

MOTHERING IN THE SHADOW OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PRESERVATION IN THE MIDST OF UNPREDICTABILITY*

The image on the other side of this page represents a composite narrative of stories shared by women about their experiences of mothering in the context of domestic violence. This image was created with the support of M.A.P.S. Alberta Capital Region, an organization dedicated to a more comprehensive, accessible continuum of human service through the innovative translation of research data into maps reflecting dynamic interactions between service providers and targeted populations. We see this map as a strategy to disseminate our research findings, to give voice to women who mother children in the context of domestic violence, to create a forum for community engagement, to open dialogue, and to reflect about agency practices' and policies' strengths and challenges in response to women mothering in that context.

Women were interviewed face-to-face and shared their stories of mothering, of trust and distrust of self and others as individuals and as mothers, and of their interactions with sources of support and non-support. The interpretation of the findings lead to the prevailing story of unpredictability and to five main supporting narratives. This interpretation was further verified and confirmed by 27 women who mothered children after leaving a domestic violence situation and also by four service providers.

The story of unpredictability emerged as pervasive regardless of the location women found themselves on this journey at the time they shared their stories. Unpredictability was depicted as a web of mostly unstable ropes, first while living at home with the perpetrator of violence and continuing on after women left the household with their children. Women revealed that these ropes were frequently rattled by anyone in a position of power (the partner or anyone in a potentially supporting role). Some ropes were so frayed that they were unsafe but they were women's only option. The black hole represents the violence and trauma that women identified as always at the edge of their reality because the abuser (the image of his profile and his hand) remained a constant potential threat for most of them. This black hole was also a place where women were returned if the ropes were rattled because of rules, practices, and policies that added to their vulnerability and made their position on the ropes too precarious. Once they leaped over to the bridge, they sought resources capable of providing support and safety but these were not always available, or the agencies and systems they encountered possessed the power to challenge their mothering status, to perpetuate conditions leading to unstable and often disturbing economic conditions, and to maintain the partner's ability to disrupt their life due to his status as father of their children. The few resources that women identified as supportive helped them over time to learn to trust themselves and others again, to heal and support their children's healing, and to move forward with a sense of purpose despite the ongoing precariousness of their life.

We chose a purple background because it is the color of bruises and also a color that symbolically means transformation. As mothers in the context of domestic violence, women's main mothering priority was to protect their children from harm even when violence at home was escalating and they had become highly isolated and frightened. Once women came to name and accept that what was happening to them was violence, the protection of their children became their most important focus and the main incentive to risk leaving everything. Women however were highly aware that risks to their safety would immediately rise many folds, and they were acutely afraid that once they reached out for support they would be judged and stigmatized as 'bad mothers' and separated from their children. This delayed many women's decision to leave. Women also found that the world of service providers created further unpredictability because they now had to deal with practices, rules, and policies they had no power to influence or change. One woman summarized their mothering struggles by stating: "Why do we keep paying for something we did not cause and did not choose?" Women were nonetheless highly motivated to heal so they could grow and nurture their children in meaningful ways; they fought relentlessly to survive and thrive, to be heard and believed, and to gain control of the decisions that would lead them and their children to a future free from violence.

Given these many challenges, we propose the following questions as means to begin discussions designed to enhance women's/mothers' ability to live free from violence and from this persistent unpredictability. What do we do that works well to reduce unpredictability and to support mothers and their children so they can regain a sense of power and control in their life? What prescribed rules, practices, policies may need to be explored, modified, improved to enhance women's emotional, economic, and mothering safety, as well as their ability to trust self and others in the precarious unpredictable world that follows experiences of domestic violence?

For more information about this study and findings, please contact Dr. Nicole Y. Pitre (npitre@ualberta.ca) or Dr. Kathy Hegadoren (kmh3@ualberta.ca).

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