 74 children and young people (Costello & Holt 2024) and have produced a range of resources that highlight the experiences and needs of children living with domestic violence including a "Shared understanding of childhood domestic violence and abuse"⁷¹, Hear Me, See Me, Keep Me Safe animation, Our Rights, Your Responsibility poster, Me2U What you should know poster and leaflets, Kids Coercive Control Web.

⁷¹ [Shared understanding of childhood domestic violence and abuse](#)

1.10.3 Services for male victims

Men's Aid⁷², formerly AMEN Support Services LTD. was established in 1997 and has a national remit. It provides a confidential service underpinned by a victim centric and human rights proofed approach aimed at ensuring all male victims of Domestic Violence/Coercive Control receive the required support to be safe. Men's Aid support those victims who, from a gender perspective, primarily identify as male, including non-binary, intersex and transgender men within its support and services. These support services include confidential helpline support and legal information, one-to-one support meetings, counselling, court accompaniment and information appointments, court clinics and peer group support meetings. Men's Aid also provide education programmes and community workshops and community outreach across the north-east, with one community outreach occurring in the West and another in South of Ireland.

The Men's Development Network⁷³, originally known as the Southeast Men's Network Ltd. was founded in 1999. It originated when local men in Waterford working in the social care field, probation, youth work, addictions, academia and health came together to discuss what Men's Development Network describe as rapidly becoming a crisis. According to this group, they realised that there were no initiatives to work with men on their development where they lived and that this was not only having a negative impact on men, women and children but also on the communities we live in, on society, and also across many broad professional fields of social care. The group worked to identify and highlight the key issues in men's lives that needed addressing and offer solutions providing a range of generalist supports to men, training and advocacy. Men's development Network also provide the National Male Advice Line (MAL) and a range of supports to men experiencing domestic violence provided by dedicated staff situated beyond Waterford, more recently, in the Cavan Monaghan area.

⁷² [Home - Men's Aid \(mensaid.ie\)](http://mensaid.ie)

⁷³ [Men's Development Network - "Better Lives for Men: Better Lives for All" \(mensnetwork.ie\)](http://mensnetwork.ie)

1.10.4 Services for Perpetrators of Domestic Violence

The Men's Development Network have also initiated and host the White Ribbon Campaign in Ireland⁷⁴ and were elected to the Steering Committee of MenEngage Europe (MEE).⁷⁵ They provide the MEND (Men Ending Domestic Abuse), which is a behaviour change programme for men, who have been violent or abusive within their intimate partner relationships. Their programme draws on the CHOICES programme and involves one-to-one assessment and pre-group sessions followed by 25 group sessions. MEND also provides an integrated Partner Support Service for the partners or ex-partners of the men on the programme. This programme operates in Carlow, Kilkenny, Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Wexford, Waterford and South Tipperary.

MOVE Ireland⁷⁶, (Men Overcoming Violent Emotion), is a voluntary organisation which was established in 1996 to address domestic violence against women in a specialised programme for perpetrators of domestic violence called 'Changes'. In 2017 the programme model changed from 'Changes' to 'Choices' and this became the national programme for programmes funded by Department of Justice. MOVE also have a designated women's support service in addition to working at a local level with specialist domestic violence services in the provision of a partner support aspect of their programmes. MOVE operate 11 programmes across Athlone, Galway, Sligo, Dublin City, Dublin North, Dublin South, Meath, Louth, Cork, Limerick, Tipperary and Kerry. They form part of the Joint Agency Response to Crime (JARC)⁷⁷, working closely with Probation Services and An Garda Síochána as part of one of their programmes. They have more recently piloted two of their programmes online, with early positive indications, particularly in engaging rural men.

⁷⁴ [White Ribbon Ireland - Men's Development Network \(mensnetwork.ie\)](http://mensnetwork.ie)

⁷⁵ MenEngage Alliance is a global social change network working to transform masculinities and engage men and boys in women's rights and gender justice for all. MenEngage Europe comprises over 88 organisations and 12 individual members from 33 European countries. MDN is Ireland's sole representative.

⁷⁶ [Home - Move Ireland](http://moveireland.ie)

⁷⁷ [gov - Joint Agency Response to Crime \(JARC\) \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie)

1.11 A Biographical Note of Reflection

Engaging in a process of reflexivity whereby the researcher is enabled to better understand and evaluate how their own history, background and positionality impacts their chosen focus, study design, data collection and analysis and presentation of findings, is understood as critical to qualitative research (Ide & Beddoe, 2024). Throughout the research process, I have endeavoured to remain aware of my own positionality as being a white, middle-income woman and mother who is an educated professional with insider status. In terms of my professional background, I began this research while managing a domestic violence service. I had the privilege of working with women and children experiencing domestic violence for 17 years before moving to a national services development role with Safe Ireland. This insider status brings advantages in terms of ability to engage confidently and competently with victim-survivors, be attuned to boundaries and power dynamics in the research relationship and having knowledge of practice, service provision, policy and infrastructure at local and national level. However, this insider status also brings the increased need for attention to pre-conceptions and bias and necessitates engaging reflexively in 'a process of constant, self-conscious scrutiny of the self as researcher and of the research process' (Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015, p.18). I have welcomed and fully embraced this practice throughout this research to ensure that my insider status did not influence the design, data gathering, analysis or presentation of findings of this research. While each reflexive practitioner adopts various methods to support their process, utilising regular clinical supervision and maintaining a reflexive journal throughout was particularly effective and beneficial to the research and researcher.

1.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has served as an introduction by first providing the background and rationale for this doctoral thesis and the approach taken to achieve the

overall aims of the study - to explore multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence. Having established the case for father engagement, notwithstanding the challenges inherent in this aspiration in the context of domestic violence, the study was situated within the domestic and international policy and legal context. Evident from the overview of the Irish legislative and policy landscape is the exponential growth in this area over the last decade, particularly in the last five years. This chapter concludes with a brief introduction to service provision for women, children, young people and male victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence in Ireland.

1.13 Thesis Outline

Chapters two and three of this thesis provide a review of the literature underscoring the argument for this thesis. Chapter two, the first of two literature chapters, explores the role of fathers in children's lives: situating father involvement in the context of domestic violence. This chapter consists of two parts. Beginning with an exploration of the literature relating to fatherhood, the chapter focuses on the role of fathers in their children's lives. The second part of chapter two, drawing on the relevant literature, explores the risk presence of abusive men through the lens of mothers, children and young people.

Chapter three, the second of two literature chapters explores the process of engaging domestically abusive fathers. Drawing on relevant and recent literature, this chapter applies a policy, practice and programme lens to working with fathers in the context of domestic violence, providing an insight to the professional landscape.

Chapter four presents the methodology employed for the purpose of achieving the aims and objectives of this research study, including the theoretical framing of this research, the research strategy and the corresponding journey from inception to conclusion. The methodology

chapter pays particular attention to the challenges encountered across that journey and the strategies employed to address those challenges.

Chapter five is the first of three chapters presenting the findings emerging from the process of data analysis and in the context of the literature reviewed in chapters two and three. Chapter five draws on the perspectives of the participating professionals to depict the challenges they encounter with regard to engagement with abusive men. This chapter consists of two sections. The first section depicts challenges relating to the nature of working with fathers who are domestically abusive. The second section takes a wider view to depict challenges relating to working within complex professional systems.

Chapter six, the second of three chapters presenting the findings of the study draws from the perspectives of victim-survivors (children, young people and mothers). This chapter consists of three sections; the challenges arising from abusive tactics for victim-survivors; the challenges with and arising from professional engagement; and the wider structural challenges in this context of father engagement and domestic violence. The chapter concludes with triangulating the challenges across professionals and victim-survivors of domestic violence.

Chapter seven, the third of three findings chapters draws from the perspectives of the participating professionals, victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse to depict “what works” with regard to father engagement. This chapter begins by summarising the key elements that facilitate and sustain initial professional engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence. It then explores the key actions and indicators of successful continued engagement and positive outcomes. Finally, it illuminates what supports and sustains professional practice and focusses on shared successful strategies adopted by participating professionals in order to achieve change.

Bringing this doctoral thesis to a close, chapter eight provides a summary of findings from the study followed by a discussion of the themes.

CHAPTER TWO

The Role of Fathers in children's lives: situating father involvement in the context of domestic violence: A review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

Almost fifty years ago, fathers were described as 'forgotten contributors to child development' (Lamb 1975, p.245). Since Lamb's observation in 1975, research on fathering and fatherhood has grown exponentially. The preceding almost five decades have seen a developing increase in both the amount and focus of research on the relationship between the role of fathers and outcomes for their children. Initially during the late 1960's and early 1970's, concern about the impact of the absence of fathers in children's lives, prompted a growing body of research quantifying father involvement, utilising predominantly time-use methodologies to ascertain levels of father involvement (Lamb, 2000) This initial foray into the role of fathers, although often limited to contrasting father absence and presence, time spent and financial contributions, did provide the impetus for further exploration as it established the impact of father influence as significant, contrary to previous thinking.

In this first of two literature chapters that inform this doctoral thesis, the role of fathers in children's lives will be explored, situating that involvement against the backdrop of the presence of domestic violence, perpetrated by the father or father figure, against the child's mother. This chapter is divided into two sections. In section one, the theoretical underpinning of the role of fathers in children's lives is explored, followed by an exploration of the intertwined rise of fatherhood scholarship and increasing father involvement. Gender differences in parenting provide an insight into the distinct contribution of fathers and mothers to their children's development followed

by an exploration of the challenges and opportunities pertaining to father engagement. The second half of this chapter will sharpen the lens of interest on fathering to focus on what we know about fathers as 'risk' in the context of domestic violence.

2.2 Fathers: An Evolving Construct

During the last few decades, ideologies surrounding fatherhood have shifted significantly (Jarska, 2020; Judit, 2020), moving from the Breadwinner model of fatherhood towards the more involved nurturing parent (Schmitz, 2016). However, Cabrera, Volling and Barr (2018) assert that the perception of the father as a sensitive and nurturing parent has been slow to infiltrate the public narrative. This section charts the evolving ideologies and fatherhood scholarship with particular attention to the distinct contribution of fathers to the lives of their children.

2.2.1 Theoretical Context of Fathering

Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan (2020) have highlighted that multiple theoretical perspectives have been used to guide research on fathering, some of which include identity theory (e.g., Pasley, Petren, & Fish, 2014), social capital (e.g., Booth, Scott, & King, 2010), and family systems theories (e.g., Galovan, Holmes, Schramm, & Lee, 2014). However, a longstanding concern within fathering literature has been the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework to guide research on fathering (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley & Roggman, 2014). Fitzgerald, Robinson, Cabrera and Segal (2021) assert that despite the volumes of research on fathers, no dominant theory has emerged to drive research in the way that Bowlby's (1973) theory of attachment drove research with mothers and their young children.

Attachment theory asserts that a strong emotional and physical attachment to at least one primary caregiver is critical to personal

development. Attachment has been described as a “deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space” (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1973). According to McCaughren, Holt, Parkes and Gregory (2022), attachment theory and research provide the most validated framework for conducting assessments on parent-child relationships for infants and children under the age of six years. However, although increasing, attachment studies have primarily focussed on mother-child relationships. A significantly lesser number of studies have focussed on father-child attachment. These studies have concluded that infants become attached to their fathers (Lamb & Lewis, 2004; Lamb, 2018), with a review of the literature by Lamb and Lewis (2010) suggesting that infants in fact form attachments to fathers and mothers at the same time, rather than sequentially. Therefore, infants typically become attached to both parents at about the same age, at approximately six months of age. Paternal sensitivity can be an important predictor of father-child attachment (Barker, Iles, & Ramchandani, 2017). In some studies, fathers have been observed to be less sensitive to their children in comparison to mothers (Lickenbrock & Braungart-Rieker, 2015). As warm and responsive caregiving predicts a variety of cognitive and social outcomes, this has implications for both attachment and positive outcomes for children. Increased father involvement and more engaged styles of father-infant interactions are associated with more positive outcomes for children (Barker, Iles & Ramchandani, 2017).

Other theoretical perspectives commonly used to guide research in this area include Identity Theory, Family Systems Theory and Feminist Theory. Identity theory suggests that the extent of father involvement depends on his commitment to the father role and his identity as a father (Fagan 2014). Family systems theory posits that the family is a structure of related subsystems, such as sibling alliances, the mother-father dyad and parent-child dyads. Each of these subsystems affects the lived experience of each family member. Palkovitz, Fagan, and Hull (2013) stated, “Sex and gender interact in multiple ways to influence parents’ perceptions of interactions with their children” (p. 210). Though mothers and fathers often share ideals, values, roles, and involvement in parenting (Palkovitz, 2013), this may manifest differently. For example, Parker, Horowitz and Stepler (2017),

based on their two-wave survey drawing from 4573 respondents in the United States, suggest that fathers may perform specific tasks (e.g., watching children at a sporting event or assisting them with technologies) that are a specific form of involvement than is typically assessed or captured.

2.2.2 The Rise of Fatherhood Research and Paternal involvement

As indicated previously, research on fathering and fatherhood has grown exponentially since Lamb's initial observations in 1975. Intertwined with this growth in research are the ideologies surrounding fatherhood that have evolved significantly (Lamb & Lewis, 2010). Lamb and Lewis (2010) identified two main reasons that were guiding this developing research. The first, according to Lamb and Lewis (2010) was the increasing understanding of the formative role that fathers play in the emotional, cognitive, and social development of their children. The second, the significant changing structure of the family and roles resulting from the cultural, economic and social changes of recent years. This observation has been echoed by subsequent researchers who have noted the correlation between the evolving global, economic, social and demographic changes and the evolving roles of parents. For example, Cabrera (2020) in her commentary on father involvement, father-child relationships, and attachment in the early years notes the demographic changes in families due to the increase of both parents participating in full-time employment, prompting adjustments to parental roles. Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan (2020) in their commentary on the evolution of fathering research in the 21st century observe a range of trends emerging in relation to fathering in the last decade. These include increasing numbers of stay-at-home dads, the levelling off of fathers' time spent providing childcare, continuing large numbers of children who do not live with their biological fathers, and an increasing number of US states exploring joint physical child custody as the presumption in divorce cases. These changing roles and responsibilities are reflected in ongoing legislative and policy change incorporating work life balance measures, and at times

actively promoting father engagement with children. Examples of this include measures specifically addressing the needs of fathers in terms of their caring roles such as paternity leave and parental leave.

Fathers becoming more involved with their young children's care, is redefining the roles of both fathers and mothers as parents with a corresponding shift in the expectations of society and norms regarding fathers and fathering (Jones & Mosher, 2013). These shifts, according to Cabrera (2020), accentuate the nurturing roles of fathers and the instrumental roles of mothers. Since Ainsworth's (1969, 1973) analysis of sensitive parenting, researchers have studied the nature and consequences of mother–infant engagement. Historically, research has examined the influence of mothers' parenting practices on various child outcomes (Dubois-Comtois, Moss, Cyr & Pascuzzo, 2013). However, despite assertions from multiple studies (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-Le Monda, 2007; Mills-Koonce, Willoughby, Zvara, Barnett, Gustafsson & Cox, 2015; Cabrera & Volling 2019) asserting that fathers provide sensitive care and that infants form attachments with their fathers, research in relation to the nature and consequences of father-child engagement by comparison is relatively recent.

In considering father involvement specifically, there is significant variability in the way in which the construct of father involvement is described and conceptualised. It is often delineated by father absence or presence in the lives of their children. However, this boundary is challenging as the level of involvement is influenced by multiple dynamic variables, for example, residency, relationships and co-parenting relationships (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). In addition, Baxter and Smart (2011) caution against the measure of father-child time as children can be influenced by fathers in their absence e.g., financial support, and equally, it is difficult to discern engagement levels of fathers who are present, but not accessible to children. Baxter and Smart's (2011) observations were drawn from their previous study *Fathering in Australia Among Couple Families With Young Children* (Baxter & Smart, 2011) in combination with data drawn from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*, a large-scale, nationally representative study of children and families that is following

the experiences and wellbeing of two cohorts of children and their families, from infancy to the threshold of adulthood. Their research examined fathers' time investment with children, their supportiveness as partners, their financial contribution, their parenting behaviours and styles, and their perceptions of their own adequacy as fathers. The impact of fathers on children's wellbeing was also examined. According to Opondo, Redshaw, and Quigley (2017), based on their observational study of 10,440 UK children drawn from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), father involvement is a complex construct, comprising interaction, care and attitudes to parenting in addition to financial provision.

It is generally considered that Lamb et al., (1985) has offered one of the most influential and widely used frameworks to operationalise father involvement, the core of which is made up of three primary components: engagement, availability, and responsibility. Liu, Dittman, Guo, Morawska and Haslam, (2021) used survey methodology to explore the role of Chinese fathers examining the effect of father involvement, fathering practices and father-child relationships on child adjustment in Mainland China drawing on 609 mother-father dyads with at least one child aged 3 to 7 years in preschool. Further to their study they asserted that engagement refers to time being "directly engaged in activities with the child, such as feeding or playing; availability refers to being physically and/or psychologically present and available to the child, but not requiring active interaction; and responsibility—being accountable for the child's care and welfare, such as arranging for babysitters and resources to meet the child's needs" (Liu et al., 2021, p.1859).

As the understanding of father involvement has developed, Lamb's framework has been further refined. A more recent model has been proposed by Pleck (2010). Pleck's revision incorporates three primary components (positive engagement activities, warmth and responsiveness, and control) and two auxiliary domains (indirect care and process responsibility) which provide clarification of the responsibility component in the Lamb et al.'s (1985) original model. Pleck's revisions reflect an integrated model of paternal involvement, linked to other wider factors, such as socio-economic

status and quality of any parental couple relationship. This is of particular interest to this study as we focus on the perspectives of father engagement in the context of domestic violence. As early as 2002, Lundy reported that marital dissatisfaction adversely affected paternal synchrony and thus the security of infant-father attachment.

According to Macht (2022), father involvement is considered a reciprocal, dynamic, and multidimensional concept. This view was mooted by Roy (2014) who asserted that the most significant gap in research on fathering is a limited examination of fathering as a reciprocal relationship process that stretches out over many decades. According to Roy (2014), father involvement is typically framed as a one-way street, but reciprocity emerges early on when children begin to shape men's behaviour. This is consistent with the findings of Macht (2022), who found that "children were far removed from the image of *intimate subordinates* to their parents' socialisation practices" (Macht, 2022, p.288). In 2014, Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley and Roggman published their expanded version of their ecological model of father-child relationships. It was originally introduced in 2007 and was influenced by the concepts of Belsky in 1984 and Bronfenbrenner's later work in 1995 which emphasised the psychological and environmental contexts of parenting, respectively. Their expanded model integrated contextual nuances (e.g., fathers' work, distinctions between household socioeconomic resources and fathers' social networks and community), reciprocal relations between child development and fathering and changes over time in father-child relations. According to Dyer, Kauffman, Fagan, Pearson and Cabrera (2018), father engagement in different contexts and across developmental periods forms the basis for developing reciprocal and dynamic quality father-child relationships that are central for children's well-being.

2.2.3 Gender differences in parenting

Ladge and Humbred (2022, p.190) observe that "when referring to mothers, we don't add the term "involved" as we do with fathers. For mothers, involvement is implied, yet for fathers, it has to be assessed". Women and

men often enact their convergent goals through differentiated roles, levels, styles and patterns of involvement (Palkovitz, 2013). Mothers and fathers are also held to different standards and are judged by how “well” they perform their parental roles in different societal contexts, for example, Stewart (2021) highlights that protective services often have traditional views and expectations for women, men, and the wider family, influenced by patriarchal values. Stewart’s (2021) research explored the ideology surrounding ‘good mother’ expectations for British mothers from lower socio-economic classes who have involvement from children’s services due to domestic violence. Drawing from 15 mothers, Stewart (2021) identified five main themes including: ‘Showing the child they are loved’, ‘Being warm, caring and supportive’, ‘Meeting the child’s basic care needs’, ‘Putting the child first and doing her best’ and ‘Protects and keeps safe’. Palkovitz concluded that gendered parenting has important implications for developmental outcomes that are mediated by the sex and gender of children, parents, co-parenting relationships and marital quality,

Differences in mother-child and father-child interactions have also been observed. Differences have been found between parent's play, with mothers more likely to engage in structured play (John, Halliburton & Humphrey, 2012) and particularly evident with sons, with fathers tending towards “rough-and-tumble” play (StGeorge & Freeman, 2017). While parents often share the responsibility for “fun” play activities between them, physical activity seems to be one domain of parenting where fathers appear to be more involved than mothers (Arlinghaus & Johnston, 2017; Zahra, Sebire & Jago, 2015); with mothers tending to provide most supervision of homework (Morris, 2013) and engage more in educational activities (Keizer, van Lissa, Tiemeier & Lucassen, 2020). Parents also treat their sons and daughters differently across a number of areas. For example, John et al., (2012) observed that parents are more likely to engage girls rather than boys in pretend play during their home observations of 18 child–mother and child–father play interactions, while investigating the qualitative and quantitative differences between maternal and paternal play interaction behaviours with their preschool children. They also tend to discourage aggression in terms of girls’ play, encouraging turn-taking games with boys (Power & Parke, 1986).

Gender role stereotypes play an important role in many areas of child development (Endendijk, Groeneveld, & Mesman 2018). Based on their analysis of a recent Pew Research Center report, Yogman and Eppel (2022) asserted that gender stereotyping was more significantly practiced and believed in by fathers, with only 53% of fathers encouraging their sons to participate in activities typically associated with girls, compared with 72% of mothers. Such gender-stereotypical behaviour impacts parenting and tends to support the socialisation and conformity of children to what is “normal” in their society (Bornstein, Putnick, Bradley, Deater-Deckard & Lansford, 2016). For example, in the United States, educational activities are considered more important for young girls as they age, than for young boys (Warash, Root and Devito Doris, 2017).

In their study Warash, Root and Devito Doris (2017) drew on responses from 38 middle class couples and parents of preschool-aged children and although both fathers and mothers perceived play positively, the findings of this study demonstrated that mothers valued play more than fathers and that fathers placed a higher value on academic focus. Echoing these findings, Waters, Tidswell and Bryant’s (2022) study of parental views about their children’s education and play in the UK, highlighted that fathers believed that academic activities were more important for their children’s development than mothers did, demonstrating a key area where parents can diverge in their views relating to their children.

Ryan, Claessens and Markowit (2015) posit that there is limited research on how parenting unfolds in different family structures and diverse cultural contexts which have important influences on both mother and father parenting. For example, after controlling for maternal characteristics, adverse birth outcomes throughout Canada were associated with decreasing father education (Shapiro, Bushnik, Sheppard, Kramer, Kaufman & Yang, 2017) and much lower income associated with father absence has poorer reproductive and infant health outcomes than father-present families (Hibbs, Rankin, DeSisto & Collins, 2018). An older study conducted by Smith Leavell, Tamis-LeMonda, Ruble, Zosuls and Cabrera (2012) longitudinally examined fathers’ activities with their young children across a three-year period. 426

biological fathers who self-identified as White, African American or Latino drawn from the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project were included. Drawing on interviews, surveys and observations Smith Leavell et al. (2012) found that the activities children engage in with their fathers can vary by gender but also race/ethnicity and family circumstances. Ethnic differences were found in fathers' activities with children, and child gender moderated ethnic patterns of behaviour. For example, Black fathers of sons reported the highest levels of engagement in caregiving, play and visiting activities, and both Latino and African American fathers of sons engaged in more visiting activities compared to white fathers of sons. Fathers' education and marital status were also associated with fathers' activities. Married fathers and those with a high school diploma more frequently engaged in literacy activities than unmarried fathers without a diploma; and although Latino fathers engaged less in caregiving activities than African American and White fathers, the difference attenuated after controlling for differences in fathers' education.

2.2.4 Engaging Fathering: Challenges and Opportunities

Consistent with an Identity Theory lens, how much and in what way fathers are involved in their child's life and their relationship with their child, is related to their perception of fatherhood (Gültekin, Akduman Türkoğlu, 2015). Livingston and Parker (2019) assert that Twenty-First Century fathers see their parenting role as central to their identity and are more involved in caretaking of their children. In support of identifying with the role as central to identity, Knoester and Petts' (2017) analysis of 2547 participants of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) cohort, found that fathers who held positive beliefs towards their fathering role and expressed a desire to care directly for their children, reported lower levels of parenting stress, concluding that father identities play an important role in shaping fathering experiences and parenting stress. However other studies, for example, Coe, Dallos, Stedmon and Rydin-Orwin (2021), who used a multiple in-depth case-study design to explore the experience of six fathers with infants, found

that fathers' perceptions can sometimes be influenced by the lack of positive social discourses of fathers as carers. They also suggested that fathers may feel unsupported, requiring capacity building to promote engagement as fathers. The suggestion of employing strategies for fathers and those they encounter is consistent across the literature (Feinberg & Jones, 2018; UNICEF Early Childhood Development, 2019; Tura & Kanat 2021; Levy & Kotelchuck, 2022).

Bowles, Kotelchuck and Grau (2022) have developed three working principles that emerged from insights gained at the Experts Meeting on Fatherhood⁷⁸. The three working principles relate to “(1) creating individual, non-transferable parenting resources explicitly for fathers, (2) reducing economic conflicts between breadwinning and caregiving, and (3) building supportive social networks for engaged fatherhood” (Bowles et al., 2022, p.300). These working principles are suggested as a preliminary framework to engage fathers and compliment issues identified earlier in the chapter. This is consistent with the views of Speer, Park and Bellamy (2024, p.187) who assert that “while parenting beliefs are malleable and parental warmth is a teachable skill, many fathers do not have access to local fatherhood programs, and fathers' rate of participation in parent training and home-visiting interventions is relatively low when compared to mothers”.

Cabrera, Volling and Barr (2018) assert that most studies of parenting neither include fathers or control for fathers' effects on children's outcomes. They further highlight that even though fathers may not engage in the same types of activities that characterise mother-child relationships, measures of fathering, when fathers are included, are often derived from assessments of mothering. They attribute this to at least three causes; the distinction between primary and secondary caregivers, the belief that fathers do not engage in hands-on parenting (Eagly & Wood, 2017) and the shifting composition of families that has at times conflated non-residence of fathers with their absence. Barker, Isles and Ramchandani (2017) highlighted that

⁷⁸ Multi-disciplinary Experts Meeting on Fatherhood Engagement hosted by the Harvard Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program, funded by the Social Trends Institute (STI), and organised in collaboration with the International Center for Work and Family at the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de la Empresa (IESE) Business School.

research with a paternal parenting focus has tended to use a deficit model approach, exploring father absence and its relationship with child psychopathology or the negative aspects of fathering. Coe et al., (2021) recently drew attention to the context in which paternal parenting studies predominantly occur, asserting that this research is typically focussed on challenging scenarios such as serious illness of a child (Bailey-Pearce, Stedmon, Dallos, & Davis, 2018), concluding that “there seems to be a lack of exploration of fathers’ experience of parenting their infants in non-clinical contexts” (Coe et al., 2021, p. 1777).

For some, paternal involvement begins prenatally with substantial growth in this area of research (Sharp, Lawlor & Richardson, 2018; Jansen, Marceau, Sellers, Chen, Garfield, Leve, Neiderhiser, Spotts & Roary, 2024). Father involvement during pregnancy and childbirth has also been associated with enhanced infant cognitive neurodevelopment (Jackson, 2017). They are increasingly attendant at their children’s births, more involved in their children’s health care and education, are experiencing similar work-family conflicts to mothers, and have unique relationships with their children (Yogman, Garfield, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2016)

According to Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth and Lamb (2000) the quality of interactions predicts outcomes for children rather than the quantity. It is widely viewed that children with a strong father-child relationship have better friendship relations, their leadership skills are more developed, and their self-esteem becomes stronger (Bloom, 1997). Warm and strong father-child relationships, established at an early age decreases the risk of having behavioural problems and positively affects children’s social behaviour (Webster, Low, Siller & Hackett, 2013; Gültekin Akduman & Türkoğlu, 2015). Paquette (2004) proposed that an emotional bond and interactions between father and child, referred to as the father-child relationship, plays an important role in developing a sense of self and having positive relationships with others (Palkovitz, 2019). In considering father-child relationships through the lens of attachment theory, Paquette (2004) asserts that children need to be motivated and stimulated as much as calmed

and secured, with fathers providing the majority of this stimulation through physical play; advising that this dynamic can only be effective in the context of an emotional bond that he refers to as the “activation relationship” (Paquette, 2004, p.212).

In terms of skills, children whose fathers are positively engaged in their lives are more likely to excel emotionally, socially and academically (Baker, Kainz, & Reynolds, 2018) and a direct correlation between the amount of time fathers talk to their children, applied problem-solving scores and child vocabulary has been found in pre-school children (Baker, Vernon-Feagans, & Family Life Project Investigators, 2015). Han, Palermo, Ispa and Carlo, (2021) studied 2,291 mothers recruited from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project. Their research focused on whether the residency of their children’s father modified the associations among father involvement, mothers’ supportiveness, children’s negative emotionality during toddlerhood and children’s academic skills in pre-kindergarten via children’s self-regulation. Han et al., (2021) found that fathers’ presence in the home may contribute to children’s self-regulation and academic skills by creating family subsystems (e.g., mother-father, father-child, and mother-father-child systems) and changing family dynamics.

In terms of health, fathers have a consequential impact on their children’s nutrition, play, exercise and, eventually, their own parenting behaviour (Ladge & Humbred, 2022). Paternal involvement in a child’s life has been linked to positive child outcomes, including reduced asthma and obesity, and improved cognition and mental health (Allport, Johnson, Aqil, Labrique, Nelson, Carabas & Marcell, 2018).

In terms of mental health, in their meta-analytic review of 41 studies focusing on paternal sensitivity and children’s cognitive and socioemotional outcomes, Rodrigues, Sokolovic, Madigan, Luo, Silva, Misra and Jenkins, (2021) reported that in fathers of children ranging in age from 7 months to 9 years, paternal sensitivity was not only associated with cognitive functioning but also with children’s emotional regulation and externalising problems. Similarly, Cooke, Deneault, Devereux, Eirich, Fearon and Madigan (2022), in their meta-analytic review of 108 studies focusing on parental sensitivity and

child behavioural problems, found that observed paternal sensitivity was related to both child externalising and internalising symptoms. Liu et al., (2021), drawing from 609 mother-father dyads with at least one child aged 3 to 7 years in preschool, found that father involvement, fathering practices, and father-child relationships were significant predictors of child adjustment. Father-child relationships and fathering practices also moderated the relationship between child adjustment and father involvement. Father involvement with consistency in fathering was particularly beneficial for child adjustment. However, Liu et al. (2021) cautions that without positive father-child relationships and fathering practices, increased father involvement could potentially be harmful for child adjustment.

2.2.5 Section 1 Conclusion

Studies of fatherhood have largely neglected the men who perpetrate domestic violence while studies of domestic violence have largely neglected to focus on these men through the lens of fatherhood. It has been established that fathers can directly impact the trajectory of their children's lives. There is evidence that father interactions provide children with unique, enriching experiences. There is also evidence that fathers can affect their children even in their absence. Of interest to this present research is the way in which the father-child, the mother-child, the parenting relationship and the wider influences interact. Opondo, Redshaw, Savage-McGlynn and Quigley (2016) suggests that father involvement generates an interpersonal context of love and warmth through which the father's involvement enhanced the child's psychological adjustment. According to Opondo, this warm father-child relationship also contributed to the warmth of the mother-child relationship, which in turn also affects the child's outcome. This influence is of particular interest to this research as context matters, the context being domestic violence. Section 2 will now explore risk presence of fathers in the context of domestic violence.

2.3 Section 2- Considering Fathers as ‘Risk’ in the Context of Domestic Violence risk presence of abusive fathers

As the previous section has outlined, research focusing on fathers has yielded a robust evidence base arguing for father involvement in children’s lives. Fathers are increasingly recognised in the literature as a potential resource to their children and the recognition of the potential positive contribution that fathers can make to their children’s development has positioned father involvement as highly advantageous when considering outcomes for children (Gültekin Akduman & Türkoğlu, 2015; Jackson, 2017; Allport et al. 2018; Palkovitz, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2021). The cultural shift from provider to nurturer; the overwhelmingly positive perception of father contribution; and various governmental initiatives⁷⁹⁸⁰ to create, enhance and maintain father involvement, permeates attitudes, behaviours and decisions in relation to what is understood as the best interests of children. However, within the disconnect between what is known about fathering and what is known about domestic violence, there lies a vacuum. That vacuum is partially filled by what we know about how children experience living with domestic violence, but much less so with what we know about the fathering of domestically abusive men. Therefore, the pervading dominant narrative remains the promotion of father involvement regardless of and without sufficient interrogation, distinction or consideration of the context of domestic violence. Over twenty years ago Featherstone (2010) cautioned that focusing solely on father–child interactions without due consideration of the parents’ relationship is particularly problematic in the context of domestic violence. This narrow focus obscures the potential immediate, dynamic and enduring risks to victim-survivors. This second section attempts to fill that gap by theoretically contextualising and conceptualising father engagement in the context of domestic violence and presenting and interrogating the evidence base on domestically abusive men as risk.

⁷⁹ [Father-inclusive practice guide | Department of Social Services, Australian Government \(dss.gov.au\)](#)

⁸⁰ [Federal Agency Initiatives | Fatherhood.gov](#)

2.3.1 Conceptualising Father engagement in the context of domestic violence

The understanding of father engagement has significantly advanced from Lamb's (1985) initial model comprising three primary components: engagement, availability, and responsibility. Subsequent theorists have posited father engagement as a complex multi-dimensional construct, reciprocal in nature, that acknowledges the significant role fathers play in their children's lives.

Applying a domestic violence lens to this understanding of father engagement requires a nuanced understanding of this context. The influences and impacts of fathers on their children can extend beyond their involvement in their daily lives. For example, Thiara and Humphreys (2017) have posited the concept of absent presence that captures the relentless reach of perpetrators of abuse. Their research highlights a range of ways that fear is experienced, including living in an atmosphere of unpredictability and fear. Therefore, fathers are not required to remain directly involved in their children's daily lives to create impact, exert influence and instil fear; the impact of their behaviour often reaching beyond the experience into their children's future. In considering the reciprocal nature of these relationships, Katz (2015) highlights the range of active roles children and young people play in the context of domestic violence, while Callaghan and Alexander (2015) note that children engage in strategic actions to de-escalate and divert abusive behaviour. Therefore, children and young people also potentially influence their father's trajectory.

This thesis is concerned with multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence, some through a professional lens. These fathers are influenced by and influence professionals and the wider systems within which they practice. Therefore, for the purposes of this doctoral thesis father engagement in the context of domestic violence is conceptualised as father presence and absence in the lives of their children, reciprocal in nature and extending beyond their children to the wider systems that shape and influence our lives.

2.3.2 Theoretical lens on father engagement in the context of domestic violence

In considering the intersection between fatherhood and domestic violence, this thesis draws on key tenets of prominent theories relevant to fathering in the context of domestic violence including feminist, social cognitive learning, intersectionality and systems theories. Although at junctures converging and diverging, each of these theories provides valuable insight to various aspects of this complex experience.

Fundamental to feminist theory is that historical, economic and social processes operate indirectly and directly to promote and sustain a patriarchal society (Lawson, 2012). Feminist theory views domestic violence as a consequence of gendered patterns of power and privilege in society promoting the subordination of women, achieved and sustained by the use and misuse of power and control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Schechter, 1982; Yllö & Bograd, 1988). This use and misuse of power and control is viewed as instrumental behaviour, inflicting harm, instilling fear and entrapping victim-survivors (Stark, 2007). Using fear as a strategy to create and sustain control is well documented (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017; Cheng & Lo, 2019; Humphreys et al., 2019) ensuring that the abuse remains obscured, creating challenges in identifying and responding to domestic violence. Viewing the experience of domestic violence through a feminist lens facilitates the identification and subsequent targeting of these patterns of behaviour toward change (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith & Fellin, 2018). Many behavioural change programmes draw from feminist concepts focusing on violence used instrumentally by men to exert control of their female partners (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Understanding and recognising the behaviour as the use and misuse of power and control provides additional protection against collusive practice, supporting perpetrators of domestic violence to take responsibility for their behaviour and choices (Gatfield, O'Leary, Meyer & Baird, 2022).

Social cognitive learning theory posits learning is gleaned from the social environment (Bandura, 1986). This learning is achieved through observation, imitation and modelling. Therefore, domestic violence is understood as

learned through observation. This is of particular interest to this thesis given that some research has posited a relationship between experiencing domestic violence in childhood and future perpetration and victimisation (Heinze, Hsieh, Thulin, Howe, Miller & Zimmerman, 2021; Curtis, Harries, Pizzirani, Hyder, Baldwin, Mayshak, Walker, Toumbourou & Miller, 2023).

Intersectional theory examines the combination of gendered axes of power with other characteristics such as ethnicity, race, sexuality, ability, socioeconomic status and age and how these characteristics intersect and overlap, mutually shaping one another (Crenshaw, 1989). The interaction of these characteristics can influence access to opportunities and privileges, occurring within connected systems and power structures, for example, justice and child protection agencies and guiding legislation (Gatfield et al., 2022). Viewing the interplay of these characteristics through an intersectional lens in the context of engagement with domestically violent fathers provides a deeper understanding of the behaviours of perpetrators of domestic violence and appreciation of the uniqueness of the experiences of victim-survivors and the complexity of their help seeking journey.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory posits that human development is influenced by a series of interconnected environmental systems ranging from immediate surroundings to wider societal structures. These systems comprise microsystems, the immediate environment e.g., family, teachers, friends. The mesosystem involves interactions between the microsystems. Exosystems consist of other formal and informal social structures that influence the microsystems and mesosystems, for example child protection services. The macrosystem shapes beliefs, attitudes, ideologies and behaviours of societies, while the chronosystem relates to transitions over time. Drawing from this theory Heise (1994) adopted an integrated ecological approach specific to domestic violence conceptualising violence as a multifaceted phenomenon located within the interaction between personal, situational, and sociocultural factors.

According to ecological systems theory, these interconnected systems interact to influence and shape how people develop and respond which is of particular relevance to this thesis that seeks to explore father engagement

across these systems. Viewing father engagement in the context of domestic violence, reciprocal in nature, through an ecological lens enables us to consider the interplay within and between the systems and take a wider systemic view of the influence of and on perpetrators of domestic violence and the experience of victim-survivors. In considering an ecological lens of importance to note is that fathers may isolate their victim-survivors to ensure that their abuse is not known to the mesosystems and exosystems (Day & Bowen, 2015; Queensland Centre for Domestic & Family Violence Research, 2018). Similarly, Gatfield, O’Leary, Meyer and Baird (2022) assert that research on fathers who perpetrate domestic violence identifies their “strategic manipulation of service systems to ensure that abuse remains undetected or is framed as caused by the mother’s behaviour” (Gatfield et al., 2022, p 886). This observation is particularly relevant as the domestically abusive behaviour of fathers as risk is explored in the remainder of the chapter, beginning with attacking mothering.

2.3.3 Attacking Mothering

Abuse against mothers needs to be understood as abuse against children (Alexander, Humphreys, Wise & Zhou, 2022). According to Maher, Fitz-Gibbon, Meyer, Roberts and Pfitzner (2021), current research locates the undermining of the mother-child relationship as common in abusive relationships. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 domestically abusive men in Australia, Heward-Belle (2017) examined the ways in which these men assault women as mothers and attack their mothering. Heward-Belle (2017) found that this tactic was used instrumentally to exert power and control over women and children, grounded in hegemonic representations of the “good mother”, a mother who is deemed caring, loving and protective of her children. Echoing this observation, Maher et al., (2021, p. 660) asserted that mothers experiencing domestic violence are often judged negatively through normative paradigms of “good motherhood”, despite evidence that they are acting to protect their children and that the “unchallenged accounts of mothers as endlessly responsible for and responsive to their children

animate persistent discourses of mother blame in a wide range of contexts”. Specifically with regard to mothering in the context of domestic violence, this judgement may undermine relationships with their children and reduce the support available to them (Heward-Belle, 2017). From their research with 15 mothers in the UK, Stewart (2021) explored the ideology surrounding “good mother” and identified five main themes that emerged from this exploration. These themes included showing children they are loved and nurturing the child’s emotions; being warm, caring and supportive and spending time with the children; meeting the child’s basic care needs and looking after them; protecting children and keeping them safe and for the mother to do her best and put her children first.

More recently, Dekel and Abrahams (2023) in their study of 16 domestic violence victim-survivor mothers across three provinces in South Africa, found mothers experiencing a simultaneous loss of control over their mothering and an increased sense of responsibility as a parent. They also noted that abuse aimed at either the child or the mother, impacted the mother. The mothers in this study tended to judge themselves negatively against the normative paradigm of the ‘good mother’. Dekel and Abrahams (2023) also identified a range of examples of how the mother-child relationship is attacked. Examples included weaponising children against her (Monk & Bowen, 2021); humiliating and abusing her in front of her children; abusing her children and preventing her from comforting them; undermining her decisions and mothering role; withholding resources and threatening to report her to Child Protection Services. Attacks on the mother-child relationship can also extend beyond separation. In her study drawing from children and young people, mothers, fathers and a range of professionals, Holt (2017, p. 2049) advises that the continued post separation presence of perpetrators of abuse “may compromise the child’s recovery from the experience of domestic abuse due to continuing abuse and undermining of the maternal role and mother–child relationship”. According to Monk and Bowen (2021) decades of research demonstrate that when women are targeted as mothers, domestically abusive men use contact and the family court system to continue intimidation, harassment and retaliation post separation. This use of systems by perpetrators of abuse is well established

(Miller & Smolter, 2011; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017; Elizabeth, 2017; Douglas, 2018; Miller & Manzer, 2021; Archer-Kuhn, Hughes, Saini, Tam, Beltrano & Still, 2024). In her study of custody stalking drawing from 12 mothers whose contact with their children had been subject to attempts to prevent or reduce this contact, Elizabeth (2017) found that all of the participants had been maliciously reported to Child Protection Services by their ex-partners. These malicious reports had resulted, in some cases, with reduced or loss of custody. Echoing these findings, Douglas and Fell (2020), focusing on 11 participants of their 65-participant study cohort who had been the subject of malicious Child Protection reporting or threats to report, found that those reported had experienced substantial negative impacts. Archer-Kuhn et al. (2024), concluded from the findings of their study with 20 mothers with children under four years of age, that courts and helping institutions can either support or impede the efforts of mothers to protect their children.

Monk and Bowen (2021, p. 23), drawing from qualitative accounts of six women who described having their children turned against them by abusive ex-partners, found that “strategic interference in the mother–child relationship is achieved through: the direct and indirect use and abuse of children, undermining mothers via mother-blaming; exploiting professionals, and capitalising on patriarchal institutions and mother-blaming theories, systems and practices”. Tactics that disrupt the mother-child relationship can have long term detrimental impact on the child with Brandt (2023) asserting that this disruption is likely to produce psychopathology in children. However, consistent with some studies (Katz, 2014, 2015) despite attacks on the mother-child relationship, children and mothers may provide support to each other in promoting recovery. In their Canadian qualitative study of safety strategies used by mothers and children coping together with domestic violence, Winfield, Hilton, Poon, Straatman and Jaffe, (2024), found that mothers and children worked together to keep each other safe, to reassure each other and to work towards leaving the abusive relationship. This is particularly important as Katz (2015b) and others assert that when considering the recovery of children from domestic violence, a positive mother-child relationship is deemed as one of the most important factors.

The empirical evidence on how children experience living with domestic violence is growing, with convergent findings that this experience is as harmful for them as other forms of abuse (Gartland, Conway, Giallo, Mensah, Cook, Hegarty, Herrman, Nicholson, Reilly, Hiscock, Sciberras & Brown, 2021). There is a growing acknowledgement that children are direct victims of domestic violence and abuse in their own right and require support and protection (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith & Fellin, 2016), with the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) in England and Wales recognising their distinct status. Indeed, the risk presence of abusive fathers in children's lives can begin before they are born.

This next section sharpens the lens of interest to provide an overview of the empirical evidence concerning what is known about the risks associated with the presence of abusive fathers in children's lives. Following a brief discussion on the different ways in which children can experience risk in the context of domestic violence, this next section focuses on risk through a developmental lens and commences with the presence of risk for children who live with domestic violence during pregnancy. The risks for children and young people of having abusive father presence in their lives is then explored before this section moves on to a discussion on the risks associated with post-separation contact for children.

2.3.4 Risk presence and type of abuse

When children and young people live with domestic violence and abuse, they live with a whole range of risks. Historically, physical violence has been foregrounded as the primary focus in assessing risk by professionals. In their research, Hunter, Barnett and Kaganas, (2018) reflect on the practice of only considering serious physical violence as a relevant consideration to a decision on child contact. Previous research with Judges and Lawyers conducted by Hunter and Barnett (2013) captured the widely held belief that violent men could be 'good enough' fathers. The area of children and domestic violence is often still primarily grounded in the physical incident model, with Stark (2009, p. 293) asserting that 'virtually all domestic violence

research and intervention is predicated on this model'. Stark (2007) asserted that the physical incident model is harmful because it ignores the many non-physical forms of abuse inherent to coercive control, as well as the ongoing nature of the domestic violence. Katz (2015), based on her study with 15 mothers and 15 of their children in the UK who were living separately from their perpetrator of abuse, found that children and young people are harmed by and resist more than physical abuse in the context of coercive control and that children experiencing this type of abuse may require different supports. Katz (2015, p. 57) urges that "moving beyond a physical incident model", would enable us to develop deeper understandings of these children's lived experiences and their support needs".

Coercive control and psychological abuse take place in familial contexts, where children can be enrolled in coercive behaviours, used as tools to exert control, and can be direct victims of controlling and coercive acts (Hardesty, Crossman, Haselschwerdt, Raffaelli, Ogolsky & Johnson, 2015). Westmarland and Kelly (2013) conducted interviews with seventy-three men on programmes, with their partners/ex-partners, programme staff, and research commissioners and funders to explore what 'success' meant from participant perspectives in terms of interventions for perpetrators of abuse in the UK. In accordance with their findings, data from mothers' interviews suggested that children's 'space for action' was narrowed by perpetrators of abuse/fathers' coercive control and was also narrowed by children themselves as a way of avoiding abuse (Westmarland & Kelly, 2013, p. 1101).

Katz's (2016) qualitative study of 15 mothers and their children (ages 10–14) highlighted similar outcomes for children (e.g., internalising and externalising behaviours) whose mothers experienced coercive control, but in the absence of physical violence, when compared with children whose mothers reported frequent and/or severe physical violence. Jouriles and McDonald (2015) interviewed 107 mothers (82% married) of 7–10-year-old children in the US who had experienced physical violence in the last six months. In multivariate analyses which controlled for mothers' education, they concluded that frequency of physical violence, psychological abuse, and coercive control

were all related to both mother and child reports of the child's externalising and internalising behaviours. Based on the overall findings, the authors concluded that the processes underlying the violence (i.e., the coercive control dynamics), rather than the violence itself, are associated with child adjustment difficulties.

According to Pleck's (2010) revised tripartite model, paternal control includes a range of parenting behaviours that keep children safe and help them learn discipline. Although paternal control can serve as a protective factor, higher levels of control or intrusive parenting are associated with poor child and adolescent well-being (Barber, 1996). Viewing risk through the prism of physical incidents can obscure the actual level of risk related to behaviours of perpetrators of abuse. This can lead to misinformed and incomplete risk assessments and can determine subsequent, perhaps ill-informed decisions. In their review of Domestic Homicide reviews, in England and Wales, Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly (2016) found that control was present in 92% of cases, obsession in 94% and isolation from family and friends in 78% of domestic homicides.

The risk presence of domestically abusive fathers can begin before a child is conceived. Reproductive coercion essentially removes women's' autonomy in terms of becoming and remaining pregnant. It manifests across a range of physical, sexual, psychological, financial and other strategies to control conception and pregnancy outcomes. Examples can include forced pregnancy, contraception sabotage and forced termination. Moulton, Corona, Vaughan and Bohren (2021) in their evidence synthesis of 33 studies across twelve countries in Europe, South Asia, the Asia pacific, North and South America and Africa, found that reproductive coercion manifested in a range of behaviours including contraceptive sabotage, pregnancy pressure and pregnancy outcomes. These controlling behaviours can prevent women from exercising their reproductive rights and can determine conception and subsequent pregnancy outcomes resulting in ante natal risk. The next section explores this in more detail.

2.3.5 Domestic Violence & Pregnancy

Domestic violence can occur across the lifespan, however the prevalence of domestic violence among women of reproductive age is reported as higher than at other stages of life (Hasstedt & Rowan, 2016; Sardinha, Maheu-Giroux, Stöckl, Meyer & García-Moreno, 2022). Specifically, the prevalence of abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner during pregnancy is estimated at 25% according to the systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Román-Gálvez, Martín-Peláez, Fernández-Félix, Zamora, Khan & Bueno-Cavanillas (2021). 155 studies were included, of which 44 (28%) met two-thirds of the quality criteria. A physical abuse prevalence of 9.2%, a psychological abuse prevalence of 18.7% and a sexual abuse prevalence of 5.5% was found. Where several types of IPV were reported combined, the prevalence of any kind of IPV (118 studies, 124,838 participants) was 25.0%. IPV rates varied within and between continents, the highest being Africa and the lowest, Europe. Román-Gálvez et al., (2021) concluded from their research that routine systematic antenatal detection should be applied globally.

Pregnancy can occur as a consequence of rape, with 2.1 million women in the U.S. reported to become pregnant as a result of intimate partner rape (Hasstedt & Rowan, 2016). Research also suggests that pregnancy can act as a trigger for domestic violence or exacerbate ongoing existing violence (Mueller & Tronick 2019). In a study of 113 patients in Italy by Bo, Canavase, Magnano, Rondana, Castagna and Gino (2020), an analysis of their medical records found that 20 participants disclosed that the abuse escalated during their pregnancy. The experience of abuse during pregnancy can result in a range of deficits for children that can have long term impacts including prematurity, low birth weight, and newborns considered physically small for their gestational age (Donovan, Spracklen, Schweizer, Ryckman & Saftlas 2016).

Finnbogadóttir, Baird and Thies-Lagergren, (2020) employed a longitudinal cohort design across 1939 pregnant women to explore childbirth outcomes in a Swedish population of women reporting a history of violence including

domestic violence during pregnancy. Utilising two questionnaires in early and late pregnancy and drawing on medical records of 1694 mothers who gave birth, Finnbogadóttir et al., (2020) found that Infants born to a mother who reported a history of violence, were at significant risk of being born premature < 37 weeks of gestation compared to infants born to mothers with no history of violence ($p = 0,049$). Donovan et al., (2016), drawing on their meta-analysis of 50 studies comparing the rates of one or more adverse birth outcome in women who experienced IPV during pregnancy and those who did not, asserted that pregnant women experiencing domestic violence are predisposed to higher levels of stress related hormones, accelerated through sexual and physical trauma. These elevated stress hormones can lead to preterm birth and low birth weight that directly affects the immune system of both mother and infant. Donovan et al. (2016) also found that premature rupture of membranes, uterine contractions, placental damage and genitourinary infections are among some of the adverse outcomes attributable to sexual and physical assault.

A history of sexual violence may lead to fear of childbirth (Schei, Lukasse, Ryding, Campbell, Karro, Kristjansdotti et al., 2014). This fear of childbirth increases the risk of both emergency and planned caesarean section which elevates the risk of infection for both mother and child and significantly increases the need for recovery time. These elevated risks for mothers include blood loss and clotting, prolonged pelvic pain, injury to surrounding organs, anaesthesia related risk and placenta previa and accreta and tearing in future pregnancies. The elevated risk for babies can include accidental injury through cutting and forceps use and transient tachypnoea of the newborn (TTN). A history of emotional abuse also significantly increases the risk of having a caesarean section, irrespective of whether it was a planned or an emergency caesarean section, with mothers 1.5 times more likely to have a Caesarean birth (OR 1.50 Finnbogadóttir et al., 2020). Additionally, pregnant women who experience domestic violence are more likely to experience reproductive health complications, such as unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and induced abortion (Prakash, Patra & Khanna, 2018).

Women experiencing domestic violence during pregnancy and postpartum are also at increased greater risk of lifelong health consequences (Donovan et al., 2016). International studies have identified that pregnant women who experience domestic violence have a significantly increased risk for depression in the perinatal period (Halim, Beard, Mesic, Patel, Henderson & Hibberd, 2019) and stillbirth (Pastor-Moreno, Ruiz-Pérez, Henares-Montiel & Petrova, 2020).

The risk of schizophrenia for children has been found to be particularly associated with severe stress in the first trimester of pregnancy (Guo, He, Song, & Zheng, 2019). Suh, Chang, Lee, Yang and Hong's (2017) review of birth cohort and national registry studies in Korea summarised current evidence on the impact of prenatal maternal distress on the development of offspring's allergic diseases. A total of 20 studies were selected: 17 prospective cohort studies and 3 national registry studies. Prenatal maternal distress had a close association with wheezing/asthma in 17 studies and atopic dermatitis in five studies. Two studies reported good relationships with both asthma and atopic dermatitis. One cohort study assessed the possible relationship between maternal distress and allergic rhinitis. Madigan, Oatley, Racine, Fearon, Schumacher, Akbari, Cooke and Tarabulsky's (2018) meta-analysis of 71 studies focusing on maternal prenatal depression and anxiety and the impact on child socioemotional development, found an association between prenatal stress and increased risk for child emotional problems, especially depression and anxiety; for neurodevelopmental and psychopathological disorders, including intellectual and cognitive impairment (attention deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD), autism and in some studies schizophrenia). Difficult temperament, sleep problems and fearfulness were also associated with higher maternal stress during pregnancy. There is also an increased risk for other outcomes, including preterm delivery and reduced telomere length, possibly indicative of an accelerated life history (Lautarescu, Craig & Glover 2020).

The complex processes involved in brain development in utero can be influenced by levels of maternal stress. Hiscox, Fairchild, Donald, Groenewold, Koenc, Roos, Narr, Lawrence, Hoffmand, Wedderburn,

Barnetth, Zar, Stein and Halligan, (2023) explored exposure to domestic violence during pregnancy in South Africa among 143 mothers at 28-32 weeks gestation. Infants underwent a common medical process of structural and diffusion magnetic resonance imaging at a mean age of three weeks. Hiscox et al., (2023) found that domestic violence during pregnancy was associated with sex-specific alterations in brain structure among young infants at the time of imaging; a larger amygdala volume in females, but not in males and a larger caudate nucleus in males, but not in females. This indicated that severe maternal distress in the antenatal period may impact early brain development and maturation in utero. Consistent with previous studies, domestic violence during pregnancy has been associated with larger amygdala volumes in females, but not males (Graham, Rasmussen, Entringer, Ben Ward, Rudolph, Gilmore, Styner, Wadhwa, Fair & Buss, 2019; Stoye, Blesa, Sullivan, Galdi, Lamb, Black, Quigley, Thrippleton, Bastin, Reynolds & Boardman, 2020) and a larger caudate nucleus in males, but not females. Both structures, the amygdala and caudate nucleus are crucial for emotion regulation and cognitive control. The amygdala plays an essential role in emotional processing, affective/mood state, social behaviours and fear and vigilance (Fox & Shackman, 2019; Putnam & Chang, 2021), while the caudate nucleus provides a key role in executive functioning, socio-emotional processing and sensory integration (Choi, Son & Park, 2022). Caudate structure and function have recently been identified as a marker of severe neurodevelopmental delay within the first 2 years of life (Hüls, Wedderburn, Groenewold, Gladish, Jones, Koen, MacIsaac, Lin, Ramadori, Epstein, Donald, Kobor, Zar & Stein, 2022). Similarly, Graham et al. (2019) recruited 70 women in early pregnancy and 45 infants born after 34 weeks gestation and assessed maternal cortisol concentrations over four days in early, mid, and late gestation. Resting state functional connectivity magnetic resonance imaging of the neonatal amygdala was examined, and children's internalising behaviour problems was reported by mothers at 24 months. Graham et al., (2019) found that elevated prenatal maternal cortisol predicts stronger amygdala functional connectivity to other brain regions and to sensory processing, during the neonatal period, and higher internalising symptoms in girls, but not boys. These structural brain alterations prompted

by prenatal maternal stress were observed in infancy to adulthood. They have been found to vary for males and females with implications for sex-specific psychopathology (Hicks, Swales, Garcia, Driver & Davis, 2019). An emergent growing literature suggests that there may be lasting neurological impact that can have implications for children's lifelong well-being.

The experience of domestic violence can affect the timing, frequency and adequacy of prenatal and post-natal care (Islam, Broidy, Baird & Mazerolle, 2017), thus increasing risk to both the mother and infant. Late entry to antenatal care can reduce opportunities for identification of difficulties and addressing same. Similarly insufficient or absent post-natal care can limit monitoring of the recovery of women and the development of infants, creating missed opportunities to remedy difficulties. In addition to missing post-natal appointments (Danilack, Brousseau, Paulo, Matteson & Clark 2019), postpartum victim-survivors may experience elevated risk of post-natal depression (Ankerstjerne, Laizer, Andreasen, Normann, Wu, Linde & Rasch, 2022) and encounter issues with breastfeeding (Normann, Bakiewicz, Madsen, Khan, Rasch & Linde, (2020) and attachment (Zare, Ghaffari, Nahidi, Nasiri & Masjedi, 2022). They not only have to navigate their own experiences of abuse but also encounter the additional challenge of protecting the newborn infant who begins their own experience of abuse in infancy. The next section explores these concerns.

2.3.6 Children & Young People

Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers experiencing domestic violence exhibit a range of challenges arising from their experience of domestic violence. Early evidenced associations between the experience and eating, mood and sleep disturbances have been established (Layzer, Goodson & Delange, 1986). Alessi and Hearn (2007) found higher irritability, increased crying and screaming, poorer sleeping habits and general health among infants experiencing domestic violence. Critically, Zeanah and Gleason (2015) in their review of infant trauma studies literature with a focus on reactive

attachment disorder and disinhibited social engagement disorder, found that the perceived threat to a caregiver was associated with the most severe symptoms exhibited by infants including increased fear and hyperarousal. Further to increased fear and arousal, developmental disruption and regression has also been found in toileting and language (Mueller & Tronick 2019).

Early childhood experiences of domestic violence have a cumulative impact (Graham Bermann & Perkins, 2010), for example increasing the risk of internalising and externalising behaviours in later childhood and adolescence (Vu, Jouriles, McDonald & Rosenfield, 2016). The risk of developing internalising challenges, for example, anxiety, depression and withdrawal, is associated with the infant's increased attention to threatening stimuli that occur in the context of domestic violence (Miller, 2015). The early and cumulative impact of experiencing domestic violence has a substantial impact on the infant, also increasing the risk for acquired externalising behaviour (Graham Bermann & Perkins, 2010). The development of the Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis, a critical stress response system and brain structure relating to seeing and hearing, the audio and visual cortex, is disrupted by adverse experiences (Mueller & Tronick 2019). Research demonstrates that exposure to adversity during the first five years of life can result in enduring impact on brain development (Bick & Nelson, 2016). Focusing on the caregiver–infant dyad as a buffer or transducer of resource enhancing or depleting factors that shape psychobiological development, Tronick (2017) asserts that in terms of brain development, there are two significant contributors with regard to primary caregiver interaction: a secure ongoing relationship or attachment between caregiver and child; and in the presence of a stressor, a sensitive co-regulation with the caregiver to promote independent emotional regulation. This secure relationship protects the developing brain from the detrimental impact of stress hormones (Tronick, 2017).

An insecure attachment has been associated with both externalising behaviours and internalising challenges (Madigan, Brumariu, Villani, Atkinson & Lyons-Ruth, 2016), emotional dysregulation (Cooke,

Kochendorfer, Stuart-Parrigon, Koeh, & Kerns, 2018) and challenges with regard to intimate relationships in adulthood and relationships generally (Miga, Hare, Allen & Manning, 2010; Seibert & Kerns, 2015). In their review of 15 studies focusing on child attachment, Noonan and Pilkington (2020) found that experience of domestic violence was significantly associated with less secure attachment. This finding was most evident among infants, consistent with attachment theory that identifies infancy as a critical time of attachment development (Bowlby, 1973). According to Noonan and Pilkington (2020), a secure ongoing relationship with their caretaker is fundamental for successful development as they move through their childhood.

Childhood and Adolescence

Domestic violence can disrupt development in childhood, manifesting in educational, social and psychological impacts (Geyer & Ogbonnaya, 2021). According to Lamela, Jongenelen, Pinto, Levendosky, et al. (2021), children exhibit fear, encounter difficulties in interacting with others, tend to be more aggressive in their play and struggle to sustain feelings of peace and calm. Children and young people who experience domestic violence have greater risk of a range of enduring difficulties including mental health difficulties throughout their lives. In their study, Sharratt, Mason, Kirkman, Willmott, McDermott, Timmins & Wager (2023) utilised latent class analysis to discern four classes among nine maltreatment subtypes in the sample of 2813 children and young people between the ages of 10 and 17 in the UK. These classes consisted of a low victimisation class (59.3%), an emotional neglect and abuse class (19.0%), a high verbal domestic violence class (10.5%) and a domestic violence and maltreatment class (11.2%). Utilising self-report measures across domestic violence, victimisation, depression, anxiety and suicide ideation, Sharratt et al. (2023) found that in comparison to the low victimisation class, the emotional neglect and abuse class, the high verbal domestic violence class and particularly the maltreatment and domestic violence class reported higher symptoms of depression and anxiety and an increased likelihood of non-suicidal self-injury, suicide ideation and suicide attempt.

Many negative outcomes in later life, including impairments in physical and mental health, learning and socio-behavioural outcomes, have been associated with childhood trauma (Shonkoff, Garner, Siegel, Dobbins, Earls, Garner, McGuinn, Pascoe & Wood, 2012; Ballard, Van Eck, Musci, Hart, Storr, Breslau & Wilcox, 2015). Continuing with mental health outcomes; depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and anti-social personality disorder have been attributed to childhood trauma (McLafferty, Ross, Waterhouse-Bradley & Armour, 2019). Traumatic experiences (TEs) are reported to impact on the psychopathology of children and young people and can be separated into emotional or internalising problems and behavioural or externalising problems (Grasso, Petitclerc, Henry, McCarthy, Wakschlag, Briggs, Petitclerc & Briggs-Gowan, 2016). These behavioural problems e.g., aggressive and delinquent behaviours may prompt additional adverse consequences and may increase maladaptive behaviours in adolescence (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

In 2020, Liang, Zhou, Ruzek and Liu, conducted a large-scale cross-sectional survey across 15,890 migrant workers' children in China with a focus on traumatic experiences including injuries, accidents, vicarious trauma and interpersonal violence. Demographics and externalising and internalising behaviours were measured. Liang et al., (2020) identified four patterns of childhood trauma; low trauma exposure (60.4%); vicarious trauma exposure (23.9%); domestic violence exposure (10.5%); and multiple trauma exposure (5.3%). Their results indicated that externalising and internalising behaviour were associated with domestic violence. Fong, Hawes and Allen, (2019) in their systematic review of 31 studies with a focus on Intimate Partner Violence and child externalising behaviour also identified increased risk for a variety of behavioural and psychological difficulties. These problems in relation to adjustment have been found to affect children and young people of all ages and can have an enduring effect. A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies conducted by Vu et al., (2016) reported prospective associations between children's exposure to IPV and both externalising and internalising behaviours. Butjosa, Camprodon-Rosanas, Aizpitarte, Alvarez-Segura, Albiac and Lacasa, (2024) recruited 194 parents and 104 child witnesses of domestic violence (WDV), 28 children diagnosed

with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and 62 children from the general population (GP). Interviews were conducted with all children and adapted for child witnesses of domestic violence (WDV). The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder- Child Behaviour Check List (PTSD-CBCL) was administered to all children. Echoing the findings of Vu et al. (2016), Butjosa et al. (2024) found that approximately 35% of children and adolescents exposed to domestic violence present with externalising and internalising behaviours, 45% of these reaching the threshold of clinical significance. Even after controlling for a child's trauma history, age and gender, there is a strong relationship between the level of exposure to IPV and children and young people's mental health functioning and behaviours (Roberts, Campbell, Ferguson & Crusto, 2013).

When children experience abuse by a caretaker, there is a risk they will develop more harmful trauma symptoms as well as additional trauma, when compared with children who have experienced potential traumatising events perpetrated by someone outside the family (Tang & Freyd, 2012; Kisiel, Fehrenbach, Torgersen, Stolbach, McClelland, Griffin & Burkman, 2014). Symptoms of post-traumatic stress are most likely to occur when the person causing the traumatic event is a trusted, loved person for the victim (Van der Kolk, 2005). Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Semel & Shapiro, (2002), assessed 111 adolescents and their mothers across a range of measures including: Severity of Violence Against Women Scales (domestic violence experience of mothers); the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Child abuse); a modified version of the Adult Attachment Scale (internalised model of relationships- adolescents); The Beck Depression Inventory (Maternal psychological functioning); Parenting Style Survey (Maternal parenting); the Perceived Social Support Scale (Social Support- adolescents); The Network of Relationships Inventory and the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (Peer relationships- adolescents). Levendosky et al., (2002) found that interpersonal trauma is simultaneously a physiological, psychological and relational event, leading to a sense of betrayal and a loss of trust. This exposure to interpersonal trauma has more psychosocial consequences than non-interpersonal trauma and is more associated with childhood post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) (Luthra, Abramovitz, Greenberg, Schoor,

Newcorn, Schmeidler, Levine, Nomura & Chemtob 2009). Guilt over failure to prevent or stop violence has been associated with PTSD severity among child victims of interpersonal violence (Kletter, Weems & Carrion, 2009).

Telman, Overbeek, de Schipper, Lamers-Winkelmann, Finkenauer & Schuengel, (2016) examined the association between child abuse and neglect, other traumatic experiences, children's post-traumatic stress (PTS) symptoms and interparental violence (IPV) across 120 children and young people and their care-giving parent. The moderating role of family functioning in the aftermath of IPV was also examined. A range of scales were used to assess Children's trauma symptoms (Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC)); Severity of IPV Exposure (the Conflict Tactics Scales-2); Chronicity of IPV; Child Abuse and Neglect (the Conflict Tactics Scale Parent-child (CTSPC)); Other Potentially Traumatic Experiences (the Parent Report of Traumatic Impact); Children's Feelings of Emotional Security in the Family (the Security in the Family System scale); and Parenting Stress (the Parenting Stress Index (PSI). Telman et al., (2016) found high clinical levels of posttraumatic stress in 21% of the 120 children in their Netherlands sample. They found that the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms was related to the duration of the domestic violence experience, the frequency and the age of the children. They proposed that younger children generally have more difficulty interpreting abuse and domestic violence. They are also more dependent on parents and may feel less supported by their parents, which could generate increased stress and therefore more susceptibility to symptoms of PTSD. In relation to gender differences, Georgsson, Almqvist and Broberg's, (2011) study of 14 children between 8 and 12 years in Sweden, found that approximately 67% of children with experiences of DV had scores at or above the clinical cut-off for PTSD. They also found that girls appeared more negatively affected when the abuser was their biological father. These girls reported both more general mental health problems and more trauma symptoms than did girls who experienced abuse against their mother performed by another partner. According to Butjosa et al. (2024) the consequences of PTSD include an elevated risk of other psychological challenges including suicide, reduced

economic and social opportunities, significant impairment of role functioning and earlier onset of chronic diseases, in particular cardiovascular.

To determine the incidence of PTSD among trauma-exposed children and adolescents, Alisic, Zalta, van Wesel, Larsen, Hafstad, Hassanpour and Smid (2014) conducted a systemic review of 72 peer-reviewed articles based on 43 independent samples (n=3563). Alisic et al. (2014) found that the overall rate of PTSD was 15.9% which varied according to gender and type of trauma. Boys who experienced non-interpersonal trauma were found to be least at risk of PTSD (8.4%), while girls who experienced interpersonal trauma demonstrated the highest risk of PTSD (32.9%). Again, this prevalence can be explained by the interpersonal nature of traumatic experiences, as children are harmed more by being close to those directly involved, the perpetrator of abuse and the adult victim. Children and young people may be pressured to divulge details about their mother and may have their relationship with their mother undermined (Holt, 2017). Prevailing pro-contact attitudes may force the child to engage in contact against their wishes (Holt, 2020) and conversely, they may not be allowed to engage with services that they need through denial of parental consent (Kuruppu, Novy, Fetter, Oo & Hegarty, 2023).

Elevated emotional reactivity and dysregulation have been linked to the development of psychosocial difficulty in the future (Menefee, Ledoux & Johnston, 2022). It has also been linked to future involvement in violent relationships and is considered as a key factor in the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence (Ehrensaft & Cohen, 2012; Harding, Morelen, Thomassin, Bradbury & Shaffer, 2013; Siegel, 2013). In their study drawing from 850 participants across twelve waves of data over seventeen years, Heinze, Hsieh, Thulin, Howe, Miller and Zimmerman (2021) found that adolescent experience of domestic violence predicted a higher risk for domestic violence experience over fifteen years later. They also found that domestic violence was consistently associated with mental distress in emerging adulthood. Domestic violence was moderately correlated with alcohol/marijuana use at both baseline and in emerging adulthood. Curtis et al. (2023) conducted a 5-year update of a previously conducted systematic

review on the longitudinal predictors of domestic violence perpetration and victimisation. Further to their systematic review of 12 studies, Curtis et al. (2023) found that family of origin risks, child and adolescent abuse, adolescent peer risks and behavioural problems were identified as significant predictors of domestic violence perpetration and victimisation. According to Heinze, Hsieh, Aiyer, Buu and Zimmerman (2020), adolescent experience of domestic violence may influence how they understand and engage with others which may have enduring influence on how they subsequently engage in early adult relationships.

Children and young people are also at increased risk of physical health difficulties (Cleaver, Unell & Aldgate, 2011); substance misuse, and dating violence victimisation and perpetration (Karlsson, Temple, Weston & Le, 2016); housing instability and homelessness (Bai, Collins, Fischer & Crampton, 2019); later child maltreatment perpetration (Anderson, Edwards, Silver & Johnson, 2018); fear for the safety of their siblings or themselves (Humphreys et al., 2019); and increased risk for removal by child welfare systems (Bassuk, Hart & Donovan, 2020). Children experiencing domestic violence are also at risk of being subjected to direct violence. They may intervene in abuse hoping to deter its occurrence. They may also be in close proximity to their mothers at the time of the attack and are hurt as a consequence. Children may also be deliberately abused as part of the abuse against their mothers and vice versa (McGee, 2000).

The experience of living with domestic violence and abuse pervades the family and has a negative impact on patterns of relating throughout the household (Vetere & Cooper, 2008; Dallos & Vetere, 2012). According to Bancroft, Silverman and Ritchie, (2012), men who abuse their partner also compromise their parenting capacity to care for and protect children. In addition, children and young people regularly experience additional intersecting risks. For example, Rossman (2000) identified the 'Adversity Package' that encompassed: unemployment, parental mental health, parental substance use, social isolation, involvement in crime, child abuse and homelessness. Almost twenty-five years later, this package continues to resonate (Bai et al., 2019). Childhood homelessness, which can be directly

attributed to domestic violence is, according to Anthony, Vincent and Shin (2018), associated with poor outcomes in the domains of social-emotional development, behavioural and physical health, academic achievement, and family stability. In the context of a housing crisis this risk is further magnified. Additional risk for families experiencing domestic violence includes financial instability and poverty arising from economic abuse, for example the withholding of maintenance (Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). One in five⁸¹ women in the UK has experienced economic abuse by a current or former partner in the past 12 months (Surviving Economic Abuse, 2024).

2.3.7 Post separation contact as a context of risk for father involvement

Even in separation, fathers often seek and achieve contact despite an evidenced history of abuse (Holt, 2020; James-Hanman & Holt, 2021). This contact generally occurs in the absence of the mitigating influence and intervention of the protective parent. Remaining in domestically abusive relationships to protect children in this context has been cited by many survivors of abuse. According to Holt (2020), despite the established correlation between domestic abuse and child abuse, and between post-separation contact and continued abuse, contact is rarely denied. Harne (2011, p. 65) asserts that the conviction that father involvement correlates unreservedly with children's welfare 'has overridden children and mothers' rights to protection' and has 'compromised their safety as a result', with the drive towards father involvement resulting in their ongoing presence or 'absent presence' in children and mothers' lives (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017). Morrison (2015) further observes that a preoccupation with making contact happen may result in contact decisions that do not fully assess the risks posed by a father who perpetrates domestic abuse. A study conducted by Macdonald (2017) analysing family court responses to child welfare reports in the UK, found that even with evidence of domestic violence and concerns expressed by child welfare agencies about children's safety and welfare,

⁸¹ [EA stats and facts sheet - V2 \(survivingeconomicabuse.org\)](https://www.survivingeconomicabuse.org)

contact with fathers was still promoted. Evidence also demonstrates that women remain at risk of domestic abuse following separation, and that contact may provide opportunities for abuse to continue (Holt, 2013). In families that have separated, child contact can provide a context in which the abuse of women and children is perpetuated (Stanley et al., 2011; Radford, Hester, Stanley & Humphreys, 2015). This concerning experience that can escalate existing risk for children and their mothers has elicited much criticism with regard to decision making in this context. It occurs in the absence of the expressed views of children, who are often not given voice or visibility in this context. Children themselves, when asked, can express clear views about the risks associated with and indeed the value of contact (Holt, 2015). However, continued father involvement via contact continues to give precedence to the father-child relationship despite evidence demonstrating that children who do not have contact with abusive fathers report feeling safer and more secure (Holt, 2018). It is a source of ongoing fear, risk and exhaustion for those trying to navigate separation with elevated risks including child abduction, serious injury and death.

2.3.8 Domestic Violence and lethal implications

Children are not only present as affected-observers, but domestic violence can also escalate to direct involvement in the violence, which carries with it the risk of child homicide (Reif & Jaffe, 2019). Domestic homicides are usually the culmination of a long-term history of DVA (Sharps-Jeffs & Kelly, 2016). The harm inflicted on child survivors of domestic homicide is likely to be long-term and severe (Alisic, Groot, Snetselaar, Stroeken, Hehenkamp & van de Putte, 2017), requiring lifelong access to therapeutic support at various life transitions and developmental stages (Kurdi, Devaney, Houghton, Eastwood, Frederick, Joy, Marinkovic Chavez, Sakthiakumaran & Alisic et al., 2024). In their study drawing from 32 participants across three categories: those with lived experience of parental loss through domestic homicide; current or former caregivers to those who have experienced this loss and professionals who have worked with those who have experienced

loss in this context, Kurdi et al. (2024) identified three critical themes. These three themes relate to circumstances that require particular attention when responding to children and young people with lived experience of loss in this context: children's presence at the time of the murder; relatedness to the perpetrator of abuse and relationships with the wider family, and biological relatedness to the perpetrator of abuse and the response from others. As highlighted by Jaffe, Campbell, Hamilton and Juodis, (2012), children also lose their lives in some cases.

A comprehensive review conducted of child homicides in Canada conducted by Dawson (2015) found that 1612 children had been killed by their parents between 1961 and 2011, many of which occurred within the context of ongoing domestic violence. Websdale (1999) identified three antecedents to child domestic homicide, which include a history of child abuse, prior family involvement with agencies, and domestic violence within the family. Other important factors include past child abduction or threats of abduction, and threats of killing the child (Websdale 1999). In reviews of child homicides in other jurisdictions there appears to be a pattern of multiple risk factors including a history of domestic violence, parental mental health problems, and substance abuse (Brandon, 2009). Reviews of the literature on paternal filicide (killing of children by a father) point to more men killing children as an act of retaliation for the mother leaving (Hamilton, Jaffe & Campbell, 2013). Two rapid reviews of DHRs in 2013 and in 2016 identified missed opportunities for safeguarding children (Home Office, 2013, 2016a). Sanders-McDonagh and Neville's (2014) analysis of thirteen DHRs from the West Midlands recommended improved collaboration between children's and adults' services. This review also noted that fear of losing children to the care system was highlighted as a barrier to seeking help for domestic violence. In addition, in over a third of DHRs analysed, child safeguarding issues were identified (Sharps-Jeffs & Kelly 2016). They also found that, for practitioners, 'holding both women and children, and their relationship, in view is the challenge' (Sharps-Jeffs & Kelly, 2016, p. 72).

In a qualitative review of 15 annual domestic violence death review committee (DVDRC) reports from the United States and Canada, Jaffe and

Juodis (2006) identified three scenarios in which children were killed: indirectly as a result of attempting to protect a parent during a violent episode; directly as revenge against the partner who decided to end the relationship or for some other perceived betrayal; or directly/indirectly as part of an overall murder-suicide plan by a parent who decides to kill the entire family. Contact arrangements, both formal and informal, surfaced as a theme in a third of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) reviewed by Stanley, Chantler & Robbins (2019). Stanley et al. (2019) reviewed this subsample of 55 reports relating to children and young people drawn from 142 available reports in England and Wales during 2011-2016. Contact was evidenced as a key mechanism to sustain control of mothers, children and young people post separation. According to Stanley et al. (2019) contact was mentioned but not explored in the majority of reports. However, three reports specifically identified child contact as a mechanism to sustain control or coercion; four reports identified contact linked with abduction threats; two identified fear of the perpetrator of abuse and contact resistance and a further three evidenced failure to identify contact associated risk. Other established risk factors that increase the risk of familicide were highlighted by Boyd, Sutton, Dawson, Zecha, Poon, Straatman, and Jaffe (2024). These included a history of domestic violence and actual or threatened separation. Boyd et al. (2024) analysed 26 incidents of familicide that occurred in Canada between 2010 and 2019. Some research has found that these factors similarly place children at risk of homicide. The presence of current child custody/access disputes among parents has also been identified as a risk factor for domestic homicides of children (Myers, Lee, Montplaisir, Lazarou, Safarik, Chan & Beaugard, 2021).

Graham, Jun, Kim, Power, Devaney, Frederick and Betz (2024) recently conducted a scoping review of 60 articles published between 1986-2022, that focused on child fatality in the context of current or past IPV. These studies originated across 23 countries. There were two predominant and distinct groups among articles reviewed: children killed by a parent or other adult caregiver; and adolescents killed by an intimate partner. Most articles (56.6%) found that murdered children were either biological or stepchildren of the person who killed them, with the larger proportion being biological

children. Graham et al., (2024) also found three distinct groups of perpetrators of domestic violence, the most significant in terms of percentage was current or former intimate partners of a child's mother, either biologically related to the child or not, who harmed the child (93.3%). In their recent study of consequences relating to child homicide between 1985 and 2018 in Canada, Johnson and Dawson (2023) found that based on 603 cases familial perpetrators of domestic violence were less likely to be convicted of murder.

When we consider the lethal implications of domestic violence, we should also be cognisant of the recognition of the experiences of children and young people in terms of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as ACEs are also associated with premature death during adulthood. In a recent study by O'Súilleabháin, D'Arcy-Bewick, Fredrix et al. (2024) drawing from 6218 participants across a 24-year period, the presence of Adverse Childhood Experiences were found to significantly increase mortality rates. O'Súilleabháin et al. (2024) suggested that ACEs may affect mortality risk, partially through lower self-acceptance and purpose during adulthood thus providing a potential direction for future intervention that may increase both the quality and longevity of lives. In addition, when considering lethal implications, almost one in 5 of the women who died by suicide had a known history of domestic abuse (MBRRACE 2021).

2.3.9 Risk factors, Theory & Resilience

Risk factors are defined as adversities or stressors associated with an increased likelihood of negative outcomes (Wright, Fagan & Pinchevsky, 2013). Various theoretical perspectives have been applied to the study of family violence, including ecological (Bronfenbrenner 1977; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Heise, 2011), feminist theory (Dutton & Nichols, 2005) attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), family systems theory (Lawson, 2012), and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). While each offers some insight into the sequelae of family violence, none has been able to account for the range of outcomes observed in children. Theoretical models posit that risk factors may lead to negative outcomes by disrupting the developing

child's learning processes (McLaughlin & Sheridan 2016), stress-response system (Evans, Greaves-Lord, Euser, Tulen, Franken & Huizink, 2013), and regulatory abilities (Cummings, El-Sheikh, Kouros & Buckhalt, 2009). Exposure to domestic violence may have a varied impact at different stages (Cunningham & Baker 2004) with early and prolonged exposure potentially creating more severe problems because it affects the subsequent chain of development. Multiple theoretical models identify children's internal representations, defined as beliefs or expectations regarding relationships that originate from past interactions with others (Bretherton, Lambert & Golby, 2005), as a fundamental means connecting domestic violence experience and children's short and long-term adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2011). This is further highlighted by Lawson, Speidel, Fondren, Cummings and Valentino's (2020) study of children's implicit internal representations of inter-adult conflict within families experiencing domestic violence and child maltreatment. Drawing from findings based on 132 preschool children who had been maltreated and a control group of 83 non-maltreated preschool children, Lawson et al. (2020) concluded that multiple theoretical models identify children's internal representations as a central means coupling early experience of domestic violence and divergence with developmental outcomes. The findings underscore the significance of multiple pathways of domestic violence and its impact on children's implicit internal representations of this experience.

There is evidence, however, that the impact of risk varies from individual to individual (Wright, Fagan & Pinchevsky, 2013). There are numerous interweaving factors e.g., age and gender (Vu et al., 2016) that contribute to the impact of a child's experience. Developmental differences in children's coping strategies or cognitive capacities may mediate how children respond to stressors. Gender differences may influence how boys and girls express distress or access support (Yates, Egeland & Sroufe, 2003). Adaptive systems identified with promoting resilience in children include secure attachment relationships with parents, social support, positive peer networks, health and normal cognitive development, and capacity for self-regulation. Severe adversity has a major or lasting effect only if important adaptive

systems are compromised prior to, or as a consequence of the adversity (Masten, 2007). More recently, in advance of the development of their MPOWER intervention, Callaghan, Fellin and Alexander (2019) conducted a study of 107 children and young people across Italy, Spain, Greece and the UK, exploring their experiences of domestic violence and their coping mechanisms as part of Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies. Children and young people shared that they maintained a capacity for resistance and a sense of agency by employing a range of strategies: by maintaining caring relationships (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith & Fellin, 2016b); managing complexity (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, Alexander & Sixsmith, et al. 2017a); keeping themselves and others safe (Callaghan et al. 2016a); by maintaining a sense of their own playfulness and creativity (Fellin, Callaghan, Alexander, Mavrou & Harrison-Breed 2018b); and by decision making with regard to sharing their experiences (Callaghan et al., 2017b). These findings subsequently informed the development of the positively evaluated MPOWER programme that was delivered to 58 children and young people across the four participating countries (Callaghan et al., 2019). These findings build on previous findings of Callaghan and Alexander (2015) whereby children were found to engage in strategic actions to de-escalate and divert abusive behaviour. In a similar vein echoed by Katz (2015) who spoke of the range of active roles children and young people play in the context of domestic violence. In conclusion, "Children and adolescents are not passive bystanders to the violence taking place in their home but actively develop their own strategies to navigate their everyday lives and protect themselves, their mother and their siblings (Cited by Øverlien and Holt, 2019, p. 66).

2.3.10 Conclusion

Domestic violence poses a significant problem for those whose life is affected by this issue, the social, health and criminal justice agencies that respond to it, and wider society that must bear the costs (Devaney, 2015). However, according to Graham, Embry, Young, Macy, Moracco, Reyes & Martin

(2021), despite well-established adverse outcomes for children and young people, there remains a lack of evidence for effective prevention and intervention options in this context (Karakurt, Koç, Çetinsaya., Ayluçtarhan & Bolen, 2019; Graham et al., 2021).

Children and young people experiencing domestic violence also experience significant risk. This risk is enduring and dynamic. These risks are often heightened through the inaction and actions of others and often remain hidden in plain sight. When we assess risk purely through a physical incident lens, we fail to see the interweaving tactics that entrap children. When we view children as witnesses to abuse, we deny them their victimhood in their own right, assess, decide and action on that basis. When we do not fully understand or minimise the manifestation of abuse and experience of children and young people in the context of domestic violence, we can conflate best interests with father involvement. When we do not include children and young people in decision making about their lives, under the guise of protection, we deny them voice, visibility and ultimately make decisions that are detrimental to their safety. When we do not resource and support interventions to increase safety, we potentially deny children their future.

2.4 Chapter Summary

Chapter two, the first of two literature chapters of this thesis explored the role of fathers in children's lives, situating father involvement in the context of domestic violence. This chapter comprised two distinct sections. The first section journeyed the theoretical fatherhood landscape and charted the rise of fatherhood scholarship and evolving ideologies of fathers with a focus on the distinct contribution that fathers make to the lives of their children. Concentrating further on the distinctiveness of the fatherhood role, the gender differences in parenting were explored leading to an overview of challenges and opportunities with regard to fathering. The second section applied a domestic violence lens considering the risk presence of abusive

fathers. Beginning with attacking mothering, the risk to children and young people in the context of domestic violence was further expanded from prenatal risk and impact across infancy, childhood and adolescence. Risk in the context of post separation contact was explored leading to consideration of the lethal implications of domestic violence. Section two of chapter two concluded with an exploration of theory and resilience.

The next chapter in this doctoral thesis will explore the complex nature of working with fathers in the context of domestic violence through the lens of policy, practice and programmes. The first section will provide an overview of policy evolution across parental involvement and domestic violence in Ireland. Drawing on identified promising practice and bringing attention to inherent risk, the second section will explore the potential facilitators and barriers to working with perpetrators of domestic violence. The third section will provide an overview of selected models and frameworks created to support the practice of professionals across identifying tactics, collaborative practice and engaging with fathers effectively, concluding with a reminder of systemic challenges, drawn from historical policy positions that can create legacy practice challenges. The fourth and final section of this chapter will provide an overview of the landscape with regard to working with perpetrators of abuse with particular focus on programmes specific to father engagement and inclusion.

CHAPTER THREE

The Complex Nature of Working with Fathers in the Context of Domestic Violence: A Review of the Literature on Policy, Practice and Programmes

3.1 Introduction

This second literature review chapter will explore the complex nature of working with fathers in the context of domestic violence through the lens of policy, practice and programmes. Chapter two, the first chapter reviewing the literature, introduced a case for father engagement in this context of domestic violence, acknowledging that ending domestic violence is challenging if we continue to exclusively focus on victim-survivors without addressing those who perpetrate abuse and the underlying causes (Scott & Crooks, 2006; Hoppstadious, 2020). The potential benefits of engaging with fathers in this context were noted to include having access to critical information to inform assessment and the management of risk (Mc Connell, Barnard & Taylor, 2017). Engaging with fathers was also viewed as a mitigating factor against the risk of simultaneously holding mothers to account for the abuse and for the safety of their children, which manifests in accusations of ‘failure to protect’ when fathers are not held accountable (Wingfield, 2018; Stewart, 2021; Meier & Sankaran, 2021; Humphreys et al., 2022). Addressing abusive behaviour therefore increases safety for women and children by channelling fathers’ desire for sustained relationships with their children (Scott & Crooks, 2007; Holt, 2015; Meyer, 2017; Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin, 2024, Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2024). Chapter two provided an insight into the changing roles and perceptions of fathering (Jarska, 2020; Judit, 2020), from provider to nurturer (Schmitz, 2016; Krishnaswamy, 2019; Cabrera, 2020) with corresponding measures to promote father involvement. However, as the

latter part of chapter two demonstrated, the context of domestic violence matters, and unassessed and unmanaged inherent risk in this context across pregnancy, birth and childhood can create lasting negative impact on children's lives. This present chapter explores the intrinsic risks, barriers and facilitators across policy, practice and programmes pertaining to working with perpetrators of abuse and specifically fathers in the context of domestic violence.

The first section of this chapter begins with providing an overview of pertinent policy evolution across parental involvement and domestic violence in Ireland. It then draws attention to the legacy of the wider historical policy position of predominantly focusing on mothers, identifying the need to reorient policy to effectively engage with fathers in this context. The second section of this chapter probes the contributing barriers and potential facilitators to working with perpetrators of domestic violence, drawing on identified promising practice and bringing attention to associated risk. The third section then provides an overview of selected models and frameworks created to support the practice of professionals across identifying tactics, collaborative practice and engaging with fathers effectively, concluding with a reminder of systemic challenges, drawn from historical policy positions that can create legacy practice challenges. The fourth and final section of this chapter provides an overview of the landscape with regard to working with perpetrators of abuse, with a particular focus on programmes specific to father engagement and inclusion.

3.2 An Overview of the Relevant Policy Arena

Policy is essentially a statement of intent. It reflects a position relating to a particular issue, often offering guiding principles. Practice is derived from and is held by policy, promoting compliance, consistency and transparency. The following section explores the Irish policy context with regard to parental involvement and domestic violence, followed by a wider view of policy relating to fathers in the context of domestic violence.

3.2.1 The Irish Policy Context

Policy in relation to engaging with parents in various aspects of their children's lives is well established globally. In Ireland, beginning in 1998, the Strengthening Families for Life⁸² report made substantive recommendations for supporting parents in Ireland (Commission on the Family, 1998). These recommendations coincided with the introduction of the Parental Leave Act in 1998 and were followed by Ireland's first children's strategy, the National Children's Strategy, Our Children- Their Lives⁸³ (Department of Health and Children, 2000) which acknowledged the need to provide supports to parents. The first strategy specific to parents, the Parenting Support Strategy⁸⁴ (Tusla, 2013) was launched in 2013 and the most recent strategy, 2022-2027 was launched in 2022. In the interim, engaging and supporting parents in the lives of their children continued to be acknowledged across other related strategies. Policy in relation to engaging fathers specifically, although less established, is growing. In Ireland, working with fathers was specifically named in the Health Service Executive's Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook (Health Service Executive, 2011) and the current Parenting Support Strategy 2022-2027⁸⁵ (Tusla, 2022) has identified fathers specifically in connection with the need for "A range of specialised supports are required to meet the needs of diverse family forms and respond to specific issues" (Tusla, 2022, p. 18).

Policy in relation to addressing domestic violence is also well established globally with initiatives engaging men against violence also established. In Ireland as identified in chapter one, related legislation sets out the protections afforded to victim-survivors and the sanctions for perpetrators of abuse. The current national strategy and related implementation plans set out Ireland's position in addressing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and specifically identify working with and addressing perpetrating behaviour across all four pillars and engaging men and boys specifically with regard to

⁸² [Strengthening families for life final report to the Minister for social, community and family affairs \(lenus.ie\)](#)

⁸³ [The National Children's Strategy: Our children: their lives: executive summary. \(lenus.ie\)](#)

⁸⁴ [Family Support CFA Parenting Support Strategy.pdf \(tusla.ie\)](#)

⁸⁵ [Tusla Parenting Support Strategy 2022-2027 Web.pdf](#)

the prevention pillar (Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan, 2022). However, both policy positions rarely collide, with policy specific to engaging fathers who are domestically violent barely visible and often sector specific. As Nonomura, Zamfir, Scott, Jaffe, Bukhari and Heslop (2024, p. 103) observe, “[T]his gap lies between two well-established focus areas: anti-violence initiatives engaging men and boys that address violence but not fathers specifically, and parenting initiatives that address a broad range of fathering activities but not violence specifically”.

3.2.2 The evolution of policy with regard to engaging domestically abusive fathers

Professional responses that target engagement with fathers as perpetrators of domestic violence are relatively new (Hine et al., 2022). According to a study conducted by Heward-Belle, Humphreys, Healey, Toivonen and Tsantefski (2019), the visibility of fathers differs greatly within and across agencies. This study, drawing from the views of 232 frontline personnel in Australia involved in the Invisible Practices Project: Engaging With Fathers Who Use Violence, urges policy and practice development specific to this context. In addition, Isobe, Healey and Humphreys (2020) observe that the differences with regard to organisational culture, policy guidance, practice frameworks and legislation that constitute each service, creates barriers to collaborative working, deemed essential in addressing domestic violence (Tsantefski, Young, Wilde & O’Leary, 2021).

Despite fathers' prevalence as perpetrators of harm against children within their families, child protection work has traditionally focused on mothers. In an historical examination of child protection practices in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland, Humphreys and Absler (2011) revealed that in early policy, fathers' responsibility in ending children's exposure to domestic violence was predominantly ignored by encouraging victimised mothers to work harder on the family relationship. This approach later shifted towards encouraging women to separate in order to minimise

the impact of domestic violence on children's safety, well-being and development. Workers are encouraged to focus on mothers by concepts such as 'failure to protect' and its corollary, the 'protective parent' (Strega, 2006). This approach has been found to increase pressure on the mother, fail to address the difficulties of the family, does not challenge the abusive behaviour and does not promote behaviour change of the abusive parent. The legacy of these policies, "failure to protect" and "the leave ultimatum" remain. In her qualitative study with 15 mothers, Stewart (2021) confirmed these 'good mother' expectations for mothers involved with children's services due to their partner violence. Stewart and Arnull's (2023) subsequent research with 19 mothers in England and Wales, found that mothers felt blamed, were made to feel responsible for the abuse and were advised that if they did not leave the abusive relationship that their children would be removed from their care.

According to Heward-Belle, Laing, Humphreys and Toivonen (2018), drawing on the findings of their study of 54 Australian professionals working in either family law, statutory child protection or domestic violence and community services, moving away from oppressive policies and practices requires a shift from domestic violence destructive practice to domestic violence proficient practice (Mandel, 2015). This involves simultaneously managing risk for victim-survivors while holding perpetrators of abuse accountable for their behaviour. In order to attain and sustain practice that requires that practitioners "pivot to the perpetrator" (Mandel, 2014, p. 50), practice needs to be embedded in policy. In order to build on this paradigm shift by bringing fathers who are domestically abusive into sharper focus, policy needs to bridge the divide between father engagement and domestic violence policy.

As demonstrated, policy can have a powerful and enduring influence. It asserts a position that supports and guides practice, encouraging consistency, transparency and compliance within its parameters. It also creates a mechanism whereby progress can be measured and poor practice addressed. In the absence of policy, chaos reigns, with poor, inconsistent practice that differs within and across agencies. While policy in relation to domestic violence is well established globally, manifesting in legislation,

national strategies and sector specific policies, policy specific to father engagement is less established with policy relating to father engagement in the context of domestic violence even less so.

Having established the critical nature of policy in guiding the actions of professionals, we will now focus on practice across 'working with fathers' in the context of domestic violence. Worker risk in the context of working with domestically abusive fathers is discussed and a selection of practice frameworks and models that have been created to guide impactful practice are presented.

3.3 Practice of working with fathers-essential components

“Focus should as a practice standard, be on the perpetrators’ behaviour rather than on the victim-survivors’ so that the duty is shifted for ensuring that violence and abuse is contained, curtailed or the risk minimized” (Wild, 2023, p. 1399).

While there is broad agreement in the literature on the critical importance of maintaining a focus on the behaviour of the perpetrator of domestic violence as argued above, engaging with perpetrators of abuse rather than simply working solely with the mother, nonetheless requires additional skill and indeed brings additional risk. Importantly, Humphreys, Healey and Heward Belle (2020) assert that few workers are trained to undertake work with domestically abusive men, particularly in relation to their parenting. This observation was made further to qualitative data gathered from surveys, focus groups, and ethnographic notes of 30 Community of Practice sessions in Australia. Similar observations have been made previously, for example by Scourfield, Smail and Butler (2015). Their findings drawn from the evaluation of a Fatherhood Institute project in six English local authorities found that the strongest message from practitioners was that working with domestically abusive fathers is skilled work that they do not feel adequately prepared for. Scourfield et al. (2015) further observed that working in this

context is not a core learning skill in the training qualifications for human service professionals, including social workers. In considering the skillset required for this work, Humphreys et al. (2019) assert that many new skills are required. These identified skills include having the capacity to divert blame shifting behaviour towards the father's own parenting; to being able to assert, while being respectful and non-collusive, reorienting from a position of validation and belief to discerning; and having the capacity to undertake comprehensive, yet sensitive domestic violence risk assessment.

In terms of non-collusive practice, of importance are the observations made by a number of researchers in relation to the use of control by perpetrators of domestic violence with professionals (Stark, 2007; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Douglas, 2018; Stark & Hester, 2019; Spearman, Vaughan-Eden, Hardesty & Campbell, 2024). Douglas (2018) conducted a study with 65 women engaged in the legal system, whereby control was not only found to be implemented against the women involved, but also against the professionals. Echoing this finding, Spearman et al.'s (2024) review of 48 published peer reviewed articles in the US and Canada from 2011 to 2022, found that Court professionals (e.g., guardian ad litem, attorneys, custody evaluators, magistrates, judges) who are not aware of the pattern of tactics employed by the perpetrator of domestic violence, may unwittingly be used to further abuse or harm victim-survivors. Spearman et al. (2024) highlighted the need for training for professionals to mitigate this risk. This recommendation is echoed across the literature (Douglas, 2018; Humphreys et al., 2019; Heward-Belle et al., 2019; Humphreys, Isobe & Kertesz, 2024), with Wright, Carr and Akin (2021) urging education at all levels, including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral. According to Humphreys et al., (2024), skill development and supervision are also required to mitigate against charm and grooming utilised by perpetrators of domestic violence.

In Ireland, McCaughren, Holt, Parkes and Gregory's (2022) mixed methods study capturing the views and experiences of both parents and a range of relevant professionals on the issue of contact for 0–6-year-old children, also identified the need for continuing training of professionals involved in the Irish Family Law system. According to McCaughren et al. (2022), while this issue

was raised across all data sets, participating parents identified a training need specifically for solicitors, barristers and judges. Education for judges was found to be a common theme that emerged from the study with all groups of participants, including the participating judges themselves. McCaughren et al., (2022) further specified that accessible, structured, regular and ongoing training for judges working in the area of Irish family law is critical and that a central component of this multidisciplinary training would include child development. This research also confirmed concerns pertaining to court reports highlighting the unregulated nature of the profession who provide these reports. According to Kuruppu, Novy, Fetter, Oo and Hegarty (2023), judges require training in family violence to understand the complexity of the experience of victim-survivors. Sheehy and Boyd (2020) highlighted that the lack of specific training and education in the context of family law continues, even though allegations of child maltreatment and domestic violence are prevalent, with Miller and Manzer (2021) drawing attention to the significant decision-making power held by court systems.

In relation to other justice professionals, training for police officers has been highlighted consistently across research conducted in different jurisdictions (Wire & Myhill, 2018; Douglas, 2018; Millar, Saxton, Øverlien & Elliffe 2022; Maple & Kebbell, 2024). Millar et al., (2022) conducted a rapid review of the empirical literature on the police response to domestic violence involving children. The final sample comprised of six studies with three themes identified regarding the police: variability in police response; limited view of police role and lack of professional competence. Further to this review, Millar et al., (2022) developed three key messages from their research: awareness raising was required regarding the impact of domestic violence and abuse on children and young people; training was required to embed Children's Rights (UNCRC, 1989) within the context of domestic violence and abuse; and a focus on the skills and abilities of individual officers was also needed. In addition to training needs, Maple and Kebbell (2024) also highlighted that police departments may have organisational structural challenges that undermine effective responses to domestic violence, including resources and lack of protocols or guidelines for responding to incidents of domestic violence. In addition, Haines-Delmont, Bracewell and Chantler's (2022)

qualitative study exploring the barriers and facilitators to the conduct and impact of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) in England and Wales, found that appropriate training, codes of practice, quality assurance and a stringent recruitment process were significant requirements to ensure quality completion of these reviews.

In relation to human service professionals, concerns have been raised about the adequacy of social work education in preparing graduates to work effectively with domestic violence (Black, Weisz & Bennett, 2010; Scourfield et al., 2015; Fedina, Lee & de Tablan, 2018). This is concerning because social workers' understanding and conceptualisation of domestic violence can significantly impact their practice, and inadequate preparation may hinder their ability to identify and respond to domestic violence risks (Black, Weisz & Bennett, 2010; Postmus et al., 2011; McMahon et al., 2013; Fedina, Lee & de Tablan, 2018). Schaffer, Martin, Lawrence and Bryce (2024, p. 2103) urge that we "must ensure that social work graduates understand domestic violence as an issue embedded in broader social structures, with intersecting power-based influences. Failure to do so is a form of injustice and goes against the very principles that social work aims to uphold." In specialist domestic violence refuges and non-accommodation support services for victim-survivors, staff identified barriers to services for children at varying levels. These barriers, Reif, Jaffe, Dawson and Straatman (2020) assert, include agency-related barriers, comprising a lack of training, tools, protocols and funding; client related barriers, such as parents' and children's own lack of trust of child protection services; and systemic barriers, including poor inter-agency collaboration and lack of children's services. In considering domestic violence and child welfare training needs, Banda, Carlson, Diaz, Akin et al., (2024) recommend five key elements for impactful practice. Among these key elements are mandatory pre-service training; ongoing learning supports (e.g., joint learning opportunities, shadowing, learning collaboratives) and supervision that is accountable to and promotes collaborative, survivor-centred practices. Specific to domestic violence and child welfare education, Banda et al., (2024) urges that instead of teaching courses that separate child welfare and domestic violence into siloed areas of knowledge and practice, child welfare content can be taught in domestic

violence classes and domestic violence content can be taught in child welfare classes. Banda et al., (2024) reason that in advance of assuming a social work role, their framework is intersectional. Similarly, the prevention framework can reorient to capture both domestic violence and child maltreatment resulting in a victim-survivor centred approach.

In addition to knowledge and skills, organisational support was also identified as an important component of impactful practice for social workers and other human service personnel in order to adequately investigate, assess and engage with fathers who are domestically violent (Heward-Belle et al., 2019). Similarly, in their Australian research that utilised co-design supported by the Safe & Together Institute with professionals in Communities of Practice, Humphreys, Healey and Heward-Belle (2019) identified four essential components to improve practice and support organisational development in the context of working with fathers who use violence. These essential components are leadership by senior managers; recognition that domestic violence work needs to strengthen collaborative working; supervision, coaching extensive training and enhanced worker safety. Tsantefski, Humphreys, Wilde, Young, Heward-Belle and O'Leary (2024) drew particular attention to the behaviour of less experienced professionals and their requirement for supervision and training. This study drew from 15 senior practitioners and team leaders from women's and men's domestic violence services, child protection, family support, and justice services with data sources also including ethnographic notes and transcripts from communities of practice and focus groups. These findings build on previous research by Scourfield et al. (2015) and others in relation to the importance of organisational support. Scourfield et al. (2015) also highlight the significance of recognising the importance of keeping in direct contact with fathers to sustain their involvement in the child protection process.

As previously identified, alongside training, education and organisational support, collaborative practice as a key component of effective practice is cited across the literature (Smith & Humphreys, 2019; O'Leary, Pallatino, Morrison & Miller et al., 2018; Tsantefski et al. 2021; Scott, 2021; Scott & Loncar, 2021; Dheensa and Feder, 2022). Stake holder engagement theory

posits that interaction with various stakeholders provides valuable insight, knowledge and potentially resources (Smith & Lohrke, 2008), which may in addition to creating potential positive outcomes for service users, contribute to institutional success generally, for example, increased institutional empathy. The potential benefits of collaborative working for service users resonates when we consider the remits and bounds of the various agencies at the frontline of domestic violence response. While services may converge at points with respect of service provision, for example, safety planning, there are times when services diverge completely, for example, capacity to arrest and bring charges, a unique mandate of the police. The aspiration of collaborative practice, however, may not be as straightforward when considering the wider organisational structures and mandates, for example, child protection and domestic violence services.

Both specialist domestic violence and child protection services are critical to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. However, each of these service systems typically operates in distinctly different ways. Child protection systems have as their focus, dependent child victim-survivors and are concerned with the rights and safety of children and young people⁸⁶(Children First, 2017). Domestic violence services, in contrast, typically focus on both adult and child victims, providing a range of supports, guided by an empowerment practice framework⁸⁷(Safe Practice, 2023). Additional key differences exist between domestic violence and child protection services which stem from their respective organisational structures and mandates. Child Protection agencies are statutory agencies that typically work with involuntary clients, whereas domestic violence services, by contrast, are generally provided by non-government organisations who work with voluntary clients. These differences can create unintentional challenges and have hindered collaboration to the detriment of both services, but more importantly, to the detriment of their respective service users. These challenges have emerged across a range of studies.

⁸⁶ Child welfare and protection policy is based on a legal framework provided primarily by the Child Care Act 1991 and the Children First Act 2015. The specific role of Tusla is to promote the welfare of children who are at risk of not receiving adequate care and protection. Under the Child Care Act 1991, Tusla is obliged to coordinate information from all relevant sources about a child who may not be receiving adequate care and protection.

⁸⁷ [SP-Web-Version \(2\).pdf](#)

For example, O’Leary et al.’s (2018) study interviewed 30 professionals drawn from the Gold Coast Domestic Violence Integrated Response (GCDVIR), based on the Duluth Model incorporating over 15 NGO agencies and statutory agencies in Australia. The focus of this research was on the operation of the model. While progress was evident in the operation of the model, “challenges remained regarding how differing mandates created inherent tensions, as well as differences in philosophical orientations to domestic violence and child protection. Gaps in understanding and a reliance on informal relationships were most evident amongst front-line workers” (O’Leary et al, 2018, p. 175).

Of particular focus in relation to domestic violence response is the child protection and domestic violence intersection. Notwithstanding research and practice-based efforts, for example, the Greenbook initiative to address domestic violence and child maltreatment, this remains an area of focus, with little evidence of effective sustained models of collaboration (Banda et al., 2024). McNamara (2016) contends that collaborative practice requires a more formalised approach, for example, mandated integration. However, McLaughlin, Mewhirter, Wright and Feiock (2021) caution that mandated collaborations may create challenges that do not necessarily occur with organically developed collaborations.

In the interim, calls for increased integration across frontline responders in the context of domestic violence continue to resound, for example, the need for increased integration across legal, policy, support service, advocacy and research sectors has been posited by Scott (2021) and Scott and Loncar (2021). In considering this call for increased integration, Nonomura et al., (2024) underscores the need for increased identification of fathers who use domestic violence in child protection services and family law, promoting full assessments of domestic violence to curtail further violence for children, particularly while in the independent care of a parent. Consistent with this, according to O’Leary et al. (2018), well-functioning teams within integrated responses increase safety for women and children.

Integral to collaborative working is information sharing with Dheensa and Feder (2022) highlighting that Information sharing between services about

the risks posed by the perpetrator of domestic violence is understood as a critical component of accurate risk assessment. A review of recommendations produced by domestic violence fatality reviews found that lack of referrals beyond agencies or information sharing and poor service coordination, were not only challenges agencies working with victim-survivors to prevent homicide encountered, but they also contributed to the risk of homicide (Reif & Jaffe 2019). Tsantefski et al., (2024) suggest that the practice of mapping the perpetrator of abuse's patterns of violence into one shared document in some areas, counters information fragmentation that can undermine accurate risk assessment and subsequent management. In summary, advanced domestic violence knowledge, skills and related training and education generally, are essential to practice confidently and competently in this area. Practice can be both supported and hindered by organisational capacity and the supports available to practitioners. Conversely, collaborative practice, when achieved can demonstrate benefits for both the service user and the wider agencies involved. However, there have been particular skills and abilities that have been identified as instrumental to father engagement in the context of domestic violence that are explored in the next section.

3.3.1 Working with fathers in the context of domestic violence-fostering engagement

Working directly with perpetrators of domestic violence, as previously established, requires advanced skill and knowledge to achieve capacity to recognise and respond to behaviour consistent with domestic violence perpetration. These behaviours include minimisation and denial (Grönte et al., 2024); victim blaming (Katz et al., 2020; Turhan, 2021); manipulation and control (Stark & Hester, 2019; Spearman, Hardesty & Campbell, 2023); and cultivating an environment of fear and volatility (Katz et al., 2020). In this context, the goal of achieving and sustaining engagement is widely acknowledged as challenging work. Pallatino et al.'s (2019) study drawing on the experience of 36 Batterer Intervention Programme (BIP) facilitators,

domestic violence advocates, socio-judicial officials, and local and state policy makers, found that addressing abusive behaviour was identified by the participating professionals as a particularly challenging aspect of their respective roles. Many of the skills identified as complimentary to engaging perpetrators of abuse resonate with relationship-based practice. Relationship based practice, underscoring the importance of building robust and meaningful professional relationships, is increasingly recognised as a central tenet to successful outcomes in engagement. Some of the behaviours and skills identified as integral to the building and sustaining of engagement in this context include explaining (Morrison et al., 2021); being non-judgemental (Scott & Crooks, 2006; Scourfield, 2006; Brandon et al., 2019); persistence (Brandon et al., 2019); adopting an incremental approach to engagement and building rapport (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2024); and listening (Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin, 2024). According to Scott and Crooks (2006, p. 37), the guiding principle with regard to fostering engagement should be 'invite, don't indict', with Scott and Jenney (2023) advocating for a Trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC) approach with perpetrators of abuse.

Additional knowledge and skills with regard to specifically engaging fathers in this context have also been identified by Humphreys et al. (2019) who asserted the need to at times challenge parenting behaviours. Heward-Belle (2016) argued that the parenting skills and knowledge of fathers who use domestic violence is underdeveloped. This has subsequently been consistently identified in the literature (Holt, 2015; Humphreys & Campo, 2017; Meyer, 2017), with McCaughren et al., (2022) summarising that domestically violent and abusive fathers are more likely than non-abusive fathers to grapple with compromised and poor parenting. Holt (2015) also highlighted that these fathers may employ controlling behaviours against their children and where separated, domestically abusive fathers may perceive their co parents to be over-responsible for co-parenting challenges (Holt, 2013; 2018). As demonstrated, addressing parenting in this context adds an additional layer of skill and knowledge requirement. Inherent in this work is the associated risk for professionals when engaging with perpetrators of abuse. This is discussed in the next section.

3.3.2 Worker risk in the context of working with domestically abusive fathers

Katz, Nikupeteri and Laitinen's (2020) study of 29 children in relation to post separation fathering found that some children had reported their fathers intimidating the professionals who were trying to help them. Risk to staff arising from engagement with perpetrators of domestic violence is well evidenced in the literature (Broadley & Paterson, 2020; Humphreys et al., 2024; Tsantefski et al., 2024). While the predominant focus has been on physical safety, the research nonetheless cautions that there is an increasing need to focus on the emotional and psychological toll of this work. Specifically, focusing on emotional safety and the susceptibility of professionals to secondary, or vicarious trauma, Humphreys, Healy and Heward-Belle (2019) highlight the need for regular debriefing and clinical supervision.

According to Humphreys et al. (2024), the impetus to focus on worker safety arises from shifts in domestic abuse practice from solely focussing on victim-survivors to increasing engagement with domestically abusive men. Humphreys et al.'s (2024) and Tsantefski et al.'s (2024) recent child protection service focused research identified the risk to physical and psychological safety for the professional involved. Arising from their research, Humphreys et al. (2024) identified themes including: the need for a tailored approach to practising safely; the need to attend to physical safety; threats to professional identity; the importance of promoting emotional well-being and documenting to support worker safety; and attending to cultural safety. Tsantefski et al., (2024) advised that as senior workers, the participants in their study were acutely aware of their own safety and the limits of that safety. However, the issue of less experienced workers was also discussed, with recommendation that this group especially require training and supervision, not only for working with men as parents (Mandel & Wright, 2019), but also on the presentation of higher risk perpetrators of abuse and building the capacity to know when and when not to engage. According to Tsantefski et al., (2024), a dynamic approach to assessing safety is therefore

needed when working with men who use violence, requiring case-by-case judgment, with some structured guidance and supervision.

As previously outlined in the earlier part of this chapter, having a framework, a policy or a model to guide practice has been found to be particularly beneficial within complex work such as is reported here. In the context of domestic violence responses there are multiple frameworks and models that seek to support professional understanding and practice within the various aspects of the experience. The following provides a brief introduction to these frameworks and models.

3.4 Selected Frameworks and Models

The following Frameworks and Models have been selected as examples to address the identified challenges encountered by professionals. These Frameworks and Models have been developed to support practice across a wide variety of areas including identifying tactics and patterns (Child and Mother Sabotage (CAMS)); informing decision making (SAFeR Model); engaging with perpetrators of abuse (The Safe & Together™ Model); supporting collaborative practice (The PATRICIA Project) and engaging with fathers (The ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) intervention).

3.4.1 Child and Mother Sabotage (CAMS)

This framework has been proposed within the last year to describe a collection of behaviours used by abusive fathers to interfere with and sabotage a child's relationship with their mother. CAMS becomes applicable after a couple has separated, and in the following situations:

- Where a father deliberately attempts to negatively influence the perception of the mother across children, friends, professionals etc.

- When the manipulation results in perception shifting of third parties and with subsequent consequences for the mother, for example, losing contact or custody of children.
- When the father attempts to portray the mother as unsafe, unstable, malicious, unreliable and dangerous.
- When the manipulative tactics exploit and amplify sexist stereotypes.
- When the pattern of manipulation and dominance are established.
- When there are historical indicators that the abusive father is attempting to dominate, destabilise and manipulate the interactions between the mother and her children.

The framework has been introduced as an alternative to the problematic term and use of parental alienation and related terminology. Furthermore, CAMS is distinctly gender-specific. It links the sabotage of the mother-child relationship to a pattern of gendered abuse. The specificity of the framework ensures that it cannot be commandeered by domestically abusive fathers as it sets out acknowledged behaviours of perpetrators of domestic violence that undermine the mother-child relationship in this context, for example, denial, manipulation (Stark & Hester, 2019); and post separation control (Hulley, Wager, Gomersall, Bailey, Kirkman, Gibbs & Jones, 2023). It draws on the findings of previous research focusing on the impact of this behaviour on the mother-child relationship (see Heward-Belle, 2017, Katz, 2022, Dekel & Abrahams, 2023). Heward-Belle (2017) examined how domestically abusive men attack mothering in the context of domestic violence drawing on the narratives of 17 Australian men. Heward-Belle (2017) found that domestically abusive men employ this tactic instrumentally to exert power and control over mother and children. This framework captures the interweaving nature of tactics employed by perpetrators of domestic violence and how they undermine the mother-child relationship supporting professionals to identify and address the pattern appropriately.

3.4.2 The SAFeR Model

According to Nonomura et al. (2024) there are a range of toolkits and conceptual models available to support family law professionals to make evidence informed decisions. This includes the SAFeR model which consists of four steps:

1. Screening for domestic violence.
2. Assessing.
3. Focusing on the effects; and
4. Responding to domestic violence across all decisions, recommendations and interventions.

These four steps are supplemented by comprehensive worksheets and supported by tutorials and training. The project has delivered training to over 20,000 individuals. This framework seeks to address the lack of identification or misidentification of domestic violence within the court setting by employing this basic, yet effective proactive approach. Lack of identification and misidentification of domestic violence is a common contributor to poorer outcomes within this setting (Hay, Grobbelaar & Guggisberg, 2023). According to Hay et al., (2023), the most recent review of the Australian Family Law Act amendments (2012) conducted by Kaspiew, Carson, Qu, Horsfall, Tayton, Moore, Coulson and Dunston (2015) on behalf of the Australian Institute for Family Studies, found that almost one third of parents surveyed about their experiences of Family Law proceedings had never been asked about domestic violence or any safety related concerns while they were engaged in the process. In addition, according to Feresin, Folla, Lapierre and Romito (2018), family law and legal professionals tend to apply Johnson's situational couple violence model (2008) in this context. Accurate identification of domestic violence at this juncture is critical to appropriate decision making and ultimately the safety of victim-survivors. This framework facilitates identification by prompting screening and utilises a comprehensive tool to assess the nature and context of the lived experience accurately. It subsequently requires the professional to focus on the effects of the abuse

and respond accordingly across all decisions, recommendation and intervention.

3.4.3 The Safe & Together™ Model

Building on the Greenbook's pioneering work, domestic violence expert David Mandel developed the Safe and Together Institute, whose "mission is to create, nurture and sustain a global network of domestic violence-informed child welfare professionals, communities and systems"⁸⁸.

The Safe & Together™ Model is an internationally recognised suite of tools and interventions designed to help child welfare professionals become domestic violence-informed. The model has partnered extensively in the US, UK and Australia and more recently, Ireland, providing training and technical assistance to the women's sector, addiction services, child welfare agencies and their community partners to increase their proficiency in domestic violence informed practice. The model uses a perpetrator pattern-based framework that is informed by a gender analysis that informs their work.

There are three Safe and Together guiding principles;

1. Keeping child Safe and Together with non-offending parent; safety, healing from trauma, stability and nurturance.
2. Partnering with non-offending parent as default position; efficient, effective and child-centred.
3. Intervening with perpetrator to reduce risk and harm to child; engagement, accountability and Courts.

Safe and Together critical components include perpetrator's pattern of coercive control; actions taken by perpetrator to harm the child; full spectrum of the non-offending parent's efforts to promote the safety and wellbeing of the child; adverse impact of the perpetrator's behaviour on the child; role of substance abuse, mental health, culture, and other socio-economic factors.

⁸⁸ [Our Mission | Safe & Together Institute \(safeandtogetherinstitute.com\)](https://www.safeandtogetherinstitute.com)

This model has been very positively received, for example, according to Heward-Belle et al., (2019) participants in one agency described adopting the Safe and Together Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool in direct work and group work with women survivors. This tool was used to aid risk assessment and safety planning processes and as a psychoeducational tool in group-work settings to help survivors document and discuss the tactics of power and control deployed by their partners and ex-partners. More recently, Tsantefski et al., (2024, p. 983) asserted that in addition to the merit of engaging with the Safe & Together Institute in terms of resources, training and coaching for staff and that while implementing the model was found to be challenging at times with regard to the physical and psychological safety of workers, “it also introduced strategies for addressing worker safety, including learning from women, and using perpetrator mapping as a shared task across agencies and sectors”.

3.4.4 The PATRICIA Project

PATHways and Research In Collaborative Inter-Agency practice (the PATRICIA Project)⁸⁹ is an action research project focused on the collaborative relationship between specialist community based domestic violence services and statutory child protection organisations. The PATRICIA Project comprised five components of research, each with its own methodology, set within an action research framework studying the “problems” of developing collaborative work and strengthening accountability of perpetrators of domestic violence. The intended outcome was to use evidence to foster greater collaboration to support the safety and wellbeing of women and their children and strengthen accountability for perpetrators of domestic violence. The PATRICIA Project discovered that there was no singular factor that emerged, rather a complex array of factors that enabled or challenged the collaborative working. Some of these elements would be common across all collaborations; others were specific to the statutory and

⁸⁹ [Patricia Compass.pdf \(anrows-2019.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com\)](#)

domestic violence context. Further to this the Collaborative Practice Framework for Child Protection and Specialist Domestic and Family Violence was developed. The framework was designed to build, maintain, and sustain collaboration where domestic violence involving children was identified. It pays particular attention to the safety of women and children and the complex array of factors which need to be addressed to support collaboration between the domestic violence and child protection sectors.

Ninnes (2022) completed an evaluation of the Patricia research project in 2022, examining the links between research, knowledge dissemination and the subsequent impact on policy and practice in Australia. The evaluation was drawn from five selected research sites in the Queensland area and utilised four strategies to measure the impact of the project. These strategies encompassed collation of academic papers citing the Patricia Project to ascertain how this research impacted policy and practice. An analysis of Queensland Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women resources and website was conducted with a particular focus on the Child Safety Practice Manual. An in-depth interview with the lead researcher and interviews with key stakeholders within the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women were conducted. Ninnes (2022) concluded that the PATRICIA Project has made a significant contribution to a more appropriate and ethical approach to child protection cases in the context of domestic violence in Queensland. Ninnes (2022) observed that although the Safe & Together model originated in the United States, the PATRICIA Project facilitated a specific Australian evidence base to implement the model. Of note was that the practitioner led and focused approach augmented adoption of the model with practitioners channelling the partnership approach as opposed to being subjects of the research. The research generated by this project has subsequently significantly impacted caseworker practice due to the provision of strategies for the improvement of child protection work in an Australia specific context.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Additional findings in relation to the Safe & Together Model can be found at:
[Safe and Together Edinburgh Implementation Report-2017.pdf \(safeandtogetherinstitute.com\)](#)
[OverviewEvalDataBriefing_A4_r3.pdf \(safeandtogetherinstitute.com\)](#)
<https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/lowa-ST-PP-Assessment3.pdf>

3.4.5 The ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) intervention

The ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) intervention has been developed by The Fatherhood Institute and The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University. Based on two previous separate interventions which have had positive initial evaluations, the ISAFE initiative "combines in-service social work practitioner training with other elements of organisational development to improve the engagement of fathers". (Scourfield, Davies, Jones & Maxwell, 2024, p. 1). Scourfield et al. (2024) employs a range of actions to address organisational culture including initial identification of team champions. These team champions are subsequently trained in both awareness raising with regard to the importance of engaging men and introductory motivational interviewing skills. Case file audits and a webinar for service leaders are also employed. Unlike previous training initiatives, this approach also harnesses the power of peer influence while building capacity and implementing a tangible measure of progress. This concludes the overview of selected frameworks and models as we now move to explore the evolving landscape of programmes and interventions that seek to address the behaviour of domestically abusive fathers.

3.5 Practice Context- Systemic Challenges

Having provided a brief overview of a selection of Models and frameworks, it is important to note the contextual challenges that can impact on practice, some previously mentioned, with some now introduced. Tolmie, Smith & Wilson (2024) argue for locating the experience of victim-survivors within a broader conceptualisation of domestic violence as a form of social and systemic entrapment. By viewing the experience of victim-survivors through a social and systemic lens we can uncover not just the restrictions placed on victim-survivors by domestically abusive men, but the restrictions imposed by broader systemic patterns of harm. 'Gendered Practice' was identified

over two decades ago by Scourfield (2003) in his ethnographic study with a social work team in child protection. Scourfield highlighted the gendered practices that manifested in focusing on mothers and not engaging with fathers. This practice was more recently identified as enduring by Olszowy, Jaffe, Dawson and Straatman (2020). Olszowy et al.'s research (2020, p. 1) with 29 key informants in Canada found criticism of the child protection sector "for placing the onus on victims to keep children safe and failing to engage perpetrators". The related practices of the presumption of contact, "the leave ultimatum", "failure to protect" and the removal of children from the care of their mothers have been previously outlined in addition to the needed embedding of standard practice in listening to the voices of children and young people.

Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan, Helps and Ralph (2024, p. 82) assert that in addition to a multifaceted and collaborative approach, "a commitment to understanding individual pathways to change, and to ensuring that adequate support systems are in place to facilitate long-term behaviour change and attitudinal transformation" is required when working with perpetrators of abuse toward accountability. Whilst Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2024) highlight the individual pathways to change, the predominant response to date to domestically abusive perpetrators has been behaviour change programmes, also known as perpetrator programmes, batterer intervention programmes (BIPs) and Men's Behaviour Change (MBC) programmes. While elements of individual work are incorporated into some of the programmes, the wider approach is groupwork.

3.5.1 Perpetrator Programmes

Perpetrator programmes were first developed in the late 1970s and continue to be the standard domestic violence treatment approach in the United States and other parts of the world. Proposed in 1997, Gondolf's three common goals for the programmes (Gondolf, 1997, p. 85) remain applicable (Tutty, Babins-Wagner & Rothery, 2020). They include changing beliefs and attitudes that justify intimate partner violence; providing the skills to stop

abusive actions; and preventing recidivism. In Ireland, the CHOICES programme is the national intervention programme introduced by COSC⁹¹ as part of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender based Violence (2016-21). The programme utilises six modules: respect, parenting, gender, support and trust, sexual respect and emotional intimacy. It utilises a cognitive behavioural therapy approach, focusing on motivation, responsibility, safety and acknowledgement. Men are also taught mindfulness techniques to increase self-awareness and to develop capacities to observe and change their own reactions.

In a review of 60 European perpetrator programme evaluations (both published and unpublished) involving 7,212 programme participants across 12 countries, Lilley et al. (2018) recommended a process whereby evaluations were standardised, thereby enabling comparison. The process of standardisation Lilley et al. (2018) asserted would involve all of the following:

- A mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.
- larger and more varied participant samples.
- some form of control group design.
- a wider range of potential outcome measures (including perpetration of controlling and coercive behaviours as well as all other types of domestic abuse) assessed over a longer period post intervention.
- a focus on the role and quality of programme facilitation; and
- outcome data triangulation (e.g., including reports of those women/partners in a position to reliably assess change).

They asserted that studies also need to specify who exactly is participating, completing, and dropping out, at what point, and their motivations for doing so. They urged that careful attention must be paid to the types of information being collected -and also then reported -at different time points in order to better understand what and how behaviour and attitudes might change throughout the course of the programme.

⁹¹ Cosc is the former national agency with responsibility for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

As part of a 2-year ethnographic study, Morrison, Hawker, Cluss, Miller et al. (2021, p. 3525) conducted 36 individual semi structured interviews with professionals working with BIPs. Morrison et al. (2021) identified six themes related to challenges to promoting behavioural change among men who perpetrate violence: (a) social acceptance of IPV, (b) hypermasculine attitudes, (c) emotional problems, (d) childhood exposure to violence, (e) co-morbid mental health issues, and (f) denial, minimisation, and blame.

Studies that have examined the effectiveness of these programmes for preventing recidivism were inconclusive as results have tended to be mixed (Cheng, Davis, Jonson-Reid & Yaeger, 2021; Wilson, Feder & Olaghere, 2021) with evaluations of programmes aimed at perpetrators of domestic violence often weakened by a lack of engagement with the service or the research process (Mc Connell & Taylor, 2016).

3.5.2 Behaviour change programmes specific to fathers

A relatively small number of behaviour change programmes have focused specifically on fathering in the context of domestic violence. In some instances, fathering is a dedicated module, for example, the CHOICES Programme. Other programmes such as Caring Dads (Scott et al., 2017) and Strong Fathers (Pennell et al., 2013) provide a focused intervention grounded on fathering. As the Caring Dads Programme promotes child centred fathering, cessation of familial abuse and supports father change through leveraging men's motivation to be a positive parent, it is particularly aligned with the aim of this research and warrants further exploration.

3.5.2.1 *Caring Dads Programme*

Developed in Canada for use with populations similar to those in Australia, Caring Dads (CD) is a Men's Behaviour Change (MBC) programme that focuses on fathers (Scott et al., 2021). Recognising that children are often co-abused alongside their mothers, it targets gender-based violence and

control, and supports respectful, non-abusive, nurturing and child-centred parenting (Scott, Thompson-Walsh, & Nsiri, 2018). Leveraging men's motivation to be good fathers, the intervention is a 17-week empirically supported group program that works with fathers who have behaved abusively or neglectfully towards their children, and/or children's mothers (Scott & Crooks, 2007; Scott & Lishak, 2012). The CD program aims to assist fathers in both acknowledging their abusive or neglectful behaviours and in making changes to these through group work that employs cognitive behavioural approaches (Scott, Thompson-Walsh & Nsiri, 2018).

The Caring Dads programme (Scott, 2010) is among the most prominent programmes focussing on fathering in the context of domestic violence. The programme originated in Canada and has been implemented within the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. The programme uses men's fathering role to motivate, examine and change behaviour. There are seven treatment target areas including: anger/hostility/over-reactivity; self-centredness; perceptions of the child as a problem; use of corporal punishment and other aversive behaviours; family cohesion/co-parenting/domestic violence; positive and involved parent-child relationship; and misuse of substances (Scott, 2010). It has four main goals including: to develop sufficient trust and motivation to engage men in the process of examining their fathering; to increase men's awareness of child-centred fathering; to increase men's awareness of, and responsibility for, abusive and neglectful fathering and to consolidate learning, rebuild trust and plan for the future (Scott, 2010).

This programme was developed in collaboration with an advisory group that included representatives from child protection, women's advocacy and shelter services, child and family mental health services, family court assessors, and programmes for abusive men. It has three components: intervention with fathers, outreach to mothers, and a systematic model of communication and coordination with referring professionals. The father intervention component of the Caring Dads programme consists of an individual intake followed by 17, two hour closed intervention sessions. Sessions consist of motivational interviewing, psychoeducation, cognitive

behavioural therapy and group-based processing. Caring Dads also includes phone outreach to caregiving mothers at the beginning, middle, and end of the programme provided by women's advocates. These advocates are associated or partnered with the programme and endeavour to ensure safety and freedom from coercion and to connect her with resources, as required. In addition, the facilitators of the Caring Dads programme collaborate with referral agents and other professionals engaged with families throughout the programme.

Criteria for inclusion on the Caring Dads Programme includes previous abuse or neglect of their children, domestic abuse, or be deemed to be at high risk of these behaviours. Only fathers who provide care or who have regular contact with their children are eligible. In addition, it must also be believed that the father's attendance is in their child's best interests. Programme delivery is aligned with local child protection and domestic abuse services, family courts and criminal justice systems to ensure children and partner safety. Where agreeable, regular contact with the partner is maintained.

Scott et al., (2021) examined child protection outcomes for a sample of fathers who were referred to the Caring Dads programme in Canada. Participants had either completed the programme or were put on a waitlist for service. Results found that involvement in Caring Dads was associated with significantly higher levels of contact between child protection workers and fathers over two years and with significantly lower rates of re-referral as compared to fathers who were referred to, but who did not receive, intervention.

Researchers focussing on the Australian implementation of the Caring Dads Programme provided their findings based on triangulated analysis across self-reports from 202 fathers, 53 reports of fathers' behaviour by mothers, group observation, and interviews with group facilitators and referrers (Diemer et al., 2020). The research concluded that the programme had reduced the risk of children's further exposure to domestic and family violence, had positive impact on fathers' parenting and co-parenting practices, increased fathers' ability to identify the impact of their aggressive

behaviour on their children, and improved men's over-reactive responses to people more generally. Recommendations were made for improving outcomes and for improved integration of the service.

More recently, Gatfield, O'Leary, Tsantefski, Meyer and Baird (2024) investigated co-parenting interactions, family functioning and wellbeing, considering relationship status and father characteristics that correlated with positive outcomes in Australia. Surveys and interviews were conducted concurrently across five sites. At pre-intervention stage, 33 sets of surveys and interviews were completed, 22 sets at post-intervention stage and 10 sets ten months post-interview. Gatfield et al., (2024) found early support for improvements in fathering of Caring Dads participants, family functioning and parental alliance. These findings were significant for partnered fathers.

Partner contact and engagement is acknowledged as good practice in the delivery of behaviour change programmes and is a standard held by the European Standards for Perpetrator Programmes.⁹²

3.5.3 Whole of family working in the context of domestic violence

Hoppstadius (2020) asserts that ending domestic violence is challenging if we continue to exclusively focus on victim-survivors without addressing both those who perpetrate abuse and the underlying causes of that abuse. The multiple potential benefits of increased engagement include enhanced assessment and management of risk due to availability of critical information (Mc Connell, Barnard & Taylor 2017); reduced 'failure to protect' allegations (Wingfield, 2018; Stewart, 2021; Meier & Sankaran, 2021; Humphreys et al., 2022); and increased safety for women and children by leveraging father motivation for sustained relationships with their children (Scott & Crooks, 2007; Holt, 2015; Meyer, 2017; Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin, 2024, Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2024). Services have historically worked separately with victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse. However, simultaneously working with

⁹² [European Standards for Perpetrator Programmes website.pdf \(work-with-perpetrators.eu\)](#)

the whole family has been identified as a means to increase effectiveness of interventions (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017) with early indications of increased father engagement further to the recent shift toward a whole-of-family-approach in statutory child protection agencies across jurisdictions (Humphreys & Campo, 2017; Humphreys et al., 2019; Mandel & Wright, 2019). This approach warrants further exploration.

3.5.4 The Keeping Safe Together Programme

The Keeping Safe Together (KST) has been designed as an ‘all of family’ programme and was piloted over an 18-month period in Australia. KST provided separate services to the mothers, children and fathers engaged in the programme. This engagement was overseen by a multi-agency team, meeting regularly to ensure clear information sharing between the different aspects of the response for each family member. Diemer, Hammond, Absler, Spiteri-Staines and Humphreys et al., (2024) explored the impact of this programme on child safety drawing on interviews from eight children engaged in the programme. Diemer et al. (2024) found that the programme had a positive impact on the children’s safety and the safety of their wider families, particularly in relation to reducing their fathers’ abusive behaviour. The children were found to be cognisant of the impact of their fathers’ abusive behaviour on their families. The children demonstrated a desire for change and a strong empathy in relation to the wellbeing of their families. In exploring the impact of the programme Diemer et al., (2024) found that programme supported them to increase their own sense of happiness, control and development of coping strategies. This whole family approach demonstrated the critical nature of coordination and information sharing.

3.5.5 Dublin Safer Families

In Ireland, a similar approach to that reported on by Diemer et al., (2024), has been previously initiated by the Daughters of Charity and Family

Services (DoCCFS). DoCCFS provide a range of early years, therapeutic and child protection and welfare services to children and families most in need. DoCCFS established Dublin Safer Families Service (DSFS) in 2017, a Gender, Sexual and Domestic Abuse Service that work with parents and children to increase family safety in order to prevent and stop domestic abuse. This service offers direct interventions to individuals, children, couples and families experiencing domestic violence using a whole family approach in contrast to existing specialist domestic violence services that work exclusively with the victims of abuse and perpetrator programmes that work to change behaviour while providing support to partners where possible. This 'whole family' approach to intervention is delivered by way of a "systemically informed safety methodology that involves the identification, assessment and management of risk of future violence, helping people take responsibility for safety and for behaviours that harmed others" (Spratt, Swords & O'Hanlon, 2019, p. 4) working with all members of a family that have experienced domestic abuse.

Referrals to Dublin Safer Families Service are received from Tusla (The Child and Family Agency) or the Probation Service. Family Workers follow a systemically informed safety methodology involving the assessment, identification, and management of risk of future violence, helping people take responsibility for safety and for behaviour that harmed others, and collaborative practices (Cooper & Vetere, 2005; Scerri, Vetere, Abela, & Cooper, 2017). Each victim attends for individual sessions initially while an assessment of safety is being conducted. The perpetrator of abuse is subsequently invited to attend individual sessions when safety is established. Individual sessions continue as required addressing triggers, intergenerational violence and emotional regulation. When deemed safe, children can also begin individual work. If indicated and appropriate joint sessions between the victim-survivor and perpetrator of domestic violence, the victim and child/ren, the perpetrator of domestic violence and children or the whole family can be facilitated. Family Workers engage a range of therapeutic tools and approaches with clients including No-Violence Contracts, Motivational Interviewing, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Safety Planning, In-Room Consultant and Psycho-education. Recently evaluated,

drawing from thirty-seven mothers and twenty-four fathers, results indicate significant reduction in conflict between participating partners, and improvements in parental mental health and quality of parent–child relationships according to Spratt, Swords & Hanlon, (2022).

3.6 Chapter Summary

Chapter three explored the complex nature of working with fathers in the context of domestic violence through the lens of policy, practice and programmes. The chapter began by identifying the trajectory of policy development relating to parenting in Ireland, followed by policy relating to domestic violence and the relative absence of policy specific to fathers who are domestically violent. The influence of policy on practice was explored followed by a sharper focus on practice in this context. The components of successful work with fathers and associated risk were explored followed by overviews of a selection of frameworks and models designed to support practice. These frameworks and models range from enhancing identification of domestic violence, enhancing identification of abusive tactics to providing guidance and capacity building to engage successfully with fathers. The chapter then provided an overview of programmes, beginning with programmes aimed at perpetrators of abuse, then perpetrators of abuse who are fathers, concluding with working with the whole family.

3.7 Key Messages Emerging from the Literature to Inform this Study

Chapters two and three of this doctoral thesis introduced a range of literature pertaining to father engagement in the context of domestic violence. Chapter two, the first literature chapter introduced a case for father engagement outlining the potential benefits of engaging with fathers in this context, including having access to critical information to inform assessment and the

management of risk (Mc Connell, Barnard & Taylor, 2017). Chapter two also charted the changing roles and perceptions of fathering (Jarska, 2020; Judit, 2020), from provider to nurturer (Schmitz, 2016; Krishnaswamy, 2019; Cabrera, 2020) with particular attention on the distinct contributions of fathers in children's lives. However, as the latter part of chapter two demonstrated, the context of domestic violence matters, and unassessed and unmanaged inherent risk in this context across pregnancy, birth and childhood can create lasting negative impact on children's lives thus reinforcing the case for father engagement. Chapter three subsequently explored the intrinsic risks, barriers and facilitators across policy, practice and programmes pertaining to working with perpetrators of domestic violence and specifically fathers in the context of domestic violence encouraging further exploration of how father engagement is experienced in the context of domestic violence by the key stakeholders in this research; what supports professional engagement with domestically abusive fathers; and what are the challenges/barriers to engaging with fathers who are domestically violent.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This thesis is concerned with understanding father engagement in the context of domestic violence from multiple perspectives. Central to this study is understanding how this engagement is experienced by children, mothers, fathers and a range of professionals who respond to families experiencing domestic violence in both a statutory and non-statutory capacity. It was initially intended that this understanding would be achieved by utilising a mixed method approach embedded within a case study design. The proposed mix of methods included surveys, focus groups and individual interviews, underpinned and predominantly influenced by social constructionist theory. However, due to unforeseen challenges, in part attributable to Covid-19, but also arising from the challenges engaging An Garda Síochána in survey research, the research design was reviewed and revised to focus on a purely qualitative approach drawing on individual interviews underpinned and predominantly influenced by social constructionist theory and embedded in a case study design. This chapter provides an outline and description of the development process of this thesis from inception to aims and objectives, theoretical approach, research design and chosen research methods, sampling decisions, ethical issues, sampling approaches and data collection. In keeping with a reflective and reflexive approach, the chapter also details and explores challenges encountered during the design and execution of this research, associated with real world research of this nature.

4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Position

The ontological position of this thesis on father engagement in the context of domestic violence encompasses understanding the reality of father engagement in this context and how it is experienced by victim-survivors, a range of professionals and domestically abusive fathers. Chapter One established that domestic violence (DV) is a serious human rights violation and a public health concern that impacts individuals, families, and communities globally (World Health Organisation, 2020; Devaney et al., 2021). Chapter One also chartered how the perception of this experience has evolved over time moving from an understanding of it essentially as a physical incident focussed experience to a wider lens of appreciation of the devastating impact of the non-physical and coercively controlling aspects of the experience on victim-survivors (Katz, 2016; Stark & Hester, 2019; Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). This ontological position subscribes to the subjective nature of reality, aligning with the belief that “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision’ (Bryman, 2001, pp. 16–18). It values the richness of the lived experiences of victim-survivors of domestic violence, the experiences of professionals working with fathers in this context and the experience of domestically abusive father’s experience of engagement; acknowledging that context matters in relation to the social, political and cultural influences that shape the experience and guide the meaning ascribed to these experiences. Understanding of both the impact of domestic violence on women, children and their relationships and of what constitutes effective measures is growing, but there remains a significant gap in the knowledge base. The experience of DV is also acknowledged as being highly gendered (Cunningham & Anderson, 2023; Graham, Jun, Kim, Power, Devaney, Frederick & Betz, et al., 2024), with women being disproportionately the victims and men overwhelmingly the perpetrators of domestic violence. This research values interpretation over description, seeking to understand the reality of father engagement in the

context of domestic violence at a deeper level and from a range of perspectives, recognising that men who perpetrate abuse are often fathers who parent or have ongoing post separation contact with their children (Humphreys et al., 2019). Fatherhood research has largely neglected domestically violent men and domestic violence research has largely neglected domestically violent fathers (Heward-Belle, 2016). In addition, the positioning of children and young people, the positioning of men as perpetrators of abuse and as fathers, and the positioning of agencies in respect of this issue has evolved over time. Children and young people are increasingly acknowledged as victims of domestic violence in their own right (Callaghan et al., 2018). There is an increasing movement towards professionals ‘pivoting to the perpetrator’ (Mandel, 2014) and ideologies surrounding fatherhood have shifted significantly (Jarska, 2020; Judit, 2020); moving from the breadwinner model of fatherhood towards the more involved nurturing parent (Schmitz, 2016). As the introductory chapter to this thesis has established, the issue of domestic violence in Ireland is increasing in focus across policy, legislation, practice, and in the wider public domain. The domestic violence landscape is evolving, providing this thesis with an optimum juncture to increase the evidence informed development.

The epistemological position of this thesis emanates from the ontological position subscribing to the belief that knowledge is constructed through experiences and social processes. The roles and remits of agencies with regard to domestic violence are evolving, guided by national policy and legislative change and shaped by political and social forces that are increasingly victim-survivor informed⁹³. The chosen epistemological approach to knowledge generation honours and values the views and interpretations gleaned from the lived experience of domestic violence victim-survivors, the experience of professionals responding to domestic violence and the perspectives of domestically abusive fathers in the context of professional engagement. This research is conscious of the interweaving cultural, social, economic and political influences on those who experience

⁹³ The development of the Third National Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence strategy 2022-2026 was informed by adult, child and young person victim-survivors. The strategy commits to victim-survivor centered approach. [DOJ DSGBV Strategy.indd](#) (p.11)

domestic violence, the influences on those who seek to address domestic violence and those who perpetrate domestic violence. This position subscribes to an engaged, incremental inductive approach to knowledge generation from the bottom up, whilst also acknowledging the role of researcher reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006) who at all times is concerned with the ethical generation of knowledge. The evolving understanding and positioning with regard to domestic violence and specifically father engagement in this context aligns with the theoretical framing of this research within a social construction framework. Social constructionism provides an aligned epistemological perspective in which to explore father engagement in the context of domestic violence from multiple perspectives.

Emanating from this ontological and epistemological position, this research is underpinned by social constructionism, a theoretical tradition that views realities and truths as constructed through language, representation and other social processes (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). Social constructionism facilitates space for the voice of the victim to be heard (Crotty, 1998). "The terms in which the world is understood are seen as related to specific socio-political, cultural and historical contexts, and meanings are seen as social artefacts, resulting from social interaction, rather than some inherent truth about the nature of reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, p. 45). Drawing on social constructionism provides a perspective on social problems such as domestic violence and involves "elucidating the process by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, pp. 3-4). A social constructionist perspective underscores this study; examining how the participants understand domestic violence as victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and professionals responding to and addressing domestic violence; and how social and political processes influence the social construction of domestic violence. What is considered domestic violence is socially constructed and varies over time and place. How experiences like domestic violence are understood influences how they are defined and measured (Tolmie, Smith & Wilson, 2024); which has the potential to highlight particular aspects of the experience and obscure others; which in turn can potentially influence how

people relay and relate to the experience. Fatherhood is also a multifaceted and evolving construction.

Reflexivity compels us to evaluate our own life experiences, preconceptions, biases, while acknowledging how these values may impact the research process, for example the bi-directional influence on the researcher and the research (Meloni, 2020). The conceptual framework of this thesis is also influenced by the researcher's qualifications and experience of working within the domestic violence sector. The researcher's undergraduate and post graduate qualifications are in social and applied psychology respectively. The researcher worked in a frontline capacity in the domestic violence sector for 17 years, a further six years in a national services development role and more recently within education. Reflective and reflexive practice is an essential core aspect of the work within specialist domestic violence service provision.

4.3 Choosing the research strategy

'Real world research is the cornerstone of applied learning, evidence-based policy and informed decision-making' (Robson & Mc Cartan 2016, p. 10)

The research design process of this thesis was influenced by the desire to ultimately improve the outcomes for those experiencing and perpetrating domestic violence. Underpinning this research strategy was a commitment to social justice and a desire to contribute to greater social equality, a shared approach by most qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Cresswell, 2012). Domestic violence is a pervasive issue that has received much attention, debate and research. It poses a significant problem for those whose life is affected by this issue, the social, health and criminal justice agencies that respond to it, and wider society that must bear the costs (Devaney, 2015; Devaney et al., 2021).

As such and as reflected in the above quote, the chosen research design is compatible with real world research and is reflected in the aims and

objectives of this thesis. The aim of this research is to explore multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence. These perspectives include children and young people, mothers, fathers and a broad range of relevant professionals. The objectives set out below seek to provide a contextually rich understanding of this under-researched area. From the perspectives of victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and a range of relevant professionals, the objectives of this research are:

- To explore the experience of father engagement in the context of domestic violence.
- To identify potential risks and resources associated with father engagement in the context of domestic violence.
- To identify factors that minimise risk and maximise opportunities for father engagement in the context of domestic violence.
- To contribute to the conceptual and theoretical knowledge base on father engagement in the context of domestic violence.

This thesis is therefore concerned with understanding the nature of father engagement in the context of domestic violence, from multiple perspectives. As this thesis is also interested in understanding the broader processes and dynamics that influence the subjective experiences of participants, a social constructionist perspective underscores the following core research questions:

- How is father engagement experienced in the context of domestic violence by the key stakeholders in this research?
- What supports professional engagement with domestically abusive fathers?
- What are the challenges/barriers to engaging with fathers who are domestically violent/ What doesn't work well?

4.3.1 Case Study Design

This thesis is grounded in a qualitative case study design. Case study methodology is an appropriate strategy for providing a rich and in-depth investigation of a “particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Robson, 1998, p. 52). For the purpose of this study, the ‘case’ is father engagement in the context of domestic violence. Triangulation, the combination of methods or sources of data in a single study (Lune & Berg, 2017) was utilised in this research, as according to Bryman (2012), by drawing on other types and sources of data, observers also gain a deeper and clearer understanding of the setting and people being studied. Yin (2017) argues that the triangulation of several different data sources strengthens the findings. Triangulation of data was achieved providing a richer and more comprehensive account of the phenomenon by answering core research questions from multiple viewpoints - adult and child victim-survivors, fathers who have perpetrated domestic violence and a range of professionals responding to domestic violence. Evidenced in this research, triangulation is used to “deepen the understanding of a phenomenon, not to confirm one true reality” (Jentoft & Olsen, 2017, p. 4).

4.3.2 Choosing a qualitative approach

“Domestic abuse is a pernicious societal issue that has both short- and long-term consequences for those who are victimised” (Skafida, Morrison & Devaney, 2022, p. 9811). It is a subjective experience that evolves over time, includes a pattern of behaviours and tactics and is mediated by a range of factors. Its nuanced complexity lends itself to the sensitivity of qualitative research, a sensitivity that is lacking in quantitative research (Siverio, Sheen, Bramante, Knighting, Koops, Montgomery, November, Soulsby, Stevenson, Watkins, Easter & Sandall, 2022). A qualitative approach focuses on understanding how individuals interpret their reality and is rooted in the lived

experience, aligned to the epistemological position outlined earlier. It broadens the scope of the data and captures the nuances of individual perspectives, providing a systematic way of exploring these perspectives and subjective experiences (Grove, Burns & Gray, 2012). In relation to domestic violence, a complex social problem, it can advance our knowledge and facilitate the building of a comprehensive perception of the participant's experience at a specific juncture in their lives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Qualitative research is therefore more appropriate than quantitative methods when seeking to explore the subjective meaning given to experiences of abuse by victim-survivors (Downes, Kelly & Westmarland, 2014). Communicating participant's own subjective experience is considered the more appropriate mechanism for research with children and young people (Freeman & Mathison 2009). Drawing on their experience as qualitative interviewers of children, Øverlien and Holt (2023, p. 658) assert that the aim of the interview "has been to capture the lifeworld of the child, to the best of our (adult) abilities, that is to see the world through the eyes of the child, as experienced by him or her". Given the ability of the semi-structured interview format to flexibly enable the interviewee to shape the direction and context of the interview (Yeo, Frydenberg, Northam & Deans, 2014), semi-structured interviews were the chosen approach to data collection across all data sets in this thesis: adult and child victim-survivors, domestically violent fathers and a broad range of professionals.

4.3.3 Individual Interviews

Individual interviews are the most appropriate method to explore the experiences of both victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence, facilitating the sharing of sensitive personal information that may not otherwise be shared in a group setting (Schuster, Brewis, Wutich, Safi, Vanrespaille, Bowen, SturtzSreetharan, McDaniel & Ochandarena, 2023). Talking about domestic violence poses a significant challenge because it risks evoking feelings of shame (Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin, 2024). In their meta synthesis of 40 publications focusing on research with children, Noble-

Carr, Moore and Mc Arthur (2020) found that many children could not speak about their experiences because they found it embarrassing or shameful (Berman, 2000; Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2007). Heron, Eisma and Browne (2022) in their study of barriers and facilitators to disclosure drawn from 29 women victim-survivors in the UK, found that barriers to disclosure included fear, embarrassment/shame and self-blame. Fitz-Gibbon et al., (2024) highlighted the role of shame on engagement of men who are domestically abusive. In their study, shame was identified as a leading indicator of disengagement risk. Therefore, facilitating individual interviews can best mitigate against the impact of feelings of shame, offering a more shame sensitive and dignity conferring medium within which to share experiences. It also facilitates a focus on individual experiences, ensuring that this sensitive personal information achieves the attention that it requires (Webster, Lewis & Brown, 2013). Interviewing victim-survivors on an individual basis was selected to more easily facilitate the potential discomfort or distress of participants and enable immediate responses (Thunberg, 2022). Individual interviews with senior personnel were selected to provide a detailed view of the respective organisation's structure, policy context and culture. Having a semi-structured format was selected to facilitate the addition of information that may not otherwise be shared within a more rigid structure, informing the current and potentially future research.

4.4 Conducting the Research

The fieldwork process involved three phases; firstly, gatekeeper recruitment and engagement; secondly, participant recruitment and data collection and thirdly, the coding and analysis of data. However, it was not a linear journey. Due to various participant recruitment challenges, phases one and two were revisited numerous times before progressing to phase three, coding and analysing.

4.4.1 Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to facilitate detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and questions pertaining to this thesis (Bryman, 2012). The potential study population from which the samples were drawn were identified by considering their proximity to domestic violence: as a victim-survivor, as a perpetrator of abuse or as a professional with connections with either or both victim-survivor and perpetrator of abuse (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant & Rahim, 2014). Recruited gatekeepers, guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, identified potential participants utilising a purposive sampling approach. The recruitment and engagement of gatekeepers is now explored in greater detail.

Recruiting Gatekeepers

As gatekeepers are usually the participant's first contact with the research and play a vital role in the initial approach and process of securing consent (Webster, Lewis & Brown, 2013), particular care was taken with their recruitment. Initial conversations about the research and provisional recruitment took place prior to seeking ethical approval, due primarily to the researchers position as a practitioner in the field. While having an established professional connection made initial recruitment less onerous on the researcher, careful attention was equally given to researcher positioning and remits with regards to their ability to identify and recruit participants, particularly victim-survivors and fathers who are domestically violent (Johnson, 2018). Given the elapsed time between their provisional agreement to act in a gatekeeper role and the fieldwork actually starting with delays due to Covid-19, one new gatekeeper was recruited at this point due to the retirement of the previous gatekeeper. This gatekeeper was designated by their agency as having the most appropriate role to identify and recruit professional participants. The initial gatekeepers comprised a Support Co-ordinator from specialist domestic violence services, a Principal Social Worker from Tusla, a Senior Manager from the court services and an Assistant Principal Probation Officer. It was anticipated that the specialist domestic violence service and probation services would suffice in facilitating

access to adult and child victim-survivors and fathers who were domestically violent (Johnson, 2018). However additional domestic violence gatekeepers were required and an additional agency working in partnership with Probation Services, MOVE Ireland, was engaged to support the recruitment of men. The identification of additional young people who met the inclusion criteria was supported by Barnardos via their TLC KIDZ programme.

Engaging Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers were provided with an information leaflet (appendix 1) pertaining to their role, specifying the research background, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data, privacy and confidentiality management, the limits of confidentiality, data storage, consent and their rights relating to viewing information and withdrawal from the research. This was followed up by a meeting with the researcher to discuss any outstanding questions and prepare the gatekeeper for engagement with potential participants across all participant cohorts. Gatekeepers were provided with bespoke leaflets for each participant cohort (appendices 2,3,4,5), in addition to consent and assent forms (appendices 6,7,8,9). The agreed procedure for gatekeepers of professionals was to identify and approach professionals providing leaflet and consent form for consideration (appendix 6); checking with identified potential participants and upon receiving confirmation, provide preferred contact details to the researcher. The agreed procedure for gatekeepers involved in the recruitment of victim-survivors and domestically violent fathers included: displaying A4 size leaflets in common public areas; identifying potential participants engaged with the respective services; providing a brief explanation and written material about the research to the potential participant; and follow up with the potential participant at least three days post provision of the information in order to minimise any sense of obligation to the service that the gatekeeper represented (Graham et al., 2007a). Gatekeepers were asked to check if potential participants had had sufficient time to consider the research and if they had any questions. Inviting additional questions was used as a strategy to facilitate additional information, but also to mitigate against any literacy challenges. Upon receiving a positive response, gatekeepers were requested to ask permission to share potential participant's preferred contact method and

details with the researcher. Gatekeepers fulfilled an invaluable role in the research, particularly in relation to the recruitment of children and young people (Webster, Lewis & Brown, 2013).

4.4.2 Sampling Children and Young people

Children and young people were recruited by purposive sampling employed by the respective gatekeepers and guided by inclusion criteria⁹⁴. Initial enquiry regarding the children's involvement was made by the gatekeepers with their mothers. Following the outlined gatekeeper procedure, when a positive indication was received, mothers were asked for permission to share contact details and preferences with the researcher. The preferred method for all mothers was by mobile phone. Conscious of technology facilitated abuse (Holt, Cahill & Elliffe, 2023) and the sensitive nature of their child's potential participation, the researcher made initial contact by text advising that the named Gatekeeper had provided their number and inviting an initial conversation. The majority of referred potential participants (95%) responded outlining a suitable time to speak. Initial conversations outlined the research and what their child's engagement would entail (Klykken, 2022), the research background, data, privacy and confidentiality management, the limits of confidentiality, data storage, the rationale for audio recording and the right to access information and withdraw from the research pre, during or post interview. The need for both parental consent and assent of prospective children and young people was explained and discussed with the option for children and young people to have contact in advance to address outstanding questions offered. The potential negative impacts for the prospective participants, arranged supports and confidentiality limits was fully explained with opportunities for further questions across all areas. This conversation also served as a risk assessment to ensure that the inclusion criteria were met and that their circumstance had not changed since their initial referral for involvement in the research. Provisional dates for interviews

⁹⁴ Victim-survivor of domestic violence. 12 years and older. Not living with perpetrator of abuse. Not currently living in refuge. Not currently in a period of crisis. Connect with specialist domestic violence support and sufficient level of English to comfortably participate.

were agreed with the opportunity for both mothers and children to call the researcher with further questions in the interim. An approximate 10-day period to reflect on participation was given to all prospective participants to ensure that they had adequate time to consider engaging. Contact was made the day before the provisional interview to confirm consent was still in place. Six of nine provisional interviews with children and young people progressed to interview.

Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) establishes the right of children capable of forming their own views to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Although qualitative research with children and young people who have lived with domestic violence has been conducted for almost 25 years (McGee, 2000; Mullender, Imam & Hague, 2002), the “relational framing of children’s voices and recognition and enabling of children’s agency is less evolved in research and professional interventions” (Morris, Humphreys & Hegarty 2020, p. 1). According to Øverlien and Holt (2018), when it comes to interventions with children living with domestic violence, there is a strong desire by adults to protect children’s childhood and innocence, which paradoxically can render them silent. Echoing these observations, Hyden, Gadd and Grund (2020) assert that excluding children and young people from participation may be attributable to a misdirected aspiration to protect children, which overlooks their right to be heard.

Research involving children and young people is often considered sensitive due to the age of participants, particularly with some research topics, including domestic violence, considered compounding the perceived sensitivity (Arnell & Thunberg, 2023). McCafferty (2017) argues that the dominant view of children as vulnerable and in need of protection, contributes to professionals and other adults making decisions on their behalf rather than in partnership with them, which also undermines their rights. Involving children in research is, according to Arnell and Thunberg (2023), a mechanism to both achieve new knowledge through their narratives and perspectives while also protecting their right to share these perspectives and be listened to, consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). Arnell and

Thunberg (2023) and others (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Callaghan et al., 2018; Øverlien & Holt, (2023) encourage the inclusion of children and young people's voices in research. According to Øverlien and Holt (in 2023) if interviews with children and young people are conducted in a way that is ethically secure, this can be experienced as empowering for children and young people.

Buoyed by the encouragement evident in the literature to include children and young people and mindful that children are direct victims of domestic violence and abuse in their own right (Callaghan et al., 2018), including children and young people in this research was therefore considered essential. The inclusion of children and young people was guided by strict criteria including being 12 years or older, not currently living with their father, not currently in crisis, having a sufficient level of English to participate comfortably and engaged with a support service. Guided by good practice guidance garnered from the literature (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Callaghan et al., 2018; Øverlien & Holt, 2023; Arnell & Thunberg 2023) careful attention was given across the research journey of each child including recruitment, informed consent, preparation for and conducting the interview and post interview follow up. Having worked directly with children and young people previously in this context was advantageous when considering the importance of training, having an understanding and respect for their experience, remaining conscious of creating an opposite experience to their abusive situation (Øverlien & Holt, 2023) and being aware and mindful of the impacts of the violence and abuse on the mother-child relationship (Katz, 2019).

Table 6: Children and Young people profile

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Mother Participation
1	Alfie	Male	16	
2	Amira	Female	12	Yes
3	Jenna	Female	15	Yes
4	Gia	Female	13	
5	Alex	Male	14	
6	Rachel	Female	16	Yes

4.4.3 Sampling Mothers

Mothers were recruited by purposive sampling employed by the respective gatekeeper and guided by the inclusion criteria⁹⁵. The required criteria for participation for mothers included that they had experienced domestic violence, that they had self-selected to participate, that they were not currently living with the perpetrator of domestic violence, that they had a sufficient level of English and that they were engaged with a specialist support service. It is understood that revisiting experiences of previous abuse can cause discomfort and distress for participants, therefore engagement with a support service was a critical inclusion criterion.

Following the outlined gatekeeper procedure, when a positive indication was received, mothers were asked for their permission for the gatekeeper to share contact details and preferences with the researcher. The researcher sent a text message to each mother and invited a conversation about potential involvement in the research. The initial conversation with potential participants outlined the research background, data, privacy and confidentiality management, the limits of confidentiality, data storage, the rationale for audio recording and the right to access information and withdraw from the research pre, during or post interview. It also served as a risk assessment to ensure that the inclusion criteria were met and that the

⁹⁵ Victim-survivor of domestic violence. Not living with perpetrator of domestic violence. Not currently living in refuge. Not currently in a period of crisis. Connected with specialist domestic violence support and sufficient level of English to participate comfortably.

potential participants circumstances had not changed since their referral for inclusion in the research. Provisional dates for interviews were agreed with the opportunity to call the researcher with further questions in the interim. Contact was made the day before the provisional interview to confirm the interview would proceed. A total of eight mothers proceeded to interview and the table below presents their profile.

Table 7: Mother profile

No	Pseudonym	Age range	No. of children
1	Sandra	35-44	2
2	Gillian	45-54	4
3	Joan	45-54	3
4	Lyndsey	45-54	2
5	Farrah	35-44	4
6	Claire	45-54	1
7	Maria	25-34	2
8	Rebecca	35-44	6

4.4.4 Sampling Fathers

Fathers were recruited by purposive sampling employed by the respective gatekeeper and guided by inclusion criteria⁹⁶. The required criteria for participation of fathers included engagement with a service with the specific remit of addressing domestic violence by males. Participants were included if they self-selected to participate. Fathers were not interviewed if they were currently living with the victim-survivors of abuse, did not have a sufficient level of English to participate or were considered by the gatekeeper to be in a period of crisis.

⁹⁶ Having disclosed domestic violence perpetration. Not in a period of crisis. Not living with victim-survivors. Connected with a support service and sufficient level of English to participate comfortably.

Following the outlined gatekeeper procedure, when a positive indication was received, fathers were asked for permission to share contact details and preferences with the researcher. The researcher then sent a text message to each father and invited a conversation about their potential involvement in the research. The initial conversation outlined the research background, data, privacy and confidentiality management, the limits of confidentiality, data storage and the right to access information and withdraw from the research pre, during or post interview. It also served as a risk assessment to ensure that the inclusion criteria were met and that their circumstance had not changed since their referral for participation in the research. Provisional dates for interviews were agreed with the opportunity to call the researcher with further questions in the interim. Contact was made the day before the provisional interview to confirm the interview would proceed as planned. Three out of six initial conversations progressed to interview. Table 3 below presents the profile of participating fathers.

Table 8: father profile

No.	Pseudonym	Age Range	No. of children
1	David	45-54	1
2	Kieran	45-54	2
3	Matthew	35-44	2

4.4.5 Sampling professionals

Frontline professionals and senior personnel were recruited utilising purposive sampling facilitated by the established gatekeepers within each agency. Professional participants were identified as either working directly with victim-survivors, fathers or both. Following the outlined agreed procedure for gatekeepers of professionals, when a positive indication was

received, professionals were asked for permission to share contact details and preferences with the researcher. The researcher made initial contact by email and arranged a pre-interview meeting if required to address any outstanding questions and to arrange the interview. The researcher contacted the participant the day before interview to confirm attendance. All 28 participants progressed from initial contact to interview. Table 4 below presents the profile of participating professionals.

Table 9: Professional profile

Role	Gender	
	Female	Male
<i>Child Support worker/Supervised access worker</i>	2	
<i>Child Support Coordinator</i>	1	
<i>Supervisor access coordinator</i>	1	
<i>Domestic Violence Support Worker</i>	2	
<i>Domestic Violence manager/co-ordinator</i>	2	
<i>Court Services Staff member</i>	4	1
<i>Court Services Manager</i>	1	1
<i>Probation officer</i>	3	2
<i>Probation Manager</i>	1	1
<i>Social Worker</i>	2	
<i>DV Liaison Worker</i>	1	
<i>Family Support Manager</i>	1	
<i>Family Support Worker</i>		1
<i>Perpetrator Programme Facilitator</i>		1
Total	21	7

4.4.6 Conducting the interviews

The qualitative researcher studies people in the context of their pasts and the situations in which they find themselves (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Tracy & Geist-Martin, 2013; Yin, 2011), a perspective that was embraced in preparation for and throughout the interview process. While there was some overlap, professionals were interviewed first followed by mothers, children and young people concluding with fathers. Commencing with the professional participants enabled the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of professional engagement in this context before engaging with victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse therefore further sensitising the researcher to their nuanced experiences during interviews.

In relation to consent, asking participants again whilst in the field, can be viewed as an example of explicit maintenance and renegotiation of informed consent (Plankey-Videla, 2012). This iterative, continuous approach to consent was demonstrated across initial contact by gatekeepers to initial conversations with prospective participants culminating in achieving signed consent in advance of the research interview. At the beginning of each research interview, time was taken to re-review and discuss each aspect of the consent form from the voluntary nature of participation, the option of recording the interview, the storage and use of data, the limits of confidentiality, the right to withdraw at any time during or after the interview and the right to review their contribution at any time. Following discussion each participant signed their consent form followed by the researcher's signature. Opportunities to discuss the request to record the interviews were created in every instance at the beginning and throughout the interview. Careful attention was given to providing the rationale for recording and the choice at all times of the participant to discontinue recording. Control of the recording was given to the participant to ensure that at all times they felt in control of their contribution. Giving participants "the choice to permanently or temporarily withdraw during fieldwork can contribute towards a mutual understanding of the active role that participants play in the research" (Klykken, 2022, p. 802). Therefore, throughout and upon conclusion of the

interview participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and the process for same

Interviewing Professionals

As stated above, twenty-eight professionals completed individual semi-structured interviews. Each professional was offered the choice of having their interview in person or online. 17 professionals were interviewed in person with the remaining 11 interviewed utilising MSTeams. In-person interviews were conducted in the preferred location identified by the interviewee.

Each interview was guided by an interview schedule (appendix 11) and began with an explanation of the research and what the interview would entail (Klykken, 2022). The opportunity for questions was provided before commencing the interview. On completion of the interview each interviewee was reminded of their right to withdraw post interview and their right to access their stored information. Post interview contact was made with each participant to thank them for their participation. Interviews with professionals ranged from 22 to 106 minutes.

Interviewing Mothers

Eight interviews with mothers were conducted in places they identified as comfortable for them, including their homes (six participants) and the domestic violence service they were engaged with (two participants). All mothers were living separately from their husbands/partners at the point of interview and all interviews were conducted in person. Gatekeepers were apprised of the interviews as per the researcher safety protocol (appendix 12).

Each interview was guided by an interview schedule (appendix 13) and began with an explanation of the research and what the interview would entail (Klykken, 2022). Each interview concluded with the question “is there anything that you didn’t get a chance to say that you would like to” before reminding the mother that they could withdraw at any time if they decided, thus contributing to the mutual understanding of their active role in the research (Klykken, 2022). Interviews with mothers ranged from 42 to 134 minutes. Post interview contact was made with each mother in the days

following the interview to ascertain if further support was needed. No further support was required by any of the participating mothers.

Interviewing Children and Young People

Six interviews with children and young people were conducted in person in places they identified as comfortable for them (Morris et al., 2020) including their homes (four) and the domestic violence service they were engaged with (two). All six children and young people were living with their mothers at the time of the interview. Two young people had unstructured sporadic access/contact with their father, one had structured yet sporadic access/contact with their father, one had structured regular access/contact with their father, one had recently decided to discontinue access/contact. In one situation access/contact had been paused to facilitate further assessment of the father's capacity to parent. Gatekeepers were apprised of the interviews as per the researcher safety protocol. Post interview contact was made with each participant in the days following the interview to ascertain if further support was required. Further support was not required by any of the participants.

The researcher spoke with both the mother and the young person before the interview. During this time the parental consent form was signed by the child's mother and children and young people were advised of the opportunity to have accompaniment during the interview. None of the children opted for accompaniment. Each interview was guided by an interview schedule (appendix 14) and began with an explanation of the research and what the interview would entail (Klykken, 2022). An important aspect of involving children in research is consent (Øverlien, 2012). While consent had been discussed previously with their mothers, this was the first conversation with each child in relation to their assent to participate. This was given careful attention utilising the assent form (appendix 9) to guide the conversation. The opportunity for questions was given. The researcher outlined and discussed the research background with the young person. During this discussion the researcher ascertained the young person's understanding of domestic violence. The Barnardo's animation "Hear, me,

see me and keep me safe”⁹⁷ was prepared in advance should children or young people require additional support in understanding use of the term domestic violence. However, all of the children and young people demonstrated a clear understanding of the experience of domestic violence.

Opportunities to discuss the request to record the interviews were created in every instance at the beginning and throughout the interview. Careful attention was given to providing the rationale for recording and the choice at all times of the participant to discontinue recording. Control of the recording was given to the children to ensure that at all times they felt in control of their contribution. One young person decided against being recorded, explaining that she had previously felt pressured to have her statement to An Garda Síochána recorded. This request was acceded to. Interviews were conducted with brief pauses throughout to check the comfort levels of children and young people. Guided by the literature (Henderson-Dekort et al., 2022; Arnell & Thunberg, 2023) an activity was incorporated within the interview design to provide an additional medium for participation for children and young people. Henderson-Dekort et al. (2022) suggest that non-verbal methods including play and art increase opportunities for children and young people to provide their perspectives and share their experiences and according to Arnell and Thunberg, (2023) drawing also creates a means to move between the challenging subject being discussed and the drawing augmenting comfort in the interview setting.

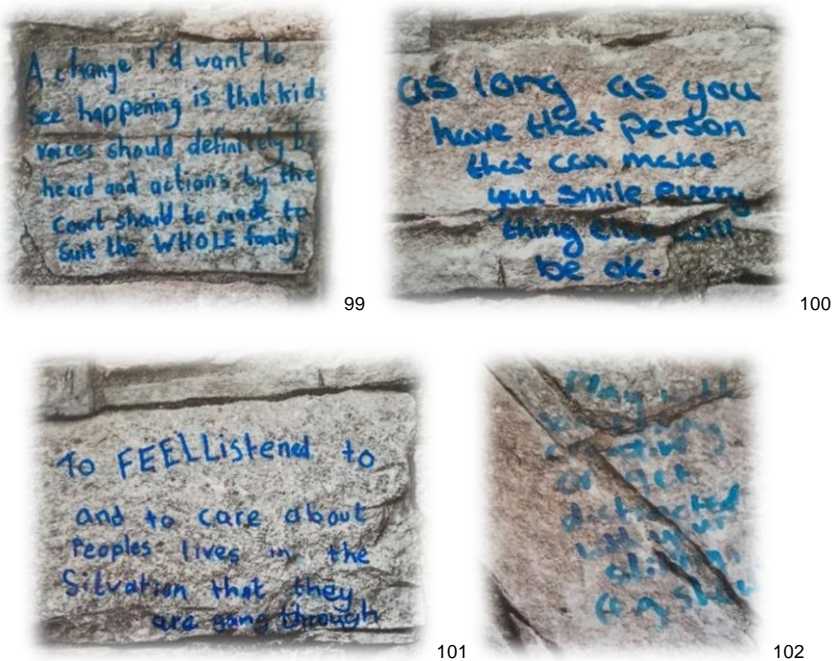
The “Wall of Wants” activity, sourced from the Tusla Child and Youth Participation Toolkit⁹⁸ created an opportunity for the participating children and young people to express their views with regard to what they wanted professionals to take notice of when they lived with domestic violence. The activity facilitates young people to add their views to the wall across individual bricks. Care was taken to provide fresh ‘bricks’ to each participant to avoid influence. In interview, the children and young people discussed their contributions to the wall. Each interview concluded with the question “is there

⁹⁷ <https://youtu.be/51TeDmDjcEg?si=nROtZrHnL2WNw.PI>

⁹⁸ [Tusla - Toolkit \(web version\).pdf](#) pg 61

anything that you didn't get a chance to say that you would like to" before reminding the child or young person that they could withdraw at any time if they decided, thus contributing to the mutual understanding of their active role in the research (Klykken, 2022). Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 23 minutes. Post interview contact was made with the mother of each participant in the days following the interview to ascertain if further support was required. Further support was not required by any of the participants.

Figure 1: Wall of Wants

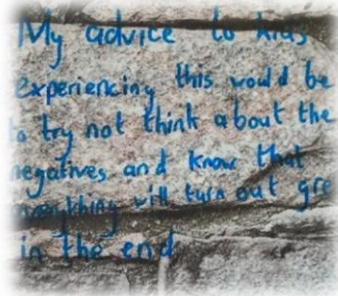


⁹⁹ A change I'd want to see happening is that kids voices should definitely be heard and actions by the court should be made to suit the whole family

¹⁰⁰ As long as you have that person that can make you smile every thing else will be ok

¹⁰¹ To feel listened to and to care about peoples lives in the situation that they are going through

¹⁰² Play with something creative or get distracted with your siblings. Do a show.

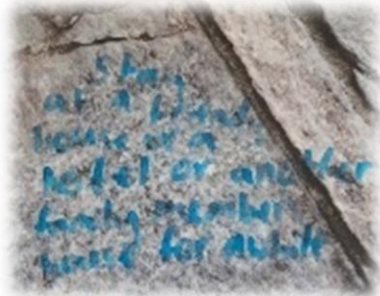


My advice to kids
experiencing this would be
to try not think about the
negatives and know that
everything will turn out great
in the end

103 104

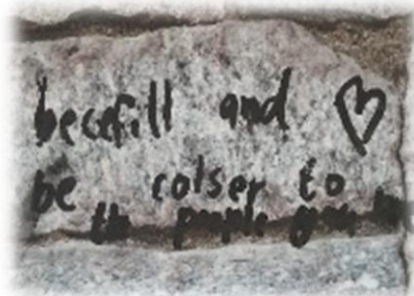



Rid of
bias!



Stay at a friend's
house or a
hotel or another
family member's
house for a while

105



be careful and 
be closer to
the people you love

106



We all wanna
see the end
of this tunnel
and hopefully
we will.

107

Interviewing Fathers

Three interviews with fathers were conducted in pre-arranged places identified as comfortable for them, including in a park (two) and a local venue (one). The gatekeeper was apprised of the interviews as per the researcher safety protocol (appendix 12).

¹⁰³ My advice to kids experiencing this would be to try not think about the negatives and know that everything will turn out great in the end

¹⁰⁴ Rid of bias!

¹⁰⁵ Stay at a friend's house or a hotel or another family member's house for a while

¹⁰⁶ Be careful and be closer to the people you love

¹⁰⁷ We all wanna see the end of this tunnel and hopefully we will

Each interview began with an explanation of the research and what the interview would entail (Klykken, 2022). Consent was given careful attention utilising the previously provided consent form to guide the conversation. Each interview was guided by an interview schedule (appendix 15). Opportunities to discuss the request to record the interviews were created in every instance at the beginning and throughout the interview. Careful attention was given to providing the rationale for recording and the choice at all times of the participant to discontinue recording. Control of the recording was given to the participant to ensure that at all times they felt in control of their contribution. Interviews were conducted with brief pauses throughout to check the comfort levels and to reaffirm the continuation of the interview. Each interview concluded with the question “is there anything that you didn’t get a chance to say that you would like to” before reminding the father that they could withdraw at any time if they decide thus contributing to the mutual understanding of their active role in the research (Klykken, 2022). Interviews with fathers ranged from 28 to 51 minutes. Post interview contact was made with each father in the days following the interview to ascertain if further support was needed. Further support was not required by any of the participants.

4.5 Analysing the data

To enhance the rigor of the study, the researcher adopted the framework proposed by Harley and Cornelissen (2022). This framework promotes methodological coherence across ontology, epistemology, methodology and theory. This framework requires logical consistency from data collection to analysis, contrastive reasoning promoting a reflexive position and explicating explanations. Guided by this framework, a number of methods of analysis were considered. However, the core assumptions of Reflexive Thematic Analysis¹⁰⁸ (Braun & Clarke, 2020) is very aligned to the position of this

¹⁰⁸ 1. Researcher subjectivity is the primary “tool” for reflexive TA; subjectivity is not a problem to be managed or controlled, it is a resource for research (Gough & Madill, 2012). The notion of “researcher bias,” which implies the possibility of unbiased or objective knowledge generation, is incompatible with reflexive TA, as knowledge generation is inherently subjective and situated. 2.

research. Therefore, Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2019a) was deemed the most appropriate "family of methods" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4) for this analysis. Reflexive approaches involve later theme development. Themes are developed from codes and conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept (Braun et al., 2014). The central organising concept for this process of analysis was 'father engagement'.

Thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach within a constructionist framework. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022), the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process to capture initial insights and reflections and to strengthen reflexivity. This was particularly useful as the analysis moved through the six phases identified by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six stages in this process are now explored in further detail.

1. Familiarising yourself with your data

44 of the 45 interviews were audio recorded. The remaining interview was hand recorded by the researcher during the interview, utilising verbatim quotes and shorthand notes. These were then reviewed by the young person for her approval. All audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher within four days of the interview, noting inflections, breaks, pauses and tones

Following on from this, analysis and interpretation of data cannot be accurate or objective, but can be weaker (e.g., underdeveloped, unconvincing, thin, and superficial, shallow) or stronger (e.g., compelling, insightful, thoughtful, rich, complex, deep, nuanced). 3. Good quality coding and themes result from dual processes of immersion or depth of engagement, and distancing, allowing time and space for reflection and for insight and inspiration to develop. 4. Coding quality is not dependent on multiple coders; a single coder/analyst is typical in reflexive TA. Good coding (and theme development) can be achieved singly, or through collaboration, if it seeks to enhance reflexivity and interpretative depth, rather than consensus between coders. 5. Themes are analytic outputs, not inputs, and are developed after coding and from codes (which are also analytic outputs); as Saldana (2013) ~ noted, a theme is "an outcome of coding :: not something that is, in itself, coded" (p. 14). 6. Themes are patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept (central organising concept), not summaries of meaning related to a topic. 7. Themes are not waiting in the data to "emerge" when the researcher "discovers" them; they are conceptualised as produced by the researcher through their systematic analytic engagement with the data set, and all they bring to the data in terms of personal positioning and metatheoretical perspectives. 8. Data analysis is always underpinned by theoretical assumptions, and these assumptions need to be acknowledged and reflected on. 9. Reflexivity, the researchers' insight into, and articulation of, their generative role in research, is key to good quality analysis. Researchers must strive to "own their perspectives" (Elliott et al., 1999). 10. Data analysis is conceptualised as an art, not a science; creativity is central to the process, within a framework of rigor. (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp 8-9)

(Braun & Clarke, 2013). Transcription of the interviews by the researcher accelerated the familiarisation phase of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were read and re-read multiple times and checked for accuracy against the recording. Supplemental notes were made in the reflexive journal.

2. Generating initial codes

The second phase involved re-reading the transcripts and locating interesting features. Drawing on an inductive approach, the researcher systematically highlighted all material of interest across the complete data set. In collating the codes, the researcher re-read the transcripts and highlighted again using various shades to depict categories that codes aligned to. Colour themed codes (categories) were extracted from the transcripts and reviewed across the entire data set to facilitate the identification of patterns.

3. Searching for themes

The third phase involved reviewing all identified categories. In considering the large yield of categories and central organising concept- father engagement- it was useful to further categorise themes and sub themes aligned to the research questions with regard to what challenges are encountered in the context of father engagement and what works well in the context of father engagement. This enabled the gathering of all data relating to each potential theme.

4. Reviewing themes

The fourth phase involved re-reviewing initial individual codes and categories followed by a re-review of the categories disaggregated by what works and the challenges with regard to father engagement. A thematic map was generated to provide a visual representation of the potential themes and is presented at the end of chapter 7 (figure 3).

5 Defining and naming themes

The fifth phase involved ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme naming each theme clearly. As part of the ongoing analysis potential themes were triangulated across data from the professional cohort, the

victim-survivor cohort and the domestically violent father cohort to ensure a comprehensive approach to theme construction.

6. Producing the report

The final phase of this analysis involved revisiting the transcripts to locate the most appropriate extracts to evidence the themes. This was an iterative process whereby a selection of extracts was collated. The final extract selections were made during the writing and refining of the analysis which encompasses three chapters drawing on the related literature. The first of the findings chapters that follows this chapter captures challenges in relation to father engagement from a professional perspective. The second findings chapter focuses on challenges in relation to father engagement through the lens of victim-survivors. The final findings chapter focuses on what works with regard to father engagement across all participants.

4.6 Issues of validity, reliability and generalisability

Although consensus has not been reached on the nature and role of reliability in qualitative research, a number of approaches were employed in this research to promote reliability. According to Grosseohme (2014), the essence of reliability for qualitative research lies with consistency. Every effort was made to sufficiently prepare gatekeepers in their respective roles, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were adhered to, interview schedules guided each interview, and particular care was taken during analysis to check and re-check the recurrence and spread of patterns to achieve consistency throughout. However, Braun and Clarke (2021a) draw attention to the organic rather than coding framework approach to the generation of themes, with researcher subjectivity considered a resource for knowledge production when using their six-step analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). For these reasons they assert that the demonstration of coding reliability is illogical. The findings from each participant cohort were triangulated against the findings of all other categories: mothers, children and young people, fathers and professionals.

Validity is about the accuracy and truthfulness of the research findings (Leung, 2015). In considering internal validity, particularly during analysis, data was checked and re-checked a number of times to ensure that the relationship between the origins and the recurring patterns were accurate and not influenced by the researcher's own pre-conceptions. The use of the reflexive journal was particularly useful in this context. Internal validity of any study is strengthened particularly when views are shared across the different participating cohorts (Yin, 2017). Commonalities and differences were explored which contributed to the further understanding and theme development (Jentoft & Olsen, 2017). In terms of external validity, care was taken in recruitment to ensure that the participants were representative of the wider professional, victim-survivor and domestically abusive populations engaged with services. The role of gatekeeper was particularly useful in this regard.

Achieving generalisability in domestic violence research can be challenging due to the diversity of experience and the sensitive nature of the topic. According to Leung (2015) most qualitative research is specific to a phenomenon within a particular population in a particular context challenging generalisability. However, the range of perspectives drawn upon utilising a case study design, the case being father engagement enabled the achievement of detailed contextual information reflected in the reporting of the findings that discerns the origins and the intent of the information shared and is therefore generalisable to a greater degree in Ireland across the participating agencies.

4.7 Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations involved in this research were given constant attention. The researcher understands that the integrity of the project relies on an ethically sound research design and their ability to conduct research in a safe and ethical manner. The fundamental elements to ethical research are to do no harm, to ensure consent is fully informed and to maintain

confidentiality and anonymity (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones & Milne, 2010; Smette, 2019). The research design involved full consideration of each of these elements to ensure it was ethically sound.

4.7.1 Informed consent

Informed consent, a key component of the dignity and respect principle of good practice in research within Irish higher education institutions¹⁰⁹ was sought across all participants. In keeping with the shared approach of qualitative researchers attending to and discussing informed consent prior to fieldwork, emphasis was placed on the recruitment phase (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones & Milne, 2010) applying an iterative and continuous approach to informed consent. Conscious that an essential criterion for consent's validity is that the decision of an individual to participate is voluntary and based on clear, unambiguous information about what engagement in the research will entail (Klykken, 2022), the journey towards informed consent began with the Gatekeepers. As part of the recruitment strategy, Gatekeepers were provided with an information leaflet about the study further to an initial conversation that set out all key criteria pertaining to the research, as outlined earlier in the chapter. In the interest of achieving informed consent whilst also remaining transparent, gatekeepers initially identified potential participants and shared the information leaflets with them. As the researcher has previously worked in a specialist domestic violence service, it was possible that they had previously engaged directly with some of the prospective research participants. The leaflet detailed the author's name and previous involvement in domestic violence service provision to create awareness of a possible previous professional connection. This provided an additional opportunity for any prospective participant to have an informed choice to participate or not.

¹⁰⁹ [HEA Principles of Good Practice in Research within Irish Higher Education Institutions | Policy | Higher Education Authority](#)

4.7.2 Ensuring no harm

In terms of doing no harm, inclusion and exclusion criteria determined participation in this study. Participants were only included if they self-selected and were engaged with support services. Participants were not interviewed if they were currently living with the victim-survivor/perpetrator of abuse, did not have a sufficient level of English to participate or were in a period of crisis. It is understood that revisiting experiences of previous abuse can cause discomfort and distress for participants. In that regard, participants were advised of this in the initial information leaflet, when seeking informed consent of their option to pause or withdraw at any point before and during their engagement in an interview. The researcher provided initial post interview support as required and a protocol with the participant's local specialist domestic violence service was agreed to ensure immediate and ongoing support if required. Every effort was made to ensure before, during and after participation that participants were not harmed by their involvement.

Careful attention was given to the body language of all participants, particularly those with an acknowledged experience of domestic violence. As the experience of domestic violence within the wider population is widely under reported, the researcher maintained a level of vigilance throughout all interviews.

Moving away from framing domestic violence as an adult interaction to one that triangulates the child's experience, focusing on it as central, rather than overlooking it (Callaghan et al., 2018; Holt, 2019) prompted the inclusion of children and young people. According to multiple sources, when children's views are valued and their independence is maintained, their capacity to cope with adversity is enhanced (Bagshaw, 2007), their self-esteem is bolstered (Van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders, 2015) and decisions are better informed so that they improve children's protection and the quality of their lives (Stanley, 2006).

The researcher was conscious that research findings indicate that perpetrators of coercive control engage in minimising, denying and blaming

others for their abusive behaviours (Lehmann, Simmons & Pillai, 2012), and may claim to be the real victim in the relationship (Morris, 2009; Bancroft, Silverman & Ritchie, 2012; Morris). Consequently, the interviews were carefully structured in keeping with the understanding that the research design in qualitative research remains flexible both before and throughout the actual research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

4.7.3 Ensuring confidentiality, anonymity

In terms of confidentiality and anonymity, audio recordings of interviews were made with the written informed consent of the research participants, anonymised, transcribed verbatim and stored securely on a password protected single use computer, accessible only by the researcher. Limits to confidentiality and the role of Tusla Child and Family Agency in respect of Children First National Guidance for the protection and welfare of children, were outlined in each participant information leaflet and consent form and were discussed with each participant prior to each interview.

4.7.4 Insider status

As a professional who previously worked with women and children experiencing domestic violence for 17 years, and in my subsequent role as Services Development Manager, I have insider status. Insider status, while having advantages, can also have disadvantages in terms of research. Rose (1985) asserts that “There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one’s biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you’re leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you’re doing” (p. 77). It is therefore essential that I employed continuous reflection to ensure that my insider status did not colour any aspect of the design, data gathering or analysis of this research. Asselin (2003) recommends approaching the gathering of data with “eyes open”, assuming that the researcher knows nothing of what they are studying. I assumed this position throughout

ensure that the integrity of this research was maintained by employing a range of methods across the journey of research design, data gathering, analysis and reporting of the analyses. Every decision at each juncture was audited to avoid any semblance of confirmation bias. Utilising clinical supervision and maintaining a reflexive journal throughout was particularly effective and beneficial to the research and the researcher, whereby particularly the analysis of the data was interrogated. Particular care was taken during the analysis to ensure that patterns and eventual themes were strongly evidenced. This was achieved by implementing additional reviews across each stage of analysis.

During stage 1, 'Familiarising yourself with your data', transcripts were read and re-read multiple times and checked for accuracy against the recording. All material of interest across the complete data set were highlighted during stage 2, 'Generating initial codes'. In collating the codes, the transcripts were read and re-read and highlighted again using various shades to depict categories that codes aligned to. Colour themed codes (categories) were extracted from the transcripts and reviewed across the entire data set to facilitate the identification of patterns. Initial individual codes and categories were re-reviewed during stage 4, 'Reviewing themes', followed by a re-review of the categories disaggregated by what works and the challenges with regard to father engagement. The fifth phase, 'Defining and naming themes', involved ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, naming each theme clearly. As part of the ongoing analysis, potential themes were triangulated across data from the professional cohort, the victim-survivor cohort and the domestically violent father cohort to ensure a comprehensive approach to theme construction.

In terms of insider status, having this previous experience of working directly with women and children experiencing domestic violence also advantaged my position as a researcher and I believe encouraged the participation of participants in this study. Working in this area for seventeen years in a variety of frontline and managerial roles has increased my ability to engage confidently and competently with this cohort, to be sensitised and sensitive to reactions, enabling immediate intervention should it be required.

Acknowledged by some of the participants, these abilities contributed to the breadth and depth of the interviews whereby participants provided unguarded insights to their experiences which contributed to the richness of the data. These abilities also augmented analysis whereby being sensitised to the experience supported a deeper understanding of the data which supported the identification of patterns.

4.8 Challenges

4.8.1 Ethical Approval Process

Beginning with the Belmont Report in the US (Office of the Secretary, 1979), many countries have established standardised administrative procedures for governing research ethics. In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority's principles of good practice in research within Irish higher education institutions (2022), is one such administrative procedure guiding research. According to Dragiewicz, Woodlock, Easton, Harris and Salter (2023), University research ethics committees (RECs) often approach research on gender-based violence as potentially traumatising for participants. Subsequently, research with a focus on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence can be subject to hindering intervention by RECs (Downes, Kelly & Westmarland, 2014; Westmarland & Bows, 2018). Additional measures to promote safety are also required when interviewing children and young people. Achieving ethical approval for this present study involved a protracted journey, lengthened in part by the Covid-19 pandemic and the HSE cyber-attack (2021) and involved four distinct yet intertwined processes. The first ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. The second ethical approval was granted by the Probation services. In preparation for the ethical approval process, bespoke information leaflets were created for mothers, children and young people, domestically violent fathers and professionals. Letters detailing the role were provided to potential gatekeepers and consent forms and an assent form for children and young

people were developed. Particular attention was given to the development of the children and young person's leaflet to ensure that the content was age appropriate and visually appealing (Robson, 2011).

The third and fourth ethical approval processed involved An Garda Síochána and Tusla¹¹⁰ Ethics. While Tusla agency approval had been agreed in principle prior to making the formal ethics application, formal agency agreement took over a year to achieve and was required in advance of ethical approval application submission. Demonstration of participating agency ethical approval was required by the Tusla REC. Ethical approval from An Garda Síochána was protracted and had a subsequent impact on Tusla ethical approval. In relation to the Tusla requested amendments, minor supplemental requirements in relation to interviewing children and young people and researcher safety was requested and amendments made accordingly. However, as final approval approached, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived. Interview protocols were revised to align with public health guidance and resubmitted for review. Unfortunately, the HSE cyber-attack (2021) further delayed final approval at which time public health guidance had eased allowing a reversion to the original proposal.

Further to An Garda Síochána ethical approval, requested amendments were made in respect of the draft survey. However, An Garda Síochána decided against participating and withdrew from the research.

4.8.2 Recruiting fathers

Recruiting fathers was a challenge with a total of three fathers progressing to interview from initial conversations with six fathers. The inclusion criterion of being connected to a support service, although appropriate, limited the scope of recruitment. Given the relatively small number of men who perpetrate domestic violence and lesser still, fathers, who are connected with support services, the potential cohort is limited. In considering further

¹¹⁰ Tusla, the Child and Family Agency requires full ethical approval to interview service users and staff of Tusla organisations and Tusla funded organisations.

recruitment, the contributions from all six fathers were reviewed and found to be consistent with each other in terms of their individual challenges and what works for them in terms of professional engagement. Their observations also resonated with the contributions of probation services and international research whereby the identified challenges and the strategies employed to foster engagement were identified. Therefore, the data gleaned from the fathers was considered maximised in exploring the views of the fathers within the parameters of this research.

The challenges in recruiting fathers in this instance echoes similar findings, for example, with evaluations of programmes aimed at perpetrators of domestic violence which has been weakened by a lack of engagement with the service or the research process (Mc Connell & Taylor, 2016). The role of researcher in this context is particularly challenging. The brevity of contact in the absence of a professional relationship prohibits the building of rapport and trust, acknowledged strategies in promoting engagement in this context, a consideration for future research with this focus.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, the conceptual framework and steps taken in carrying out the qualitative research design have been outlined. The study sought to explore father engagement in the context of domestic violence from multiple perspectives utilising qualitative semi structured interviews with 28 professionals, eight mothers and six children and young people who had experienced domestic violence and three fathers who have been domestically violent. Interviews with children and young people were further enhanced by the use of an activity, Wall of Wants through the medium of drawing to facilitate their messaging to professionals. The process of ethical approval was challenging at times and protracted, in part due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the study yielded rich and enlightening data in relation to father engagement in this context. A reflexive thematic analysis of the data was conducted drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006,

2019) 6 stages of analysis. This analysis is presented across chapters 5, 6 and 7.

CHAPTER FIVE Analysis

Challenging Professionals

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three chapters presenting the findings of this current study exploring father engagement in the context of domestic violence from multiple perspectives. Central to this study is the aim of garnering an understanding of how this engagement is experienced by children, mothers, fathers and a range of professionals responding to families experiencing domestic violence in both a statutory and non-statutory capacity. As outlined in the previous chapter, a qualitative case study design was employed in order to achieve the objectives of this research and provide a deeper understanding of the nature of father engagement. In depth qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted across the eleven sample populations; young people, mothers and fathers; social workers, family support workers, court services staff, probation officers, perpetrator programme facilitator, supervised access workers and specialist domestic violence child support workers and specialist domestic violence support workers at both frontline and managerial levels. These interviews yielded a significant amount of rich qualitative data.

Drawing on an analysis of the data gathered as a result of this process, the three chapters that follow present the findings relating to father engagement in the context of domestic violence. This first findings chapter details the challenges pertaining to father engagement as experienced by professional practitioners. The second findings chapter outlines challenges pertaining to father engagement from the perspectives of both adult and child victim-survivors. The third findings chapter provides valuable insight into what optimises and maximises father engagement in the context of domestic violence. The final chapter triangulates the views of professional practitioners with those of victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence.

This first chapter is organised into two sections, as follows:

- Section 1: Father engagement in the context of domestic violence: challenging, complex work with challenging complex men; and
- Section 2: Father engagement in the context of domestic violence: challenging, complex work within complex professional systems.

The first section shares the perspectives of professionals in relation to the challenges they encounter in terms of engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence, outlined across three sub sections: Denial, Minimisation and Blame; Using control; and using fear.

The second shorter section, takes a wider lens, sharing professionals' perspectives on the systems within which they work.

5.2 Section 1: Father engagement in the context of domestic violence: challenging, complex work with challenging complex men

Consistent across all contributors to the research was a stated commitment and dedication to those experiencing domestic violence and the expressed desire to see change at an individual, familial, and societal level. However, in describing their experiences of father engagement in the context of domestic violence, this commitment and dedication to victim-survivors' safety and recovery was reported by the participants to be considerably challenged, with the word 'complex' the most common descriptor used by the participating professionals to reflect the nature of this engagement.

Whether concerning the patterns of behaviour of the fathers themselves; the historical and sometimes ongoing impact of those behaviours on others; the perceived actions or inactions of allied professionals; the presence of potential risk to professionals and victim-survivors; or the felt responsibility of holding the risk and pioneering change; all participating professionals evidenced that father engagement in the context of domestic violence is

among the most challenging, complex work of their professional lives. While this finding is not necessarily new, as evidenced in the literature reviewed in chapter two (Stanley et al., 2011; Donovan & Griffiths, 2015; Lilley-Walker et al., 2018; Olszowy et al., 2020), it nonetheless is an important finding in an Irish context, illustrating the complexity of challenges occurring at individual, organisational and systemic levels. This complexity is poignantly captured in this next quote by a Probation Service manager:

I'd acknowledge that it's some of the most difficult work that I've done over my 20, well 19 years as a probation officer and 18 months as a manager of a team. I suppose, the challenges for us and the anxiety sometimes when you're dealing with people who have committed very violent offences with severe consequences for their partners and children; trying to hold that risk and trying to get that person to change, if that's possible; address their issues or be held accountable for their behaviour. (PS8)

With regard to complexity, all participating professionals noted their experience of how varied fathers can be in their respective contexts; with some professionals advancing this thinking further and taking a “spectrum” approach to fathers.

There's a kind of a spectrum of behaviours; very violent men who should never be in a relationship and who may not be willing to change at one end; who could kill and have killed women. At the other end of the spectrum there's young men in early stages of first relationships who have tendencies that are abusive and controlling and we get in there and try and stop the cycle and support women to be safe. So, I think it's about, there's more of a spectrum than we probably thought about. So, it's about intervening as early as possible and holding men to account. (PS8)

This variance presents challenges, as with all heterogeneous groups, requiring a case-by-case approach and multifaceted responses, consistent with the observations of Humphreys et al. (2023). The study of the heterogeneous nature of perpetrators of abuse (Weber & Bouman, 2020;

Aguilar Ruiz & González-Calderón 2022; Luis González-Álvarez, L, Soldino, Santos-Hermoso & Carbonell-Vaya, 2024) indicates potential future benefits for risk assessment and operational decision making (Luis González-Álvarez et al., 2024). Adding to this complexity was the spectre of childhood domestic violence and abuse experienced by many adult perpetrators of domestic violence. This finding is consistent with Curtis et al.'s (2023) research which asserted that childhood DVA is a significant predictor of both perpetration and victimisation. For those directly engaging on an ongoing basis with fathers in this present study, childhood DVA was a significant issue that may have a relationship with adult perpetration of abuse. The regularity of childhood domestic abuse disclosure was captured by a supervised access domestic violence worker below:

Generally, when you go through the intake to ensure that it's safe for the child to attend, there is a bit there is background work that's done with the dad and nine times out of ten you'll find that dad himself was exposed to domestic violence, himself as a child or as young person and or may have had really adverse circumstances in his life growing up. (DVS7)

Providing an insight into the complexity of the experience of engaging with fathers, the participants in this present study identified a range of themes that contributed to the multifaceted ways in which father engagement in the context of domestic violence challenges professionals. Consistent across the literature (Stark, 2007; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Stark & Hester, 2019; Spearman et al., 2023) and with findings from the victim-survivor data (as outlined in the next findings chapter), the power and control tactics utilised by abusive fathers in the context of domestic violence, can create significant challenges for both professionals and victim-survivors. These challenges include anger, aggression, volatility, denial, minimisation, victim blaming, manipulation, and the absence of responsibility for their behaviour. These power and control tactics, identified by the professionals involved, can begin to become more visible when the victim-survivor draws additional attention and support; whether through discovery, disclosure or help-seeking. This creates opportunity for support and engagement, but it can also, at times,

create challenges between the victim-survivor, professionals and the wider complex systems within which they work.

The wider system related challenges will be discussed further to the abusive tactics used by perpetrators of abuse to create and sustain power and control. These abusive tactics of perpetrators of abuse are now discussed under the following broad headings:

- Blame
- Denial and Minimisation
- Charm and Manipulation
- Using Control
- Using Fear

5.2.1 Blame

Consistent with the literature (Sutherland et al., 2019; Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Katz, Nikupeteri, & Laitinen, 2020; Turhan, 2021), the practice of assigning blame to the mother of the children by the father was evidenced across all participating groups. However, the assignment of blame was not limited to victim-survivors. It sometimes extended beyond to the professional groups with varying expressions of blame associated with particular professional groups.

Victim Blaming

Victim-survivors are frequently blamed for the abuse enacted against them, often by implications or suggestions that they provoked, invited or were complicit in their abuse. Victim blaming and blame shifting was identified by all of the participating professionals as an extremely commonplace behaviour in their work with perpetrators of domestic violence. This behaviour, known for being a critical component of creating and sustaining control of victim-survivors, also serves the purpose of undermining the potential support of the victim-survivors with their concurrent avoidance of responsibility or taking

accountability for their behaviour. Echoing the findings of Silva, Agampodi, Evans, Knipe, Rathnayake and Rajapakse (2022), participating professionals in this present study asserted that victim-survivors are not only often blamed for the abusive behaviour they experience but also subsequently blamed for the involvement of agencies in response to the abuse. This is articulated in the quote below:

They can blame their ex-partner. It's your fault I have to go and see her. It's your fault I have to do this. It's your fault I'm in court. You're going to get me sent to prison. I find that quite a lot, it's her fault I'm being sent to prison. The risks for women are huge. (PS1)

All of the participating professionals spoke about victim blaming, making her “out to be the worst person in the world” (SW2); speaking about the victim-survivor in terms of them being “crazy”, vengeful, unfit to parent. Similar to the findings of Sutherland et al.’s (2019) descriptive and content analysis of media reports on violence against women in Australia, there were also examples shared in this present study of the implications of the relationship itself being to blame for the abuse; implying a highly conflictual relationship. Unchecked, blaming the victim-survivor for the abuse or indeed the practice of the perpetrator of domestic violence presenting as the victim (DARVO)¹¹¹, can reach beyond the impact on the adult victim-survivor to their relationship with their children; and colour the perception of them by agencies and the wider community to the detriment of the victim-survivor. This is captured by the recently proposed framework of Child and Mother Sabotage (CAMS) by Dalgarno, Meier, Ayeb-Karlsson, Pollack, and Katz, (2023).

Child and Mother Sabotage (CAMS), whereby the alleged failings, negative behaviours and choices of the mother are presented as fact by the father to sabotage the mother-child relationship, was evident across the contributions to this present research by all participating agencies. These victim blaming

¹¹¹ Freyd, (1997) DARVO, an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender summarises a consistent reaction and manipulation tactic used by perpetrators of abuse or other types of wrongdoing by shifting the focus away from the original issue and attacking the actual victim. It attempts to switch the roles of victim and perpetrator to allow the offender to receive sympathy and compassion, publicly or privately, as well as to avoid consequences for their actions.

behaviours were reported to have the potential to create a catalyst for irreparable damage to the mother child relationship, as outlined below:

And particularly for the children that might not just be able to understand what's going on; and could even end up resenting the mum for getting them into this situation; especially if they're hearing it from other people; 'ohh you know, I can't get to see you because your mum, you know, she went and lied to the court on me'; this sort of thing. (CS7)

Drawing on the CAMS framework (Dalgarno et al., 2023), the behaviour extends beyond the child to the decision-making professionals that have the power to influence their future. Alleged failings of the mother highlighted by fathers included: domestic violence, child abuse, parental alienation, poor mental health, substance use etc. These allegations can influence the perception of the individual professionals and their respective agencies. The impact, at a minimum, can create transient doubt, even in very experienced professionals. Such participants in this study advised that when they encounter these allegations, they use corroborating sources of information, to support them to understand the reality of the abuse. However, unimpeded allegations aimed at Child Protection social work, or the judiciary can create tangible far reaching consequences as will be presented in the next findings chapter.

Blaming Professionals

As previously mentioned, assignment of blame by the perpetrator of domestic violence is not limited to the victim-survivor. All participating professionals evidenced a variation of being assigned blame by fathers, with blame generally being identified as a consistent behaviour in this context, as demonstrated below:

When you're talking to dads, they might say it was the teacher's fault that they didn't get to there... and the stories you get about who else's fault it was except their own. (SW5)

The context in which blame occurred varied across the participating professions in this study. For example, a successful court outcome for a

victim-survivor at times resulted in the blaming of judges and court personnel by perpetrators of domestic violence. Social workers spoke of being blamed by fathers further to children being placed in care. However, participating professionals demonstrated a keen awareness of the circumstances that elevated their respective risk of blame, for example, when challenging the behaviour of fathers, employing consequences for those behaviours and giving evidence against fathers, as demonstrated below:

Very recently we were working with a family where and we were called to give evidence in court in relation to his contact with his children, which was very abusive.... so obviously Tusla had wanted to get that evidence brought into court for a section 12. What subsequently had happened was he became aware of where one of the access workers lived and made a verbal threat that he was going to burn her house down. (DVS7)

Victim Blaming- within the wider community

Similar to Wild's (2023) study of the experiences of mothers involved with England's children's social care system when experiencing domestic violence, all participants in this study shared their observations of victim blaming discourses. The following quote underscores how this can play a critical role in limiting support and deterring victim-survivors:

Because to everyone else normally they're very charming, they're not aggressive and they can, you know, they have this support from people in the community and that tricks so many people. You know when they go to court, they'll have letters from employers and neighbours and, you know, people of importance in their town, and those people say 'oh sure you know Mr X would never do this like he's so kind' and all of this and then when you see, you know, what he's really like. It's so it's very hard because you are all the time trying to challenge somebody who has actually been, you know, kind of supported, I suppose, by all these other people saying oh what a great guy he is you know and it's only the wife or the girlfriend or the partner who is making up these terrible accusations. (PS3)

5.2.2: Denial & minimisation

Echoing the findings of Smyth, Teicher & Wilde's (2023) systematic review of how denial, minimisation, justifying, and blaming operate in intimate partner abuse committed by men, the way in which these behaviours were reported to operate in this present study is complex. Denial and minimisation specifically emerged as a strong theme across all of the participating professionals. Similar to Smyth, Teicher & Wilde's (2023) findings, this present study also identified that at times the abusive behaviour was reported to be rationalised, redefined, justified, denied and minimised by perpetrators of domestic violence; used at times as a self-protective measure, but also used instrumentally at other times to undermine the victim-survivor experience. This behaviour was reported to present a significant challenge to professionals in terms of engagement and was recounted by participants in this present study as an expected and accepted aspect of father engagement in the context of domestic violence. This finding is illustrated in the quote below:

Well I mean I can't think of anybody who ever really came in and said I know what I'm doing is wrong; and I shouldn't be doing it or, you know what I mean; and like I can think of some who felt, you know like a lot of them would tell you that what we've heard is lies; that this is being orchestrated against them; it's to deny them access to their children and, do you know, that this is the whole thing; she wants to shack up with another man or whatever else. (CS7)

Minimisation of the behaviour, again, was consistently evident across all participating professionals and agencies with some reporting fathers attributing the abuse to having an anger problem; some signalling poor mental health or substance use. Some perpetrators of domestic violence were reported to minimise their role in the abuse by diminishing the relationship and by association, their partner; indicating that "*their relationship was toxic anyway; that they should have left each other a long time ago but didn't.*" (PS4). Other perpetrators of domestic violence were

reported by participants to take some partial responsibility for the abuse, while highlighting their perceived abuse limits as below:

Oftentimes their fathers will come in and say, OK, yeah, you know, I hit her, I was violent towards her, I shouted, but I've never touched the kids. (PS7)

In addition to being a significant challenge, continued denial and minimisation is also documented in the literature to potentially be an insurmountable issue in respect of post assessment progression to, for example the CHOICES¹¹² perpetrator programmes. In this present study it was also documented to be a challenge in ongoing engagement with professionals in the Probation Services, as outlined below:

Obviously if somebody doesn't attend as we request for our supervision or is very challenging or is stuck in minimisation of the impact of their behaviour, or often in complete denial, we'll inform the court very clearly that that's not somebody that is safe for us to work with. (PS8)

Taking responsibility is viewed as a core principle of behavioural change programmes in the context of domestic violence. In their rapid review of Men's Behaviour Change Programmes (MBCPs), O'Connor, Morris, Panayiotidis, Cooke and Skouteris (2021) asserted that their aim is to achieve change in perpetrators' violent behaviours, by making men accountable and responsible for their actions. In Ireland the MOVE Programme stipulates the taking of responsibility at assessment stage in order to progress to the CHOICES programme. Crossing that "hurdle" of taking responsibility is viewed as a prerequisite to continued engagement, by both MOVE Ireland and Probation Services, with both agencies requiring "even partial" responsibility in order to progress effectively.

¹¹² The CHOICES programme is a national intervention programme introduced by COSC as part of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender based Violence 2016-21.

5.2.3 Charm and manipulation

The use of charm and manipulation of professionals has been explored in the literature review in chapter three (Monk, 2017; Stark & Hester, 2019; Katz, Nikupeteri, & Laitinen, 2020). Of note and relevance to this present research is the concept analysis of post separation abuse conducted by Spearman et al. (2023), which identified essential attributes including fear and intimidation; domination, power and control; intrusion and entrapment; omnipresence; and manipulation of systems. Manipulation of systems emerged also in this present study, with the extent and impact of this behaviour varying across the participating professions. For example, court services staff, by their own role descriptions, require the least involvement with fathers in that context and do not hold a behaviour change brief as described below:

As I say we're lucky in the sense that our role within the court service doesn't require us to inquire into their behaviour; it is just more, you know, what's your name and address; and what's the children's names and address; and OK, yeah we'll put that through. (CS7)

While court services professionals participating in this present study signalled awareness of the tactics of employing charm and manipulation, these strategies have relatively less impact on court services professionals when compared with social work and probation services personnel. Ultimately the judge will decide the fate of those before them. The contributions of specialist domestic violence practitioners demonstrated an expectation of this behaviour and an ability to quickly identify and mitigate the risk. However, participants from social work, perpetrator programme facilitation and probation services, while cognisant of the behaviour themselves, articulated the challenge this behaviour presents to their profession; the risk of not identifying this behaviour and the subsequent risk to victim-survivors.

Sometimes I find myself with certain guys who are maybe at the lesser end of things and I think, you know, is there any truth in that

and I'm like no, no, no. They're convicted by the court. There was evidence, you know, for them to be guilty. The evidence for them to be charged and when I because I have so many perpetrators when I look it's the common thread of like 'no she provoked me. Oh, we had a turbulent relationship. I hit her, she hit me', you know, and this is one of the excuses that they use and it's very easy to see how even solicitors get kind of sucked into that thinking because they are so convincing to the point where sometimes I say could there be some truth in that? Maybe it is a really toxic relationship and then I'm like no, no, no, wait a minute now. Go back. Go back to the facts. Go back to the book of evidence. But they're very, very skilled. They're very skilled. (PS3)

All participating professional groups shared their observations and caution in relation to the potential for disingenuous engagement; where a perpetrator of abuse may engage for the purpose of increased access, to negotiate the lifting of a barring order or safety order or to avoid a custodial sentence, as demonstrated below:

He's finished the 26 weeks or whatever programme he's doing and he's home then. And he may not have changed at all. What he's done is, it's an extra layer of veneer over the house. It's another opportunity for him to hide his abuse and that's always a danger it's always a worry then. It's always a danger. And I'm sure it happens. (PS5)

As one of the participants highlighted, while the programme may be very good, the preparation for and “*what you do after the programme*” (PS2) is critical to sustain any change achieved as, indicated by another colleague, “*the risk is always there*”. (PS8) According to Katz, Nikupeteri and Laitinen, (2020), children represent a significant risk factor for continued abuse with child contact elevating the risk of violence, threats and harassment.

Some professionals also spoke about how easy it is to get drawn in to the narrative of minimisation and blame, facilitated by charm and manipulation, and even as seasoned professionals, needing to constantly remind themselves of the harm perpetrated by these men and the reflecting

conviction imposed on them. These professionals highlighted the importance of advanced knowledge and practice in this context to avoid collusion. This is consistent with the findings of Humphreys et al.'s (2024) study with 69 senior practitioners in a practice-led research project in Australia. This study concluded that skill development and supervision is required to mitigate against the risk of grooming of professionals. Concern for less experienced, less aware colleagues was also raised, echoing Tsantefski et al.'s (2023) study of worker safety that highlighted the behaviour of less experienced professionals and their requirement for training and supervision.

As previously referred to, victim blaming within the wider community is strengthened by the charm and manipulation of perpetrators of abuse.

5.2.4 Using control

This thesis has already established the centrality of power and control to understanding violence towards an intimate partner (Stark & Hester, 2019). Using control in a variety of contexts was evident across all of the professional groups; particularly using children to continue control of the relationships post separation. This is not a new finding, with Clements, Moore, Laajala–Lozano and Casanave's (2022) study of 299 unstably housed victim-survivors, highlighting the significant use of children as a tactic to control. Attempting to control the respective professionals engaging with the perpetrating fathers was also highlighted in this present study. Using control manifested itself in a number of ways, including: the weaponising of parental consent, post separation control and controlling professionals and the court system. These tactics of control are explored in further detail in the sub-sections that follow.

Parental Consent

Participating professionals from domestic violence services, social work and probation, all identified potential adverse reactions from fathers in relation to victim-survivor engagement. DV services spoke about the significance of parental consent as an extension of control; where the practice of

perpetrators of domestic violence withholding consent was reported to obstruct the pathway to therapeutic engagement for children and young people. As reported in chapter two, this echoes the findings of Kuruppu et al., (2023) in their study of 15 GPs' experiences of supporting victim-survivors of domestic violence, and is also reflected in the participant quote as below:

Suddenly now they want guardianship, and they are trying to make some decisions that they previously wouldn't have done before. I suppose as well, I would see it in things like getting consent maybe where both parents have to sign consent, let's say for a child to take part in counselling in a school or counselling at an external service. In particular maybe a domestic violence service; which could be a major issue for getting consent from the father. So, a lot of the time they will refuse to sign that which I suppose is back to the control. You know, taking that support away from the children that they so badly need and also then in turn causing distress for the mother because she is maybe trying her best to get things better for the children, to improve their life and then this consent is not given. That is something that has come up quite a bit. (DVS5)

Participating social workers spoke about the requirement to secure the consent of the father in order for them to meet with their child “*unless we thought they weren't involved or it wasn't in the child's best interest*” (SW1). Participating probation service workers also spoke about the potential ramifications for adult victim-survivors engagement with their services as “*engagement with outside agencies like ourselves can be seen as betrayal by him so her speaking to me, some men have a problem with me accessing or speaking to their ex-partners*” (PS1). These potential ramifications form part of a wider range of risk identified.

Post separation control

Post separation control, a consistent experience in the context of domestic violence and demonstrated across the literature (see for example Katz, Nikupeteri, & Laitinen, 2020; Spearman et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023), also emerged as an important finding in this present study. While all of the

participating professionals demonstrated an awareness of this issue and the related challenges inherent with post-separation control, it was articulated particularly robustly by specialist domestic violence practitioners. These professionals provided an insight to the experience of post separation abuse; both from the perspective of working with victim-survivors and the relaying of their own experiences of observing these behaviours in a supervised access context. In these multiple examples, the child or children were cited as the primary mechanism by which control was achieved and sustained. Echoing the findings of Clements et al., (2022) study with 299 unstably housed victim-survivors, the participants in this present study cited numerous examples of perpetrators of domestic violence interrogating children, subtly garnering pertinent safety information, using children as a vehicle for communication and using the handover between parents as an opportunity to instil fear and compliance. This is articulated in this next quote by a specialist domestic violence worker:

The way I suppose very often what we would see is the relationship maybe has ended or you know is in the process of that and the woman is starting to find out her information and you know getting some of her control back on her life. What very often can happen is then the perpetrator is looking at the situation and thinking well I don't really have control now over this woman so how can I control the situation and it's done through the children... I suppose what's happening from that is they are using various methods then as the children's father to control the situation once again.. so I suppose that's why I would say control is the main thing that I would see from this. (DVS5)

Controlling Professionals

Katz, Nikupeteri and Laitinen's (2020) study of 29 children in relation to post separation fathering found that some children had reported their fathers intimidating the professionals who were trying to help them. This attempt to control not only the children, but to also control the professionals, emerged also in the narratives of the participating professionals in this present study. While not always identifying or naming the strategies as attempts to control,

there were a number of professionals that clearly identified similar patterns to those used in the familial context and the motivation for these behaviours, as demonstrated below:

The work would be so draining because he was very covertly aggressive and controlling with me in interviews. To the point where I would only schedule him on that day because after I dealt with him for an hour, I was exhausted from trying to constantly push him back and, you know, kind of, create and enforce boundaries with him. And that's a big part of the work, I think, in that the whole boundary thing and trying not to get drawn in like the guy that's very aggressive now even last week, Thursday or Friday, he wanted to talk to me and when he wants something he wants it now and it just gives me a tiny glimpse into what life was like for the victim with him and he would send me message after message after message, why are you ignoring me? What did I do wrong? Why won't you talk to me? And then the phone calls start and you know there's a part of me that's like OK I shouldn't be ignoring this person if they need me because part of my job is responding to people and at the same time realising, Oh no wait a minute he's trying to control me. He wants to talk to me and he wants it now. (PS3)

Control Tactics

While the multiple tactics used by perpetrators of abuse to create and sustain control are covert and subtle, evidence was also found in this present study of more overt threatening behaviours towards professionals. “Threats to professional identity” as articulated by (Humphreys et al., 2023), including for example the threat of complaint, actual complaints and the threat of legal action, were also highlighted in this present study as both unsettling for the worker and distracting them from the work at hand, as this professional explains:

And they can be tricky then, them kind of characters like. They'll make complaints. That particular person made, and I mean I was so respectful like speaking to him and this sort of tone like all of the time; never was anything but respectful and he made three complaints

about me and my, just my whole approach and saying I was unprofessional. But for that actually the last call my team leader here was in the room so she knew like how I spoke to him and I didn't say anything, anything out of line at all, and so she was kind of managing that for me. (SW1)

Controlling the Court system

Using systems and particularly the court system as a tactic of control is a well evidenced tactic of perpetrators of domestic violence. Increasingly recognised as 'legal abuse', Gutowski and Goodman (2023, p. 534) conceptualised it as "a form of coercive control and reflects the specific mechanisms through which ex-partners use post-separation legal processes to exert control over the victim-mother". Echoing Gutowski and Goodman's (2023) observations and indeed the observations of other key experts in the field (Toews & Bermea, 2017; Miller & Manzer, 2018; Douglas, 2018), evidence of 'legal abuse' also emerged in this present study. The ways in which the court system can be used to the detriment of the victim-survivors has been reported in chapter 3 to include not appearing for court appointments, enforcing continued adjournments, thus prolonging court processes (Toews & Bermea, 2017); making false accusations and acting dishonestly (Miller & Manzer, 2018); using intimidation (Zeoli, Rivera, Sullivan and Kubiak, 2013); using children to provide false evidence (Monk, 2017); breaches of orders, appeals and exploitation of existing mechanisms (Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). Much of this existing evidence also emerged potently in this present research, as this DV worker explains:

I think the court systems; they're used; perpetrators are so skilled in manipulating and utilising systems to benefit themselves; and to cause further harm to the women; and indirectly to the children; sometimes directly to the children; by bringing the children in; where there's maybe custody cases going on, and, you know, subjecting their children to this control of the mother. So, in those systems that are in place; do you continue to, what's the word, weaponise. (DVS8)

In terms of exploiting existing mechanisms, all participating court personnel brought attention to the use of counter or cross applications in relation to civil

orders. These findings are consistent with the analysis of 313 cross filings for protection orders conducted in the US by Durfee and Goodmark (2021). These authors asserted that “Cross-filings may be an example of abusers leveraging the legal system to extend control over victim/survivors, rendering victim/survivors ineligible for resources and making them vulnerable to arrest and other forms of state control” (p. 471). The use of this measure as a potentially abusive tactic was highlighted by a court services professional in the following excerpt:

Sometimes counter applications; safety and barring order counter applications; sometimes they're tactical. I think the number of cases where there's counter applications and even where there's counter orders granted; like sometimes I wondered about, you know, like I suppose, off the record, you know, as a court registrar you're not supposed to second guess the judge, but sometimes I wonder; with some of the counter applications; you know, kind of safety orders being made; sometimes I think there has been a bit of unbalance, but occasionally somebody would come in and you'd say, well, he's every bit as entitled to a safety order as she is from what he's told me, do you know what I mean, but that would be few and far between, you know. (CS7)

Counter or cross applications are viewed as an aspect of Legal abuse and are garnering increasing attention internationally (Durfee & Goodmark, 2021).

5.2.5 Using Fear

Using fear as a strategy to achieve and sustain control of victim-survivors is well documented in the literature. Specifically, Thiara and Humphreys (2017) draw on interviews with 45 mothers and 52 children to highlight a range of ways that fear is experienced, including living in an atmosphere of fear and unpredictability; positing the concept of absent presence to capture the relentless reach of perpetrators of abuse. However, fear of the possible

consequences arising from behaviours of the perpetrator of abuse can also extend beyond the victim-survivors to the professionals who attempt to intervene.

All of the professional groups referenced the potential escalation in risk because of professional engagement, a concern shared by victim-survivors (Grubb & Muftić, 2018); whether that arose through the victim-survivor's help-seeking activities, information gleaned in the course of the professionals' work with the perpetrator of abuse or as a direct result of challenging behaviour or unpacking their experiences of childhood domestic violence and abuse. Consistent with the literature, for example Goodman, Epstein, Nnawulezi, Zhang, Hailes and Slocum, (2023), potential risk elevates in response to help-seeking of victim-survivors, as captured below:

I suppose the first one is that the abuse will accelerate and get worse and sometimes you know I suppose even for the women and children who interact with us very often when they start to come to our services or when they start to interact. Even if the abuser is not aware directly that that's what they're doing they know something's going on and they will tend to see an increase in the abuse that would be the main issue there would be that the abuse actually accelerates to a more dangerous level and puts them at risk to some extent because of the fact that there's some engagement there let's say from a domestic violence service or maybe social work and that they are taking that out on the children or thinking of new ways to control the situation that might not be so obvious to the people who are working with them whether it's an agency or that they may do things in a more discreet but dangerous way. (DVS5)

Additionally, some of the participating professionals in this present study expressed concern about how information gleaned in the course of their engagement with the father, might serve as a weapon to increase the risk for victim-survivors. The impact of that for the worker is explained further in this next quote:

My main risk fear is something I would do will trigger something for him to go and hurt her. That would be something I would always be concerned about, something I would write in a report or something I speak about in an interview will put her at more risk of him attacking or purposefully going where he's not supposed to be or singling her out or whatever, based on information that has come from me. That I find very hard to sometimes manage. (PS1)

Other professionals, particularly those with a role in challenging the behaviour of perpetrators of domestic violence, also expressed concern that their actions may have a detrimental impact on the victim-survivors, as outlined below:

We're sending these guys home then, and we're sending them home having experienced things in their childhood and they talk about it, and they do talk about it in detail. And a lot of guys have disclosed stuff that they've never disclosed before. And we send them home after two hours then. We don't know what they're like then when they go home. (PS5)

Many of the participating professionals described wondering about and at times worrying about the potential impact of their engagement on victim-survivors. However, as one Probation officer reasoned, “*yes there is a risk, but I think the risk of him doing it again without being challenged is greater.*” (PS1)

Whether from direct professional experience, awareness of the experience of other professionals or the knowledge of the history of abuse in any given case, all of the participating professionals referred to the risk of directed anger, aggression and the volatile nature of father engagement in the context of domestic violence. Some spoke about experiencing the intimidating tactics employed by perpetrators of domestic violence, including threats, aggression, volatility and anger, as outlined below:

They can be volatile that way. They can be angry with the system which I represent. That could be something that they are very angry with; that they're ordered by the court to do this and it's me that's the

one that's making them come to engage in a process that they don't want to speak about. A lot of the time they're not comfortable and they don't want to speak about it. So that can be difficult. You kind of need to be keeping yourself safe. Like with every client you'd be keeping yourself safe, keeping your information to yourself, about yourself and that kind of stuff. They'll ask personal questions of course. (PS1)

One professional spoke about having been “*beaten before*” (DVS2) while others spoke about their first-hand knowledge of abusive behaviour towards staff and managing risk in the context of staff members having “*had their windscreens put through, threatened with a hammer*” (DVS7). While some professionals spoke about overt anger, aggression and volatility, others spoke of the father being “*covertly aggressive*” (PS3) and the “*wiser ones know not to*” (SW 2) alert the professional of their anger.

Echoing the existing evidence base (Broadley & Paterson, 2020; Natalier, Cortis, Seymour, Wendt and King, 2021; Humphreys et al., 2023; Tsantefski et al., 2024), and consequent to experienced or feared anger, aggression or volatility, the risk associated with father engagement in the context of domestic violence was evident across all professional groups. While there was an acknowledged potential risk for all professions, particularly outside of their work, the expressed likelihood of harm appeared to correlate with the level of consequence that the respective professional could enforce. Similar to research conducted in Australia, the risks identified were not limited to physical risks, with professionals across all groups providing insight to the emotional and psychological impact of this challenging work (Humphreys, Isobe & Kertesz, 2024; Tsantefski, et al., 2024).

In terms of risk of physical harm, court services professionals (who do not have a decision-making role in these cases), considered themselves largely protected by their role and the environment within which there is constant police (An Garda Síochána) presence. Interestingly, these professionals also cited the protective glass barrier in place in the ‘front of house’ entrance to the court buildings as a deterrent to engaging in a welcoming and positive way with the public, particularly perpetrators of domestic violence. Probation

services also considered themselves somewhat protected from physical abuse by their role as justice professionals, but also connected to their capacity to return a case to court which could result in a custodial sentence. Social workers and family support workers reported being simultaneously both protected and targeted as a result of their statutory role in relation to children and their capacity to enforce consequences – for example executing care orders for children. Their risk is elevated in comparison to their court service and probation service colleagues. Specialist domestic violence practitioners, as non-statutory professionals, cannot enforce consequences and evidenced high levels of concern for their safety in this context, citing “*high risk. It is high risk in what we’re doing*” (DVS6), while social work provided the following insight to perceived risk:

OK so in terms of staff I suppose there's the risk of violence, aggression, you know, the risks of harm, the danger of working. So, you know, that's always the risk. If there's been incidences of domestic violence, so there's evidence that there's been violence there as well. You know, damage to your car, threats to your family - so they're the risks that are there. Whether it's verbal or whether it's physical. (SW4)

Some of the participating professionals spoke about particular contexts that can escalate the risk of physical harm, for example: when they need to respond to challenging the behaviour of perpetrators of abuse in the context of supervised access; or advise a father on the conclusion of an assessment that they have not been deemed suitable for or further probation service engagement etc. While participating professionals were able to pinpoint particularly risky contexts for anger and physical violence, the emotional and psychological toll of working in this challenging area resulted at times in vicarious or secondary trauma (Natalier, Cortis, Seymour, Wendt and King, 2021). This was attributed by the professionals concerned to their knowledge of the abuse perpetrated, their need to respond to the victim-survivors and the “draining” nature of working with the complex attributes of perpetrators of domestic violence. All of the participating professional groups reported that they had identified and employed a range of safety strategies to maximise

their physical and emotional safety and to sustain them in their work. These are further explored in the third findings chapter.

5.3 Section 2: Father engagement in the context of domestic violence: challenging, complex work within complex professional systems

The wider system related challenges identified by the professionals and addressed in this next section encompassed the challenges arising from interprofessional working, ensuring adequate information is gathered and shared and working in the context of a pro-contact culture and gendered expectations.

5.3.1 Interprofessional working

The majority of participants in this present study spoke with positivity about interprofessional working. However, where there were challenges identified, they primarily concerned judicial decisions; whether that was with regard to granting access without assessment or being in conflict with the professional judgement of social work. As indicated by one social worker, *“you get in a lot of trouble in the courts when we say that dads can't be in the house, because that's their human right to have a place to live”* (SW2). Similarly with regard to managing an escalating risk in the context of an access order, a social work participant highlighted potential repercussions to professional recommendations, citing, *“if you don't think it's safe don't send them, but the judges in the area don't like that”* (SW2); leading to the position that social workers *“actually can't go against a court order.”* (SW2)

With regard to judges' decisions, two of the professional groups also indicated a desire for judges *“to have better sense of DV”* to inform their decision-making; the example given being an increase in access hours *“when in another hour the kids could again be reliving everything.”* (SW2)

Of concern noted is:

It all depends. I'm sure you've heard this on numerous occasions, what judge is sitting, each judge has their own view and their own interpretation of the legislation and their own way of going forward (CS4)

When describing collaborative working, professionals spoke with positivity with regard to the effectiveness of sharing information, mutual support, consistency etc. However, there were instances where collaborative working, although desired, was reported to be either absent or ad hoc. The absence of or limited collaborative working has been linked to potential negative impacts for victim-survivors and worker safety, consistent the findings of Tsantefski et al.'s (2021) research involving 15 senior practitioners in Australia in relation to their reflections on high-risk domestic violence cases. Similarly, Reif and Jaffe (2019) found that lack of information sharing, the lack of proactive referral to additional support for service users and limited collaboration not only challenged agencies but also contributed to the risk of homicide.

5.3.2 Getting sufficient information

Having complete information was deemed essential across all of the professional groups, with each facing challenges in this regard; whether it presented as incomplete referrals, not being made aware of a connection to an existing case, the shift patterns of other agencies or not having access to information grounding a court order when dealing with a breach of same. For some professionals, the challenge begins with how the issue of domestic violence is not always the primary or apparent referral, as demonstrated in this next quote from a participating probation officer:

So quite frequently you'd have index offences of breaches of a protection order, an assault where it's very clear, but on other occasions you might be engaging with the man and he's before the courts for something different, and it becomes apparent after working

with him, that there are other issues going on within the relationship; where domestic violence becomes a concern as well. (PS6)

Mirroring Dheensa & Feder's (2022) assertion about information being an essential element to accurate risk assessment, a consistent message emerging from the narratives of all professionals in this present research concerned the perceived detrimental impact and risk associated with incomplete information. Incomplete information was indicated by some professionals as impacting the quality of assessment upon which their recommendations are based, as captured below by a probation officer:

So, our challenges are always, you know, getting the full picture; understanding all the dynamics and to do that we kind of have to access multiple sources of information to try and get a picture. We want perpetrators to accept responsibility; to look and own their own behaviour and to be committed to changing their own behaviour for them, not for court, not for the social workers so they get the child overnight, but for them, you know. So, it's challenging. (PS6)

Related to quality assessment and making professional recommendations was the felt responsibility, particularly by probation services participants, in relation to accuracy, given the many challenges of this work, as demonstrated below:

So sometimes the cases are difficult. The responsibility of making a recommendation to a court is felt; I feel it anyway. Has this person done enough by maybe engaging in a group work programme; by maybe engaging in what appears to be an honest and open way with the assessment process. Is that enough to take a chance that this person won't be violent in a relationship again; that's a responsibility that I personally don't take lightly; and it's challenging. (PS8)

Some professionals shared examples of the success of previous manipulative tactics used by the perpetrator of abuse, albeit temporary; and described fear of collusion, getting it wrong, and strategies employed to counteract same.

5.3.3 Pro-contact culture

Consistent with the existing literature regarding the international prevalence of a pro-contact culture (Holt, 2020), all participating professionals expressed concern about this culture and practice. Specifically, access (contact) was identified as a vehicle for continued control, with contact providing a potentially risky context for children and young people in the absence of a prior assessment of their father. While the majority of Probation Services participants signalled the importance for fathers that they had contact with their children, using contact to continue to exert fear and control while not having the capacity to engage in quality contact was also highlighted. Similar to the observations of Heward-Belle et al., (2019) regarding parenting capacity in the context of post-separation contact, one participant suggested that fathers who have perpetrated domestic violence “*don't know how to entertain their children or they get frustrated with their children*” (PS1), echoed by other professionals. Additionally, some participants raised concerns about fathers being “absent”, commensurate with a pro-contact attitude.

The judicial practice of granting access/contact as a matter of course, with the subsequent expectation for the victim-survivor and perpetrator of abuse to continue engagement, was also highlighted as a concern and is captured below by this participant:

I'm sure you've heard this on numerous occasions, what judge is sitting, each judge has their own view and their own interpretation of the legislation and their own way of going forward. But our own current judge at the moment, she does seem to take a very proactive role, in that she wants the father to be involved. She doesn't really like to go down the road of issuing orders, unless she deems that they're absolutely necessary. She very, very, rarely, in fact I can't even think of an instance where she's revoked access altogether. She works with the family unit. (CS4)

Inherent also in this pro-contact culture is an expectation that the mother and father will work together to “find an amicable solution” to the issue of continued father presence in the child’s life – something Holt (2017, p. 2059) referred to as the ‘paradox of post-separation mothering’. This was also evident in this present study, particularly among Court Services participants as asserted below:

So, yeah, so when it gets to that stage, the majority of it, the court wants everybody to sort of work together, in order to get along for the sake of the children. (CS7)

Indeed, the onus or responsibility on mothers to facilitate ongoing fathering engagement was referred to by all participating professionals, as the next section details.

5.3.4 Onus on mothers

In the context of speaking about father engagement, all professional groups, unprompted, spoke about the onus of responsibility being placed on mothers in this context. This echoes the literature in relation to the expectations that are placed on mothers as highlighted for example by Stewart (2021) in her study with 15 mothers. Stewart’s (2021) five main themes included showing children they are loved and nurturing the child’s emotions; being warm, caring and supportive and spending time with the children; meeting the child’s basic care needs and looking after them; protecting children and keeping them safe and for the mother to do her best and put her children first (Stewart 2021, p. 691). The participant groups in this present research that spoke to a greater extent on this subject were the specialist domestic violence practitioners. However, all professions noted the expectations that are placed on mothers. Of particular note was the concern for mothers being held responsible for what “*somebody else chose to do to her and her children*” (DVS 7) and “*revictimising the mom and you put a lot of pressure on the mom*” (SW 2) to manage the response to ongoing abuse. Some

professionals also highlighted the perceived imbalance of expectations of mothers as demonstrated below:

They [mothers] just feel that the onus is all on them. Everything is up to them and it's a huge responsibility on their shoulders after having been in an abusive situation they're just trying to come out of it and all the lists that they have to tick off that's been sent to them and I think a lot of the time they would say to me things like 'well like he's not too worried you know he doesn't have anything to do here. Look at all I have to do. I'm trying to turn this whole situation you know the right way around and what's he got to do only sit back and laugh basically you know' as in oh well it's no big deal and it's so frustrating for women. You know they say that. It's really, really difficult. (DVS5)

The threat of “you leave him or your children are coming into care” or the realisation of children actually being taken into care further to the abuse, was identified by all of the professional groups. This to a degree echoes the findings of Stewart and Arnall's (2023) research with 19 mothers in England and Wales. This study found that mothers felt blamed, were made to feel responsible for the abuse and were advised that if they did not leave the abusive relationship that their children would be removed from their care. This fear was also echoed by participants in this present study, highlighted as an area of significant concern and frustration with a suggestion “*for him to be dealt with in another way, rather than be threatened with losing her children.*” (PS6)

Indeed, some participants highlighted what they perceived to be double standards in parenting expectations of mothers and fathers in the context of domestic violence, specifically a gendered imbalance with regard to what constitutes good parenting. One participant explains this further in the next quote below:

How we hold mothers and how we hold fathers is so different... you know mam needs to be present, she needs to be attached, she's needs to be emotional, she needs to be understanding, she needs to be available at all times, she needs to be in tune, she needs to know

every facet of her child's being in order to be a good mother. And she needs to provide for them, she needs to make sure that all that there is provision for everything they need too...If she doesn't do that, she's a terrible mother... you know dad just needs to show up and he's a great dad. (DVS8)

These findings echo Milani, Grumi, Camisasca, Miragoli, Cattani and Di Blasio's (2023) research that found that differences emerged between fathers' and mothers' risk profile, indicating that workers attributed a different weight to some factors, determined by whether they concerned the mother or the father.

5.3.5 Signs of Safety: National Child Protection Framework

The suggested insufficiency of Signs of Safety in responding to DV was raised by two of the professional groups, social work and specialist domestic violence practitioners, in terms of the focus and approach, as this participating social worker explains:

So, I think that sometimes signs of safety, I don't think works for domestic violence cases. I think it might work for maybe the lower end ones...where it's more kind of maybe financial or the parents have separated and they're in the house and no one can move out and they hate each other and it's kind of going into DV territory because the environment they're in, like more those ones. But I don't think with a lot of the cases we see that go for an assessment or when kids have to come into care, I don't think signs of safety is appropriate for them. I think it puts a lot of pressure on the moms. We're revictimising, I can see like two sides of the coins like it has to be up to the mom to keep her child safe, but she's also been brainwashed in a sense for the last few years and can't, and then we're taking her kids off her; and that's trauma and that's awful. So, I think maybe if it was a different approach through our standard business process was

discussed around these more higher end risky DV cases. I just don't think signs of safety is it. I don't think it's going to work. (SW2)

Of particular concern to the domestic violence practitioner was the lack of recognition of the protective parent in this context. Of concern for the social work participant was the “strengths-based” and “solution-focused” approach that could at times conflict with the impact and dynamic of the abusive experience and ongoing connection. This was consistent with other findings (Healey, Connolly & Humphreys, 2018; Humphreys et al., 2022; Heward-Belle et al., 2022; Kertesz, Humphreys, Fogden, Scott, Laslett, & Tsantefski, 2022; Tsantefski et al., 2024) that outline the value of supplementing existing frameworks to attend to the context of domestic violence.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has charted the everyday intricacies of father engagement for professionals across their direct work with fathers, within their professional systems and across the wider structural challenges that permeate their work. Beginning with tactics employed by domestically abusive fathers, the first section, *Father engagement in the context of domestic violence: challenging, complex work with challenging complex men*, outlines how the tactics of blame, denial and minimisation, charm and manipulation, using control and using fear manifest in their work with fathers. As evidenced in this chapter these tactics which are synonymous with the experiences of victim-survivors, at times pervaded the professional space causing a myriad of challenges for these professionals in their attempts to engage abusive fathers. The second section, *Father engagement in the context of domestic violence: challenging, complex work within complex professional systems*, charted the challenges experienced by professionals relating to the systems within which they work, including interprofessional working, achieving sufficient information and touching on the national practice model, Signs of Safety. Drawing on a wider systemic lens the chapter brings attention to the observations of professionals with regard to a prevailing pro-contact culture and onus on

mothers that permeates their work. The next chapter presents the findings of this doctoral thesis on the challenges of father engagement from the perspectives of adult and child victim-survivors.

CHAPTER SIX Analysis-

The Challenge of Father Engagement: Victim-Survivor Perspectives

6.1 Introduction

This second findings chapter outlines the challenges pertaining to father engagement from the perspectives of both adult and child victim-survivors of domestic violence. These findings largely converge with the findings from the previous chapter regarding professionals' perspectives on the tactics of power and control employed by abusive fathers in the context of domestic violence. This present chapter primarily focuses on the victim-survivors' lived experiences of these abusive tactics. Similar to the previous analysis chapter, additional challenges pertaining to father engagement in the context of domestic violence are discussed across three broad sections as follows:

Section 1: The challenges arising from abusive tactics for victim-survivors;

Section 2: The challenges with and arising from professional engagement;

Section 3: The wider structural challenges in this context of father engagement and domestic violence.

6.2 Section 1: Challenges arising from abusive tactics for victim-survivors

Consistent with the literature and as reflected in the previous chapter which reported on professionals' experiences and perspectives, the abusive tactics employed by fathers in a domestically violent context were reported to create ongoing significant challenges for all of the participating victim-survivors. These experiences were shared in the context of discussing father

engagement with professionals and provided a valuable retrospect to the origins of their continuing experiences. Similar to that reported in the literature review chapters, this myriad of tactics employed by perpetrators of abuse against victim-survivors were reported to include: anger and aggression (World Health Organisation, 2020); denial and minimisation (Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin, 2024); victim blaming (Turhan, 2021); manipulation and control (Stark & Hester, 2019); cultivating an environment of fear and volatility (Katz et al., 2020); and consistently accompanied by the absence of perpetrators of domestic violence taking responsibility for their behaviour (Smyth, Teicher & Wilde, 2023) The tactics identified by victim-survivors echoed the observations made by professionals in the previous chapter, who had both observed and at times experienced these tactics themselves in the course of their engagement with fathers. Some of these tactics are now explored in greater depth, with reference to the research engagement with victim-survivors.

6.2.1 The impact of fear and volatility

Consistent with the literature (for example, Katz (2020), participants spoke of the volatile nature of domestic violence, where perpetrators of abuse are reported to create an atmosphere of unpredictability and sustained fear, requiring ongoing mitigation to redress the impact. In the next quote below, one mother describes the cyclical nature of the impact of contact on her sons and her support role in response to this impact:

You just had to, you'd get them together, the pieces together. You'd get them support and you'd get them feeling good about themselves and then wham! - another thing would knock them. It was like a bowling ball. Down again. You'd have to start putting them all back together again. It was constantly putting the pieces back together again. You know when they'd come home from access, I used to call it damage control. They'd come back on a Monday. It'd be Thursday before I'd get them back on track again and feeling good, you know, feeling safe. Then they'd have to go again. And then I'd have to do

the same thing again the following week, the Monday when they'd come back, It'd take them three days to kind of de-programme, de-traumatise themselves from their experience with this person. And so I felt I was constantly doing this damage control. I was constantly having to support them. Constantly having to reach out to look for somebody to help me, you know. (Joan)

The enduring experience of fear arising from both past and present anger and aggression was evident across both adult and child participants. Supported also by the literature, fear was reported as central to their experience and manifested itself across a range of contexts; fear for their own and their child's safety (Holt, 2017); as a pre-cursor and consequence of abuse (Cheng & Lo, 2019); and as a strategy to achieve and sustain control (Wilson, Graham & Taft, 2017). As demonstrated by one mother and as articulated by Wingfield (2018), fear of retaliation continued long beyond separation:

Like he has thirteen charges of child neglect and that's not even counting anything to do with me. He has the Coercive Control. He has firearms. He has burglary. He has a lot and it was me who told the guards in my statements where the guns were because I was afraid he was going to use them on me. I was scared for such a long time. Like I used to get out of my car and run straight to the house, do you know, to get in the door, just in case he'd be sitting waiting for me. (Rebecca)

In particular, the adult participants spoke of carrying "*fear all the time*", living with the unpredictable nature of historical and ongoing threats that shadow them on a daily basis. They described threats including that "*he would bury me like if I ever, ever spoke about anything that happened*" (Rebecca); to "*burn my house down*" (Claire); to "*stab anybody*" (Claire); and experiencing "*this constant anxiety of not knowing what was going to happen next*" (Joan).

The fear and actual experience of losing their children was significant across the participants. The fear of losing children in this context is well founded, supported by the findings of multiple studies including the recent study by

Stewart and Arnall (2023) across England and Wales. Their study with nineteen mothers highlighted that in addition to feeling blamed and responsabilised for the abuse they experienced, the ultimatum of leaving or having their children removed from their care was a significant factor for these mothers. These findings echo the seminal work of Douglas and Walsh (2010) conducted over a decade earlier but with similar results.

While at the point of interview all of the participating mothers had custody of their children, the children of two of the mothers had previously been in the care of their father with limited contact between the children and their mother; another mother's children were placed in the care of a relative. The periods of alternative care ranged from weeks to years. A further two mothers spoke of the fear of losing their children; being "*worried because obviously you hear the things about kids being taken away from you, so I was really worried about that*" (Joan) and one young person expressed their fear of losing their siblings to the care of their father. Participants spoke about how this fear, which in some cases became a reality, impacted their engagement with professionals.

As articulated in this next quote, one mother spoke about the threat she perceived a judge to make to review custody arrangements should she continue to speak "*disparagingly about your husband*" (Joan):

Well, that judge that made that statement, you know, I'll have to review custody. That placed us all at risk, because that gave carte blanche for him to do whatever he wanted to do. He knew he could get away with it. I was silenced for ten years. I was afraid to speak up. I was terrified and that put us all at risk. I wasn't able to go back. I wasn't able to reach out. I was afraid if I went back, he would spin another lie and I could lose my kids, so that was the biggest risk that happened us. (Joan)

Another mother spoke of being advised by child protection social work that should she not conform to, among other requests, their request to go to a domestic violence refuge, that they were "*outside the court room door ready to go in*" (Rebecca). One young person spoke of his fear of what his father

would do next and the “*stress of losing my younger siblings to my dad*” (Alfie, 16). The “*terrible fear that he’d take off with them*” (Joan) was another way in which one of the mothers additionally feared losing her children. Her fear of international child abduction is well founded, as highlighted by Lowe and Stephens in their (2018b) analysis of global trends in the operation of the Hague Convention as a growing phenomenon. Married to someone with non-Irish citizenship with a familial support structure outside of Ireland meant that this fear posed a realistic possibility for some of the mothers.

6.2.2 Control and Coercion as a tactic of abuse

Participants in this present study reported multiple ways in which control was achieved and sustained in their lives, for example by ongoing post separation abuse, threats and coercion (Hulley et al., 2023); punishment and withholding consent (Kuruppu et al., 2023) and withholding money (Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). All of the adult victim-survivors spoke of the enduring nature of domestic violence; for some the “absent presence” of their perpetrator of abuse, a term coined by Thiara & Humphreys (2017), maintained the ongoing shadow of threats; the subtle reminders pervaded victim-survivors’ lives. Echoing the findings of Thiara & Humphreys’ study of 45 mothers and 52 children, one participant said, “*It’s not fair because like he always sends little reminders that he’s still around.*” (Rebecca). Some of the participating mothers whose children had aged sufficiently to have a choice with regard to contact, spoke of the enduring impact on their children in relation to anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm and difficulties forming and sustaining relationships. This finding is consistent with the literature reviewed in chapter two, with Sharratt et al. (2023) amongst others, highlighting the relationship between experiencing domestic violence in childhood and poorer psychological wellbeing. In their large cross-sectional study in England, children and young people who experienced maltreatment and domestic violence reported the highest symptoms of depression and anxiety and were among the largest proportion of children and young people reporting a history of self-harm, non-suicidal self-injury and suicide attempt. For other child

participants at the time of interview for this present study, contact had been paused pending their father complying with a range of requirements stipulated by child protection social work, including psychological evaluation and substance use assessments. They continued to live with the likelihood of a resumption of post assessment contact in the future. For the remaining two mothers, continued post-separation abuse was reported to occur independently of and directly related to ongoing access, with one of the young people described by their mother as *“still witnessing her father scream and shout”* (Claire).

The issue of withholding parental consent for the child’s access to both therapeutic and medical intervention was raised by three of the adult victim survivor participants. These findings are consistent with the findings of Kuruppu et al. (2023) in their study of 15 GPs providing care to victim-survivors of domestic violence, where “mental health services for children being blocked by lack of consent from perpetrators” (p. 6). In the words of one participant in this present study, parental consent is something *“which by the way he can hold for an awful long time”* (Lyndsey). Consistent particularly with the findings from domestic violence practitioners as reported in the previous chapter, withholding consent in the context of domestic violence service engagement was noted by one mother, who advised that *“there was a bit of a worry that he would not give consent and (son’s name) couldn’t get his play therapy because he would hear the word domestic violence”* (Lyndsey). However, the withholding of parental consent was not limited to domestic violence service engagement, as demonstrated below:

I suppose around the psychological support for the kids. There was this thing that you have to both parent’s support or both parent’s permission and you’d be bent over backwards trying to get him to agree. And when you’d get him to agree to get that support for them. He again would cause so much problems there and sabotage it, that you just couldn’t continue it. You know, so it was constant sabotaging everything, you know. (Joan)

Withholding maintenance and wider economic abuse has been included in the literature review in chapter two, with Postmus et. al. (2020, p. 262)

concluding from their review of 46 peer reviewed studies that economic insecurity contributes to “women consistently experiencing poorer social and economic outcomes throughout their life course”. This issue also emerged in this present study for all adult victim-survivors, described as leaving them financially “*on the bread line*” (Lyndsey). In addition to withholding maintenance was the common experience of the fluctuating nature of the payment, with maintenance creating uncertainty and at times requiring victim-survivors having “to beg”, as this mother explains:

He just stopped paying maintenance and, you know, for months on end I had no money for these kids and when I went to bring that case into look for maintenance, he stood there and said well, ‘you know, can I give nothing?’, to the judge. (Joan)

Financial strain was particularly evident whereby two of the participating mothers who could not afford legal representation in court found themselves facing the “full legal team” of their perpetrator of abuse as the court was deciding the future of their children. Another mother found having to pay for play therapy a significant challenge. In addition to child related expenses, there had been a pattern of recurring costly damage arising from, among other tactics, nails being left underneath the back wheels of her car. Another mother reported she had no access to any money, with child benefit being paid directly into her husband’s bank account, while another stated she had no recourse to public funding as a result of her status and had been completely reliant on the children’s father for money.

This next quote captures the experiences of many participating mothers, where punishment was reported to be employed as a means of control:

He’s putting out that child’s back for control, you know, but his punishment for being here with me when I moved in was he was going to Tayto park with his friends. Because remember it was Easter holidays on the Friday and he wouldn’t; he rang me then crying said dad won’t take me; and that was really upsetting; so that was his punishment. That’s the way he works. Like (daughter’s) text today to say he’s not paying for her ski trip. That’s the way he works. (Gillian)

Coercion, particularly of children and young people was reported by the participants to have a significant impact on them while also having an ensuing consequential impact on their mothers in the context of agency engagement. This is poignantly articulated by Sandra in the next quote:

Because the children were coerced and they were rehearsed in what they would say to the guards. And the guards later said to me that they literally all stood in line and said the same thing. And he said 'what can we do?'. He said we knew they were coached, but they said they didn't want to go, and the children were afraid to go against their daddy because they had to live with it. You know, that was horrible to think. (Sandra)

Stark and Hester (2019, p. 98) similarly noted how children and young people can “align with the abusive parent or join his coercive control”; sometimes being forced to “collude” with their father’s abusive tactics. One participating mother in this present study, reflects in this next quote on her experience of the enduring nature of the control which existed far beyond the ending of the relationship:

I'm not through it yet. I'm not at the end of it yet so I'm still very vulnerable to the abuse and I'm vulnerable to the words he uses and the control and I'm still under the spell. (Claire)

Victim Blaming

Consistent with the literature (Katz et al., 2020; Wild, 2023) and the views of professionals (Chapter 5), victim blaming was found by the mothers to have had a particularly detrimental impact on how they viewed their experience of abuse, as Maria explains:

They knew that something was wrong, but same as me, they were thinking this was normal; this behaviour was normal, you know. My ex-partner all the time he was putting everything that it was my fault, it was the kids fault, and all the time we were thinking this was our fault and these programs helped them to understand and to see clearly the situation.” (Maria)

In addition to the impact on how victim-survivors view their experience, victim blaming was also found to have had a detrimental impact on how professionals perceived the situation of the victim-survivor; leading to instances of not being believed (Katz et al., 2020; Monk, 2017) and having to prove themselves against false allegations. Where children and young people were without their mothers, these false allegations were central to that loss.

6.2.3 Charm and Manipulation and the Creation of False Narratives

As previously mentioned, false allegations played a significant role in relation to the ongoing care of children and young people by their mothers. Once raised, these allegations propelled the affected mothers towards devastating consequences and often a lengthy journey of proving the falsehood of the allegations, as this mother explains:

Like no kids should have their mom taken away at the lies of their dad. When they spoke to the children, the children didn't have anything to say. That wasn't good enough because dad did. (Gillian)

Not being believed

Victim-survivors reported experience of not being believed further to the father's narrative, ranged from initial disbelief to longer lasting experiences of not being believed. This experience was reported by all of the participating adult victim-survivors and predominantly concerned three professional groups: An Garda Síochána, Tusla Child Protection Social Work and the Judiciary. One participating mother, Sandra, explains how this was experienced by her:

I was always on the back foot. I always had to prove myself on the words of this man and no matter what I said; no matter how many witnesses I had, he would come back with another story and he'd be believed. I was accused of doing drugs and they had to do, like umpteen drugs tests, on the word of this man. (Sandra)

This appeared to manifest differently across agencies with the perceived onus on the victim-survivor to prove the abuse in relation to engagement with An Garda Síochána; afforded less time and opportunity within the court setting and having to successfully complete a range of intrusive tests to address concerns of Tusla Child Protection.

Mothers experience of not being believed was also an issue raised by the participating young people, as highlighted below:

Some of the shallow talks that they have had with my dad; I think they took what he said on a very surface level and just took it at face value and I think they leaned into what he said too much in comparison to how much they believed my mother. I think that they leaned in much more into what my dad said when they had the meetings with him and as opposed to the long hour, two hours, three-hour long meetings that they had with my mother. In which they didn't really seem to believe her because after every question there was like a follow up kind of different question. Like I'll use an example, maybe she was asked what did he do and she'd answer and then they'd ask why didn't you leave him before or why didn't you look for, why didn't you look for help before; or anything that seemed to like want to catch her out; and like seemed to want to reveal her lies, even though they weren't lies. And for my dad they just took everything he said at face value.”
(Alex, 14)

Another young person spoke of Tusla Child Protection putting her “*mother under a flashlight; made her feel like she was the problem; acting like she was the abuser. We were two weeks in granny's; she's been trying to prove herself since.*” (Jenna, 15)

Consistent with the views of professionals presented in the previous chapter, Dalgarno et al.'s (2023) Child and Mother Sabotage (CAMS) framework was also evidenced in the narratives of the mother and child participants in this present study. This included the presentation by the father as fact, of the alleged failings, negative behaviours and choices of the mother, in order to

sabotage the mother-child relationship; as illuminated by one mother in this next quote:

She was able to explore the big emotions she was having with not only her mummy and daddy breaking down, but the fact that her father was telling her confusing messages about that. 'We're not a family anymore. You don't have a family. If mummy ever gets another boyfriend that means you're gonna get a new dad 'cause I won't be your dad anymore. You'll have a new one. This is all mummy's fault. Mummy made me move away' (Claire).

At the point of interview, the lasting impact of this behaviour was not apparent. Children and young people had been returned to the care of their mothers and relationships were reported to be healing. However, where the alleged failings of the mother had taken hold, participating mothers described the challenges regarding the behaviour of their children towards them, including aggression. Echoing the findings of Yosep, Hikmat and Marhiyah's (2022) scoping review of nine articles focussing on the impact of domestic violence on child development, one participating mother described having to lock her child out of the house following multiple attempts by the child to push her mother down the stairs. This mother shared that "*that took nearly a year to come right.*" (Sandra); for the aggressive behaviour to dissipate.

Mothers also spoke of not wanting their children to defend them from "*the nasty things he'd say*" (Joan) for fear of the consequences for those children. One participating mother described the challenge that "*they felt responsible to defend me no matter how many times I said, don't defend me, just don't bother. I know you love me*" (Joan). Mothers spoke of significant days in their children's lives being "sabotaged" by their father, for example, first Communion, Confirmations, Birthdays and Christmas. This pattern was also mentioned by professionals. These once off rites of passage and annual celebratory days are considered by most as special, memorable days that involve significant planning and preparation to ensure success. These significant events are therefore susceptible to sabotage, not limited to unwelcome intrusion, public aggression, unfulfilled promises etc.; resulting in

lasting negative experiences and memories of the events and creating increased apprehension with regard to future events.

Consistent with the views of Stark and Hester, (2019) and as articulated by the next quote, the role of charm and manipulation in terms of creating and sustaining abusive relationships was spoken about by some of the mothers:

I think it's important to note that quite often, victims of domestic abuse are portrayed as crazy, portrayed as 'it's not that bad', portrayed as it's normal. And perpetrators are masters at being victims and perpetrators are masters of charming. I mean I don't even want to say perpetrator I want to say predator. I want to say predator because you feel, when you're through domestic abuse, you feel like you've been preyed upon. You've been charmed. I think it's important that agencies need to understand that when you're dealing with perpetrators or potential perpetrator. (Claire)

Charm and manipulation as an experienced effective strategy in the context of the family; and its potential for harm when applied to professionals, was something that the participants in this study were eager to highlight. The impact of the behaviour of perpetrators of domestic violence on professionals is captured by Humphreys, Isobe and Kertesz's (2024), study drawing from the experiences of 69 senior health practitioners from a range of services in Australia. Identified themes included: a tailored approach to practising safely; attending to physical safety; threats to professional identity; promoting emotional well-being; documentation to support worker safety; and attending to cultural safety (Humphreys, Isobe & Kertesz, 2024, p. 707). Regarding the risk relating to charm and manipulation, one young person in this present study advised the researcher to “*be careful around the guy*” (Alfie, 16) should I encounter him. Similarly, some of the participating mothers spoke about their perceptions of professionals lowering their expectations and requirements of the father consequent to his employment of charm and manipulation. Consistent with the findings of Monk (2017) the perception of the father by the professional as an “amazing person” and a “great dad” lessened the comparative requirements of him and at times the consequences for non-compliance.

Participating mothers spoke at length about the impact on them of the conflicting narrative with regard to the abusive behaviour of the perpetrator of domestic violence and the presentation of their children's fathers as "street angels", but "house devils". Monk (2017, p. 183) similarly described fathers in this context as 'lying, threatening, charming, playing the victim or the hero'. The participants in this present study spoke of their experience of the tendency among professionals to easily believe the father and the arduous journey they as mothers subsequently had to endure in order to expose the abuse and ever-present risk. This is captured by one mother reflecting on the response from a social worker in the following quote:

You also have to realise that they are extremely clever men; that are really able to bring people around to their way of thinking. So, I think that's always a factor. I know when the social worker came out to this house; she sat down on that couch [and said] 'ohh he wasn't what I expected at all, because he told me a few things'. And I just thought, you haven't a clue who you're dealing with there, girl; that's the whole point; you haven't a clue; yes, they're going to tell you; and what's even more shocking is that they fall for it; hook, line and sinker. The amount of lies that they get away with is unbelievable; and nobody ever challenges, because you're back to the 'your word against his word'. (Lyndsey)

Mothers spoke about how "he literally turned everybody on me" (Gillian) and their hope that professionals "would see through" the behaviour. However, as evidenced by the majority of participants in this present study, this did not always transpire.

As reflected in this next quote, young people also spoke about the effective use of charm and manipulation towards professionals and their fear of the potential impact:

I'm scared he might influence the social workers in another way, like influence them thinking ohh we're the bad guys and he's the good guy. (Alfie, 16)

One young person spoke about her father applying “*to get custody to show that he cared. He applied but didn’t do anything*” (Jenna, 15). Another young person spoke about the buying of gifts, not to please their children, but to “*look like a good dad in front of his pals*” (Alfie, 16). Both of these behaviours are considered consistent with “admirable fathering” practices identified by Katz, Nikupeteri and Laitinen’s (2020) study. As one young person summarised the experience of charm and manipulation from her viewpoint and experience:

He knows all the tricks to get you on his side. He knows how to work a person. He knows how to get into someone's head. If he wanted to make them happy, he did. If he wanted to make them sad, he did. Basically, he knows how to control people. (Jenna, 15)

6.3 Section 2: Challenges with and arising from professional engagement

Section 2 charts the challenges encountered by mothers and young people arising from professional engagement traversing the challenges emanating from fathers across the responses of professionals.

6.3.1 Practice Issues, Attitudes and Capacity

The challenges identified by mothers and young people with and arising from professional engagement included: the need for mothers to retell experiences across professionals; the non-engagement with father and by fathers; non-compliance of fathers with actions directed by professionals; fathers controlling professionals and using professionals to further abuse; lack of professional training/capacity; professionals not holding father to account; professionals exhibiting a pro-contact attitude and expectations of mother/father engagement and the resulting onus on mothers; professionals

not hearing or actioning the voice of the child and inconsistent professional practice.

The need to tell and retell the story of abuse arose for the mothers with this experience across two contexts: the absence of interprofessional working, as evidenced across the literature (Isobe et al., 2020) and the turnover of professionals (Stewart & Arnull, 2023). With the exception of one participating mother who spoke about good interprofessional working in another jurisdiction, none of the remaining participating mothers in this study experienced interprofessional cooperation, despite this being identified by many participants as a need. The utter frustration arising from this absence of interprofessional working is captured poignantly in the next quote from a participating mother:

The agencies don't work together and when you're in the height of trauma, you might be telling the police like this that there was one time he took a petrol can to my car and you know can you help me? 'Oh no you're going to have to go here' and then you're talking to the next agency, and you forget to say that part because the next part of the trauma is in and he's threatened to do this, that and the other and by the time you get to the end of the agencies and you're like, what is the point? And they're all different and the police may have one piece of the puzzle, (DV service) have another piece of the puzzle, the school have another piece of puzzle. There's nobody putting the puzzle pieces together. I'm still here drowning. Why am I drowning? I'm telling everybody everything. I am disclosing. I am saying help me. Somebody for God's sake put the fucking puzzles together. Put them together. (Claire)

The telling of “*your whole story again and again and again*” (Sandra) put significant avoidable pressure on mothers. While this experience is harder to mitigate in the context of garda response, the majority of frustration emanated from “*meeting another judge who didn't know the story*” (Sandra) and personnel changes in Tusla, The Child and Family Agency; with one mother recommending:

Try and keep one social worker on the case, because it's wrong meeting... I have twenty phone numbers in my contacts for Tusla over the two and a half years" (Sandra).

Worryingly, one young person also spoke about having “*between 13 and 16 social workers. Everyone had a different perspective*” (Jenna, 15).

Professionals enrolled by the fathers to facilitate further abuse and maintain control was a common experience reported by all participating mothers in this present study. Examples given by mothers and young people included teachers, gardaí, mediators, social workers and court professionals. These professionals were at times unknowingly complicit in the fathers’ attempt to punish, frighten, silence or coerce compliance of the mothers, as the quote below from this mother explains:

So, I stopped WhatsApp because we are court ordered to use the (parenting) app. The father then rang the school and demanded that somebody go to the classroom and get our 7-year-old daughter because her daddy wants to talk to her and was extremely abusive to the head of the school at the time. (Claire)

Mirroring the findings of Douglas and Fell’s (2020) study with victim-survivors of domestic violence, mothers in this study similarly spoke about the use of false concern to prompt welfare checks or false allegations to prompt a garda or social work responses to the family. Participants also spoke about the father of their children using every opportunity to involve authorities, as outlined by one mother who advised that “*he would phone the guards if I was five minutes late and the guards would come out*” (Joan).

At times participants stated that this strategy was very impactful, at other times they asserted that it was an attempt to create difficulty and was acknowledged as such by the respective professional; with one garda advising “*here we go again, (mother’s name)*” (Sandra). However, the recognition of this as a groundless strategy was experienced by the participating mothers as contingent on the individual professional’s ability to discern the motivation for professional contact. In considering credibility, this may present a challenge to less experienced professionals as, according to

Epstein and Goodman (2019, p. 423), domestically violent men “excel at presenting themselves as self-confident and in control, are adept at manipulation”.

Over two decades ago and reporting on practice in the UK, Scourfield’s (2003) ethnographic study with a social work team in child protection highlighted the gendered practices of focusing on mothers and not engaging with fathers. This theme, which has been consistently reported across jurisdictions since then (Wild, 2023), also emerged strongly in this present study. All of the participating mothers spoke about the father of their children not engaging or complying across a variety of settings including access, mediation, child protection, maintenance, consent etc. As one mother outlined:

No one stopped him, you know, no one said to him, you can't do this or you can't have this behaviour or he had a time and date to collect the kids and he never collected them in the time, the right time. He never brought them back in the same time. I think they [professionals] should be more strong. (Maria)

Mothers spoke about the ongoing challenge of agreeing “*one thing and then he'd change the goal posts*” (Joan). Some of the participating mothers also drew attention to professionals at times not wanting to engage with perpetrators of domestic violence and the paradox of “*they didn't want him there because they were afraid of him. And that's the gas thing; they were afraid of him but they wanted me to deal with him*” (Sandra). This finding echoes the findings of Olszowy et al., (2020) in their study examining barriers for child protection workers in assessing risk in the context of domestic violence. This study, drawing on 29 key informants in Canada was informed by criticism of the child protection sector “for placing the onus on victims to keep children safe and failing to engage perpetrators” (Olszowy et al., 2020, p. 1).

However, it emerged clearly from the narratives of participants, that their frustration relating to non-engagement/non-compliance was eclipsed by their frustration regarding the lack of perceived consequences imposed by

professionals in response to this non-engagement or compliance. This frustration is summarised by one mother in this next quote:

But he didn't really engage with them and they let him away with it; and he didn't do what he was told; and they let him away with it; and he did everything he shouldn't have done; and they let him away with it. So, his engagement with them was; he walked all over them; and they let him. More fool them. (Sandra)

This frustration increased for some mothers when reflecting on the “*steps and hoops and jumps*” (Gillian) required from them by the same agency with one mother proposing that “*If I went down the town and broke a window, I'd probably be locked up for it*” (Rebecca) in comparison to the perceived lack of consequences for the behaviour of her children’s father.

When considering the lack of holding to account, professionals being “*scared of him*” was mooted by some of the mothers. This is consistent with insight provided by participating professionals in the previous chapter in terms of their perceived risk when engaging with perpetrators of abuse. It is also consistent with the existing empirical evidence, including research on child protection practice in Australia (Humphreys et al., 2024; Tsantefski et al., 2024). Across both of these studies as highlighted in the literature in chapter three, was the risk to physical and psychological safety of professionals working in this context and the need for a range of measures to increase worker safety.

There was also an acknowledgement by some participants that they, the mothers, were the “easier”, more compliant parties for professionals to have to engage with, also consistent with the existing evidence (Humphreys & Absler, 2011; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Olszowy et al., 2020). One participating mother in this present study reflected “*when I was dealing with the dad and not seeing my kids; they (Tusla) wouldn't intervene*” (Sandra). Some of the mothers drew a correlation between the lack of accountability for their abusive behaviour and the ever-present potential of complaints by the perpetrator of abuse against the professionals, with one mother linking

the turnover of social workers with the threatening behaviour of her children's dad towards them, as demonstrated below:

Like it's just, they [professionals] were just afraid as well because he was so litigious. Like he made formal complaints about every social worker, but no one stepped in and said tough, that's your social worker. So, my children and me, every couple of months, another social worker, another social worker (Sandra)

Perceived lack of training and/or professional capacity at times to recognise and respond appropriately to the abuse has already been discussed in the literature (Heward-Belle et al. 2018; Humphreys et al., 2019). This was raised by the participants in relation to judges, mediators, social workers and gardaí, with participating mothers asserting that “*it is the luck of the draw*” (Claire), with some professionals experienced by mothers as having “*no understanding of domestic abuse. No understanding of emotional or psychological abuse or gaslighting. Nothing. Zero. Then expecting you to be in the room with the person and you're absolutely terrified*” (Joan).

Comparisons were drawn by one mother in respect of her experience as a victim-survivor in Ireland and in the UK. She asserted that:

The guards aren't trained in the, I want to say nuances, but it's even deeper than that isn't it, the subtlety of domestic abuse when you're not presented with a black eye. The subtlety of that. The guards do not understand it. They think it's noise. They think it's a waste of time. At least that's how it comes across. (Claire)

Mothers also spoke about their ability to recognise a lack of professional capacity almost immediately and how this lack of capacity at times influenced the trajectory of their journey, varying from abuse not being recognised and mitigated initially, to years before abuse was acknowledged. In a similar vein, mothers also spoke about the lack of training and capacity in the wider context, among family and friends, as summarised below:

Speaking to the wrong person, that is, someone that doesn't understand, isn't trained or doesn't get the situation, it's probably the

most destructive thing you can do to yourself. That includes family members; agencies; a whole multitude of people, because it makes you question. ...it's like taking 20 steps backwards. If you're not validated and how you're thinking is there, you know, so you're starting to see through the fog, you're starting to see the true feelings of someone; you're starting to see a little bit of a pattern; you're starting to see that they are trying to get back at you; you're starting to see the nasty stuff and then you relate it into an incident and someone kind of dismisses that kind of incident; you go back then, you question what you were questioning in the first place. It's like it's soul destructive for you and I found in my own way, I know now who not to talk to; and I know that's very difficult; and it's also something that's very hard to understand; that they don't understand; and I think that's true for a lot of things, but I think it's especially in this kind of a thing, because it is so nuanced, it's so difficult to pinpoint; it's so difficult to prove; it's all so coercive; it's all so underhanded. (Lyndsey)

Consistent with the views of professionals as documented in the previous chapter, a pro-contact attitude (Holt, 2020) was identified by the majority of mothers and young people as influencing the outcomes of family law cases where contact decisions needed to be made. This pro-contact culture was described in the literature review in chapter two to involve the presumption of contact and the widely held view that this is automatically in the best interests of the child. The existing empirical evidence was also reflected in this current study and is explained by one mother in this next quote:

I was told this very quickly by a barrister; the way the court sees it is; ohh yeah sure they [child/ren] might cry, but sure they'll get on with it after six months. My son was only three when he started being put into a taxi and sent off to (town name) for the weekend. My young one was only six. Ohh yeah sure they'll cry and they'll be alright. And that's very much the judge's opinion. That's very much the [agency's] opinion sometimes as well. Yeah it'll be hard but it'll be better for them in the long run, because it's back to this; they must be allowed to have a relationship with both parents; that opportunity must be presented,

but what they don't get is, all the years that you're married to that person and the child living in the house, they don't have a relationship with the child either. So, there is no relationship to start with and that's something that's totally lost on all the services as well; and you're not believed when you say that; like you're this overpowering, over controlling mother. (Lyndsey)

The quality of the prior relationship resonates with James-Hanman & Holt's (2021) seven-point plan for safe[r] contact for children; urging the exploration of parental knowledge of and authenticity of interest in their children prior to decision making in relation to contact.

Mothers also spoke about managing the frustration of their children and their fear of the consequences of not complying; *"trying to explain, I can't save you because the courts are telling me you have to go. If you don't go I'm going to be in contempt, you know, and I'm going to get into trouble"* (Joan).

One of the participating young people, speaking of her lived experience of forced contact recalled:

We were two weeks in granny's and made to see dad. We were observed. He tried to turn you against the workers. I told them I didn't want to go but they said just go (Tusla whispering in sister's ear). You're better off to go. (Jenna, 15)

Another young person speaking of her experience said:

Like I wasn't allowed to do any of that. [choose whether to have access or not] I think I did chance my arm a few times at the time but then my mam got in trouble for it, because like they weren't happy what was happening, that I wasn't going because they weren't happy that I was choosing my own voice. They thought my mam was forcing me to stay (Gia, 13).

Consistent with the views of professionals, the expectation of continued mother/father engagement was acknowledged by the majority of participating mothers. Similar to observations in the literature review (Meier & Sankaran, 2021; Sheehy & Boyd, 2020) regarding the promotion of shared parenting

ideal which maintains father contact, the pressure to conform and not appear as obstructive or undermining of the father-child relationship was a common experience in this present study, as articulated by one mother in this next quote:

And you get a lot of people saying 'ohh can you not work it out, you know, like could you not talk'. There was no talking to him. Like social work wouldn't deal with him, yet they expected me to go off and deal with them, you know (Sandra)

Examples of expected mother/father engagement included shared parent/teacher meetings, mediation, access liaison and within the court settings. Needing to be “fair to both parents” was often used as the rationale for promoted engagement, with the feeling of being treated like “*two people that just couldn't get on*”, (Joan) often followed by “*why can't ye get on with each other? Tit for tat*” (Joan) and “*why can't you work with this person?*” (Joan). However, there was a shared view expressed by the mothers that in the context of domestic violence “*it's not the same. It shouldn't be the same. It should be the protective parent first and her children*” (Joan).

Consistent with the views of professionals in the previous chapter and as expressed by all of the victim-survivor participants, was the experience that the onus was placed on mothers across a range of responsibilities including: assuming the full care and support of their children, ensuring that they go to all appointments and fulfil all requirements set out by professionals, ensuring that the children go to access, and at times managing the behaviour of their children's dad. This experience is well documented in existing research, with Lapierre's (2010) qualitative Canadian study highlighting women's increased sense of responsibility in regard to their children and their loss of control over their mothering. In addition to the role of caring for children's everyday needs, participating mothers in this present study described finding themselves “*putting the pieces back together again*” (Joan), consequent to what they said was traumatic access for their children. These expectations also involved, at times managing the behaviour of the perpetrator of abuse, shouldering financial constraints, managing appointments and all the while trying to

recover from their own experience of domestic violence. As one participating mother outlined in her interview:

You can look like a nutjob compared to the father; because you're at home with upset children trying to hold it all together; they are not paying you maintenance; you're on the bread line; you could be even in homeless shelter; you could be in any kind of a situation. 90% of the time they have nothing else to do all day only plan their next attack; that's all they do all day. So, they're able to have the time to be ready to take this phone call; like they're not there trying to cook dinner and keep your child quiet and do homework and take a phone call off someone from an agency. They're not doing that. They are sitting down nice and calm having their cup of coffee, responding to these questions; and they have all the answers to the questions planned out in their minds. Like I don't think people realise how much forward thinking goes into the way that they respond, and it is to make you look crazy because you do look crazy because you're doing everything and they're doing nothing. The first thing they do is keep you busy - continue and continue to keep you busy, following your tail; going around, but I am a great mom; look at me, I'm trying to do this access. That's exactly what they want you to do and that's exactly what you do, because they know you're going to do that. (Lyndsey)

Of particular concern to both adult and young person victim-survivor participants was the failure to listen to the voice of the child victim-survivor. The legal obligations under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹¹³ to ascertain and represent the voice of the child in matters concerning them, are well evidenced in the literature (Holt, 2018; Elliffe & Holt, 2019; Houghton, 2018; Holt et al., 2023; Costello & Holt, 2024). In this present study, young people spoke about the length of time it had taken for professionals to speak with them, as this young person explains:

¹¹³ [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - Children's Rights \(coe.int\)](https://www.coe.int/en/web/convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child)

It took them probably around a year or half, [a] year and a half to listen to me and [then they] didn't even listen to me. So, I guess it was probably pointless to be honest. (Gia, 13)

Another young person expressed her frustration of not only not being listened to, but also not being included and informed about what was going on, including the decisions that were being made:

Nobody asked. They kept us in the dark. The social worker wouldn't let us come to meetings. When I asked, they said you are too young to understand. When I did go, it was for one question and then asked to leave. (Jenna, 15)

When young people acknowledged that they were listened to, they often queried whether they were actually heard as it wasn't always apparent that their expressed needs had or would be addressed. These observations by the young people, particularly not feeling heard and the importance of being heard, echo the findings of the study of Tusla child protection and welfare intervention, conducted by Holt et al., (2023), and informed by 20 children and young people. The importance of young people being heard is also captured in the recent report on Empowering Children and Young People through Participation provided by Costello & Holt (2024).

Inconsistency in professional practice was highlighted across all of the participating mothers; with the resultant impact that their safety and the safety of their children diminished or augmented depending on the professional response. There was very much a sense of the “*luck of the draw*” (Claire), with individual professionals highlighted as either the saviour of the situation or the catalyst for further trauma. The following quote demonstrates a mother's negative experience of policing practice that would be considered a violation of An Garda Síochána policy on Domestic Abuse Intervention and related practice:

She [Garda] says 'well we don't get involved in domestics'. And I said I rang at lunchtime. I said they were going to drive out and meet me in the car and take a statement; and she said 'nothing to do with us you have to go through the courts for that; we don't get involved'. And

she walked away, and I said it was hard enough being there. I never had any dealings with the guards in my whole life and I was so ashamed to be there; and I said, 'sorry?', and she says, 'I told you; you contact the courts for that; we don't get involved'; and I said well 'what are you going to do?' 'What do you want me to do?' Well at least write something down. Like they were going to take a statement earlier and she said what's your name, what's his name; right, it's written down and walked away again. So that was my first attempt to fight against it; and saying he can't keep getting away with this, you know. That was my first attempt (Gillian)

Central to the reported experience of inconsistency in professional responses was the understanding of the abusive context with some mothers speaking of a “well, you know, arguments happen” (Claire) approach; a “can you prove it and then we'll take you seriously” (Claire) approach and almost feeling “like you're bothering them.” (Claire)

Mothers spoke about how this lack of understanding and sometimes departure from policy and accepted practice lead to devastating impacts on their children. One mother reflected:

Like when that counsellor betrayed him and gave verbatim what he had discussed privately to him on a phone call, and that he now had that, so next time he went on access, he was bombarded by those things. Put up against a wall, choked, screamed in his face, imprisoned him in a bedroom, wouldn't let him out, left him there. He had to escape out a window. That one action of that counsellor did that to him (Joan)

While it was unclear as to whether the following view captured a shared approach to child protection in the context of domestic violence, it was an issue that was nonetheless raised a number of times by the participants:

Like you know, it's like the 'don't touch, that's something we don't go near'; and that's very much Tusla's attitude. The minute they hear custody and access, they're out, and that's where actually the abuse continues. (Lyndsey)

While there were multiple examples of highly professional behaviour that will be incorporated in the third findings chapter, there were also many examples where mothers and young people called into question the behaviour of some professionals.

In addition to challenges relating to practice, three of the participating mothers described administrative errors that impacted their confidence in relation to professional engagement; a typographical error that prevented the actioning of a protection order breach, whereby the wrong date was entered on the Protection Order; a data protection breach whereby a victim-survivor received another family's highly confidential case conference minutes and another data protection breach whereby a consultant engaged to review Tusla practice was provided with personal details of a mother without her permission.

6.4 Section 3: Wider structural challenges in the context of domestic violence

This section depicts the wider structural challenges encountered by victim-survivors when fathers engaged with systems or were engaged with professionals. This section also reflects on the impact of these challenges on their help seeking journey.

When fathers decided to engage with family law processes, the presumption of contact being granted and indeed increased if requested by the perpetrator of domestic violence was expressed as extremely challenging for participating mothers in this study. These mothers highlighted that in some instances there was no existing relationship between the children and their father. One young person, speaking of his relationship with his dad stated *“he's been never there. Even though he worked at home, he's never really been part of my life. He was always just the man in the corner”* (Alfie, 16). This observation by this young person resonates with the study of 17 fathers participating in a behaviour change programme conducted by Heward-Belle (2016) in Australia. This study similarly identified a cohort of five participant

fathers that described “being “absent” from the day-to-day lives of their children due to work commitments and having the least amount of involvement in their direct care” (Heward-Belle, 2016, p. 331). These fathers described a high identification with feeling in control when using domestic violence and with hegemonic masculinity. In addition to the lack of father-child relationships, participating mothers in this present study also highlighted the ensuing risk to their children, with unassessed parenting capacity combined with automatic entitlement to access, described by one mother in the following quote:

Because you're afraid of what's going to happen, because you know what can happen; because they are the same men that put your children in the car with no car seats and drive erratically; they are the same men that don't feed the children; and you know they've done that in the past, so you know what they're capable of. You're meant to forget all that; that's in the past; so all those actions that they took was because of you and your relationship. Nothing got to do with the children. They were doing it to the children before they had access. That doesn't come into it. I don't think agencies understand that.
(Lyndsey)

Father engagement in family law was reported by mothers to bring them into the intimidating nature of court, both inside and outside of hearings. Having to share limited waiting areas in close proximity to their perpetrators of abuse for hours was highlighted as a challenge, described by one mother as “*every chance he'd get just staring at me*” (Gillian). This is consistent with the observations of Spearman et al., (2023) whose conceptual analysis of post separation abuse identified court appearances as a particular context that provide opportunities where victim-survivors are mandated to be available in the presence of the abuser. A contributing factor to this risk is the shared observation by both mothers and professionals of the lack of separate spaces in many of the older court buildings in Ireland. In terms of the court environment, one of the mothers, having experienced the court system in the UK, highlighted the differences below:

The family court system [in the UK] is so different to the family court system in Ireland. In Ireland it's set up the equivalent of a Criminal Court. You have to stand in a dock. You have to face the perpetrator and a lot of times when you're facing your perpetrator you want to make everything better because that's how you were conditioned during the relationship. If I do this, he will be fine. If I just give him what he wants my life is good. And when you're facing him in court from the dock you're already intimidated. You want it to be quiet. You want it to be OK.....I'm stood in that dock like a criminal In Ireland - which one of you is the criminal then? Let's have a look, you get up here. And you shake. You shake when you're in that dock. You shake when you look at the judge because the judge is an authority figure and we're all Irish Catholics right? So we're guilty before we even start. And you shake when you want to look away from the judge and tell your story and the only other direction you can look is at your perpetrator who's intimidated you for years. Very big difference. (Claire)

6.4.1 Family Law decision making processes

The power held by the judge and the court appointed professionals (McCaughren et al., 2022) and the far-reaching consequence of an adverse decision in this context was associated with extreme fear by all who raised this challenge. As described by one mother:

I'll have to renew custody or renew access and that was very frightening to me because that was my biggest fear was him getting the children and me knowing that he wasn't a good person. And that was like a green flag for him, that immediately he realised I get what I need out of this court and he manipulated the court, he groomed them, he, re-abused me time and time again. I would say I had over 25 visits in court over that kind of two, 3, 4-year period when the kids were like maybe they were like 3 and 7, so like for at least 10, you

know, that six to ten year period I'd say I'd over 25 visits in court all to do. (Joan)

Similar to the power held by the respective judge, the role and power of the guardian ad litem (GAL) and other court appointed professionals was highlighted in this present study as both an extremely positive experience or an extremely negative experience. As highlighted in McCaughren et al. (2022) regarding the influential power of these reports, one participating mother in this present study asserted that “*the judge will read that report and take that as gospel*” (Lyndsey). This is concerning considering McCaughren et al.’s (2022, p. 130) assertion that “the lack of robust regulation and oversight in respect of such reports has led to significant concerns about the quality and effectiveness of such a mechanism in practice in terms of introducing the views of children into court.” Of particular concern for some of the participating mothers in this present study, was the limited engagement assessors were reported to have had with their respective children prior to making life altering recommendations to the court; and what the participants described as the selective inclusion of the respective children’s views. This very much echoes the views of Holt (2020, p. 328) whereby children are “listened to if they want contact and overruled if they do not on the grounds of age, capacity and maturity”. One young person participating in this present study asserted that she had advised the GAL that she “*never wanted to see her father again*” (Rachel, 16). This young person also reported that she had self-harmed by stabbing herself to avoid access. However, she stated in interview for this study that the GAL subsequently reported in the assessment requested by the Judge that she wished to see her father once a month, with this recommendation resulting in a referral to Theraplay¹¹⁴ to augment the father-child bond. The young person recounted how her father had attended only one session before disengaging. Of particular concern for one of the participating mothers was what they described as the coexistence

¹¹⁴ Theraplay is a dyadic child and family therapy that has been recognised by the Association of Play Therapy as one of seven seminal psychotherapies for children. Developed over 50 years ago, and practiced around the world, Theraplay was developed for any professional working to support healthy child/caregiver attachment.

of the powerful influence of these assessors alongside the lack of regulation of these professionals, as outlined below:

They are unregulated. Like people went on about other psychologists being unregulated; what about these? Completely unregulated, but what they say is God and I think the power that they have is unbelievable. The power, because, nobody actually gets to question or query what they put in a report. Now I understand why you can't, in some ways, but at the same time, you're really in a powerless position when you have them involved. It's not meant to be about you; it's meant to be about the child. It doesn't make sense, none of it.
(Lyndsey)

Mothers also spoke about their often-protracted journeys and the unpredictable and immediate nature of court decisions that can transform their lives in a matter of hours. Prolonging the court process has been recognised as an abusive tactic in this context by a range of researchers (Miller & Smolter, 2011; Douglas, 2018a;). The unpredictability of court outcomes is described below by one mother:

You're literally going into the court on a Friday or Thursday-whatever fucking day it is of the week and you don't know coming out of there what the court is going to tell you to do; and it could be a child, in my case, that hasn't seen their father for over a year; and they're suddenly heading off to (town name) to spend overnights with them; just because he's brought an application at Christmas time. That's the type of stuff that happens every day of the week. That's the sort of stuff a judge, a child comes home from school on a Friday and is finding out you're heading to daddy tonight; and they have no control over it whatsoever. They're not even told; you can't say too much to a child either because you're going to have a very distressed child if you start discussing court. You can't discuss court with them. That's literally how quick their lives are turned upside down. It's within one day; the day they come home from court they don't know what's gonna happen but what they do is that they insist on the father

collecting the children from the home; that makes the children feel very unsafe; and every court does that. (Lyndsey)

All of the adult victim-survivors and some of the young people victim-survivors participating in this present study spoke about the breaching of orders. These breaches related to protection, safety, barring, maintenance and access orders; and also included specific orders made by the respective judge. In this next quote, one participating mother shared her experience of multiple breaches:

I was frightened, do you know what I mean, and then I was getting phone calls that night. Like I didn't even have the barring order twelve hours and he had broke it. Do you know, like he has been in court for them, but fines, do you know what I mean. They're not taken serious enough. They're not, not when someone threatens your life and then when you get an order that is, they're meant to be there to protect you, but yet and all, it doesn't protect you. It doesn't actually protect you. Like the amount of times I've been in that station with things that he has done, but they don't meet the criteria for a breach. What's the point in having it, do you know. (Rebecca)

The subjective nature of the criteria for responding to breaches was considered problematic by many of the participants, with the affected mothers in this study speaking of the lack of consequence and how this can lead or contribute to escalating abuse. As one mother recalled: there were orders made and “*he broke every one of them*” (Sandra) with “*not even a slap on the wrist*” (Sandra). The following recollection, shared by one of the mothers demonstrates the relationship between lack of consequences to breaches and continued and potentially escalating abuse:

So, I touched on when he was arrested or spoken to at Dublin airport when I could prove that one of the breaches, one of the hundreds of breaches, had happened in the airport. When he was spoken to and released with no action, the guard spoke to me and said look we're really sorry etc. The very next day I had abusive messages from him telling me that the guards were on his side; that the guard said he

should go for custody; that the guard said I was just a crazy bitter woman; that the guard said, the guard said; the guard said and why you doing this you're just you know and it's all my fault. That did not work well. That did not work well for me at all. Not at all. And the reason it didn't work well for me is because I've never reported another breach. (Claire)

As demonstrated in the recollection above, lack of consequence can have a chilling impact on reporting.

Durfee and Goodmark, (2021), asserted in their review of 313 cross applications that these applications can result in a number of consequences for victim-survivors including the deliberate intimidatory prospect of facing their abuser to defend unfounded accusations; the creation of a false impression of culpability that may influence further charges sometimes resulting in victim-survivors withdrawing their application. These empirical findings resonate in this present study and are consistent with the experience of one participant whose partner's cross application was subsequently used as leverage to coerce her to drop her protection order; "*well if you get rid of yours, I'll get rid of mine*" (Gillian).

For another participating mother, her protection order did not afford her protection due to the jurisdictional limitation of her order, as she explains:

I have a protection order in Ireland from (name of town) court, and he had breached it and he had breached it multiple, multiple times. Because the breaches had occurred in the UK, the guards couldn't do anything. (Claire)

Similar to the findings of Vasil (2024) who identified fear of deportation and the elevated risk of multiple forms of institutional, economic, legal and social precarity associated with status, the legal status of one participant in this present study, created additional barriers to her getting help. Despite, agency involvement and an evidenced attempt on her life in front of the children; with no recourse to public funding, she remained completely reliant on the perpetrator of abuse, as she explains:

I came to Ireland illegal. I didn't have permission to stay in the country and when I went to (DV service 1) I tried to get help from them. They couldn't help me because they said you are illegal in the country. At that time my daughter she was a baby. I think she was eight months and I couldn't work. I just tried to leave that situation and they couldn't help me. I stayed in the refuge for I think one week or two weeks and they said we can't do anything for you. You need to come back home. And I was very very disappointed. I was very frustrated, because I had no money, I had no help from social, anything, and they couldn't help me. (Maria)

In the absence of flexible funding, this mother remained in an extremely abusive situation until the children got older.

A language barrier was a similar challenge for two of the participants on their help-seeking journey, as described below:

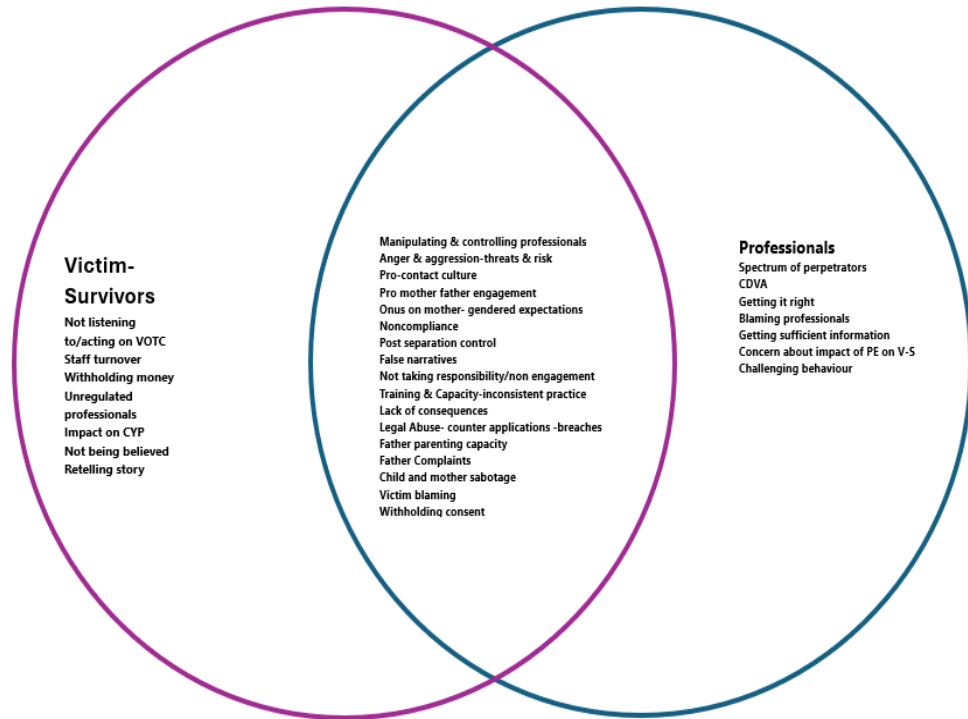
I didn't have any agency help me. I could not speak English. Just yes, no. My daughter xxxx helped me to speak. (Farrah)

This mother's help seeking journey was not only lengthened by the lack of capacity of agencies to engage with her but forced her to speak about the abusive experiences through her child who acted as interpreter. This can create instances where abuse is minimised to shield the child. This situation can have far reaching consequences for both mother and child, not least compounding the experience of children and young people who are further exposed to the abuse of their mother.

6.5 Triangulating the perspectives of victim-survivors of domestic violence and professionals on challenges

When the views on challenges were triangulated across the analysis of the narratives of participating victim-survivors of domestic violence and professionals, there were key areas where the views and perspectives of both groups aligned. These are presented in figure 2.

Figure 2: Challenges



Evident from the figure above (fig. 2), victim-survivors and professionals converged across a number of areas; manipulating and controlling of professionals, the anger and aggression of domestically abusive fathers, pro-contact attitudes, expectations of mothers, non-compliance of domestically abusive fathers across a range of issues, post separation control, false narratives, fathers not taking responsibility and non-engagement, training, capacity and inconsistent practice, lack of consequences for fathers who are domestically abusive, legal abuse encompassing counter applications and breaches of orders, father parenting capacity, father vexatious complaints, child and mother relationship sabotage, victim blaming and withholding consent. These challenges at times manifested differently across victim-

survivors and professionals, with experiences and impacts varying. Nonetheless, all of these challenges resonated across both groups.

With regard to victim-survivors the areas of challenge identified consistently across this group included: domestically abusive fathers not being held to account, professionals not listening/acting on the voice of the child, staff turnover, withholding money, unregulated professionals, the impact of domestic violence on children and young people, not being believed and the need to tell and retell their stories. Challenges identified by professionals included the spectrum of domestically abusive men and the prevalence of childhood domestic violence and abuse among these men, the worry of getting it right, being blamed by domestically abusive fathers, getting sufficient information to work effectively, concerns about the risk for victim-survivors arising from their professional engagement and challenging the behaviour of domestically abusive fathers.

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has depicted the challenges pertaining to father engagement from the lived experiences of victim-survivors. The findings in this chapter are broadly consistent with the findings from professionals outlined in the previous chapter. Similar to the previous findings chapter, additional challenges relating to the abusive tactics employed by domestically abusive fathers were depicted in section one of this chapter. The challenges encountered in the context of professional engagement were outlined in section two encompassing practice, attitude and capacity observations. Section three resonated strongly with the views emanating from professionals captured the wider structural challenges that create challenges for victim-survivors across their help seeking journey including a prevailing pro-contact culture, the expectations of mothers and of particular focus, the decisions made in family law processes. Chapter three concluded with an overview of the triangulated challenges reported by victim-survivors and

professional participants in this study, providing an important insight into where these challenges converge.

CHAPTER SEVEN Analysis-

Getting it Right: What Works?

7.1 Introduction

This third and final findings chapter outlines, from the perspective of all participants in this study, the components that amplify the occurrence and efficacy of father engagement in the context of domestic violence. This chapter is divided across eight sections, as follows:

- Section one begins by summarising the key elements that facilitate and sustain initial professional engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence.
- Section two then explores the key actions and indicators of successful continued engagement and positive outcomes.
- Section three unpacks what supports and sustains professional practice.
- Section four focusses on shared successful strategies adopted by participating professionals to achieve change.

The chapter then shifts perspective to focus through the lens of the victim-survivor, identifying what supports engagement and achieves optimum outcomes.

- Section five explores what matters to victim-survivors in terms of professional engagement.
- Section six then reports on what matters to perpetrators of domestic violence in terms of professional engagement.

The chapter then takes a broader view in section seven, triangulating the views of all contributors; victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and professionals in terms of:

- Areas of commonality regarding what works in relation to professional engagement and effective components of change.
- Section eight concludes the chapter with a depiction of what could work with regard to optimising and maximising father engagement in the context of domestic violence; gleaned from victim-survivor experience and professional observations.

The following observations from Kieran, a perpetrator of domestic violence, resonates with a number of key observations that will be explored further throughout chapter six:

And thank God, you know, the help was put in front of me and I did it. And as I say, I'd volunteer down the line again, Lisa, because I'm not just saying it because you're here. You know you've asked me to meet you; and I said I'll meet you; I hope this helps somebody; helps you; maybe somebody down the line because, look, as Sr. xxxx says in Cuan Mhuire in xxxxxx, the tools are there, use them, if you want to, what she meant is, if you want to be helped, help is there. It's just a matter of getting up and wanting that. If you're just halfway in and halfway out it's no good. Your heart's got to be right in it; then you can change your life around for the best. (Kieran)

7.2 Section 1: Engaging Fathers: Building Relationships and Rapport

Relationship based practice (RBP) underscores the importance of building robust and meaningful professional relationships and is increasingly recognised as a central tenet to successful outcomes in professional-service user engagement. According to Hingley-Jones & Ruch (2016, p. 239) “relationship underpins social work practice in all its forms, strengthened by a deeper understanding of the psychodynamics and emotions of those relationships, set within the systems and organisational contexts in which these interactions take place”. Drawing from psychoanalysis, systems

theory, attachment theory, sociology and politics, RBP offers us a way in which we can maximise our engagement.

While all of the professionals interviewed engage to some degree with fathers in the context of domestic violence, the significance of building rapport to the fulfilment of their respective roles varied. To specialist domestic violence service practitioners working solely with mothers; while viewing professional father engagement as a necessary vehicle to longer term safety of women and children; building relationships and rapport with fathers was deemed unnecessary to the fulfilment of their role. To specialist domestic violence service child support and supervised access practitioners, father engagement, and therefore building a relationship was given greater significance. Considering the value of father engagement, one specialist domestic violence worker describes how this engagement provides “*an insight into how they work or where they they've come to this place or what actually is their understanding of DV*” (DVS7). This information is considered essential to challenge behaviour where possible; garner consent and maximise the safety of the children and young people that they work with. To court services professionals, father engagement, while desirable in the fulfilling of “*our civil service values*” (CS4), was not deemed necessary as ultimately “*we don't have judgment or an opinion one way or the other. That's for the judge*” (CS3). Family support workers, although eager to engage and viewing father engagement as significant for achieving change, shared “*that almost all families then that actually are referred into family support are solely the mummy and the children, so the father has either left the family home or isn't in the family home or could be in jail, so that really the focus of family support is generally always on the mother with the children*”(SW4). Social workers and the domestic violence and abuse support liaison officer within the child protection team in Tusla, viewed father engagement and therefore building the relationship and rapport as significant to their ongoing work with the children and young people, as this worker explains:

Because we can't complete our assessment if we don't have a conversation with him. Because nothing is going to change. There's going to be no conversation with him if he doesn't engage, so we can't

actually complete our own piece of work if we don't make contact with him. (SW3)

Probation Services, whose role is to manage risk, viewed quality father engagement and therefore building relationships and rapport as critical to the fulfilment of their role. These professionals were found to have the most engagement with fathers, describing components of their practice that resonate powerfully with RBP principles in social work across the literature (Ingram & Smith, 2018)

While all of the professionals experienced varying levels and significance of father engagement, all provided valuable insight into the components of their individual and organisational practice that maximised father engagement. Consistent with the literature, these components include listening (Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin, 2024); explaining (Morrison et al., 2021); being non-judgemental (Scott & Crooks, 2006; Scourfield, 2006; Brandon et al., 2019); persistence (Brandon et al., 2019); adopting an incremental approach to engagement and building rapport (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2024). The following passage, shared by a probation officer captures the process by which she employs these components in building a strong foundational relationship with her clients:

When I first meet somebody, usually I'm interviewing them for a court report. So, as I'm going through their history and everything, I keep it very easy and light and I purposefully don't read the book of evidence at that first meeting. I kind of give them the opportunity to present themselves to me in whatever way they choose. So, it can be easy and light and developing a rapport and then at the end I might just say, ask about the charges. They'll give me some denial or some minimised, sanitised version of what happened. And I'll say ok, so I'll let them say whatever they want to say. And so, they get some support from me. They're sitting down. They're able to talk about all this court stuff, and whatever, and then I say Ok, so I'm going to read the book of evidence and the next time we're going to talk about the offence. So, then the next time they come in I start challenging them and that will be quite tough for them. However, they've already had

the opportunity to have a supportive type session, where they've talked and I've listened and we've gently talked about their work, their education, their family, their childhood and so forth, their health. For me, what I find is that, for the most part then, those perpetrators don't see me as the enemy. They see me as someone who is trying to help and even though I'm challenging and I'm pushing them and pulling things out of them that they don't want to do. I'm always referring them for treatment, they respond to that because I think they feel heard, because I will explain it, look, it's an issue and whether you want to fully accept it or not, it's an issue. It brought you to court and I tell them I know it's a hard thing to admit to because none of us like to admit to terrible things that we've done or when we've hurt people in any way, and that denial is kind of natural in these kind of situations.
(PS3)

The key components of listening, explaining, non-judgemental practice, persistence, incremental approach and applying consequence will now be explored in greater depth.

7.2.1 Listening

Listening to fathers, although a simple action, was viewed by all professionals as a useful means by which to encourage engagement, gather information, diffuse frustration and demonstrate respect. Concurring with the approach of Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin 2024 (2024), creating a dedicated space to give fathers an opportunity to “tell their story”, was viewed across all professionals in this present study who engage with fathers with a change agenda, as a critical and transformative element of their practice. Participants argued that it serves not only as an opportunity for fathers to feel heard but is also serves critically the foundation for the burgeoning professional relationship that in time allows for behaviour to be challenged and change to be achieved.

7.2.2 Explaining

Explaining, again rudimentary but impactful, was identified as a vital, practical and sometimes strategic action across all of the professionals, with areas of commonality emerging from the data. For example, this could involve explaining the respective reach and limitation of roles and the distinct mandates aligned to the various roles e.g., court procedure. Defining roles and expectations concurs with the findings of Morrison et al.'s (2021) observations of Batterer Intervention Programme (BIP) sessions. An introductory action of the facilitators, observed by Morrison et al. (2021) was to provide details on the "ground rules". These "ground rules, informed by 44 observations, were used to explain policies, procedures and expectations, laying the foundation of the programme. These "ground rules" were subsequently refreshed as required if participants deviated from them. Professionals participating in this present study talked about utilising explaining, at times to calm and resolve frustration; to highlight the impact and consequence of behaviour and as a means to set parameters for engagement. As one court services professional described:

I think after speaking to us they may calm down a bit. When they ring us first, they might be very angry and then after talking to them I think if they do listen to you - like some of them won't. If they do listen, I think they know what's ahead and they kind of understand it better.
(CS6)

Of particular benefit to participating justice professionals and consistent with the parameters set out above in explaining the "ground rules", was the attachment of contextual conditions to orders or bail. This was viewed as a very effective measure for setting expectations and the subsequent management of behaviour, as outlined below in this next quote:

Also, I would ask for bail conditions. If there is going to be an adjournment I'd look for the same bail conditions to be in situ for the whole of the case before the court so an adjournment could be

required for further assessment for now for SARA¹¹⁵, for whatever it is and I will always ask for the bail conditions to stay the same so that means if there is a barring order, the barring order is there but also the bail conditions because sometimes the man will understand bail conditions quicker than they understand the order of the court. (PS1)

7.2.3 Non-judgemental Practice

“*Not judging them for what they did*” (PS1) was viewed by all professionals as imperative to countering shame and building trust and engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence. Some participating professionals, particularly court services professionals, explicitly referred to the importance of the impartial nature of their role, as demonstrated below:

Our philosophy is always that we are impartial; we are disinterested parties; in other words, we don't take sides; and it might sound hard to do; at the end of the day, we know that there is a judicial process; and we are not part of that, so we don't have to judge men coming in or whatever else. We tend to view them as; they've got a right to be heard; and that will be in the court, whatever else, so I certainly don't look at them as, you know, I don't attach any labels to them. (CS7)

The importance of non-judgemental practice in this context has been highlighted consistently across the literature over the last twenty years, as illuminated in the seminal work of Scott and Crooks and Scourfield (2006). More recently, Brandon et al.'s (2019) mixed method study of fathers and their perspectives on involvement in the child protection system in the UK, found that avoiding judgment or questions, particularly in the early stages of

¹¹⁵ The Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA) is a structured clinical judgment screening tool used by clinicians, mental health providers, and other professionals to evaluate the risk of future violence in persons who are accused or convicted of spousal assault or intimate partner violence (IPV). The SARA was developed by the British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence, the British Columbia Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission, and several other agencies as part of the Project for Protection of Victims of Spousal Assault

engagement, fostered an empathetic and respectful relationship with fathers. This practice was considered critical to these fathers.

7.2.4 Persistence

Consistent across the literature, non-engagement of fathers in the context of domestic violence was an identified issue that at times required a proactive approach by some professionals. Brandon et al. (2019) found that there were often attempts by social workers to include fathers in decision making. The levels of persistence in this study tended to correlate to the perceived benefits of father engagement to the fulfilment of their role. This was particularly evident with social work practitioners in this present study who spoke about the need for persistence in engaging fathers to adequately assess and manage concerns relating to child protection. Importantly, in contrast to their allied colleagues in Probation Services, non-engagement with social work does not attract the same level of consequence for fathers as it does with Probation Services or in other professional contexts. Therefore, persistence is often required to foster father engagement in a social work context, as outlined below:

So there has been times where I have made phone calls, I've sent messages, I have sent letters and either the letters have been returned or nobody is answering, so the next step for that is for me to go out to the house, if it's safe to do so. (SW3)

7.2.5 Incremental approach to working with fathers

Taking an incremental approach to working with fathers in the context of domestic violence was viewed as a critical approach across specialist domestic violence supervised access workers, social workers and probation service professionals. Building strength and rapport in the relationship between a facilitator and participants was cited by Fitz-Gibbon et al., (2024) in their “Engaging in Change” project as critical to overcoming the impact of

shame and for supporting participant engagement. In this current study, participating professionals detailed beginning with building the foundation of the professional relationship whereby trust and rapport are developed by creating an unopposed space for the father's narrative. This is then followed by unambiguous "rules" of engagement whereby expectations, limits and consequences in relation to engagement are outlined; to guide the way in which the professional relationship will be conducted moving forward. At this juncture it was deemed of vital importance that, for example, the rules of the access room, the limits of confidentiality and the role and boundaries of the respective professionals are clearly explained and understood, as this professional explains:

So, it's about understanding, like the main boundaries we have as Probation Officer- client; and that has to be there from the start. Otherwise, it can get very muddy down the line as well. (PS4)

As previously captured in the comprehensive excerpt from PS3, having an incremental approach to relationship building enables a firm foundation from which to begin the more substantive work of naming and challenging the behaviour that initiated their engagement with professionals in the first instance.

7.2.6 Applying consequences relating to non or poor engagement

Each profession spoke about their version of consequences to poor, abusive or non-engagement in the context of the professional relationship. At the lesser end of consequences, fathers may be advised that court staff are "*not going to talk to you until you calm down....[we] can't help you until we can engage properly together*" (CS3), to cancelling or reducing access by supervised access workers and social workers and potential custodial sentences should probation services invoke the consequences related to non-satisfactory engagement in that context. This probation officer explains:

Somebody who was continually aggressive with me, I suppose. But in our cases I would re-enter them into the court. So, if they're not engaging and they're not involving themselves in whatever interventions are needed to reduce their risk, then they go back to court. And a lot of times the court will give them back to me and sometimes it's the court then saying to them if you don't engage well then this is what's going to happen. (PS3)

These approaches were also reported by Smith and Humphreys' (2019) Australian study of men's behaviour change programmes. This study of the impact of formal and informal consequences on the accountability of men, among other findings, found that child protection "created a strong compulsion to attend MBC programmes with less attrition from an MBC programme when child protection was involved" (Smith & Humphreys, 2019, p. 162).

7.3 Section 2: Working with dads: key actions and indicators of successful engagement and positive outcomes

This section explores key actions and indicators of successful engagement and positive outcomes when working with fathers. These actions and indicators include challenging behaviour and holding to account and taking responsibility.

7.3.1 Challenging Behaviour- holding to account

Consistent across all of the professionals was the expressed belief that if there is to ever be a change in abusive behaviour, then it needs to be consistently challenged. Some professionals clearly asserted that "*if it's not challenged it just stays the same and if they don't think that there is any consequences for their behaviour, they continue the behaviours*" (PS1).

These views echo those shared in Fitz-Gibbon et al.'s (2024) study. Participants were “unanimously clear on the importance of accountability, and on utilising the program setting as a means to hold people who use violence to account for their abusive behaviours and problematic attitudes” (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2024, p. 66). Throughout the interviews, professionals participating in this present study described the way in which they have refined their approach to challenging behaviour, viewed as a means to reduce and eliminate denial and blame and as a precursor to perpetrators of abuse taking responsibility and holding themselves accountable. One of the professionals described her evolving approach to challenging behaviour as follows:

I just put it to them. I'm like so you thought it would be appropriate to hit her while you're 2-year-old was right there? Do you not think it would be better to walk away? So, I'd very much now be far more blunt with it. You're not going to make friends in this job. I realise that, but like speaking to all these women. It's just the pattern over and over and they all have such similar experiences, their own experiences but very similar patterns. So, I'm like I'm not feeding into this anymore. I'm not going to ring him up and be like hi this is Tusa, I don't want to bother you. I'm like, look we know your child has seen this. This is about what your child has said. This is what the wife has said. I'm like you need to be making better choices and safer choices and if you can't control your temper, you need to be walking away or you can't be in that house. You get in a lot of trouble in the courts when we say that dads can't be in the house, because that's their human right to have a place to live. So that really is very difficult.
(SW2)

As touched on in the quote above, and echoing the existing literature (Pallatino et al., 2019), challenging abusive behaviour was identified by the participating professionals as a particularly difficult aspect of their respective roles. Professionals in this present study were very clear about the role of experience and capacity when it comes to challenging behaviour, knowing when to challenge and when to pause. As one professional explained “/

would work off a basic instinct...you don't want to talk about this today or whatever it is...I would always, always listen to my instincts. They've served me well so far" (PS1).

7.3.2 Taking responsibility and holding themselves accountable

Taking responsibility and beginning to hold themselves accountable for their own behaviour, was viewed consistently by participating professionals in this present research as the primary indicator of potential change; an action that has multiple positive repercussions for the future of perpetrators of abuse and their victim-survivors. Similarly, Ferraro (2017) asserted that when a perpetrator of abuse accepts responsibility for his violent behaviours, it counters recidivism or commitment of future abuse. Domestic Violence practitioners spoke of perpetrators of abuse taking responsibility in terms of vindicating their experience and easing the burden of women and children *"so that they feel that their experiences are being heard and somebody's doing something about it"* (DVS5). Social workers spoke of the potential positive impact on children and young people whereby *"it only improves the relationship with their child, that if they have some sort of ownership"* (SW2); adding that *"An apology goes really a really long way with children, young children, teenagers maybe not so much, but it can go a really long way I think."* (SW2). This is consistent with the findings of Lamb, Humphreys, & Hegarty (2018, p. 166) who concluded that "the young people in the study were in universal agreement about how valuable a genuine apology from their father would be". Probation services professionals in this present study similarly spoke of the benefits for victim-survivors of their perpetrator of abuse taking responsibility and the reduced need for them to go *"through the agony of testifying"* (PS3) and as a precursor to changing behaviour, as this next quote illuminates:

If you get past denial and they accept responsibility and they accept their behaviour. Even if it's only partially, then you can move to actually address that behaviour, but until you can get over that denial,

where it's she did this, she did that, she was this and she was that, he can never move on. See, if they can acknowledge that behaviour, and then they can begin to work on that behaviour but you can't do that until they acknowledge it. So that's often the toughest piece of the work is actually taking on the client and the challenge to get over that first hurdle. Once you get over that piece, that piece of work where even if partially, means you got scope for them actually addressing their behaviour. (PS2)

In addition to taking responsibility for abusive behaviour being an indicator of potential change, it is also viewed as a condition for positive and sometimes continued engagement with Probation Services as outlined below:

We have our care and we have our control role and we have to balance that sometimes. And we are not afraid to say in reports we don't feel the risks can be managed with this person. We don't feel they're accepting responsibility. We don't feel they're buying into the plan. We feel their level of violence is escalating or becoming more frequent or it's not manageable. We don't feel we can maintain or manage their supervision in the community and the alternative to that is maybe custody. But we're not afraid to say that and we have a responsibility to be really clear on the levels of risks that we're dealing with; how we capture that; what instruments we use to guide us on that; and to put plans in place to match the level of risk. (PS6)

Taking responsibility is also viewed as a prerequisite for perpetrator programme participation and is accepted as a core principle of these programmes. As previously mentioned in chapter five, O'Connor et. al.'s (2021) rapid review of Men's Behaviour Change Programmes (MBCPs), found that the consistent aim of these programmes is to achieve change in the behaviours of perpetrators of domestic violence, by making men accountable and responsible for their actions. In addition, in Ireland the MOVE Programme stipulates the taking of responsibility at assessment stage in order to progress to the CHOICES programme. Crossing that "hurdle" of taking responsibility is viewed as a prerequisite to continued engagement. While assessments can be extended by a few sessions and at

times repeated, consistent failure to take responsibility can prohibit engagement with these programmes, as this participant explains:

Because accountability is an indication sometimes of a willingness to change. Even in terms of how they behaved. It takes some courage to take accountability for your behaviour. It takes a level of maturity as well, but we need that. Otherwise, we can't progress. Sometimes in the assessment we can add on a session or two, but it gets to a stage where if it's complete denial, it's all her fault, I'm the victim, this is just collusion with the state agencies, I can't even see my kid. Nobody knows what it's like for me. You guys don't understand. And you're giving a guy some freedom; so, what's going on at home? And he will talk about his partner for half an hour without even taking a breath, about her behaviour and what it's like for me. Nobody knows what it's like. All she has to do is ring and say that I threatened her and I'm out of the house. That's what happened. I can't even see the kids. That guy's just not ready. It just won't work. (PS5)

Importantly taking responsibility is incompatible with denial and blame, amongst the most common challenges reported by professionals and victim-survivors as discussed in chapters 5 and 6. This challenging work requires support in order to sustain this practice, as the next section explores.

7.4 Section 3: Supporting and sustaining professional practice

Training, qualifications and resources were cited, particularly by probation services, social work, family support and court services as being highly influential and beneficial in supporting and sustaining their practice in the context of domestic violence work. These are given individual attention in the sections that follow.

7.4.1 Qualifications

Social work and Probation service participants referenced their qualifications in social work and described how they regularly draw on the core skills and principles acquired as part of this qualification. Examples given included their counselling skills, employing “unconditional positive regard” for their clients, being “person centred” and using “*those techniques at times to build rapport, to build a relationship*” (PS6). However, echoing Scourfield (2015) and Humphreys et al.’s (2019) research with a similar range of professionals, the skills required to effectively engage with fathers who choose to abuse, are not commonly found as core learning in training qualifications for social work or other human services professionals. Social work participants in this present study, spoke about using the research aspect of their education to deepen their understanding of domestic violence, citing the quality of their instruction with regard to domestic violence as fundamental to their preparation for and capacity to engage with this challenging work.

In contrast, specialist domestic violence practitioners and family support workers, although mainly social care qualified, did not tend to reference their qualification with regard to their work in this context. Court Services staff, coming from diverse educational backgrounds, did not reference their foundational qualification as a source of support to their work in this context.

Eight of the professionals across four of the professional cohorts; social work, family support, court services and specialist domestic violence services had acquired a special purpose domestic violence qualification at level 8, to support their day-to-day professional practice.

7.4.2 Training and Resources

In interview, Court Services staff focused primarily on their recent participation in Trauma Informed Care training as supporting them to be “*aware of any triggers that may upset them and how to talk to them*” (CS1). There was significant emphasis on training across Probation Service

participants; both accessing comprehensive internal trainings with regard to working with perpetrators of abuse and external trainings and conferences as captured below:

The more experience I get, the more obviously I learn, but I also then try to go to any workshops or trainings that are available because, although I work with a lot of sex offenders as well, I find the domestic abuse perpetrators more difficult because in a lot of cases, you know, they are the acceptable looking and acting (behaving) people in society. (PS3)

Consistent with Najmabadi, Agénor and Tendulkar's (2024) qualitative study of health and mental health professionals in the DV workforce in Boston, increasing knowledge in this area, both through internal and external means, was also a focus for family support. However, while Najmabadi, Agénor and Tendulkar (2024, p. 2064) found that "many participants noted a myriad of personal and professional benefits related to on-the-job training", specialist domestic violence services in this present study tended to focus on sharing knowledge across agencies, with one participant asserting that "*frontline domestic violence services; they are the experts in what they do; that's what they do*" (DVS8).

While all participating professionals spoke of the importance of robust policies and procedures to guide their work in this context, the participating Probation Services professionals were found to have the largest range of resources to support and sustain their work in this area. This is captured in the quote below:

I think in Probation Services we have a great range of information from the service here in relation to how to deal with perpetrators of domestic violence. We would have, what we call a toolkit of assessment tools and research about how to approach and work with, how to engage, how to keep that relationship going....I have our training team in head office....We have some very good tools in relation to dealing with spousal assessments, inter partner violence. All these courses, all these assessments require you to go on courses

to complete them. So, they're very much tested and research based.
(PS4)

The importance of robust policies and procedures is consistent across the literature, as reflected for example in the recommendations of Smith & Humphreys (2019) and Heward-Belle et al.'s (2019) research in Australia. As discussed in the literature review in chapter three, an example of recent procedure development specific to this context is the ISAFE (Improving Safeguarding through Audited Father-Engagement) intervention, developed by The Fatherhood Institute and The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University (Scourfield, Davies, Jones et al., 2024)

7.4.3 Mentoring, Support and Supervision

Having a domestic violence informed mentor during the early days of practice was a significant support identified across all of the professional groups; whether that was a judge, a lecturer, a senior manager or a member of the wider professional community. Participants spoke of the enduring positive impact on their practice of this early influence. The importance of leadership was evident across the participants, echoing the findings of Humphreys, Healey and Heward-Belle (2020).

All of the professionals across all of the professional cohorts reported having a mechanism for support. This ranged from informal support from peers and line managers to employee assistance programmes to structured support and supervision. Participating court services personnel emerged from the data as more likely to avail of informal support and an employee assistance programme. Conversely, formal supervision was reported as a core part of social work, family support, specialist domestic violence and probation service practice, indicative of the level of frontline engagement with the complex needs of victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse. The quote below from this participating social work illuminates:

I think emotionally then as in emotional safety as in that it's not kind of getting all in at your head is just going through your cases just in supervision but also going through your own well-being in supervision- which I would [do] and that will be done every six to eight weeks, which I do think is very beneficial because you do need that time to offload because when you're working with DV it's constant, it is nearly a constant argument with the father because it's most likely it's always I didn't do this, it's not me it's her, it's this it's that, so it can be very difficult to kind of manage that. (SW3)

This commitment to supervision is compatible with strong recommendations across the literature regarding the critical nature of professional supervision in this context to support and develop practice and maximise safe practice (Banda et al., 2024).

As demonstrated above, structured supervision was utilised to augment practice, but also to support safety and longevity in roles that are associated with higher levels of vicarious trauma and burnout to ensure that “*you’re debriefing. You're not taking all of that with you home whatever it is that you are dealing with is done and dusted*” (DVS5). In one instance two types of supervision were employed in the context of perpetrator programme facilitation; practice supervision “*when someone watches, a skilled practitioner watches our videos,*” (PS5) and clinical supervision every six weeks.

7.4.4 Employing Safety Strategies

Aware of the ever-present risk of work in this context, all of the professional groups identified a range of safety strategies they employ to maximise their physical and emotional safety and to sustain them in their work. These ranged from additional safety measures; safety and panic alarms, garda accompaniment, having more than one staff present, to having comprehensive policies and procedures, supervision, good management and good self-care practices. Included in this range of practices to optimise

safety, participants cited paying particular attention to timing, location and in effect described a fluid approach to safety planning contingent on the circumstance. In describing the rationale for and her employment of safety strategies, a social worker shared the following insight:

They would try to make you nervous, some of them. But the best you can do is either have someone else with you. We have safety alarms and panic buttons and things like that, but that's really it. There's not a whole lot else. When we've dealt with really bad people, we might ask the guards. If we've had to go out to the house, we ask the guards to be floating in the area. But apart from that, it's just ourselves. You just don't wear high heels that day in case you need to walk away. But I suppose that's just the violence and aggression side just kind of from the day-to-day. You just have to remain so focused on the topic at hand and what you're there to discuss. (SW2)

This range of safety strategies echo the four themes identified by Humphreys, Healey and Heward-Belle (2020, p. 24) to augment organisational capacity for those engaging fathers in this context. These include: "senior management leadership; acknowledgement of the need to refocus the work in the DV area; prioritising worker training, coaching, and peer supporting; and greater attention to worker safety".

Also evident across all of the participating professionals was the safety strategies that professionals employ to minimise and mitigate risk for victim-survivors. Echoing the literature, these were noted to include staggering court times if possible so that perpetrators and victims did not arrive together, signposting and referring on to specialist domestic violence services, engineering perpetrator programme sessions (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2024), ensuring ongoing victim-survivor contact (Heward-Belle et al., 2019), informing and liaising with allied agencies regarding risk (Dheensa & Feder, 2022) and maintaining confidentiality of engagement and bolstering victim-survivor protection. Some of these strategies are reflected on in the next quote:

I think most of the women that are in these relationships have more acute awareness of the risks than perhaps, we would have. They have maybe an internal warning system that things are not good, or things are increasing. So, to help them understand and be their own judge of what's, their own judge of what's safe for me or not (PS6)

7.5 Section 4: Successful Measures in Achieving Change

The combined experience of the professionals across all of the professional cohorts equated to over three centuries of practice experience; developed and refined over the course of their careers. A significant number of the interviewees were able to draw on their frontline, managerial and supervisory experience to share multiple examples of tried and tested successful elements to their practice, peppered across the data, including knowing when to pause and escalate; how to maximise challenging unwanted behaviour and knowing how to navigate the complex interprofessional landscape and maximise impact. The following approaches emerged as prominent practice elements across all of the professional cohorts.

7.5.1 Assessment and Case Management

All of the professionals reported that they utilise and benefit from a form of assessment in the course of their role. While the purpose and method can vary from assessment to assessment, all assessments can provide valuable insight, a record of same and a means by which to measure change. The process of assessment was reported to serve as an important mechanism to gather necessary information, to establish eligibility (for example for a court order); to assess suitability for a programme (for example perpetrator programmes); to ascertain needs as a precursor to support planning or to ascertain risk as a precursor to risk management.

Establishing the presence, measurement and monitoring of risk was evident across all of the professionals working with victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse on an ongoing basis. The type and context of risk assessment tended to vary within and across professional cohorts; assessing premises, risk to staff, risk of harm to children and young people, risk of re-offending etc. While in some instances the use of risk assessment tools was evident, e.g., Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA), it was evident across all of the professionals that their evaluation of risk is a continuous, core and dynamic aspect of their work in this context, as demonstrated below:

Risk to children arising from father engagement is ongoing, is not just the one off thing because it can change depending on circumstances again so that we ongoingly assess risk working and talking to the mum, talking to the staff who are working with the fathers engaging and just ensuring that the risk is minimal...[if] there's any high risk that's when disengagement has to be sort of looked at and see how that you know how that's going to work for so you, for me managing risk is constant, you can't just do a risk assessment initially because there could be changes so you'd look at the behaviour. (DVS1)

The quality of the risk assessment was highlighted by practitioners as central to the ability to address and manage the identified risks effectively. The inclusion of victim-survivor experience was viewed as essential by those professionals with an assessment remit in terms of providing a valuable, unique insight to the past and present circumstance and behaviour of the perpetrator of abuse, as indicated below.

We cannot accept everything at face value; we must seek other sources. So, in our SARA risk assessment; obviously interviewing the victim is key to that. (PS6)

Ongoing victim-survivor engagement also facilitates an immediate reciprocal opportunity to advise of emerging escalating risk, consistent with the views captured in Fitz-Gibbon et al.'s, (2024) study, whereby ongoing contact with the victim-survivor was critical to understanding the engagement of and the impact on the perpetrator of abuse.

Managing identified risk in the context of father engagement was evident across all professionals with an ongoing remit regarding victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse. This may be as part of a comprehensive risk management plan, for example, in the context of working with Probation Services whereby suitable treatments and services are identified to decrease and eliminate risk. It was also, from the perspective of victim-survivor services, a means by which the risk of harm is reduced in response to established risk, with for example safety planning. Similar to risk assessment, it was evident from the related professional that managing risk is and needs to remain a fluid approach in this context.

Safety planning in a variety of contexts was also evident across all professionals. Of particular focus was safety planning for victim-survivors which ranged from singular actions, for example “*if I feel there is an imminent risk to someone then I’ll make that decision to keep contact with that person, with the victim or potential victim*” (PS2); to a more comprehensive structured approach, as outlined below:

[We are] very much guided by what the woman thinks the risk is; what the children think the risks are; and then work with her to support her in those situations where there’s going to be engagements with him. So that’s around I suppose the risk assessment; safety planning; and not just one safety plan. Sometimes I think there’s a notion that one safety plan will work forever, but to recognise that they move up and down; and risk assessment moves up and down; and it can be static and it can be acute; and to be guided by her; coupled with our own experience; and being able to give her information that she can possibly use to manage that risk. Yeah, just be constantly aware. There’s always that risk. (DVS8)

Safety planning is acknowledged as good practice in collaboration with victim-survivors of domestic violence, with Desai, Bandyopadhyay, Zafar, and Bradbury-Jones’ (2024) UK study reminding us of the importance of individualised post separation safety plans attending to de-escalation strategies, risk stratification, escape strategies, and partnership with support networks in order to promote long term safety.

7.5.2 Perpetrator Programmes and Partner Support

Although perpetrator programmes were not deemed suitable by the participants in this present research for all perpetrators of abuse, for those that were assessed as suitable and fully engaged and having previously taken responsibility for their abusive behaviour, there was optimism regarding their potential as an agent of change. However, it was also highlighted that *“The programme might be very good but then it’s what you do after the programme or what you do, what prep you do before the programme”* (PS2). This observation is consistent with Fitz-Gibbon et al.’s (2024) recommendation that the importance of “readying” participants and having longer term support to sustain any change achieved is underscored.

Similarly, victim-survivor engagement in the assessment process - the partner support aspect of perpetrator programmes - enables reciprocal notification of escalating or enduring risk, and therefore augmenting safety. It also creates an opportunity whereby victim-survivors can avail of specialist domestic violence support and information for themselves and sometimes for their children. This vital aspect of perpetrator programme delivery creates a means by which disingenuous participation is more easily identified and addressed and greatly contributes to the veracity of the programme. Partner contact and engagement is acknowledged as good practice in the delivery of behaviour change programmes as asserted by this next quote and is also a standard held by the European Standards for Perpetrator Programmes.¹¹⁶

We'll have a Risk Management meeting with the partner support. So that happens at the end of every module. There's five modules in total. So, we meet with the partner support and ourselves and our original coordinator and we'll go through each man in the room and assess the risk. We have the assessment at the start. There's a midterm review. How is this guy doing? Are things getting worse? That's feedback from partner support as well. At the end of the program then there's a final review and then there's a follow up a

¹¹⁶ [European Standards for Perpetrator Programmes website.pdf \(work-with-perpetrators.eu\)](#)

month or two later about how things are going and that involves partner support as well. That's if that individual is engaging with partner support. (PS5)

7.5.3 The importance of individualised responses

The importance of approaching each individual on a “case by case basis” was shared across all of the participating professionals, consistent with the findings of Barocas, Yang, Park, Shimizu, Murakami, Avieli and Mills’ (2024) work on mandated treatment for those convicted of DV crimes. Their findings cautioned against a “cookie cutter” approach to working with men in this context. Participants in this present study were also conscious that individuals have varying needs across their journey, learning styles and preferences, situations and capacity levels. As reflected in the following quote, it was therefore considered important that there are a range of options available to maximise success; or having a “flexible response”:

It's about just extracting as much information from them and trying to get them working with that. The likes of MOVE, attending MOVE or attending other services. In some cases, it could be just a local support group for men. Anything that will help, because if they haven't done it in the past; for a lot of men, I work with, they would have a lot of say, trauma in their childhood as well. So, a lot of men go to counselling themselves as well, just general counselling to talk about it. And that would be something I'd subscribe to as well; that I would say to them that, you know, you should think about this. You know, a lot will go to the likes of AA if they have alcohol issues and they find AA to be really, works really well because it's anonymous, no-one judges them. (PS4)

7.5.4 Peer Mentoring Approach

Similar to the Sex offender risk assessment and management (SORAM)¹¹⁷ approach to working with sex offenders, probation service participants viewed peer mentoring as the optimum approach to working with perpetrators of domestic violence. At the point of interview, a similar peer mentoring approach was planned by Probation Services for working with perpetrators of domestic violence and has since been implemented. In this next quote, a participant explains how peer mentoring works:

We do that [mentor support process] for the sex offenders, so we have a very robust mentor support system; where you do your risk assessment; you score it; it goes to another probation officer; they read a narrative; they score it and we come together once a month and sit around here and say, OK, these are the key areas. Are we in agreement that we're capturing everything. Because these are not, they're not numerical risk assessments where you get a fancy score at the end and you can be very confident. And the courts want that, Lisa. The courts want a very, are they low, medium or high. (PS6)

This anticipated development was consistently welcomed across the remaining participants as “*it's tough work and, you know, to have another colleague's view and support and sometimes validation of what you're feeling or what you are seeing from a client is really important*” (PS3). Similar to the sentiments expressed by participants in this present study, Slattery and Goodman (2009) indicated that co-worker support in an environment of shared power, demonstrated by consensual decision making, provides better protection for workers. Another critical contributor to the perceived success of SORAM was identified by all participating Probation Service professionals as interagency working and communication.

¹¹⁷ Sex Offender Risk Assessment and Management (SORAM) supports enhanced levels of co-operation and co-ordination between key statutory organisations involved in managing the risks posed to the community by convicted sex offenders and in safeguarding the welfare of children

7.5.5 Interprofessional working and information sharing

Interprofessional working and information sharing was viewed by all professionals as the central component to impactful and enduring change in the context of domestic violence engagement and intervention. This is also evidenced across the literature beginning with the theoretical context asserted by Smith and Lohrke (2008), whereby stake holder engagement theory suggests that interaction with various stakeholders provides valuable knowledge, insight and resources, which may contribute to institutional success generally. Similarly, participants in O’Leary et al.’s (2018, p. 175) study asserted that “Integrated responses to domestic violence can critically evolve by unpacking the philosophical positions of member agencies, and through identifying tensions between organisations”.

All professionals in this present study were in agreement that interprofessional working not only enriches their individual work but also optimises the overall outcomes for all involved. They spoke of interagency working in terms of working from “*the same hymn sheet*” (DVS6); having a consistent and shared approach; having access to critical information and having the benefit of additional support beyond the scope of their own role. The positive impact of interprofessional working is clearly articulated by a Probation Officer in this next quote:

And I think that when there are relevant agencies, and they all work together it makes a huge difference. Not only are all the professionals not alone in dealing with that particular case or that client, but there’s some level of information exchange. There’s a level of support. There’s also the client’s seeing that everybody is on the same page, of the same goal, so they can’t play one agency or professional off each other. You know a lot of times I’m working with Tusla, and then with MOVE and sometimes maybe, as well, with an addiction counsellor. (PS3)

While there were multiple references to the organic way in which interagency working and communication can occur, particularly amongst more

experienced professionals, the importance of a more formalised approach to interagency working was highlighted “*where you need the formal structures in terms of that there’s that collaboration piece, that working together*” (PS2) in the interest of consistency and continuity. While this echoes the views of McNamara (2016) in relation to need for more formalised, mandated integration in the development of collaborations that do not organically align, McLaughlin et al., (2021) however caution that mandated collaborations may create challenges that do not necessarily occur with organically developed coalitions. Having institutional empathy and respect was also highlighted by some professionals asserting that “*they have to respect other services and what they do*” (DVS8).

A consistent example cited across Probation Services, Social Work and Court Services was the importance of the role of the prosecuting guard in terms of interagency communication. The critical nature of this role and information, is captured by a Probation Service professional as follows:

OK so he physically assaulted his partner, but I don't know anything else until I contact the prosecuting guard. So, they are going to give me a lot of vital information; what happened; who was there; have there been previous call outs to the house; would he be known for this kind of behaviour; would the partner be known; is there a history there. So, they give us a lot of vital information from the very start. And at least that's one, that's one person that we can go back and say, look at, I've found out from the guards, or the guards have informed me that. So, it's very, very useful because that's all factual information that can be disclosed. (PS7)

The importance of information sharing is also borne out in the literature, with Dheensa and Feder’s (2022) desk review of 13 documents that guide practice, recognising the essential nature of information sharing between services in relation to the risks posed by perpetrators of abuse, as critical to accurate risk assessment.

7.5.6 Children as a motivator for change

Consistent with the literature and across professionals working directly with fathers in the context of child support, supervised access, child protection and probation services, was the belief that “*if there is any sort of way to get through to dads it would be through mentioning that it's harming their children*” (DVS3). This approach was credited as a catalyst for change, at times reported as “*the first breakthrough*” as demonstrated below:

I often find that sometimes the first point where you can get a connection and a realisation of the harm that person's behaviour has caused, [is] in the context of the family. They're often slower to accept full responsibility when it comes to the violence and threatening behaviour towards their partners, because, I suppose, they're looking at the broader picture; where they try and use justification and minimisation in terms of the harm done to another adult. But it's often easier to get that breakthrough moment when you start to focus on, 'so what did that child witness, what did that child hear, you know, 'how do you think that affected that child; why do you think that child is choosing not to have contact with you as their dad'. I often find that that can often be the first breakthrough point which allows the person to start on that journey of taking responsibility and trying to do something to address their behaviour. (PS8)

The motivational power of children as an impetus to behaviour change is well established in the literature (Holt, 2015; Heward-Belle, 2016; Meyer, 2017; Smith & Humphrey, 2019), with Fitz-Gibbon et al., (2024) highlighting ‘a desire to be a better parent/father’ as a dominant theme.

7.6 Section 5: Victim-Survivors- what matters to them in professional engagement

There were a range of actions by professionals and wider system responses identified by victim-survivors that did and could ease their journey through abuse. All of the participants, unprompted, spoke about the ‘one professional’ whose influence deeply impacted their journey; the Child Liaison Officer,

Guard, Guardian Ad Litum, Judge, Community Welfare Officer, Play Therapist, DV Support Worker. For some, unfortunately, their trauma was only lessened by aging sufficiently to have a choice with regard to contact with their fathers, but for others, the following observations serve as an indicator of what worked well.

7.6.1 Being Listened to, informed and believed

Across participating mothers and young people, “to feel listened to”, to be informed and to be believed were among the most desired and appreciated experiences in the context of professional relationships. The importance and value of listening to children and young people was documented by Holt (2018) who found that there were positive outcomes when children and young people were taken seriously and listened to, experiencing empowerment without the burden of decision-making.

Not being believed has been found consistently in the literature to serve as a barrier to disclosure, as asserted for example in the findings of Heron, Eisma & Browne’s (2022) research which found that with regard to barriers to disclosure of abuse, 59% of participants had advised that fear of losing children, the perpetrator of abuse finding out that they had been in contact with support and of not being believed influenced their decision not to disclose abuse. Conversely, for those who were believed by professionals in this study, their help seeking, and the receiving of help was augmented.

7.6.2 Having influence

Related to being listened to, having influence, particularly in the context of access was an issue consistently raised by young people, as this young participant explains:

So, when he was staying there like the only, there was no arrangements made. This was probably before anything was finalised

in the court, before the access times were made, but I think we kind of had a say like if we wanted to go with him or not. And I think I remember the first time I didn't go with him and I was happy that I got to say it, but soon after things kind of more involved, more developed and the more time passed on, the limited like say we got. (Gia, 13)

For some young people, having influence was aspirational. When speaking of her experience, one young person advised that “*the children weren't spoken to for nearly a year*” and were subsequently told “*you're too young to understand*” (Jenna, 15). Two other young people drew attention to their growing influence with regard to access and expressed their satisfaction with this development, echoing the findings of Holt (2018, p. 472) who stated that “by according them agency in the contact process, they can feel recognised as the experts of their own lives and lived experiences”. For these young people, having influence completes the four critical elements asserted by Lundy (2007) for optimum participation: space, voice, audience and influence.

7.6.3 Holding Perpetrators of domestic violence to account

Consistent with the views expressed by participating professionals, adult and child victim-survivors also asserted that holding the perpetrator of domestic violence to account was a necessary action to be prioritised by professionals who were engaging with abusive fathers. Where this occurred, mothers and young people were not only safer, but the healing journey was greatly enhanced, as this mother explains:

Perpetrators are held accountable for their breaches, for their abuse, so that when you talk about what happened on an access visit, that you're believed. When you have identified risks, you're believed. There needs to be a lot more training in regard to understanding the dynamics of domestic abuse, because it's not a tit for tat. It's not a shared power platform. (Joan)

Breaches of orders posed significant difficulties for all of the professionals “where it is repeat cases where it is the same guy with different mothers and then they’re constantly coming back in for breaches” (CS1). Breaches of orders were also found to be particularly challenging for victim-survivors who spoke of the need for immediate and consistent consequences; not for perpetrators of abuse to “get off with a suspended sentence three and four and five breaches” (Joan).

7.6.4 Professional capacity

Professionals having the capacity to recognise the abuse was emphasised by predominantly young people and mothers. However, this observation was also made by professionals about other professionals working in this area. Three of the mothers and one young person spoke of being in the care of others/having had children misplaced in the care of their fathers as a result of delayed recognition of the abuse by the professionals who were engaging with the abusive father. In contrast, mothers and young people spoke about professionals who “got it” and the difference that made to their journey. The need for mandatory standardised training for all professionals who engage with abusive men was highlighted across victim-survivors as captured below by this participating mother:

There needs to be a platform for children to be heard, you know, to be talked to with who are experienced people, who understand the complexities, not these half arsed fucking counsellors that think they know things. They don’t know it. They need people who are professionally trained and understand the complexities, but the biggest thing is understand the coercive controlling nature of abuse because that is covert, right, and you have to understand that in order then to understand the impact on kids and women. (Joan)

The importance of and need for training, quality assurance, codes of practice and optimised recruitment is evident across the literature, for example Haines-Delmont, Bracewell and Chantler’s (2022) study of the barriers and

facilitators to the conduct and impact of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs). Their findings included the identified need for appropriate training, codes of practice and quality assurance and a stringent recruitment process.

7.6.5 Practical Supports

In addition to the many recommendations that participants had to support professionals in their engagement with abusive men, adult and child victim-survivors also identified practical supports that could support their journey following their separation from this abusive man. Mothers that were in need of refuge and follow-on housing at a critical juncture in their experience described this measure as “lifesaving”. These mothers did not have access to alternative accommodation for a number of reasons, including legal status, finances and constant abuse of family and friends who had previously provided support. As described by one young person in reply to the question of was there anything any professional did that made you feel safer:

*(The) DV service (laughs). They were just. Like we were far from my dad, and we found somewhere, a good place to stay, somewhere dad wouldn't like really know where we were. That made me feel safe.
(Amira, 12)*

This echoes the findings of Mayock and Neary (2023), drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 parents in Ireland as part of a wider project. For those who were able to access a refuge place, it provided crucial temporary housing and safety. This was found to be valued by women for providing support, sanctuary and respite. Similarly, in their integrative review of 28 scientific articles, Thunberg et al., (2022) identified five themes in relation to how refuges contribute to children's life situations. Their findings included positive impacts on: safety and security; health, behaviour, and support; schooling and spare time; refuge environment and social relationships.

The participating adult victim-survivors, consisting of professionals and non-professionals, had all been subjected to economic abuse. Across that experience, flexible financial support and reduced professional rates, for

example the provision of play therapy at a reduced rate, at a critical juncture in their journey was hugely impactful. The importance of financial support with advocacy at a critical juncture is outlined by one participating mother in this present study:

DV service no. 3) in xxx help me at social welfare and the payment. I have a payment for me and my children. They gave me the food and voucher for Dunnes and they give me safe, they give me (own name), new (own name). (Farrah)

Consistent with the views of the professionals as presented earlier, participating mothers also identified that the process of engagement with the perpetrator of abuse demanded that agencies needed to work together and communicate. Reasons for this assertion varied, but included not having to repeat their story as demonstrated below:

I would say we need interagency collaboration. It can't be one service and then that person has to go to another service and another service. And you're going all around the houses and it's so exhausting fighting the system. It should be wraparound services so that women are supported and that men are held accountable, you know, and that, you know they're out there pulling all the strings, even the strings of people in power and they need to be held accountable (Joan)

Having agencies involved with the family in itself was found by some to offer a protective layer to victim-survivors as demonstrated below:

I know if they hadn't have pushed me, there's no way. It's not pushed me. If they hadn't have been present (dad's name) would have worked his way back in, so he would have. So, because they have been there, do you know, it's kind of protected me and the wee'uns, because he can't come at us, because I have their protection, do you know that kind of way? And the wee'uns have their protection, if that makes sense? (Rebecca)

7.7 Section 6: Perpetrators of domestic violence

In considering the important elements leading to change, perpetrators of domestic violence indicated the following factors as critical for their journey towards change.

6.7.1 Being Listened to

Echoing the findings from professionals and victim-survivors as previously addressed, being listened to was found to be instrumental in initial and ongoing engagement in the perpetrator programme, as explained by this participating father:

At first I thought why am I here when I first started it; why am I here with MOVE Ireland; what's all this about; why is it; explain my story; but as time went by; do you know what; I'm being heard; someone's actually listening to me; and I'm talking and it's just the same as me having this conversation now; and yeah; dealing with things like you know; people. (Kieran)

Fathers spoke about having “somebody who could just listen” (Kieran) in the context of having very limited options to speak about their abuse as captured by one father:

When you get your sentence, right, no like, nobody, Like nobody in that meeting that I go to, I will say, can talk about domestic violence to anybody. I know I can't. Like I can't even talk to, I can't talk to anybody. I can talk to you because I'm doing this in conversation, but you can't, there's nobody. That's why the meetings are good. I was thinking actually, I know it couldn't happen, like, but I was thinking, Jesus, I might need another six months in that meeting. That's the truth. It's deadly. You learn how to. It's that understanding yourself as well. I think that going to the meetings, you know. (David)

7.7.2 Perpetrator Programme; Non-judgemental practice and guidance

Echoing the views of professionals as previously addressed, non-judgemental practice was found to be critical to engagement with change work for all of the participating fathers. It enabled participation in the perpetrator programme and full engagement with the learning from the programme, which this next participant credited with being a critical support on his behaviour change journey.

Because they're not judgmental, they're not judging you; there's no judgment; they're just listening to you; they're doing what they can do to help you; you tell them what the issue is and they'll tell you the best; your options; how you can minimise that situation; how you can conquer that situation; even get halfway through that situation that you're going through; how to look around it; these obstacles that are in the way. (Kieran)

7.7.3 Taking responsibility, accountability and wanting change

The importance of taking responsibility, accountability and wanting change echoes the views of professionals. In addition, Fitz-Gibbon et al., (2024) in their study Engaging with change, found that for some perpetrators of abuse a programme that identified their problematic behaviours, encourages them to change and held them to account was valued. One father spoke of “*holding your hands up to it*” (Kieran) and “*telling the truth*” (Kieran) about behaviour. Identified as central to the experienced change was wanting it, as outlined below:

It's not like, ohh I had to do it, I wanted to do it. I wanted to change; not I have to change. In my heart, deep down in my brain and in my heart, I have to change my life, I wanted to change my life and that's what I've done Lisa. And that is exactly what I've done. (Kieran)

7.7.4 Professional Involvement

Although not initially welcomed, in hindsight professional involvement was appreciated as a critical element in the experienced change. One participant spoke of the early words of the judge that provided hope for a future family reunification that supported the participant to remain focused and engaged. This participant also spoke of the supervised access workers that recommended reducing supervision in response to positive engagement and the ongoing working relationship with child protection social work.

I said judge I'll do whatever it takes. Show me the way, you know, I need, I'm asking for a bit of help here, words to that extent. He said engage with Tusla and there'll be a family reunion. And fair play to that judge, God bless him, he stuck to his word. He said there'd be a family reunion from the first week that (daughter) was taken and he stuck to his word. But we didn't know; there was a few step backs to (daughter) coming home. We didn't expect a short period of time. You've got to, you've got to show Tusla; you've got to make sure that everything is safe. You know, they're not just gonna give you your child back after a few months of in care, you know; as I understand that now. We wanted her back straight away; any parents would, but Tusla's doing their job and I can't fault anyone; only myself. I never justified my behaviour towards (partner). (Kieran)

Similarly, another participant shared that “*the judge worked very well as well Lisa, Because he noticed my progress. He noticed my progress. He noticed my sobriety. He noticed my effort to find work. He took all that into account, because I was facing three years in jail. Yes the judge did look at my change of behaviour and took that into account*”. (David)

All three participating fathers spoke very positively about their learning from their engagement with a behaviour change programme, learning “*how to keep your behaviour under control, how to not lose your temper, how to be respectful in every way*” (David). While inter-agency working together was not evident in the narrative of two of the fathers, the third father spoke of how

the school and social work working together was very beneficial in terms of navigating access.

7.7.5 Professionals directing support and multiple supports

Having a clear list of requirements to meet, consistent with the views of professionals, and a range of supports provided to assist with meeting those requirements, was found to be beneficial for one participating father, as outlined below:

Yeah, Tusla have helped us out; they recommended a lot. Couple counselling. My sponsor. AA meetings, NA meetings, people call it AA, same thing and MOVE Ireland. There's been a lot of help for me down the line and I'm so proud. I'm not just saying it. Let me tell you, down the line, I will always thank these people. If it's 20 years down the line, I will always remember the help I received, because I wanted it, I really wanted it. (Kieran)

Having multiple support options resonates with Cheng et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis of behaviour change programme studies urging for the availability of additional supports to reflect the varying needs.

In addition, all of the participating fathers spoke in detail about the taught strategies in the perpetrator programme and continued benefits of incorporating these strategies into their daily lives. Another participating father recalled:

The timeout is how to destress in difficult circumstances. For instance, if your mind is racing to walk in natural earth with your bare feet; how to watch your behaviour there without blowing a gasket. As I call it 10 is blowing a gasket, one is only getting a little tiny bit upset. So, you learn how to not go past two or three. You learn. I learned a lot how to control if I was getting in bad form. I know how to control it now. I don't get in bad form. It doesn't bother me. There's no point, do you know. (David)

7.7.6 Fathering and the impact of their behaviour on their children

Consistent with the findings of Holt's (2015) Irish mixed methods study, the three participating fathers in this present study identified fathering as one of the most important parts of their lives. When speaking of his children, one of the fathers shared:

You get up in the morning and you go to work for your kids because your kids are your life. Everything you do between now and the future, that is for your kids. And that's the way I see it. You get out of bed in the morning for your kids. (Matthew).

Echoing the views of professionals and previously addressed, of interest was the acknowledgement of the impact of abusive behaviour on children that perhaps could be construed as a contributory factor to change, as outlined below:

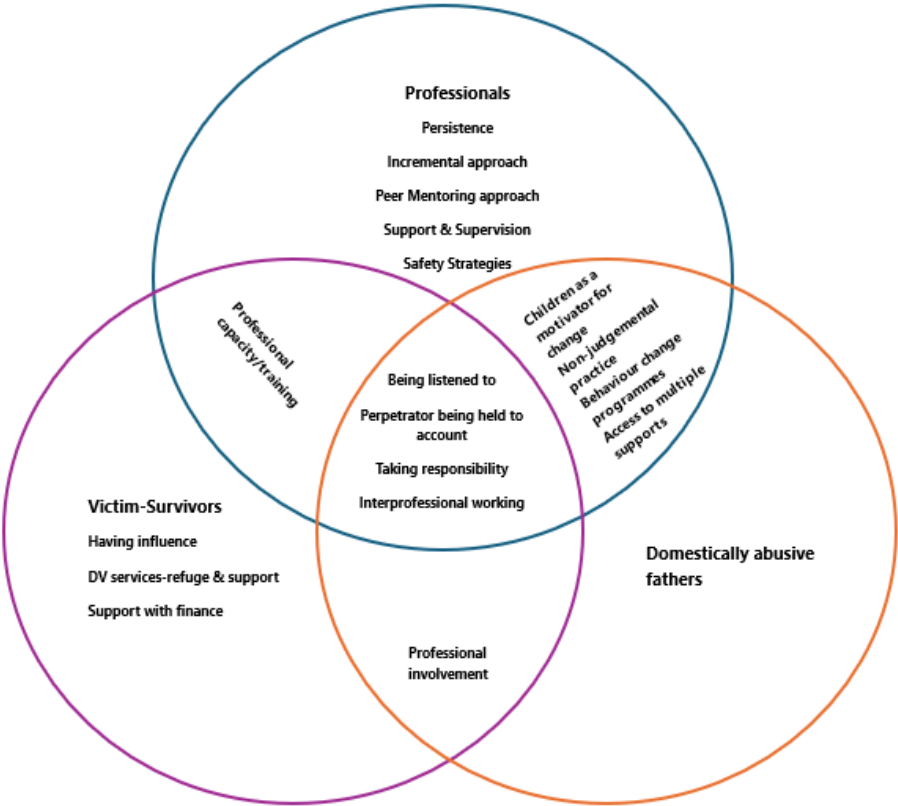
If I was a social worker and I seen a couple, you know, there's domestic, I would be for the welfare of that child; I'd have to think of that child; that child cannot defend itself, so somebody has to step in and represent, you know, shouting around a child can break a child's confidence, you know, anything, so I don't blame Tusla for what they've done, God's honest truth. At first, I did, but after a few weeks, soon after three weeks, I thought, do you know what, (name), you put yourself in this predicament, get yourself out of it. (Kieran)

This concludes the overview of the various components that work for professionals, victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse. The following section takes a wider lens in exploring the areas of commonality between the groups in respect of what works.

7.8 Section 7: Triangulating the perspectives of victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and professionals on ‘what works?’

When the views on ‘what works’ were triangulated across the analysis of the narratives of participating victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and professionals, there were key areas where the views and perspectives of all three groups aligned, key areas where the views and perspectives of two of the three groups aligned and areas where no commonality across the three groups was evident.

Figure 3: What Works



As depicted in the image above (figure 3), the areas common to all groups, professionals, victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse include: being

listened to, perpetrators of abuse taking responsibility and being held to account for their behaviour and interprofessional working. An area in common with professionals and victim-survivors was professional capacity and training. Common to professionals and perpetrators of abuse were children as a motivator to change, non-judgemental practice, behaviour change programmes and access to multiple supports. The significance of professional involvement was found to be common to both victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence.

Triangulating the experiences of victim-survivors, domestically abusive fathers and professionals has strengthened the findings of this study by providing an endorsing and reinforcing lens on what works. Common to all three groups was being listened to. This was identified as an important component by professionals with regard to building relationships and also hearing the perspective of victim-survivors to guide their work. This was reinforced by victim-survivors as a means to not only impart information, but to feel heard and acknowledged. Domestically abusive fathers reinforced the importance of being and feeling listened to, a critical component of professional relationship building. While listening is not a new or complex finding, it reinforces the importance of listening in this context.

Perpetrators of abuse taking responsibility and being held to account was also observed as an important aspect of father engagement. In considering the expressed needs of victim-survivors, domestically abusive men taking responsibility and being held to account for their actions and its relationship with victim survivor safety is not new and well documented. However, what has not always been evident is the value placed on fathers taking responsibility and holding perpetrators of abuse to account by professionals that was evidenced in this study. Professionals participating in this study demonstrated not only valuing fathers taking responsibility but have this messaged very clearly by implementing policy requiring the taking of responsibility to progress, for example, being accepted onto a perpetrator programme. Professionals were very clear throughout the study that failure to take responsibility would result in cases being returned to court. Professionals with a frontline role with domestically abusive fathers, while

acknowledging the difficult and sometimes risky nature of challenging abusive behaviour were united in the importance and action of holding perpetrators of abuse to account. Of interest, in relation to taking responsibility and being held to account, was the contributions of fathers who not only acknowledged the importance of taking responsibility but highlighted this process as being instrumental to their journey to change. This finding has not only the potential to reinforce current practice, but to shift thinking in the wider context with regard to what works for domestically abusive men.

Victim-survivors, domestically abusive fathers and professionals also converged on the importance of interprofessional working. While this is not a new finding and is well evidenced in the literature, it does reinforce the critical need for this in an Irish context. This is also timely considering the observations of the Irish GREVIO baseline report and the Third National DSGBV Strategy (2022-2026). Another area common to both victim-survivors and professionals is education, training and capacity. While the importance of professionals being adequately prepared to work and be sustained in their focus on domestic violence, it is not a new finding and is evidenced across the literature. However, this finding does reinforce the need to adequately resource professionals and is timely considering the focus on education, training and capacity building indicated in the Third National DSGBV Strategy (2022-2026).

Common to victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse was the importance of professional involvement which affirms the vital work that professionals do. This finding, however, needs to be considered in the context of observed departures from professional standards depicted at times by victim-survivors and encourages the need for consistent high standard practice in this area. Common to professionals and perpetrators of abuse were the importance of non-judgemental practice, behaviour change programmes and access to multiple supports. These findings while not new and evidenced across the literature, reinforce the need for embodying non-judgemental practice and having a suite of responses to domestically abusive fathers to reflect their varying needs. Of importance and noted throughout the research was ongoing communication with victim-survivors in the context of interventions.

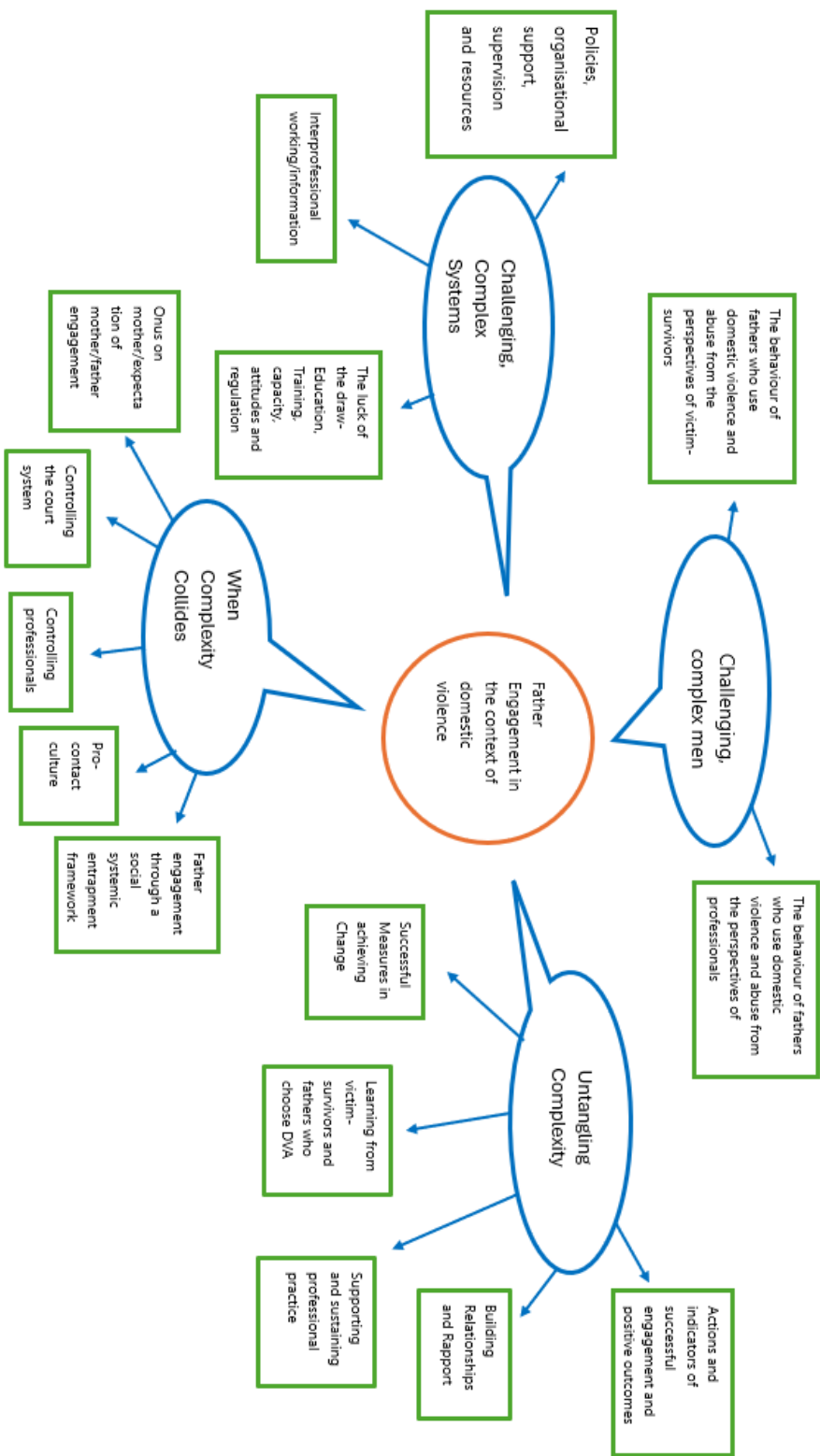
Children as a motivator and catalyst for change while mooted in the literature internationally is an important finding in an Irish context. This will be further discussed in chapter 8.

7.9 Section 8: Conclusion

Chapter seven has provided an overview of the strategies, behaviours, actions and approaches shared by victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and professionals in respect of what works regarding father engagement in the context of domestic violence. Section one began by summarising the key elements that facilitate and sustain initial professional engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence. Section two then explores the key actions and indicators of successful continued engagement and positive outcomes. Section three uncovered what supports and sustains professional practice, followed by section four focussing on shared successful strategies adopted by participating professionals to achieve change.

The chapter then shifted perspective to what supports engagement and achieves optimum outcomes from the victim-survivor lens. Section five explored what matters to victim-survivors in terms of professional engagement. Section six then uncovered what matters to perpetrators of domestic violence in terms of professional engagement. The chapter then took a broader view in section seven, triangulating the views of all contributors; victim-survivors, perpetrators of domestic violence and professionals in terms of: what works with regard to professional engagement and effective components of change.

Fig 4 Thematic Map on the following page provides a diagrammatic overview of the findings of this thesis.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Fathering in the context of domestic violence as a possible instrument of change anchors this doctoral thesis which explores multiple perspectives on father engagement in this context. This was achieved by employing a qualitative case study methodology underpinned by a social constructionist approach, to explore the phenomenon of father engagement from the perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors, domestically violent fathers and a broad range of professionals who encounter domestic violence in their day-to-day practice.

Drawing on the ontological position of this thesis, the case for father engagement was presented, notwithstanding the challenges inherent in this aspiration in the context of domestic violence. The empirical evidence illuminating the disproportionate harm that men, and men as fathers, exact on victim-survivors as women, as mothers and as children, and the relative paucity of interventions that specifically address fathering in this context was presented, as was the significant scholarship subscribing to the benefits of father involvement in children's lives (Lamb, 2010; Baker et al., 2018).

Overwhelmingly, the research evidence to date on father engagement in the context of domestic violence has focused on the issue from a social work perspective. Importantly, this present research has widened this lens to include the voices of children and young people, mothers, fathers and a wide-ranging collective of professionals who converged in their proximity to victim-survivors and perpetrators of abuse but diverged substantially in the roles and remits of their professional practice. In total, 45 individuals shared their experiences and perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence, guided by a qualitative case study design within a social constructionist framework (Gergen, 1985). Interviews with children and

young people were further enhanced by the use of an activity, Wall of Wants, through the medium of drawing to facilitate their messaging to professionals. 45 interviews ranging 15 minutes to 134 minutes were analysed utilising Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2006, 2019a) 6 stage framework. This analysis was presented across the three analyses chapters. Reflecting on those findings in the context of the literature reviewed earlier in the thesis, this final chapter further conceptualises the pertinent themes emerging from the analysis as patterns of shared meaning that are underpinned by four central organising concepts (Braun et al., 2014). The first theme '*Challenging, Complex men*' captures the complexity and challenges inherent in the experience and impact of domestically abusive fathers from the perspective of victim-survivors and professionals. The second theme '*Challenging Complex systems*' captures the complexity and challenges of working with domestic violence within professions and across professional systems. The third theme '*When Complexity Collides*' captures the tactics and impact of domestically abusive fathers within a social and systemic entrapment framework (Tolmie, Smith & Wilson, 2024). The final theme '*Untangling complexity*' captures impactful and promising practice with regard to engaging fathers drawing from victim-survivors, domestically abusive fathers and professionals. These themes will now be discussed in further detail.

8.2 Theme One: Challenging, Complex Men

The first theme, *Challenging, Complex Men*, captures the complexity and challenges that are integral to the experience and impact of domestically abusive fathers from the perspective of victim-survivors and professionals. 'Complex' was the most frequently used word by professionals when describing their engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence. Their use of this descriptor, particularly by those with direct purposeful involvement with fathers, signalled an inherent understanding of the interweaving tactics employed by domestically abusive fathers, accompanied by a deep concern for and appreciation of the experiences of

victim-survivors. Participating professionals demonstrated an appreciation of the significance of their role, expressing their felt responsibility of holding the risk and “getting it right”, alongside the potential emanating impacts from their professional engagement on victim-survivors. Indeed, there was wide acknowledgement of this work being among the most challenging, complex work of their professional lives. While this finding is not necessarily new, as evidenced in the literature reviewed in chapter two (Stanley et al., 2011; Donovan & Griffiths, 2015; Lilley-Walker et al., 2018; Olszowy et al., 2020), it prompts further understanding of how professionals can be adequately prepared for and sustained in this vital work. This is further explored within theme two, *Challenging Complex Systems*.

Contributing to the complexity of this work was the observation of how varied fathers can be in their respective contexts; with some professionals advancing this thinking further and taking a “spectrum” approach to fathers. Participating professionals acknowledged perpetrators of domestic violence as a heterogeneous group requiring a case-by-case approach (Humphreys et al., 2023), with some fathers being more malleable to change than others and some highly prolific repeat offenders considered simply not compatible with change. This reinforces the paradigm shift required that is mooted by Baracos et al. (2024, p. 461) who argued that a “cookie cutter” one size fits all approach obscures both the varied experiences of victim-survivors enacted by perpetrators of abuse and indeed their varied needs. Adding to this complexity was the spectre of childhood domestic violence and abuse referred to by many of the professionals as a common experience of the fathers they work with, with one professional estimating a prevalence of 50%. Consistent with the existing literature underscoring childhood DVA as a significant predictor of perpetration and victimisation, professionals in this present research understood that they were at times working with traumatising, but also traumatised men (Curtis et al., 2023; Davies, Barlow & Fish, 2024). This strengthens the need for a deeper understanding of the journey from abuse to perpetration, in addition to specific interventions for perpetrators of abuse and for children and young people experiencing childhood domestic violence and abuse.

In considering the multiple challenges experienced by victim-survivors and professionals arising from the abusive tactics employed by perpetrators of domestic violence, also emerging with acute clarity was the manner in which these tactics weave and are echoed across contexts (appendix 16). Clearly, these tactics created much greater risk and harm for victim-survivors, but these tactics were also used effectively against professionals, at times increasing the harm for victim-survivors. This myriad of abusive tactics employed against victim-survivors and at times professionals included denial and minimisation (Smyth, Teicher & Wilde, 2023; Grönte, Mattsson & Plantin 2024); victim blaming (Katz et al., 2020; Turhan, 2021) charm, manipulation and control; (Stark & Hester, 2019; Gatfield et al., 2022; Spearman et al., 2023); anger and aggression (World Health Organisation, 2020); cultivating an environment of fear and volatility (Katz et al., 2020); and the absence of perpetrators of domestic violence taking responsibility for their behaviour (Smyth, Teicher & Wilde, 2023).

Similar to Smyth, Teicher and Wilde's (2023) study, denial and minimisation were found in this present research to be employed instrumentally to undermine the victim-survivor experience. Professionals spoke of the abuse being redefined, justified, denied, rationalised and minimised by perpetrators of abuse; used at times as a self-protective measure, with some perpetrators of abuse signalling their poor mental health, substance use and their intimate relationships as mitigating factors. Similarly apparent from the narratives of victim-survivors was frequent blame for the abuse enacted against them, often by implication or suggestion that they provoked, invited or were complicit in the abuse. Drawing on the tactic of victim-blaming, the alleged failings, negative behaviours and choices of the mother are presented as fact by the father to sabotage the mother-child relationship (Dalgarno et al., 2023). This was evident across the contributions to this present research by victim-survivors and all participating agencies. Drawing on the CAMS framework (Dalgarno et al., 2023) these attacks on the mother-child relationship (Heward-Belle, 2017; Scott, 2021) extended beyond the children and young people to the decision-making professionals that have the power to influence their future. Alleged failings of the mother that were reported to be highlighted by fathers included: domestic violence, child abuse, parental

alienation, poor mental health, substance use and more. These allegations can and did at times influence the perception of the individual professionals and their respective agencies. The impact, at a minimum, created transient doubt, even in very experienced professionals. Victim blaming and blame shifting behaviour was highlighted as extremely commonplace behaviour that was identified by all of the professionals which can extend beyond blame for the abuse to blame for the involvement of professionals (Silva, Agampodi, Evans, Knipe, Rathnayake & Rajapakse, 2022). All of the professional groups referenced their concern regarding a potential escalation in risk because of their professional engagement, that victim-survivors would be blamed for bringing professionals into their lives, a concern shared by victim-survivors (Grubb & Muftić, 2018). Charm and manipulation, also a commonplace experience for victim survivors within their own relationships, when successfully applied to professionals, had a detrimental far-reaching impact on victim-survivors, obscuring their abuse and contributing to victim-blame (Gatfield et al., 2022). Evident across all participating professionals was the use of charm and manipulative tactics with some cautioning against disingenuous engagement; where a perpetrator of abuse may engage for the purpose of increased access, to negotiate the lifting of a barring order or safety order or to avoid a custodial sentence. Using fear as a strategy to achieve and sustain control of victim-survivors is well documented in the literature (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017; Cheng & Lo, 2019; Humphreys et al., 2019) and was palpable throughout the study. The enduring experience of fear arising from both past and present anger and aggression was evident across both adult and child participants. Fear was reported as central to their experience and manifested across a range of contexts; fear for their own and their child's safety (Holt, 2017); as a pre-cursor and consequence of abuse (Cheng & Lo, 2019); instrumentally as a strategy to achieve and sustain control (Wilson, Graham & Taft, 2017); and ultimately, fear of losing their children (Stewart & Arnull 2023). Fear of losing the care of children was evidenced strongly by victim-survivors and concern relating to this practice was also mooted by some professionals. For some victim-survivors, this fear was realised with the loss of their children for durations ranging from weeks to years. This will be further explored within the third theme, *When*

Complexity Collides. Fear of the possible consequences arising from the behaviours of perpetrators of domestic violence also extended beyond the victim-survivors to the participating professionals who recounted known abuse against colleagues and at times direct experience of physical and psychological harm by perpetrators of domestic violence. Safety strategies were readily shared across professionals, demonstrating the acknowledged evidenced need for such strategies when working in this context.

Control, although manifesting differently across victim-survivors and professionals, was found to be a tactic that crossed both cohorts, consistent with the findings of Douglas (2018). Victim-survivors in this present study reported multiple ways in which control was achieved and sustained in their lives, for example by ongoing post separation abuse, threats and coercion (Stark & Hester, 2019; Hulley et al., 2023); punishment and withholding consent (Kuruppu et al., 2023); and withholding money (Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). Post separation control, a consistent experience in the context of domestic violence and demonstrated across the literature (see for example Katz et al., 2020; Hulley et al., 2023), emerged as an important finding in this present study. While anyone who experiences domestic violence can experience post separation control, multiple examples were shared whereby the child or children were cited as the primary mechanism by which control was achieved and sustained. This is consistent with the existing evidence whereby contact with children is used primarily for the purpose of maintaining an abusive presence in the lives of mothers, to harass, frighten, intimidate, threaten and keep track of them, positioning them as the “tie that binds” (Elizabeth, 2017, p. 186). Consistent with the findings of Hardesty (2015) and Callaghan et al., (2018), this present study also highlighted that children were at times enrolled in coercively controlling behaviours and used as tools to exert control against their mothers, coerced into lying about their mothers and coerced into silence. Withholding consent as a form of control was highlighted particularly by domestic violence services and echoed by some victim-survivors. This practice although not unique to Ireland, thrives in the absence of ambiguous direction with regard

to this context. The National Consent policy,¹¹⁸ recently revised, does not currently provide adequate direction to safeguard the needs of children and young person victim-survivors with regard to therapeutic intervention, nor the services that provide it.

Economic abuse was evident across all victim survivors resulting in financial strain, at times regardless of their circumstances. Financial strain was found to undermine legal representation and engagement in therapeutic services for children and young people, the shared experience of having maintenance withheld, a contributing factor. There was also evidence of financial sabotage through damage of property. While economic abuse, a common experience of victim-survivors of domestic violence is not often viewed with the same level of concern as other tactics, in this instance it had a contributory influence on the safety and welfare of the children and young people involved. This warrants a deeper appreciation of this issue in addition to the implementation of strategies to redress this common experience, including for example, the provision of flexible funding models.¹¹⁹

While the multiple tactics used by perpetrators of abuse to create and sustain control are covert and subtle, evidence was also found in this present study of more overt threatening behaviours towards professionals. “Threats to professional identity” as articulated by Humphreys et al., (2023, p. 707), include the threat of complaint, actual complaints and the threat of legal action against professionals. These were also highlighted in this present study as both unsettling for the worker and distracting them from the work at hand. It also at times resulted in the replacement of staff that was evidenced as challenging for some of the victim-survivors of this experience. Professionals enrolled by the fathers to facilitate further abuse and maintain control was a common experience reported by all participating mothers in

¹¹⁸ [HSE National Consent Policy - Corporate](#)

¹¹⁹ Flexible funding is a term widely used in international development (Haushofer and Shapiro 2013) and refers to money given directly to people in need, and often without restriction on how funds may be used; recipients decide how best to spend the funds. Use of flexible funding to aid IPV survivors can be traced back to 2001 (Economic Stability Working Group 2002) and several programs have been described (The Red Tab Foundation 2018; Mbilinyi and Kreiter 2013a; Mbilinyi and Kreiter 2013b). See Sullivan et al., (2016)

this present study. These professionals were at times unknowingly complicit in the fathers' attempt to punish, frighten, silence or coerce compliance of the mothers.

In considering the tactics employed by domestically abusive fathers, some professionals spoke about how easy it is to get drawn in to the narrative of minimisation and blame facilitated by charm and manipulation, and even as seasoned professionals, needing to constantly remind themselves of the harm perpetrated by these men and the reflecting conviction imposed on them. These professionals highlighted the importance of advanced knowledge and practice in this context to avoid collusion, consistent with the findings of Humphreys et al., (2024). Attempts to control were evident and awareness of risk to professionals was ever present. Denial, minimisation and victim-blaming were viewed by the professionals as a critical obstacle to change and incompatible with the taking of responsibility and accountability. While these tactics were identified by participating professionals, of concern however is how these tactics were enacted beyond experienced domestic violence informed professionals. This will be explored further within the next theme.

8.3 Theme Two: Challenging Complex Systems

The second theme, *Challenging Complex Systems*, captures the complexity and challenges of working with a focus on domestic violence within professions and across professional systems. Training, education qualifications, policies, organisational supports, supervision, interagency working and resources including practice frameworks are all established vital components that combine to scaffold and sustain practice. The adequacy and combination of these components comes into sharper focus in complex work, requiring thorough identification of and management of risk.

8.3.1 Education, Training and Capacity

Victim-survivors and professionals in this present study converged on the importance of professional knowledge, skills and capacity when engaging with fathers who are domestically abusive, with professionals citing their training, qualifications and resources, as critical in supporting and sustaining their practice in the context of domestic violence work. However, there were times when participating professionals expressed frustration with other professionals, particularly the decisions of judges. Lack of training and/or professional capacity to recognise and respond appropriately to the abuse was also raised consistently across victim-survivors, particularly in relation to judges, mediators, social workers and gardaí, prompting the repeated use of the phrase by victim-survivors of *the luck of the draw*.

While Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (2022-2026), commits to a range of targeted DSGBV training, including training on children's rights and child-friendly communication and training for frontline practitioners, the need for further attention to this area was highlighted by the Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO¹²⁰) in November, 2023. GREVIO, the group tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul convention, published its first baseline evaluation report on Ireland¹²¹ (Council of Europe, 2023) and while the study commended some of the recent efforts by Ireland to address the issues of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, areas identified that require further attention include data collection, criminal law and prosecution, education, and funding for support services. The need for education and training of judges in an Irish context is already well established (McCaughren et al., 2022), with clear recommendations that training encompass awareness-raising concerning the supports available for parents and children

¹²⁰ [GREVIO](#)

¹²¹ [baseline evaluation report on Ireland](#)

regarding contact, in order to develop a stronger capacity to engage with children directly.

There are limited opportunities for accredited learning with a focus on domestic violence in Ireland which presents a myriad of challenges at an individual, agency and system level. Individuals who may have advanced knowledge and understanding of this issue may not have the vehicle to measure, accredit and demonstrate their capacity, for example, specialist domestic violence practitioners. There are also challenges for agencies who have to default to individual agency training, a practice that can contribute to and reinforce siloed approaches. This also presents challenges at a systems level for working effectively to address the behaviour of domestically abusive fathers as the skills required to investigate, assess and engage effectively with fathers who are domestically abusive are not common components of training qualifications for social work or other human services professionals (Humphreys et al., 2019).

8.3.2 Unregulated Professionals

Separate, yet connected is the role of court appointed professionals to ascertain the views of children and young people. While this emerged as a concern amongst some domestic violence workers, it was a point of sensitivity for impacted adult and young person victim-survivors impacted by engagement with these professionals. Victim-survivors spoke of limited interaction, lack of understanding of their experience and inaccurate reporting. Victim-survivors expressed views of not being believed and the consequence of charm and manipulation employed by perpetrators of domestic violence on the outcome of the report. According to McCaughren et al. (2022), the lack of robust regulation and oversight in respect of these reports has prompted significant concern in terms of effectiveness and quality of this mechanism. Concern in relation to the consistency, approaches and quality of this mechanism has been raised previously by numerous agencies and groups including the Childcare Law Reporting

Project (2021)¹²² and the Children Living With Domestic and Sexual Violence group (2021)¹²³. More recently GREVIO (2023, p. 63) has recommended “development of accreditation and the regulation of experts employed by such courts”. Subsequent to lobbying, the Minister for Justice has, in the previous weeks committed €3 million to fund expert reports and a children’s court advocate pilot to ensure the voice of impacted children can be heard.

8.3.3 Interagency Working

Interagency working has been asserted as a critical component in addressing domestic violence (Isobe et al., 2020; Banda et al., 2024). This is also evidenced across the literature beginning with the theoretical context asserted by Smith and Lohrke (2008), whereby stakeholder engagement theory suggests that interaction with various stakeholders provides valuable knowledge, insight and resources, which may contribute to institutional success generally. In relation to interagency or interprofessional working, the majority of professional participants in this present study spoke with positivity about interprofessional working. Where there were challenges identified, as previously mentioned, they primarily concerned judicial decisions, whether that was with regard to granting access without assessment or decisions being in conflict with the professional judgement of social work.

This study traversed the implementation of the peer mentoring approach adopted and implemented by Probation Services, a framework providing a structure that includes peer co-rating of the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA)¹²⁴ and multi-agency coordination. While this development was warmly welcomed by Probation Services participants, evidence of similar levels of structured interagency working was not forthcoming across the remaining professional groups in this present study. Rather, interagency working and initiatives appeared to have developed more locally and organically. These initiatives, for example, domestic

¹²² [CCLRP-Ripe-for-Reform-Report-October-2021.pdf](#)

¹²³ [Joint-Sub-to-the-FJOG-CLwDSV-FINAL.pdf](#)

¹²⁴ [SARA V-3 Factsheet-June 2024. Accessible colors](#)

violence court-based support, developed at local level rather than as part of an agreed national policy position. More formal interagency collaboration in the context of child protection, tended to be case specific. To victim-survivors or perpetrators of domestic violence in this study, the benefit and experience of interprofessional working was largely not apparent. Consistent with the literature, the consequence of their experience of disconnected services manifested in the telling and retelling of their experience which caused significant distress at times for victim-survivors (Wendt, Bastian & Jones, 2021). Not only would an interagency approach remedy the need to tell and retell an experience, but information sharing between services in relation to risks posed by perpetrators of abuse is also considered essential practice (Dheensa & Feder, 2022). Lack of information sharing, referrals and collaboration was found by Reif and Jaffe (2019) to not only confound agencies but also to contribute to the risk of homicide. Further to this, the absence of or limited collaborative working has been linked to potential negative impacts for both victim-survivors and worker safety, with Tsantefski et al., (2021) asserting that practice needs to centre victim-survivors which necessitates a collaborative approach.

CUAN, the new national DSGBV agency has committed to developing a cross Departmental and interagency response as part of the Strategy implementation process, which could, if successfully achieved, create a structure from which collaborative and interagency working at local level could replicate. This is timely considering the GREVIO baseline report, which while commending examples of collaborative working in the context of sexual violence and rape, drew attention to the inconsistency across the country with regard to collaborative domestic violence work. GREVIO has recommended that collaborative work occur “through a formal protocol, to ensure that co-ordination is systematic” (GREVIO, 2023, p. 43). The findings of this study support that recommendation.

8.3.4 Policies, Structures, Supports and Frameworks

Already clearly established in the empirical evidence is the fact that few workers are trained to undertake work with men who are domestically abusive, particularly in relation to the parenting of these men (Humphreys et al., 2019). The importance of robust policies and procedures to support this work is also clearly established (Smith & Humphreys, 2019) as is the critical need for organisational support of frontline workers to manage violence, abuse and work-related stress (Natalier et al., 2021).

Participants in this present study who work in frontline practice with victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence, evidenced structured organisational policies, structures, supports and supervision. However, in terms of frameworks for practice, variance was more pronounced. In considering the domestic violence risk assessment landscape, there are a variety of risk assessment tools and frameworks in operation across agencies, assessing various aspects of domestic violence. Signs of Safety, the national framework for child protection and welfare practice in Ireland, was highlighted within two of the professional groups as inadequate in responding to the complexity of domestic violence with the Safe & Together approach mooted as a potential supplement. There was also a cited absence of collaborative frameworks, contrary to good practice recommendations evidenced in the literature (O'Leary et al., 2018; Broadley & Paterson, 2020; Humphreys et al., (2022). Consistent and shared frameworks not only unite agencies in purpose, but provide the structure, shared language and parameters to work consistently and impactfully.

8.3.5 Staying Safe

Risk to staff arising from engagement with perpetrators of domestic violence is well evidenced in the literature (Broadley & Paterson, 2020; Humphreys et al., 2024; Tsantefski et al., 2024). While the predominant focus has been on physical safety, the research nonetheless cautions that there is an increasing

need to focus on the emotional and psychological toll of this work on professionals. Specifically, focusing on emotional safety and the susceptibility of professionals to secondary, or vicarious trauma, Humphreys, Healy and Heward-Belle (2020) highlight the need for regular debriefing and clinical supervision.

Aware of the ever-present risk of work in this context, all of the professional groups identified a range of safety strategies they employed to maximise their physical and emotional safety and to sustain them in their work. These ranged from additional safety measures; safety and panic alarms, garda accompaniment, having more than one staff present, to having comprehensive policies and procedures, supervision, good management and good self-care practices. Included in this range of practices to optimise safety, participants cited paying particular attention to timing, location and in effect described a fluid approach to safety planning contingent on the circumstance.

Tsantefski et al., (2024) and Humphreys et al.'s (2024) recent child protection service focused research identified the risk of physical and psychological safety for the professionals involved. Arising from their research, Tsantefski et al., (2024) advised that as senior workers, the participants in their study were acutely aware of their own safety and the limits of that safety. However, the issue of less experienced workers was also discussed with recommendation that this group especially require training and supervision, not only for working with men as parents (Mandel & Wright, 2019), but also on the presentation of higher risk perpetrators of abuse and building the capacity to know when and when not to engage. According to Tsantefski et al., (2024), a dynamic approach to assessing safety is therefore needed when working with men who use violence, requiring case-by-case judgment, with some structured guidance and supervision. Humphreys et al., (2024) identified themes including: the need for a tailored approach to practising safely; the need to attend to physical safety; threats to professional identity; the importance of promoting emotional well-being and documenting to support worker safety; and attending to cultural safety. The need for

continued attention to physical and emotional safety is central for wellbeing, safe practice and longevity in the work.

8.4 Theme Three: When Complexity Collides

The third theme, '*When Complexity Collides* captures the tactics and impact of domestically abusive fathers within a social and systemic entrapment framework (Tolmie, Smith & Wilson, 2024), exposing the broader system patterns of harm. The contexts and patterns of harm identified across participants in this present research include; a pro-contact culture; the responsabilisation of mothers; not appreciating or engaging with the voices of children and young people; and the weaponisation of court services.

8.4.1 Pro-Contact Culture

Consistent with the existing literature regarding the international prevalence of a pro-contact culture (Holt, 2020), all participating professionals and victim-survivors in this present study expressed concern about this culture and practice. This pro-contact culture was described in the literature review in chapter two to involve the presumption of contact and the widely held view that this is automatically in the best interests of the child. This practice belies the well-grounded risks present in this context borne out by the victim-survivors of this study and places children in harmful contact situations (Spearman et al., 2023). This is of particular concern to this study as apparent from the findings, while the majority of probation services participants signalled the importance for fathers that they had contact with their children, using contact to continue to exert fear and control while not having the capacity to engage in quality contact, was also highlighted. This practice of automatic access in the absence of assessment of parental capacity is well established in the literature (Heward-Belle, 2019; Nygren, et al., 2019). McCaughren et al. (2022) assert that domestically violent and abusive fathers are more likely than non-abusive fathers to grapple with

compromised and poor parenting, while Holt (2015) also highlighted that these fathers may employ controlling behaviours against their children and where separated, domestically abusive fathers may perceive their co-parents to be over-responsible for co-parenting challenges (Holt, 2013; 2018). Exploring the pre-separation parental relationship at a minimum is required to promote safeguarding of children and young people. This is consistent with the recommendations of James-Hanman and Holt (2021) who in advance of decision making in relation to contact/access urge the exploration of parental knowledge and authenticity of interest in their children. As McCaughren et al.'s (2022, p. 2) recent research reminds us that “contact is a right of a child to have access to both parents and not the other way around”.

The voice of children and young people in this present research comes into sharper focus in the context of a pro-contact culture as the presumption and inflexibility of contact gave rise to their expressions of not feeling heard. Despite the existence of Article 12 of the UNCRC, “‘adult-defined children’s issues’ (Houghton, 2018, p. 80) pervades the narrative. Of particular interest to this research is the proposed Child Care (Amendment) Bill (2023) which, when advanced proposes significant changes in relation to children, for example, the strengthening of the voice and decision making of the child within and outside the court setting. This is a welcome planned development when we consider that by according children “agency in the contact process, they can feel recognised as the experts of their own lives and lived experiences” (Holt, 2018, p. 472). Indeed, if empowered to use their own voices, the unique stories of children and young people can provide the foundation for unique solutions to the challenges that they face in negotiating safe and meaningful contact with their fathers.

The judicial practice of granting access/contact as a matter of course, with the subsequent expectation for the victim-survivor and perpetrator of abuse to continue engagement, was also highlighted as a concern in this research. Inherent also in this pro-contact culture is an expectation that the mother and father will work together to “find an amicable solution” to the issue of continued father presence in the child’s life – something Holt (2017, p. 2059) referred to as the ‘paradox of post-separation mothering’. This was also

evident in this present study with examples of expected mother/father engagement including shared parent/teacher meetings, mediation, access liaison and within the court settings. This is consistent with the views of Meier and Sankaran (2021) who observed the negative impact of disclosing abuse and the subsequent promotion of mother/father engagement; attributing the promotion of continued mother/father engagement as related to the shared parenting ideal which maintains father contact.

8.4.2 Responsibilisation of Mothers

Participating professionals and all of the victim-survivor participants asserted that the onus was placed on mothers across a range of responsibilities including assuming the full care and support of their children; ensuring that they go to all appointments and fulfil all requirements set out by professionals; ensuring that the children go to access; and at times managing the behaviour of their children's father. The responsabilisation of mothers extends beyond the aforementioned expectations and permeates the concept and culture of "failure to protect" and "the leave ultimatum". These concepts were mooted by professionals and situated by victim-survivors in the context of fear of losing children and the lived experience of this as previously outlined. Exploring these concepts, Stewart (2021) asserted that despite being laden with risk, these behaviours which are rooted in professional systems, are based upon social constructions and expectations for gender that are set by patriarchy. The recent GREVIO baseline report (2023) acknowledges the prevalence of these practices and cautions against their employment, attributing their engagement as "due to lack of training, hold victims responsible for failure to protect a child in cases of domestic violence" (GREVIO, 2023, p. 63).

8.4.3 Weaponisation of court services

Weaponisation of court services was mooted by professionals and evidenced by victim-survivors in this present study. This phenomenon is inextricably linked with post separation control (Spearman et al., 2023) and can manifest across a range of expressions, for example, “paper abuse” (Miller & Smolter, 2011), “custody stalking” (Elizabeth, 2017) and more recently “legal abuse” (Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). A burgeoning scholarship with a focus on this issue indicates that legal abuse may serve as a means to sustain post separation control, enabling the perpetrator of abuse to have regular and extended access to their victim-survivors (Elizabeth, 2017). This present research also indicates severe psychological consequences for victim-survivors in addition to the economic impacts of these tactics. Evidence of system manipulation was apparent across the participating professionals, particularly Court Services professionals and victim-survivors. Victim-survivors spoke of their perpetrator of abuse threatening to seek custody, using access as a means for continued appearances, grooming professionals including judges and court appointed assessors, creating false narratives, instigating adjournments, attacking the victim-survivor’s parental rights or visitation time, publicly denigrating the survivor’s capabilities as a parent, using threatening behaviour whilst in court, getting a protection order to pre-empt an application for protection and leveraging this order to coerce mothers into withdrawing their order, using access to further abuse and committing multiple breaches of orders across access and maintenance. All Court Services participants mooted cross or counter applications as problematic, and a tactic employed by perpetrators of domestic violence. Notwithstanding the cases where cross or counter applications are warranted, when the motivation is to punish, discredit or obscure the abuse perpetrated, cross and counter applications can have far reaching consequences across emotional and psychological health, employment and finances. According to Durfee and Goodmark, (2021), cross applications account for a larger share of the protection order caseload than previously considered.

More generally, victim-survivors spoke of the protracted and unpredictable nature of court proceedings whereby perpetrators of abuse instigated regular adjournments, often at short notice if at all. In agreement with Harsey and Freyd (2020), false allegations by the perpetrator of abuse were highlighted in this research to prompt further investigations that for some participants took years to resolve and further served to undermine a victim-survivors credibility. The weaponisation of court occurs therefore where all of the patterns of harm identified through this research converge, i.e., pro-contact culture, not hearing the voice of the child, and the responsabilisation of mothers. It features widely across the GREVIO Irish baseline report (GREVIO, 2023). It is also a focus of the Third National Strategy and has been the focus of a range of agency submissions and publications, for example, the National Women’s Council of Ireland and the Department of Justice *Report on the Intersection of the Criminal Justice, Private Family Law and Public Law Child Care Processes in Relation to Domestic and Sexual Violence (2023)*¹²⁵. Responses have grown outside of proceedings to attempt to counter some of the negative impacts, for example, the growing number of court based domestic violence support initiatives, more streamlined processes for applications, and separate waiting areas (where possible). However, within court proceedings domestic violence often remains invisible and muted and demands a paradigm shift. These patterns of harm, pro-contact culture, responsabilisation of mothers and weaponisation of court endured by victim-survivors were evident throughout the study and capture some of the pressing issues we need to address in an Irish context to create an environment conducive to meaningful, safe father engagement. This is now explored further within the final theme, Untangling Complexity.

8.5 Theme Four: Untangling Complexity

The fourth and final theme ‘*Untangling Complexity*’ captures impactful and promising practice in the context of father engagement, drawing from victim-

¹²⁵ [NWC_DSV_Justice_Report.pdf](#)

survivors, domestically abusive fathers and professionals. In considering impactful and promising practice in the context of father engagement, the triangulation of perspectives (appendix 17) with regard to what works, provided a rich source of endorsement and a valuable insight into how and why these interventions support change.

Having considered the infrastructure that creates and sustains professionals practice within theme 2, Complex, challenging systems, we now focus on the many additional and nuanced skills that are involved in working with fathers who are domestically abusive, echoing the findings from all of the professionals who fulfil a frontline role with fathers. According to Humphreys et al. (2019) these may include addressing parenting behaviours, working with blame shifting behaviours, having capacity to undertake sensitive and comprehensive domestic violence risk assessment and management, being assertive, yet respectful and non-collusive and holding presenting information while contributing information emerges. Heward-Belle (2016) and others have raised the potential challenges relating to the parenting skills and knowledge of fathers who use domestic violence and addressing parenting in this context adds an additional layer of skill and knowledge requirement. This observation by Heward-Belle (2016) resonates with the findings from mothers during this study particularly but also mooted by some professionals. Inherent in this work and applicable across all themes is the associated risk for professionals when engaging with perpetrators of abuse. Working directly with perpetrators of domestic violence, as previously established, requires advanced skill and knowledge to achieve capacity to recognise and respond to previously outlined behaviour consistent with domestic violence perpetration. In this context, the goal of achieving and sustaining engagement is widely acknowledged as challenging work.

8.5.1 Engaging Fathers: Building Relationships and Rapport

Many of the skills previously outlined in chapter 3 were evidenced particularly amongst professionals working frontline with fathers. Listening to fathers, although a simple action, was viewed by all professionals and by fathers

themselves as a useful means by which to encourage engagement, gather information, diffuse frustration and demonstrate respect. Further to listening, explaining, a basic yet impactful action was identified as a vital, practical and sometimes strategic action across all of the professionals. Fathers also spoke of how explaining supported their understanding. This was considered useful for them in understanding what to expect but also developed as a source of support to help clarify other challenges across the journey. Professionals participating in this present study talked about utilising explaining, at times to calm and resolve frustration; to highlight the impact and consequence of behaviour and as a means to set parameters for engagement that they could draw from as required. Non-judgemental practice was viewed by all professionals as imperative to countering shame and building trust and engagement with fathers in the context of domestic violence. This practice was considered critical to the participating fathers who spoke about the significance of non-judgemental practice and its impact on the growing relationship, suggesting that judgement is easily observed and prevents the further progression of the professional relationship. Persistence was viewed as an expected and necessary part of engagement, and interestingly, was viewed as encouragement by one of the participating fathers in this present study. The understanding of the challenge for fathers of addressing sensitive material prompted at times a proactive approach to engagement with some providing reminders and “check ins” and others making repeated attempts at contact to facilitate engagement. Taking an incremental approach to relationship building enabled a firm foundation from which to begin the more substantive work of naming and challenging the behaviour that initiated their engagement with professionals in the first instance. Applying consequences relating to non or poor engagement is an approach that serves fathers in relation to their choice to engage but also addresses a point of sensitivity for victim-survivors that emerged during this study. Victim-survivors expressed frustration on multiple occasions with regard to the perceived double standards applied to perpetrators of abuse and victim-survivors. On consideration of the multiple perspectives involved in this present research, the application of consequences serves a number

of purposes including facilitating decision making and choice for fathers and messaging that their engagement is valued.

8.6 Working with fathers: key actions and indicators of successful engagement and looking to the future

A consistent theme and thread throughout this thesis has been that for change to occur, abusive behaviour needs to be challenged. Challenging behaviour cannot occur in the absence of engagement, nor can it occur when abuse is not recognised or those charged with holding a change agenda lack the confidence or competence to address abuse. Challenging behaviour and holding to account were consistently expressed by both adult and young person victim survivors in this present study as being their highest priority; their perception of the lack of challenge and holding domestically abusive fathers to account was a source of immense frustration and at times anger. Victim-survivors shared that their invisibility and lack of challenge had at times emboldened their perpetrator of abuse and had contributed to their sense of vulnerability and isolation. It also served to at times to damage their own relationship with agencies. Importantly, some of the participating fathers themselves expressed how in hindsight, being challenged and being held to account was a necessary experience that served as a catalyst for their behaviour change. Taking responsibility and beginning to hold themselves accountable for their own behaviour, was viewed consistently by participating professionals in this present research as the primary indicator of potential change. This view permeated practice with taking responsibility for abusive behaviour described as a condition for positive and sometimes continued engagement with Probation Services and perpetrator programmes, viewed as a prerequisite for participation and an accepted core principle of these programmes, consistent with similar programmes. Domestically abusive fathers themselves spoke about taking responsibility for abusive behaviours and holding themselves to account at times with an acknowledgement of its difficulty but also its significance in terms of their journey toward change, with

some acknowledging in hindsight the critical role of challenge as a catalyst for change.

In chapter one of this thesis, based on previous research (Holt, 2015; Meyer, 2017; Smith & Humphreys, 2019), the presence of children as a motivator and catalyst for change was mooted. This was a consistent theme throughout this thesis, being confirmed across all cohorts of professionals who spoke with confidence with regard to children as a motivator for change. Professionals spoke about integrating the focus on children into conversation to induce and encourage change. The focus on children was also used at times to challenge behaviour, highlighting and emphasising the safety needs of children, the disconnect between their current behaviour and safety and the need for fathers to be able to demonstrate and sustain change into the future. Some professionals also spoke about the power of incrementally supporting fathers to draw on their own negative childhood experiences and to connect these experiences with their child's current experience of them as fathers. In fact, some of the professionals described and used the term "breakthrough" with regard to the professional relationship, stemming from strategic discussion about the abusive father's relationship with his children. Of significance is that all of the participating fathers identified fathering as one of the most important parts of their lives, at times connecting their child as the motivator for engaging with the perpetrator programme and how the importance of their relationship with their child sustained them in this process. While Tsantefski et al., (2021) assert that relationships with children are not a motivating factor for behaviour change among the most dangerous men, it is nonetheless an important finding in this context, affirming the significant role that children play in the lives of their fathers that can shape and change future practice.

This study has paid careful attention to the expressed experiences of the participants and establishes, notwithstanding the inherent complexity and challenges in engaging fathers who are domestically violent, the importance of challenging this behaviour, supporting fathers to take responsibility and holding them to account, not only for safety of victim-survivors, but for the fathers themselves. The findings from this study reinforce and urge the move

away from oppressive policies and practices identified, i.e., the presumption of contact and the responsabilisation of mothers toward, practice that simultaneously managed the risk for victim-survivors while holding perpetrators of abuse accountable for their behaviour. To draw on the phrase coined by Mandel (2014, p. 50), Ireland needs to “pivot to the perpetrator”. However, this practice needs to be embedded in policy. As demonstrated, policy can have a powerful and enduring influence. It asserts a position that supports and guides practice, encouraging consistency, transparency and compliance within its parameters. It also creates a mechanism whereby progress can be measured and poor practice addressed. In the absence of policy, chaos reigns, with poor, inconsistent practice that differs within and across agencies. While policy in relation to domestic violence is well established, manifesting in legislation, national strategies and sector specific policies, policy specific to father engagement in Ireland is less established with policy relating to father engagement in the context of domestic violence even less so. In order to achieve this paradigm shift of bringing fathers who are domestically abusive into sharper focus, father engagement needs to be central with policy bridging the divide between father engagement and domestic violence policy.

8.7 Conclusion

In considering the theoretical framework proposed in chapter two in relation to father engagement in the context of domestic violence, while no singular theory completely aligns, each provides a valuable contribution as evidenced in the findings of this thesis. Feminist theory, asserting the use and misuse of power and control to subordinate and the instrumental role of inequality resonated with the findings in terms of victim-survivor experience, manifesting in the use of control (Stark & Hester, 2019) and the responsabilisation of mothers (Stewart, 2021). However, the multiple tactics used by perpetrators of abuse to create and sustain control were not limited to women victim-survivors, extending beyond women to child victim-survivors and professionals. Understanding and recognising the behaviour as the use

and misuse of power and control was evidenced to provide additional protection to professionals against collusive practice. However, recognising and understanding the patterns of control alone was considered insufficient by these professionals who highlighted the importance of advanced knowledge and practice in this context to avoid collusion.

While viewing the experience of domestic violence through a feminist lens facilitated the identification and subsequent targeting of these patterns of behaviour toward change (Callaghan et al., 2018), supporting perpetrators of domestic violence to take responsibility for their behaviour and the choices they make, the acknowledged heterogeneity of perpetrators of domestic violence and the need for a case-by-case approach (Humphreys et al, 2023) was evidenced in the findings. Adopting a 'spectrum' approach to perpetrators of domestic violence, professionals spoke of some fathers being more malleable to change than others and some highly prolific repeat offenders considered simply impervious to change. This diversity with regard to realising change urges a broader understanding beyond the use and misuse of power to consider the characteristics of these fathers, how these characteristics intersect and overlap, mutually shaping one another, consistent with also applying an intersectional lens. In terms of intersectionality, victim-survivor characteristics, for example, legal status and language barriers created inequity with regard to access to specialist and financial support protracting their journey to safety.

In considering social cognitive learning theory, professionals in this present research understood that they were at times working with traumatising, but also traumatised men (Curtis et al., 2023; Davies, Barlow & Fish, 2024), with one professional estimating a prevalence of 50%. This strengthens the need for a deeper understanding of the journey from abuse to perpetration, further consideration of the 'spectrum' of domestically abusive men, in addition to specific interventions for perpetrators of abuse and for children and young people experiencing childhood domestic violence and abuse.

In considering ecological systems theory in the context of the findings of this thesis, a wider lens on the experience of domestic violence is indeed needed to appreciate the reach of the behaviours employed by perpetrators of abuse.

The behaviour of perpetrators of domestic violence was evidenced to extend beyond the victim-survivors to the professionals (Douglas, 2018) and at times had a detrimental subsequent impact on victim-survivors. This is also bolstered by the evidenced wider systemic attitudes and beliefs that facilitate a pro-contact culture, responsabilisation of mothers, failure to protect/losing the care of children, not listening/acting on the voice of children converging in the weaponisation of court services. These findings, consistent with the views of Heward-Belle et al., (2018) in relation to the mixed capacity of exosystems and macrosystems to address domestic violence and at times compounding the experience of victim-survivors. As victim-survivors repeatedly mentioned, the luck of the draw.

Further to the findings of this thesis, domestic violence is more accurately located within a broader conceptualisation as a form of social and systemic entrapment (consistent with Tolmie, Smith & Wilson, 2024 and others) to not only consider the experience, but also the safety measures, intersectional inequities and how that manifests in the broader social context. This wider conceptualisation as a form of social and systemic entrapment is of particular importance when considering policy and practice regarding father engagement. In addition to pivoting to the perpetrator (Mandel, 2014), this thesis suggests also pivoting to the system.

Viewing domestic violence as a form of social and systemic entrapment urges that developing policy and supporting practice with regard to father engagement in the context of domestic violence needs to be cognisant of the reach and influence on behaviour when considering training, education, collaborative working, information sharing etc. In considering the critical importance of challenging behaviour and holding to account, Probation Service, perpetrator programme facilitator and social work participants are ideally positioned within the participating agencies to challenge behaviour, support domestically violent fathers to take responsibility and hold them to account within the remit of their roles. However, the essential elements required with regard to father engagement in the context of domestic violence extend to other, particularly justice professionals whose role necessitates father engagement in this context. Probation services particularly largely

demonstrated structured alignment with these critical elements in terms of organisational policy, training, education, information sharing and collaborative practice, supported by their statutory role. While perpetrator programme facilitators can challenge domestically abusive behaviour, their ability to enforce consequences, unlike Probation Service professionals is limited. Notwithstanding the inherent challenge of maintaining engagement while assessing risk, challenging behaviour and holding the perpetrators of abuse to account, the significance of this critical work has been evidenced across victim-survivors, professionals and perpetrators of domestic violence, not only for safety of victim-survivors, but for the fathers themselves.

As previously outlined fathering in the context of domestic violence as a possible instrument of change has anchored this doctoral thesis. As this thesis concludes with a focus on 'untangling' the 'complexity' inherent in the process of engaging with domestically abusive fathers, it does so with aspirational optimism, grounded in the impactful and promising practice captured in the process. Notwithstanding the considerable challenges across policy and practice that have been reported by those who participated in this study, the data provides a rich insight into not only what works, but how and why it works, informed by victim-survivors and domestically abusive fathers. Importantly, it resonates with international good practice and recommendations which strengthens these findings as a contribution to the evidence base on father engagement in the context of domestic violence.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Gatekeeper Leaflet



Information Leaflet for Gatekeepers

Multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you and for the participants. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to participate in this research.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Lisa Marmion. I am PhD. student at Trinity College Dublin. I work with SAFE Ireland as their Services Development Manager. This study is to help us understand more fully about father involvement when there has been domestic violence; the level of father involvement, how this happens, what works well and what doesn't work well. I will be talking to professionals who work with families who have experienced domestic violence, adults and children who have experienced domestic violence and adults who have been domestically violent. I hope that by learning from your

experiences I can identify risks and potential resources of father engagement and share this knowledge to reduce risks and increase resources. Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

WHAT I NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE WITH

I am also seeking your involvement as a gatekeeper to identify service users who have perpetrated domestic violence and staff who have worked directly with these service users. Individual information shared is confidential and will not be made available outside of myself and my study advisor.

WHAT TAKING PART IN THE RESEARCH WILL INVOLVE?

Taking part in the research will involve completing a semi-structured interview in relation to the participant's experience of professional engagement in the context of domestic violence; level of engagement, factors that influenced this, perceived benefits and perceived risks.

WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO DATA FROM RESEARCH?

All information will be confidential. Your identity will remain confidential. All information gathered from surveys, focus groups and interviews will be anonymised and stored securely. Your name will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside of myself and my study advisor. However, if something shared by a research participant indicates that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either them or another individual (e.g., physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed, I will need to share this with the relevant authorities.

CAN I COMPLAIN?

Yes. Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at

<https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of this study will form part of a PhD. thesis outside of my employment and may be published. No identifying information will be included.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

You can get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from Dr Stephanie Holt who can be telephoned at 01 8963908. You can contact me at marmionl@tcd.ie 0833224428.

THANK YOU

Appendix 2: Participant Information Leaflet



Participant Information Leaflet

Title: Multiple Perspectives on Father Engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Lisa Marmion. I am PhD. student at Trinity College Dublin. I work with SAFE Ireland as their Services Development Manager. I previously managed Women's Aid Dundalk, a domestic violence service for women and children. This study is to help us understand more fully about father involvement when there has been domestic violence; the level of father involvement, how this happens, what works well and what doesn't work well. I will be talking to professionals who work with families who have experienced domestic violence, adults who have experienced domestic violence as children and/or adults and adults who have been domestically violent. I hope

that by learning from your experiences we can identify risks and potential resources of father engagement and share this knowledge to reduce risks and increase resources. Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Taking part will involve doing an interview about your experiences of father involvement when there has been domestic violence; how this experience was for you and your children; what worked well and what didn't work well. I will meet at a place and at a time that you are comfortable with. The interview will take approximately an hour and will be recorded with your consent, transcribed and stored securely.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been selected to take part in this research because you have experienced domestic violence*

**Domestic violence refers to “the use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by spouse, partner, son, daughter or any other person who is a close blood relation to the victim” Task force on Violence Against Women, 1997*

Other people taking part in this research are children who have experienced domestic violence, men who have perpetrated domestic violence, Social Work, Probation, Court Services and Specialist Domestic Violence support personnel.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is completely voluntary. You have the right not to take part, to refuse any question and to withdraw at any time.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

The risks to you in taking part in this research is that when you have experienced domestic violence, you may become upset or uncomfortable as you speak about your experiences. Support will be made available to anyone who would like further support. Your local domestic violence service will be briefed on the study and the potential need for immediate support if required. The researcher will ensure that you are connected with ongoing support if required.

The benefit to you in taking part in this research is that those who need to know how best to support families experiencing domestic violence will understand the risks and resources of father engagement more fully.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

All information will be confidential. Your identity will remain confidential. Your name will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside myself and my study advisor. However, if something you share indicates current or past child abuse that is not already known by the relevant authorities, under Children First 2017, I will need to share this information Tusla Child and Family Agency. If that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either you or another individual or if a serious crime has been committed, I will need to share this with the relevant authorities.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The information that you share will be recorded, anonymised and stored securely in a locked cabinet for ten years. It will only be used for other studies if you give permission. You can be provided with a copy of the information that you gave if you wish.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of this study will form part of a PhD. thesis outside of my employment and may be published in peer reviews publications or presented at national and international conferences. I will provide a summary of the findings and will discuss them with you if you wish. No identifying information will be included.

CAN I COMPLAIN?

Yes. Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at

<https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

You can contact me at marmionl@tcd.ie or 0833224428 or you can also get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from Dr Stephanie Holt who can be telephoned at 01 8963908.

THANK YOU

Appendix 3: Child & Young Person Information Leaflet

Participant Information Leaflet

Multiple Perspectives on Father Engagement in the context of Domestic Violence



I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand what the research is about. Please read the following information and ask questions if there is something that you're not sure about. You don't have to take part. You decide.



Who am I and what is this study about?

My name is Lisa Marmion. I am PhD. student at Trinity College Dublin. That means that I am doing a large study asking lots of people questions and learning more about their experiences. I then write about their experiences so other people can learn. I work with SAFE Ireland as their Services Development Manager. Before this, I worked with women and children who experienced domestic violence, in Women's Aid Dundalk.

This study is to help us understand more about fathers when there has been domestic violence. Domestic abuse (also called domestic violence) happens when one person hurts or bullies another person who is or was their partner or who is in the same family. It can happen between people who are going out together, living together, have children together or are married to each other. It can happen either when people live together or separately.

Domestic abuse can also happen after a relationship has finished. Usually (but not always) it is the man who is the abuser and the woman who gets hurt. Although domestic abuse happens mostly between adults, young people can be affected by the abuse that they see and hear, and they can be hurt or bullied as part of domestic abuse between adults. Young people may also experience abuse from their own boy/girlfriend.

I will be talking to professionals who work with families, mothers and children who have experienced domestic violence and Dads who have been abusive. I hope to learn from your experience and the experience of others about what was difficult and what made it easier. Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána. Ethical approval means that this research has been tested and approved by experts who make sure that research doesn't harm people.



What will taking part involve?

Taking part will involve doing an interview about your experiences. We will meet at a place and at a time that you are comfortable with. The interview will take about an hour and will be recorded with your consent, typed and stored securely. Your parent will need to give consent for you to do the interview. You can have your parent with you during the interview if you like.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been asked to take part in this research because you have experienced domestic violence and you are twelve years old or older.

Do I have to take part?

No, it's completely your choice. You have the right not to take part, to refuse any question and to stop at any time. If you decide afterwards that you don't want us to use your information, you can tell us during the two weeks after the interview.

Will taking part be confidential?

All information will be confidential. Your identity will remain confidential. Your name will not be published and will not be told to anyone outside of myself and my study advisor. However, if something you tell me is about abuse happening now or in the past, that isn't already known by social workers or Gardai, I have under Children First 2017, tell Tusla Child and Family Agency. If that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either you or another person or if a serious crime has been committed, I will need to tell Gardai.

How will information you share be recorded, stored and protected?

The information that you share will be recorded, the names removed and stored safely in a locked cabinet for ten years. It will only be used for other studies if you give permission. You can have a copy of the information that you gave if you wish.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will form part of a PhD. thesis outside of my employment and may be published. I will provide a summary of what we found out and will discuss them with you if you wish. No identifying information will be included.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

The risks to you in taking part in this research is that when you have experienced domestic violence, talking about it may be upsetting or uncomfortable. There will be someone to talk to if you would like that. Your local domestic violence service knows about this research and are ready to help. We will make sure that you have help for as long as you need it.

The benefit to you in taking part in this research is that those who need to know how best to support families experiencing domestic violence will better understand how to do this.

Can I complain?

Yes. Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

Who should I contact for further information?

You can get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from me at any time. My email is marmion@tcd.ie and my number is 083 322 44 28. You can also contact my research supervisor, Dr Stephanie Holt who can be telephoned at 01 8963908.



Appendix 4: Leaflet for Fathers



Participant Information Leaflet

Title: Multiple Perspectives on Father Engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Lisa Marmion. I am PhD. student at Trinity College Dublin. I work with SAFE Ireland as their Services Development Manager. I previously managed Women's Aid Dundalk, a domestic violence service for women and children. This study is to help us understand more fully about father involvement when there has been domestic violence; the level of father involvement, how this happens, what works well and what doesn't work well. I will be talking to professionals who work with families who have experienced domestic violence, adults who have experienced domestic violence as children and/or adults and adults who have been domestically violent. I hope that by learning from your experiences we can identify risks and potential resources of father engagement and share this knowledge

to reduce risks and increase resources. Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Taking part will involve doing an interview about your experiences of services; how this experience was for you and your children; what worked well and what didn't work well. We will meet at a place and at a time that you are comfortable with. The interview will take approximately an hour and will be recorded with your consent, transcribed and stored securely.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been selected to take part in this research because you have disclosed that you have been domestically violent* in your relationship.

**Domestic violence refers to “the use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by spouse, partner, son, daughter or any other person who is a close blood relation to the victim” Task force on Violence Against Women, 1997*

This research is not about judgement of your past or the circumstances that brought you here. It is about learning what worked well, what didn't and how your experience can help others in the future.

Other people taking part in this research are children who have experienced domestic violence, women who have experienced domestic violence, social work, probation, court services and specialist domestic violence support personnel.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is completely voluntary. You have the right not to take part, to refuse any question and to withdraw at any time.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

The risks to you in taking part in this research is that when you recall previous experiences, you may become upset or uncomfortable as you speak about these experiences. Support will be made available to anyone who would like further support.

The benefit to you in taking part in this research is that those who need to know how best to support families experiencing domestic violence will understand the risks and resources of father engagement more fully.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

All information will be confidential. Your identity will remain confidential. Your name and any identifying details will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside of myself and my study advisor. However, if something you share indicates current or past child abuse that is not already known by the relevant authorities, under Children First 2017, I will need to share this information Tusla Child and Family Agency. If there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either you or another individual or if a previously undisclosed serious crime has been committed, I will need to share this with the relevant authorities.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The information that you share will be recorded, anonymised and stored securely in a locked cabinet for ten years. It will only be used

for other studies if you give permission. You can be provided with a copy of the information that you gave if you wish.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of this study will form part of a PhD. thesis outside of my employment and may be published in peer reviewed publications or presented at national and international conferences. I will provide a summary of the findings and will discuss them with you if you wish. No identifying information will be included.

CAN I COMPLAIN?

Yes. Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

You can contact me at marmionl@tcd.ie or 0833224428. You can also get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from Dr Stephanie Holt who can be telephoned at 01 8963908.

THANK YOU



Information Leaflet for professionals

Multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you and for the participants. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to participate in this research.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

My name is Lisa Marmion. I am PhD. student at Trinity College Dublin. I work with SAFE Ireland as their Services Development Manager. This study is to help us understand more fully about father involvement when there has been domestic violence; the level of father involvement, how this happens, what works well and what doesn't work well. I will be talking to professionals who work with families who have experienced domestic violence, adults and children who have experienced domestic violence and adults who have been domestically violent. I hope that by learning from your experiences I can identify risks and potential resources of father engagement and share this knowledge to reduce risks and increase resources. Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

WHAT I NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE WITH

I am also seeking your involvement as a research participant to share your professional experiences of father engagement in the context of domestic violence. Individual information shared is confidential and will not be made available outside of myself and my study advisor.

WHAT TAKING PART IN THE RESEARCH WILL INVOLVE?

Taking part in the research may involve completing a questionnaire, taking part in a focus group and/or completing a semi-structured interview in relation to your professional experience of father engagement in the context of domestic violence; level of engagement, factors that influenced this, perceived benefits and perceived risks.

WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO DATA FROM RESEARCH?

All information will be confidential. Your identity will remain confidential. All information gathered from questionnaires, focus groups and interviews will be anonymised and stored securely. Your name will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside myself and my study advisor. However, if something shared by a research participant indicates that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either them or another individual (e.g., physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed, I will need to share this with the relevant authorities.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of this study will form part of a PhD. thesis outside of my employment and may be published. No identifying information will be included.

CAN I COMPLAIN?

Yes. Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

You can get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from Dr Stephanie Holt who can be telephoned at 01 8963908. You can contact me at marmionl@tcd.ie 0833224428.

THANK YOU

Appendix 6: Consent form for Professionals



Consent form for professionals

Multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation may involve a recorded interview, participation in a focus group and/or completion of a questionnaire.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation, conference presentation, published papers.
- I understand that if something I share indicates current or past child abuse that is not already known by the relevant authorities, under Children First 2017, the researcher will need to share this information Tusla Child and Family Agency. If there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either me or another individual or if a serious crime has been committed, the researcher will need to share this with the relevant authorities.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a locked cabinet for 10 years accessible only by the researcher and her supervisor.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for 10 years.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

I understand that Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

Please Note: All information will be confidential. Your identity will remain confidential. Your name will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside myself and my study advisor. However, if something you share indicates current or past child abuse that is not already known by the relevant authorities, under children First 2017 a referral will be made to Tusla Child and Family Agency. If there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either you or another individual or if a serious crime has been committed, I will need to share this with the relevant authorities.

Lisa Marmion, BSc., MSc.

PhD. Candidate, Trinity College Dublin

marmionl@tcd.ie 0833224428

Signature of participant Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher Date

Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

Appendix 7: Adult Participant Consent Form



Consent form for participants

Multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves a recorded interview.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation, conference presentation, published papers etc.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher of current or past child abuse, that is not already known by the relevant authorities, under Children First 2017, the researcher will refer this to Tusla Child and Family Agency. If myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in in a locked cabinet for 10 years accessible only by the researcher and her supervisor.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for 10 years.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

- I understand that Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

Lisa Marmion, BSc., MSc.

PhD. Candidate, Trinity College Dublin

marmionl@tcd.ie 0833224428

Signature of participant

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

*Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin,
Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána*

Appendix 8: Parental Assent and Consent Form



Parental Assent form for Young Person Participation in Research

Title: Multiple Perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission for your child to take part. If you decide to let your child be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

Purpose of the Study

If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about their experience of services engaging with their Dad in relation to domestic violence. The purpose of this study is to understand more about what works well, what doesn't work well, what the benefits and the risks to children may be.

What is my child going to be asked to do?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to take part in an interview. This study will take about one hour. We will be interviewing other children, mothers who have experienced domestic violence, fathers who have perpetrated domestic violence and professionals who have worked with them. If you and your child give permission, your child will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?

Your child may feel uncomfortable, sad or angry when they talk about what happened. This happens sometimes when we talk about things that hurt us or frightened us. If they feel like they would like to talk to someone about their feelings, we can arrange that for you.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

We do not know if this study will help your child, personally. We may learn something that will help other teens who are having similar experiences in the future.

Does my child have to participate?

No, your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later.

What if my child does not want to participate?

In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate they will not be included in the study. If your child initially agrees to be in the study they can change their mind later without any penalty.

Will there be any compensation?

Neither you nor your child will receive any type of payment participating in this study.

How will your child's privacy and confidentiality be protected if s/he participates in this research study?

Your child's privacy and the confidentiality of his/her data will be protected by anonymising the data. If you choose to participate in this study, your child will be audio recorded. Any audio recording will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for 10 years and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Lisa Marmion at 0833224428 or send an email to marmionl@tcd.ie for any questions..

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights, you can also contact Dr. Stephanie Holt at 01 8963908.

Signature

You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study you may discontinue his or her participation at any time. You will be given a copy of this document.

_____ My child MAY be audio recorded.

_____ My child MAY NOT be audio recorded.

Printed Name of Child

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date



Parental consent form

Multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of Domestic Violence

Consent for my child to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to my child _____ participating in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to his/her participation now, I can withdraw my consent without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from his/her interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves a recorded interview.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to _____'s interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information provided for this study will be treated confidentially.

- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my child's identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing his/her name and disguising any details of their interview which may reveal their identity or the identity of people they speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from their interview may be quoted in the dissertation, conference presentation, published papers etc.
- I understand that if they inform the researcher of current or past child abuse, that is not already known by the relevant authorities, under Children First 2017, the researcher will refer this to Tusla Child and Family Agency. If they or someone else is at risk of harm, the researcher may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a single use encrypted, password protected computer for ten years.
- I understand that a transcript of their interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for 10 years.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

- I understand that Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

Lisa Marmion, BSc., MSc.

PhD. Candidate, Trinity College Dublin

marmionl@tcd.ie 0833224428

Signature of participant

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix 9: Child Assent Form



Child Assent Form

12- 17 years old.

This form provides you with important information about the research study you are being asked to participate in. Please read it carefully! When you are finished you should know what the research study is about, what you will be asked to do and what are the likely risks and benefits. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. A copy of the form should be given to you.

Title: Multiple Perspectives on father engagement in the context of domestic violence

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

We are conducting a research study about Dads and how services work with them when there has been domestic violence. Domestic abuse (also called domestic violence) happens when one person hurts or bullies another person who is or was their partner or who is in the same family. A research study is a way for scientists to learn more about people and their behaviours. In order to do this, scientists need volunteers to participate in their research. You are being asked to volunteer because you have experience of this.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet the researcher and answer some questions. These questions are to help us

understand about what you think was good about services working with your dad and what wasn't good about it. It should take you no more than an hour to complete the study. We will record the interview if you give permission.

RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS:

You should know that there is a possibility the study procedures may make you feel uncomfortable, sad or angry when you talk about what happened. This happens sometimes when we talk about things that hurt us or frightened us. If you feel like you would like to talk to someone about your feelings, we can arrange that for you.

BENEFITS:

We do not know if this study will help you, personally. We may learn something that will help other teens who are having similar experiences to you some day. A benefit is when something good happens to you as a result of your participation.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

The information that is collected in this research study will be kept private and confidential. This means that we will do our best to not let anyone see or hear the information you give to us while you participate or after. We will protect your information by storing your information in a locked cabinet for ten years. It will only be used for other studies if you give permission. You can have a copy of the information that you gave if you wish

COMPENSATION:

You will not receive anything for participating in the study.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

It is your choice to take part in this study. You do not have to be in this research study if you do not want to. You can say yes now and change your mind later. No one will be mad at you. Even if your parents give permission for you to participate, you can still say no. If we think it is best for you not to be in the research study, we may take you out of the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

We are happy to answer any questions you have about the study now or later. If you want to contact the researcher you may call Lisa Marmion at 083 322 4428. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research study, you can call Dr Stephanie Holt who can be telephoned at 01 8963908.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT:

You can take your time in deciding if you want to participate. If you sign below it means you agree to participate. It also means that you have read this document, understand what it means and the researchers have answered all of your questions.

I have read and understand this information

I consent to take part in this research

I consent to being audio recorded

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent Date

Ethical approval for this research has been granted by Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services. Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

Appendix 10: Gatekeeper Letter



Dear ,

My name is Lisa Marmion. I am PhD student at Trinity College Dublin. I work with SAFE Ireland as their Services Development Manager and previously worked in and managed Women's Aid Dundalk. My study advisor is Dr. Stephanie Holt. This study is called Multiple perspectives on father engagement in the context of Domestic Violence. The aim of the study is to help us understand more fully about father involvement when there has been domestic violence; the level of father involvement, how this happens, what works well and what doesn't work well. I will be talking to professionals who work with families who have experienced domestic violence, adults and children who have experienced domestic violence and adults who have been domestically violent. I hope that by learning from their experiences we can identify risks and potential resources of father engagement and share this knowledge to reduce risks and increase resources.

I need your assistance in identifying and recruiting potential research participants. These research participants will have experienced domestic violence in their childhood and/or adulthood.

Inclusion criteria includes:

- Having experienced domestic violence in childhood and/or adulthood
- Having perpetrated domestic violence

- Engaged with a support service in relation to experiences.

Exclusion criteria includes:

- Currently living with victim/perpetrator of abuse.
- Insufficient level of English to participate without additional support.
- In a period of crisis
- Under twelve years old
- Resident in domestic violence refuge

I am also seeking your assistance in identifying and recruiting professionals who have worked directly with families experiencing domestic violence.

Participants who have experienced/perpetrated domestic violence will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview about their experiences of father involvement when there has been domestic violence; how this experience was for them and their children; what worked well and what didn't work well. They will be met at a place and at a time that they are comfortable with. The interview will take approximately an hour and will be recorded with their consent, transcribed and stored securely.

Participants who have worked with families experiencing domestic violence will be asked to take part in a survey to ascertain their level of father engagement, a focus group and/or semi-structured interview. The focus group/interview will take approximately an hour and will be recorded with their consent, transcribed and stored securely.

All information will be confidential. Identities will remain confidential. All information gathered from questionnaires, focus groups and interviews will be anonymised and stored securely. Names will not be published and will not be disclosed to anyone outside myself and my study advisor. However, if something shared by a research participant indicates current or past child abuse that has not been referred to the relevant authorities, or that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either them or another individual or if a serious crime has been committed, I will need to share this with the relevant authorities.

The results of this study will form part of a PhD. thesis outside of my employment and may be published. No identifying information will be included.

Ethical approval has been provided by: Trinity College Dublin, Probation Services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

Complaints can be made via Tusla Tell Us feedback and complaints policy and procedure at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications/>

If you decide to take part as a gatekeeper of this research I will need you to identify research participants who meet the inclusion criteria, provide the relevant information leaflet and advise that I am contactable to give further detail about the research further by phone or in person.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 11: Professional Interview

Multiple Perspectives on father engagement in the context of DV

Questions-Professionals

1. If you were to use one or two words to describe your experience of father engagement in the context of DVA – what would they be? [Then explore/unpack those chosen words]
2. How often do you engage with fathers when there has been Domestic violence?
3. Can you tell me about your experience of father engagement in the context of domestic violence?
4. What has influenced your experience?
5. What do you think are the benefits of engaging with fathers who have a history of domestic violence? To them (fathers) To you as a professional? To their children? To their wives/partners/ex-wives/ex-partners?
6. What do you think are the risks of engaging with fathers who have a history of domestic violence? To you as a professional? To their children? To their wives/partners/ex-wives/ex-partners?
7. What are the challenges?
8. What supports your engagement – what makes it easier and safer for you to do that?
9. Are there interventions or approaches that work in engaging dva dads?
10. What about deciding to not engage or dis-engage with fathers who are domestically abusive – how do you get to that point?

As a practitioner what would influence your decision to disengage?

11. Does inter-agency/inter-professional working play a part in engagement?
12. How do you keep yourself safe as a professional?
13. How do you as a professional manage risk to women and children arising from father engagement?

Appendix 12: Safety Protocol

Researcher Safety Protocol

In order to promote safety, only pre-arranged, pre-vetted venues will be selected for interviews. I will brief the referring agencies of all interview details; participants, times and venues. I will text the gatekeepers when I arrive at the venue and when I leave.

The researcher has worked directly with women and children experiencing domestic violence for 17 years and is experienced in self-care, engages in debriefing and regular support and supervision to ensure that the impact of trauma is processed adequately.

Appendix 13: Interviews with mothers

Interview Questions- Mothers

Mothers

Feelings Card Exercise

Laying 10-15 laminated feeling cards out on the table or floor, ask the woman to select one or two cards that best describe how she feels about how the agencies that were involved with the family because of domestic violence engaged with her child/ren's father. Invite the woman to talk about why she chose those cards.

1. Can you tell me why you chose those cards?
2. How was/is that for your child?
3. What agencies have you had involvement with to do with your experience of domestic violence?

Prompts- AGS/Child Protection/Court Services/DV Service/Probation/Perpetrator Programme/Child or adult counselling/Housing/other

4. Where there any other agencies involved with your child/ren's father that we haven't already mentioned?
5. *Using the feelings cards again.* Can you pick a feeling that describes how you felt about each of those agencies/organisations/services in terms of how they engaged with your child/ren's father? Can you tell me why you picked that card? *(Repeated for each agency)*

6. When thinking back over the experience of having agencies/organisations/services involved with you/your child/ren/your child/ren's father, do you think the professionals you worked with understood your experience of living with domestic violence?
7. Can you give me some examples of what the agencies/organisations/services expected of you?
8. Can you give me some examples of what the agencies/organisations/services expected of your child's father?
9. What worked well for you in terms of how agencies/organisations/ services engaged with the father? Are there any examples you would like to share about what worked well for you in terms of how they engaged with the father? Why do you think that worked well for you?
10. What do you think worked well for your children in relation to involvement with agencies/organisations/services? What would your children say do you think about what worked well for them?
11. Specific to father engagement with agencies/organisations/services, what didn't work well for you? Are there any examples you would like to share about what didn't work well for you? Why do you think that didn't work well for you?
12. Specific to father engagement with agencies/organisations/services, what do you think didn't work well for your children? What would your children say do you think about what didn't work well for them?

13. During the time any professional was involved with your family due to the DVA, can you recall anything any professional did, specific to father engagement that made you feel safer? Was there anything any of them did that made you think your children were safer?
14. During the time any professional was involved with your family due to DV, can you recall anything any professional did that made you feel more at risk? Was there anything any of them did that made you think your children were more at risk?
15. Did any of those agencies work together in terms of father engagement? How did that work? What was that like for you?
16. Having had professionals involved, has your life improved? Has your children's lives improved?
17. If you were asked by the Minister for Justice to say what the top things were that professionals should be doing to make things better for families by talking to dads - what might those top tips look like?
18. Anything else you didn't get a chance to say and would like to say?



Emotion Chart used in interviews

Appendix 14: Interviews with children

Interview Questions- Young people

1. *Feelings Card Exercise*

Laying feeling chart out on the table or floor, ask the young person to select one or two that best describe how they feel about how the professionals that were involved with the family because of domestic violence engaged with their father. Invite the young person to talk about why they chose those feelings.

Prompt-Agency/professional list

2. If you were to use three words to describe how you feel professionals dealt with your dad?
3. Can you tell me why you chose those words?
4. When you think about the professionals that you, your mam, your dad has had contact with...
 - a. What worked well? Any examples you would like to share?
 - b. What worked badly? Any examples you would like to share?
5. Were there actions that professionals took that made you feel safer/made things better? Any examples you would like to share?
6. Were there actions that professionals took that made things worse? Any examples that you would like to share?
7. Did anyone ask you what you thought about what your dad was doing and what you wanted to see happen?
 - a. If yes, do you think you were listened to?

- b. If no, what would you have said?
8. Thinking about professionals working with mams, young people and dads when there has been domestic violence....
- What are the 3 things you think professionals could have been better at when they worked with your dad?
9. What do you think would be useful for them to know?
10. *Wall of Wants exercise- Using pre-formed bricks, ask the young person to consider if they were starting over or thinking about other young people's experience, what would you want to see happening? Ask them to write/draw this on pre-formed bricks.*

Appendix 15: Interviews with fathers

Interview Questions – Fathers

Feeling Card Exercise

Laying 10-15 laminated feeling cards out on the table or floor, ask the dad to select one or two cards that best describe how he feels about having agency/organisation/service involvement with him because of DVA. Invite the dad to talk about why he chose those cards.

1. Can you tell me why you chose those cards?
2. What agencies/organisations/services have you had involvement because of DVA?

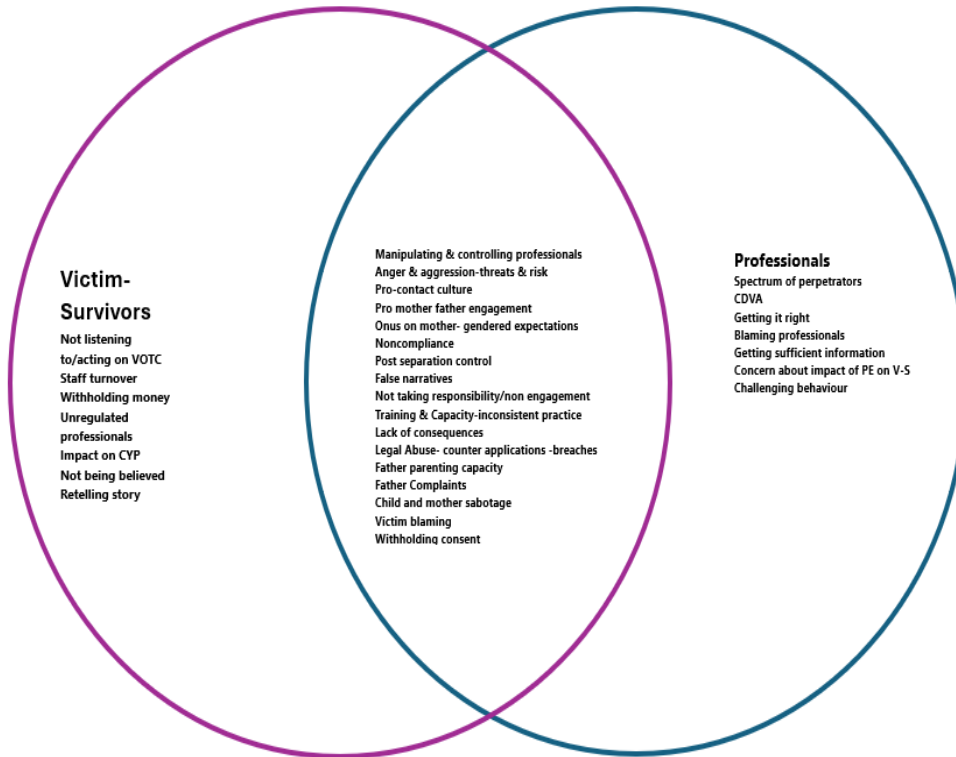
Prompts- AGS/Child Protection/Court Services/DV Service/Probation/Perpetrator Programme/Child or adult counselling/Housing/other

3. Where there any other agencies/organisations/services involved with your family at we haven't already mentioned?
4. *Using the feelings cards again.* Can you pick a feeling that describes how you felt about each of those agencies/organisations/services? Can you tell me why you picked that card? *(Repeated for each agency)*
5. When thinking back over the experience of having agencies/organisations/services involved with you and your family because of domestic violence, do you think the professionals you worked with understood what happened?

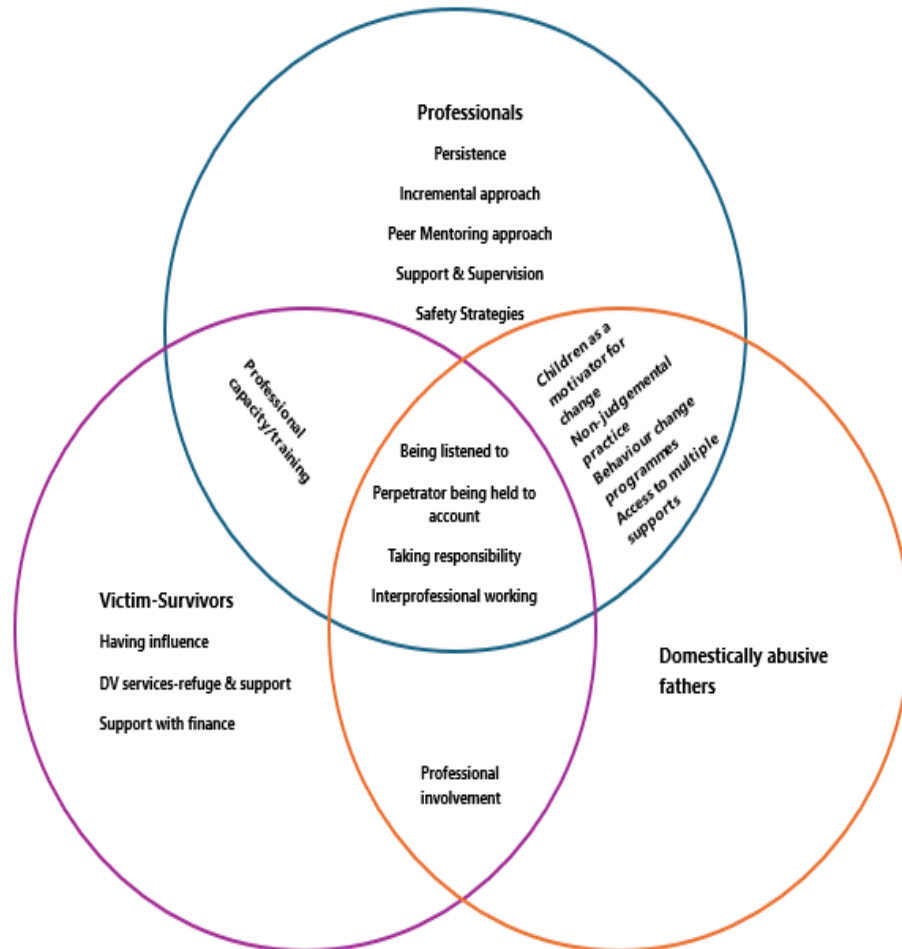
6. Can you give me some examples of what the agencies/organisations/services expected of you/asked you to do?
7. What worked well for you in relation to how those agencies worked with you? Your partner? Your children? Are there any examples you would like to share about what worked well for you? Your partner? Your children? Why do you think that worked well for you?
8. What do you think worked well for your children in relation to your involvement with agencies/organisations/services? What would your children say do you think about what worked well for them?
9. What didn't work well for you in relation to involvement with agencies/organisations/services? Are there any examples you would like to share about what didn't work well for you? Why do you think that didn't work well for you?
10. What do you think didn't work well for your children in relation to your involvement with agencies/organisations/services? What would your children say do you think about what didn't work well for them?
11. During the time any professional was involved with your family due to the DVA, can you recall anything any professional did that made working with them easier?
12. During the time any professional was involved with your family due to DV, can you recall anything any professional did that made it harder to work with them?
13. Did any of those agencies/organisations/services work together? How did that work? What was that like for you?
14. Having had professionals involved with you and your family because of DV, has your life improved? Has your children's lives improved?

15. If you were asked by the Minister for Justice to say what the top things were that professionals should be doing to make things better for families like yours - what might those top tips look like?
16. Anything else you didn't get a chance to say and would like to say?

Appendix 16: Challenges Triangulation



Appendix 17: What Works Triangulation



Appendix 18: Thematic Analysis Map

