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Intimate Partner Violence: advocates expertise on the complexity of maternal protection

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Abstract

For a long time, this country has pulled curtains and closed doors and said I don't want to know. Now we are willing to put the microscope on ourselves and not put the blindfold on our statistics.

(Stacey Pepene, Women's Refuge National Training Coordinator, 2017)

Intimate Partner Violence is a pervasive and insidious epidemic within Aotearoa New Zealand with one in three women experiencing psychological or physical abuse by their partners in a lifetime. The National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges (NCIWR) seeks to prevent and eliminate violence and in doing so liberate women abused by their partners. This research is a contribution to the gap in psychological research which calls upon the expertise of refuge advocates from a feminist standpoint and additionally adds to valuable production of knowledge from a New Zealand context. The aim was to explore how advocates perceive and understand mothering and maternal protection in the context of intimate partner violence and moreover how advocates' understandings impact their experience of client protection. A qualitative, thematic approach opened a space for advocates to voice their experiences and importantly challenge the socio-political landscape which maintains a focus on women's responsibility as protectors, opposed to perpetrator accountability. Societal expectation of mothering does not take into account the context of intimate partner violence and as mothers fail to meet expectations, notions of mother-blame are ascertained. The analysis identified three major themes: The first theme concerns the severity of perpetrator harm and the direct interruption intimate partner violence has on mothering; shaping and complicating mothering. The second theme identifies a multitude of factors mothers juggle to protect their children within the context of intimate partner violence. The final theme involves understanding the mode of survival in which women come to live, how women navigate fundamental support systems, and finally how the role of the advocate is pivotal for the safety of women and children. Overall, findings showed an alignment between the expertise of advocates and existing international research.

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