

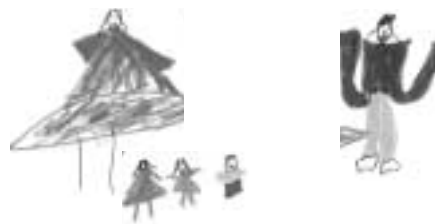
Chapter Two

The exclusion of men from social work and social care work intervention is now quite widely noted in the literature (see, for instance, Buckley, 1998; Scourfield, 2000). Yet the actual dynamics of such exclusion, the belief systems, organisational processes and practices which lead fathers to be excluded have not been clearly demonstrated. By 'exclusion' we are referring to the ways in which men are ignored, avoided, or actively kept out of child and family work by professionals and how men absent themselves, or are kept out by other family members. Our primary aim in this study is to move literature and practice forward, by critically analysing work where men were actively included, and from that, build profiles of best practice. Despite this, our data produced important findings on the dynamics of men's exclusion. The overall orientation of welfare systems was found to exclude men so powerfully that even in cases of inclusive practice clear evidence emerged of men's exclusion. It is important then for us to document this, and promote learning about the dynamics of exclusion as a means to raise awareness of and reverse such patterns.

2.1 When excluding men appears legitimate

The exclusion of men from intervention work is multi-layered, with many forms and consequences. It is crucial to point out that it is not

2



Leaving
fathers out:
The dynamics
of excluding men

Leaving Fathers Out

always an undesirable thing and can be a legitimate strategy, and good practice. There is a key distinction between avoiding the man per se in awkwardly trying to pretend (or wish) that he wasn't there, and excluding him from work with the family because it is viewed as better for them if he is not included in their lives. In the latter scenario, the man is consciously and openly excluded from 'family work' and rationales given for this, as it is viewed as being in the best interests of the children, and partner. A social worker in our study articulated this point as follows:

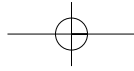
...I've one case where the parents are separated and the dad has a huge, huge, desperate effect on his kids in terms of like huge domestic violence and is quite violent towards his kids. I wouldn't try and engage him, I wouldn't, you know. I know he'd be down in the house every day and might stay over a couple of nights, but I wouldn't try and engage him because I'd be you know trying to encourage the mother to you know bar him completely from the house. And every time I would encounter him he would, it wouldn't be of any use to you know the kids at all. So I wouldn't.

... He would talk to me, yeah. More often than not he'd be very annoyed or if I see him there's obviously some very serious incident that's happened that he wants to give out about you know. The only times I would have really ever seen him was when he's been violent So I wouldn't actually you know try and work with him at all.

(female statutory social worker)

The social worker here consciously took up a position as an ally of the mother to assist her in protecting the children and ultimately trying to exclude the violent partner:

the family presents as a single parent family and I know that the mother would be very reluctant for him to know everything that's going on. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't diverge from that you know. With this particular family I think they need to be encouraged to work for themselves rather than having his influence around the whole time, and being scared of him.



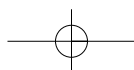
2.2 When excluding men is problematic

The key issue, however, concerns the basis on which the decision to exclude the man is reached, if indeed it can be said that a conscious decision has been made at all. Our findings show a powerful pattern of men being actively excluded on what often appeared to be for good and solid grounds at the time, but what in reality was the flimsiest of evidence. In general, we found that to speak of exclusion and inclusion as distinct phenomena is simplistic. In reality, they often coexist, while one agency works with the man, others may simultaneously be excluding him, or have excluded him in the past. Even within the service provided by the same agency a man may have been excluded in the past and now be included, or vice versa.

Three factors inter-relate in making some practitioners more father-inclusive or exclusive than others:

- Occupational cultures and institutional norms
- Personal biography and constructions of gender and parenting
- Professional training

A striking pattern to emerge from our data is the organisational differences in approaches to fathers and families. Statutory social workers are generally much less father-inclusive than voluntary agencies like family centres. The latter in our sample had taken more time, as organisations, to reflect on gender roles and accommodate the recent social changes in parenting roles, and the transformation of intimacy in families. The father-exclusivity of statutory social workers reflects how health boards are more reactive and less institutionally thought-out in their approach. This, our data suggests, is intrinsically connected to the ways such agencies go about their work and the contexts in which they inter-face with fathers and families. It reflects the messier context in which statutory social workers have to work, where the presence of men in households is often unclear, sometimes deliberately so as the family conceal the man's residence in the home because it helps them to gain more welfare benefits. When there is more than one father to the



Leaving Fathers Out

children social workers are often unclear about where, or how, to focus. The ambivalence of mothers about including their partners (or ex-partners) is also a significant factor. Some mothers appear to have little conception of themselves other than as the primary parent and want social workers to themselves, as it were; others want the men excluded because they feel they are useless, irrelevant or because they fear them.

The irony is that including fathers could make social worker's statutory obligations to promote the welfare of children easier to discharge

The kind of clarification work that is needed to establish the role of fathers in families, and try to engage them takes energy, insight, critical awareness, focus/commitment and skill. Our findings suggest that these qualities are often absent. Crucially, engaging fathers has to be seen as worthwhile. Otherwise, social workers will not be motivated to attempt it, and go beyond mothers. Dominant constructions of masculinity permeate everything, and service user men generally are seen by social workers as dangerous, useless, and 'behind the times' in relation to societal changes in gender roles and parenting. While we found traces of this thinking in family centres, especially the idea that vulnerable families have not changed with the times, family workers generally took a much more holistic view of men, masculinity and fatherhood. These professionals and organisations had a capacity to see the multiple sides there are to men, going beyond superficial images of dangerousness and fecklessness, which meant that they engaged much more fully with fathers and in creative ways, which developed them as carers.

The irony is that including fathers could make social worker's statutory obligations to promote the welfare of children easier to discharge. Our findings suggest that social workers generally expect mothers to carry the load, leaving the potential resource that fathers have to offer largely untapped. Even if it is not seen as legitimate to work with the father as a potential resource because the man is a problem or threat - neither are they worked with as dangerous or feckless men. Thus father-exclusivity is not good child or woman protection practice either. Further, men who have been abused by their partners are not worked with as victims/survivors.

But while professional orientations are crucial to how cases are constructed, the responsibility for, and outcomes of, engaging men are not professional's alone. The response and orientation of service user men themselves and what they bring to the encounter is crucial if effective engagement is to occur. This was typified by fathers who took responsibility for their own fears and resistances to receiving 'help' and getting involved with professionals:

Well it mightn't be even an attitude that they have...it might be an attitude that you have you know. As I say, when I first went looking for help I had this attitude that I don't really want to be here, you know, I don't really want to tell this person this. You know, so you're on your guard straight away and I don't know whether social workers are trained in dealing with that but most people that go and talk to these people are, they're on their guard going in there you know, they have this shield around them that they're not going to let down.

Practice is best understood as a co-construction between all of the key stakeholders involved. And this father is quite right: professional's levels of engagement skills are crucial to the effectiveness of working with men, and our findings suggest these need to improve significantly. Equally, the personal and professional blocks, the 'shields' that keep professionals away from men need to be explored and addressed.

Family centres have no statutory requirement to promote the welfare of children and work with families, but are generally more active in assessing and using the parenting resources available in families by including fathers. The entry of clients/users into such services is generally 'cleaner' than for social work in that the service has more control over who it engages with and on what terms. This is most effective where referral criteria are laid down by the agency which are 'father-inclusive' and is easier to manage in that professionals are frequently (and in some services the only) referral agents. Yet, where social workers who refer cases have not done the initial clarification and engagement work with mothers and fathers, and not included the latter in referrals to family centres, family workers are left to resolve these difficulties and try to include men.

Leaving Fathers Out

These are not absolutes, however. Some social workers are more father-inclusive than others, and not all family centre workers have the same passion for including men. It is here that the influence of personal biography and constructions of gender and parenting come into play, along with the impact of professional training. Also of relevance is the frequency and quality of supervision, and the views of managers and supervisors. All of these issues are expanded upon in the chapters that follow.

2.3 The forms of exclusion and dynamics of excluding men

The exclusion of men from child and family work takes numerous forms and dynamics. 'Forms' refers to the types of practices which exclude the man, 'dynamics' to the processes and rationales through which exclusion is practised.

The most thorough form that exclusion takes is institutional exclusion, two types of which were apparent in our data:

1. Fathers in prison. Although not available to parent when incarcerated, the general pattern is for them not to be worked with as *fathers* despite the knowledge that they would be released into the community and be returning to their families. Once back in their families, we found evidence that little was done to include them or help them to find a place back in the family and develop their relationships with their children and partner and their parenting skills. The exclusive relationship with the mother established when the man was absent continued. Again, these were not absolutes in our data as some family centre workers included incarcerated men in 'family work' by visiting them in prison, accompanying the woman and doing couple work with them and dealing with child care issues.
2. Men excluded from active fatherhood by the family courts and social services through restricted access to their children. This either creates problems that require social intervention (by family centres, counselling services) or compounds existing problems in the family. Eleven of the fathers in our sample (46%) had exclusionary experiences of this kind at some stage in their family history. For some, the entire reason for their

involvement with child and family services, was the impact on the children and father of marital breakdown, and family law difficulties.

Five patterns of rationalisations emerged from our data through which the dynamics of exclusion were manifested:

- Few men around, it's mainly single-parent mothers
- Working class men slow to change
- Men as difficult, dangerous
- Enough to do working with mothers
- There need to be obvious benefits to including men

2.3.1 Few men around, it's mainly single-parent mothers

A powerful justification by statutory social workers for not working with fathers is that there are "so few men around". This creates a rationale for the work as really being about single-parent mothers.

"the amount of fathers on my caseload isn't huge, considering the amount of families I do have."

... it's a lot of single mothers, single mothers who would have maybe two or three children with two or three different fathers with no contact. You know, people who've moved around a lot.

Yet our interviews showed that many social workers do not actively go after the fathers and try to include them. This becomes self-fulfilling prophecy, as the fathers who are 'around' are not regarded as service users and rarely engaged with. The net effect is that social workers in general do not 'know' men, have little confidence around them, and often fear having meaningful discussions with them. They also lack skills in discussing fatherhood with men and strategies to divert attention and responsibility for child care away from

Leaving Fathers Out

mothers. Fathers spoke eloquently of how they recognised such processes, which occurred even in situations where fathers themselves made efforts to engage, after social workers had initiated contact:

It just got crazy. Oh social workers were involved yes. The social work system is so clogged up, they've got so much on their plate for the limited resources they have that we never really see them and I think they need an awful lot more help themselves! You know in general. Because ... I've gone up to their centres and I've seen the girls (sic) just don't have half the people or the time to put into half the people that need it you know. So the little bit of help that I got from them, which wasn't a lot, I got more help from [the family centre] a lot more help from here.

The same father was very critical of the lack of considered response, even at the time when he had battered his wife and the social workers intervened.

That was basically it. There was no kind of counseling, there was no kind of chats, nothing, no follow-ups, no nothing! ... And god knows, anything can be going on in people's houses, you know, unless the people chase them themselves. I had to, I had to go and sit in with me kids, eventually, just sit there and wait to be seen.

2.3.2 Working class men slow to change

All the professionals we interviewed believed there to have been very significant social changes in gender and parenting roles in recent years, with a shift toward the sharing of household tasks and active involvement by fathers in the care of their children. The dynamics of where the typically marginalised families who use services fit, in terms of traditional and post-traditional families was very well captured by one family worker:

"The families that come from here are very, very traditional. Even the food they eat is traditional. You know they haven't tried Chinese they haven't tried Indian. There's the bacon and cabbage and spuds and stews and you know it's like taking

families out of the, you know, 30 years ago. You know this particular part of society in general has changed but this group of families hasn't actually moved with the rest of it you know. I think society has changed I think because both parents are working you'd have to. You know what I mean. In other areas of life and stuff like I think women and girls are brought up different now as well you know. They're not brought up to sit at home they're brought up to have careers and things like that you know, there's aspirations around your daughters as well as your sons now, umm, to have a life outside the home but that's not saying that everybody wants a life outside the home or anything like that but you know. I don't think, girls aren't taken out of school early any more and boys left there. You know that type of thing doesn't happen any more, in most of society. Unfortunately for these people they don't go to school they don't, they don't have the same traditions as people who may be middle class or who'd have better lives you know they've less chances and things like that you know."

(Family centre manager)

A statutory social worker exemplifies how our professional respondents saw social change as manifested in their own lives and families:

Yeah! I think it's [fatherhood] changed completely. There's a photo over there of two of my brothers just looking up and they're both changing their babies nappies you know and you know my mother was just there, my god, times have changed!

... [my father] was completely you know old-fashioned. Went to work, came home, you know, more potatoes [wife's name], you know that type. You know, a great father but completely, you know, my mother would go away, she'd go away for a week's holiday or something and she'd have the dinners ready for him to heat up. ... but he's gotten much better now because we're all grown up and we just go WHAT!, you know, so now he realises that ... But it's funny, I've four brothers and to have my four brothers parented that way by their father and they're so different to that.

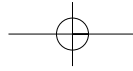
Leaving Fathers Out

Both these quotes acknowledge changes which sociologists refer to as a 'transformation of intimacy' and as a shift from traditional to post-traditional fatherhood and parenting (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Gender roles are no longer fixed in the traditional mode where men were the breadwinners, and respectable masculinity was defined in terms of the 'good provider' role. Women's identities were cast solely in terms of caring and meeting the physical and emotional needs of families. Due to the increased participation of mothers in the workforce, men are now the sole breadwinner in only half of all families with dependent children in Ireland (McKeown et al, 1998). This means that while some families still conform to the traditional model, increasingly the norm is for family life and 'intimacy' to be negotiated as men and women decide who will work, what hours, who will do the washing-up, cooking, child care and so on. It is against this background that some social scientists argue the family is becoming more 'democratic' in form, as roles and relationships have to become negotiated, with children as well as between parents (Giddens, 1998).

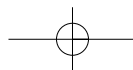
Yet while all the professionals in our study regarded these changes as significant - in both their own and people's lives in general - they are not seen as being equally distributed among the social classes, a view which was apparent among both family workers and social workers:

[we need to] bring home to them that like it's their responsibility. I think sometimes fathers don't realize that they have as much of a role as mothers do. And that they need to realize that. And that you know this is the, I was going to say the '90s, but 2000's you know. What I mean is that it's quite normal for a father to parent on his own even you know it doesn't have to be and that you just need practice because I think it's something that men don't actually you know take on board very, certainly the men I've worked with would still have quite an old-fashioned view that the mother, it's the mother's job you know. So just to kind of be very clear that they have as much responsibility as the mother to parent the child.

(Female statutory social worker)



This social worker is getting at what we refer in this report to calling men into responsibility around their children, as a crucial life-changing event, and strategy in engaging and changing fathers. Our data suggests she is quite right that some fathers need to be invited, challenged and actively brought into this responsibility through social intervention. We are less convinced, however - at least on the basis of the evidence from this study - that working class and marginalised fathers do have value systems which are that different to the societal norm, and their middle-class counterparts. Our scepticism arises from the finding that so few male clients are actively engaged with by social workers about their views on parenting. Social workers views are largely based on their observations and what mothers tell them. While this is never of course irrelevant, it should be obvious (though it is not) that the inclusion of men's voices is essential to constructing a complete picture of the meanings and practices of fatherhood. Once the father's voice is included, as it is in this study, a much more complex picture emerges of men's views on, and practices of, fatherhood. Given that the majority of our respondents were from working class backgrounds, our findings show that these men are aware of social change, and living out the changing nature of parenting and gender roles. Indeed, our findings suggest that a core aim of social intervention (even though it was rarely expressed by respondents in quite this way) was to push them along this developmental path to be good enough 'post-traditional' fathers in democratic families. Interestingly, professional's belief that fatherhood has in general changed for the better, to a more active model, was no guarantee that those same professionals would try and promote such progressive models of fatherhood in their work. We found workers who, despite strong beliefs that more active fathering was a change for the better, did little or nothing to enable the men on their caseloads to progress along such a developmental path. Here we argue that not only occupational cultures, but professional's biographies, have a particular impact in terms of attitudes and the influence of how they were parented themselves, on their approach to service users as parents. In effect, implicit and explicit contrasts are made between social professionals, families in general, and client families who remain the traditional, dangerous 'Other' in welfare work. This links child and family work profoundly to issues of social class and difference. Scourfield (2003), on the basis of his research into gender and child protection, speculates that, in a cultural context where men 'as a problem' has gained increasing purchase in the media, and where men who sexually abuse are seen as universally deviant - even within



Leaving Fathers Out

the humanist discourses of social work - giving men in general a bad name. Pejorative discourses of masculinity have some value for staff who work in child protection in making social worker men seem all right, seem safe. 'The dangerousness of rough working-class men is implicitly contrasted with the respectability of other men (Hearn, 1990; Edwards, 1998), and male social workers themselves are among the respectable men' (Scourfield, 2003, p. 105). Yet our findings suggest that this goes beyond just constructions of dangerous and 'normal' men, to entire belief systems about the supposedly traditional practices of mothers as well as fathers in families on the margins.

2.3.3 Men as difficult, dangerous

For many social workers men are seen as immensely difficult to engage, as impatient and unwilling to be challenged or brought into responsibility for their children; as more trouble than they are worth. These two social workers exemplify this perspective:

"[if] men get intimidated at all they just withdraw and they just step out of it. Whereas women I find are a bit better."

there wouldn't be that many fathers involved. You're really working with single parent families, the fathers might be around but they're, I've a couple at the moment, but on the whole I think men more so than women feel way more threatened by somebody like me advising them on different you know parenting issues. Or the fact that we're coming down to the house you know obviously you know investigating and assessing their capabilities and I suppose my experience is that men find that an awful lot more threatening than the women. And that would be just my client list you know. And that whilst the men are around that they don't want to necessarily engage with the social worker. They're frequently more likely to become verbally aggressive: "You can speak to me through my lawyer, I'm not going to see you without my lawyer being present". And another frequent thing I've come across with men is if they do anything for their kids, you know, as I said before, they feel as if they've made a sacrifice: and "oh, aren't I great that I've come to help the kids out", you know.

We found that in a minority of cases the fathers were indeed reluctant to accept social work intervention. But, for the most part, the men we interviewed were effectively engaged with by at least one professional or service. Thus it is not just the perceived 'difficult' nature of the men involved that is at issue, but the kind of services fathers are offered and the engagement strategies that make a crucial difference to the effectiveness, or otherwise, of efforts at engagement.

2.3.4 Enough to do working with mothers

The problem of excessive demands on time permeates everything social workers say about their work. Statutory child and family work is invariably pressurized and crisis-driven. In this context working with the mother seems like both the best use of time, and, possible route to reducing professional stress levels.

Working with the kids and the mother is time-consuming enough, never mind trying to engage with him. Because he's not going to engage at any real level, you know.

There need to be obvious benefits to involving fathers

There is a degree of selectivity in including men that is unthinkable in relation to women. Social workers have to feel that there are "obvious benefits" to including the father before they can be sure he is worth the effort.

"I'm bringing this guy [father] in as much as I possibly can who hasn't got all the baggage maybe that [other 'dangerous' male client] has, and whether that's right or wrong, I suppose it's more obvious that he's a benefit."

Thus, not all men are ignored and excluded by social workers but one implication is that it has to be earned in a way that (good) motherhood as a condition for being engaged in intervention work would never be. The double-bind for fathers is that they have to prove themselves worthy of professional attention before social workers engage with them to give them that chance to prove themselves. The requirement to 'prove themselves' becomes

Leaving Fathers Out

all the greater given the routine negative assumptions about marginalised fathers that social workers bring into their work and the other processes that impact on the construction of men in child and family work. Little wonder then that so few men do get

the chance to prove themselves.

2.4 The power of 'embodied' masculinity as an exclusionary dynamic

Of all these exclusionary dynamics, notions of the dangerousness of men were particularly significant. This rarely stood alone, but was cast within representations of 'embodied masculinity' (Connell, 1995; Scourfield, 2000), where certain dominant ideas are expressed about the violence and material power of men. Our data suggests that such exclusion took place through two further processes.

2.4.1 Physicality: The man is judged negatively on the basis of his presentation, appearance, his tattoos, 'hard man' persona, lifestyle - such as doing hard physical work or aggressive, violence-prone work, like bouncing, or 'security'. As one father recognises:

"Being from the [part] of the city I have tattoos, a lot of people would actually judge us by the way you look, cops especially and social workers, they take you on the way you look. People would say to me that I look rough and ready. There's people judging you, probably that's what's wrong with me like, there's nothing wrong with tattoos, I see nothing wrong with them. It's just that where I was brought up I got tattoos and whatever I don't know but I'm just caring too..."

Overcoming this kind of prejudice and classism is essential to including marginalised men and often involves challenging other professionals and family members representations of the man. As one statutory social worker observed of her work with this father:

"Dad wasn't in the picture. Mum had given a very bad account of dad and said that he was very abusive to her, that he had been violent toward her and really he wouldn't be any fit parent really for the girls. I spoke to a social worker in the

hospital who was very much against dad. Like, he looks, you know, he has the tattoos, the shaved head you know and I think she just felt, you know, on presentation alone that he just was like, you know, we won't even go there."

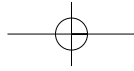
2.4.2 Mythical story telling: A powerful exclusionary dynamic surrounds the stories that float around the system about the man, usually about his dangerousness, but also fecklessness, and the various attitudinal 'uns' - uncaring, unreliable, unable, unwilling. This is typified by a father who - the social worker explains - had been represented by past social workers, the social work team leader and his partner, as being;

"incredibly emotionally abusive to her, having a loaded shotgun by the bed and bullets, leaving bullets on her pillow and, you know, hitting her. But that wasn't the main thing, it was more emotional stuff. He just allegedly had no interest in the kids. She did absolutely everything and, you know, he kept kind of the purse strings and all that kind of stuff."

This all had a powerful impact on the social worker who avoided meeting the man, the only contact was through the occasional telephone call:

"I was quite frightened of him because I believed the stories. It was a given that they were true. So I phoned the odd time but he really unnerved me, because, you know, his manner. But if you have all these stories behind that manner then you think there's something kind of weird. Whereas he's just got sort of a gentle soft-spoken manner, maybe now. I'm not convinced, you know, I'm not, I just don't know. He had like, everyone, the whole family had everyone stumped you know, all the professionals just stumped you know".

It turned out that once efforts were made to engage constructively with the man, he was a good enough parent to be given full responsibility for child care. This mythical story-telling then goes hand-in hand with the silencing of men, the failure to give them voice. The man's identity is constructed by professionals, sometimes in collaboration with family members, without any direct reference to the man himself. The stories are mythical in the



Leaving Fathers Out

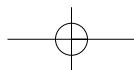
sense that they are never grounded in what the man has to say about himself or a careful assessment of his risks and capacities as a parent or intimate partner.

2.5 Excluding fathers: An exemplary case

'Frank' exemplifies the binds vulnerable men can find themselves in with social professionals. In most respects his treatment by professionals exemplifies all the exclusionary processes identified in this chapter, in one case, and will therefore be used to draw the strands of this chapter together. The father was in prison for 8 years for a sexual offence perpetrated on a woman, not a child. The mother, here called Susan - 'a chronic alcoholic' (social worker) - and children were in and out of a homeless hostel, on one occasion for an 18 month period. According to the social worker "things have been rocky with her" and the work attempts to get her to "stabilize". The children have been in and out of care, usually on a short-term basis, the last time being 4 months earlier for a week in care on an emergency care order. Frank was out of prison and he and his partner went drinking. The mother was on the streets drinking "with her old buddies" and "became extremely violent towards the guards". Now the professionals are "monitoring" the family. Entering care is extremely stressful for the children, "being away from mum" being the main source of their stress.

In relation to social work contact with father in prison, there was "absolutely none". Some contact was made with a probation officer, however. A few months before his release the social worker began to talk with the mother about her feelings and plans. She had remained in contact with Frank throughout his sentence, despite having a child to another man. She proved "hard to pin down" however, because of the "double-edged sword" of wanting Frank back in the family as a support, but with the fear of drawing child protection concerns onto them because of his history. For the social worker, "we didn't know [Frank] from the man in the moon either at that time. We didn't know what he'd want, we were going on what [Susan] was saying."

For the social worker "child protection stuff was in my head with the impact of [Frank]



coming back. I suppose [Susan] had portrayed [Frank] to us [as] the wronged hero kind of thing you know." The social worker accepts that "he served his sentence, you know, he did his time and he has a right to be out of prison and to be back with his family." But she is still concerned about the child protection implications:

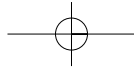
I suppose the first thing that came into my head was OK, three very small children in the family with a mum that isn't always able to protect them and the oldest child sexually abused in care by an uncle. Um, extremely, extremely vulnerable.

Yet when she met Frank she felt somewhat reassured.

I think it's like everything, I think when you concoct a picture in your head about someone you haven't even met it's like the fantasy is always worse than the reality. Um, after meeting [Frank] I suppose it changed a lot of my own thinking as well in that he's not the brute or whatever you think a person who's in this situation is going to be. You know, I suppose it challenges your own values of what, you know, a criminal is ... Because he's actually quite a quiet man. I mean he's very in your face and he's a big guy and, you know, there's potential for him to do anything, but at the same time he comes across as very non-threatening.

The father was actually out of prison and at home for 2 weeks before the social worker even met him. She had however met Susan and monitored Frank's impact through her and how "she'd come into the office and even just seeing her and how relaxed she was since he came out portrayed a picture that you know maybe here, ... I feel he changed her."

The focus of the work was on supporting the mother: "subtly getting stuff in there around parenting because [Susan] was very closed off to anything to do with us teaching her about parenting or anyone teaching her about parenting. And as far as she was concerned parenting was not an issue, she was able to do it." The children were not easy to manage, especially when they returned home from care. A child care worker was going in three days a week and doing most of the work, while the social worker rarely called (perhaps three or



Leaving Fathers Out

four times in the two months since the children returned from care) and acted as a case manager. Little wonder then that for the social worker the mother “sees me as a person who calls when things are bad.”

The social worker took a gentle approach as she didn't want to “overwhelm” Frank at first:

I suppose I'd a feeling that he was going to be seeing us too as in there whether he liked it or not and I just didn't want to be going in there putting all the stuff on him either, that he was going to feel like I have no [say] here, I have no control over my own children or whatever. So I suppose I just went out to enlighten him more than anything else as to what is there, what's been going on since he's been away, what's there now and that we are involved and remaining involved and for him to think about what he wants ... around the children.

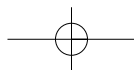
However, the father's response was not encouraging for the social worker:

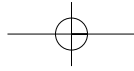
He just sat there, he didn't say much, he didn't really engage with me. I was doing most of the talking to the point where I said OK I'll leave this with you, you know, you get back to me and we can talk further. And that was it. I went a couple more times I think before the kids actually came into care.

The children stayed in care for just a week, but the ‘father-exclusive’ pattern was established. When the social worker called to the house the father would leave the living room and:

walk into the kitchen. He tended to let [Susan] talk to me and ... the child care worker would be the same. He tended to let whatever was going on just carry on and he'd kind of steer outside it. Whether he felt uncomfortable in it or whether he felt he didn't have a right to be in it I don't know.

The problem was the social worker never asked him why he was the way he was. The social work practice never went beyond this superficial level of “enlightenment”. The social worker





takes some responsibility for not being more proactive in engaging the father, but still sees him as the source of resistance. She did make some efforts, "looking to them for what they're, what are their ideas, what do they want, to keep trying to draw him in at that stage. But he was still quite guarded. I felt he was, kept himself on the fringe, let [Susan] kind of deal with us."

The social worker was asked in the research interview to reflect on her approach to the man's behaviour and apparent resistance:

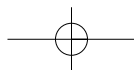
I always had the feeling that he wasn't comfortable with us coming up, most men aren't anyway.

Interviewer: *Did you ask him?*

Social worker: No I didn't. I didn't actually ask him, thinking back, yeah. I suppose I didn't really. I tended to inform him of the nicer things like, talk to him about the nicer things. You know, kids doing whatever, preschool and like that that might draw him in and he mightn't be threatened by us or whatever, I suppose.

There is an powerful assumption here that openness about more serious issues is antithetical to engaging resistant service users. Yet, as the fathers told us, it is precisely workers' failure to take them seriously and include them in meaningful dialogue about their lives which compounded any fears or suspicions the men had about involvement. The social worker is unambiguous in relation to the more serious child care issues. She ignored the father and focused on the mother as the primary client: "definitely it'd be her. T'would be [Susan]."

I have talked to the two of them together but it's more really, to be honest, if he's there I talk to him. If he's not there, he's not there and whatever I'm going up for is dealt with, with [Susan]. ... but there's practical constraints on me. If he's not there, I'm not going to be calling up again to see him.



Leaving Fathers Out

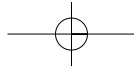
While the social worker said she had to change her "framework" of thinking about the family once the father returned home from prison, in reality she continued to see herself as the mother's social worker. One implication is that child protection is synonymous with motherhood and enabling mothers to parent safely and well enough; or at least does not involve engaging in a meaningful way with fathers about their children. Frank was not even engaged with about the fact that his daughter was sexually abused while in care, although Susan told the social worker that Frank had very strong, angry views about it.

Yet, on balance, Frank is regarded as a positive influence:

Despite everything I do think he's a stabilising factor for her [Susan]. I know that sounds totally contradicting [sic] what I just said, but I do think he has made a huge influence. I think he's taken a lot of the practical pressures off [Susan], taking the kids to school, getting the dinner ready, the whole thing, getting them up to bed and I think that's been a stress for [Susan], the ordinary stuff has been a stress for her. ... So I think he's been a stabilizing factor there alright. But I suppose considering what's happened, that it's a case of we know now that if they are going drinking, that there's issues around violence. Violence wasn't an issue but it is now. Somebody has to be aware considering what has happened.

The irony is that while the positive contribution that the father is making to his partner and children is acknowledged, he is never told this, or affirmed in any way. Nothing whatsoever is done to develop him or ensure that he does those things as often as possible.

In his research interview, Frank emphasised how he knew that, as a convicted sex offender, his identity has been spoiled and he is seen as inherently dangerous. The fact that he completed a sex offenders treatment programme in prison was ignored by social workers. On his release from prison, one professional in the community advised him to 'keep his head down' and try not to be seen. Yet, having initially tried, and failed, to prevent him from living in the home again on his release from prison, social workers basically ignored him. He disliked this because he resents not being included in on-going work and decisions concerning his children, yet he does not feel safe challenging social workers to include him,

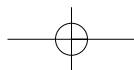


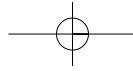
Chapter 2

because he fears that drawing attention to himself will possibly lead to the removal of the children, or him, from the family. On balance, it feels safer for him to keep his head down and try almost to seem not to be there. The costs for him are that nothing changes. Or at least he is not seen to change, which he believes he has, with the support of a family centre. He remains excluded from the social work, yet speaks very highly of the family support work done with him now, and over the years, by the mother and child unit.

Concerted work by family workers revealed that prison had completely institutionalised him - he didn't know how to cook or clean even when he wanted to. He was terrified of open spaces, feared being judged by people in the community and became almost agoraphobic. He was able to leave the house if accompanied, but could not leave the children to school as this would mean returning home alone. In prison he lived in the solitude of a single cell and returned home to find the noise and activity - especially at night - of a youngish family intolerable. Simply nothing had been done by prison staff or the criminal justice system to prepare this man to live again in the community, which is precisely what the family workers had to put great efforts into doing. It is the capacity of very vulnerable fathers to sustain their commitment that is often in doubt, not the nature of that commitment as such. And when their partners are vulnerable mothers and unable to offer stability either, there is a very high risk of severe family problems and breakdown and the situation for the children is dangerous. By the time we interviewed Frank, however, he had been out of prison for 5 months and was beginning to settle into an active fatherhood role. He was leaving the children to and from school, cooking, cleaning and much else.

This shows how the ambivalence of service users in presenting themselves as users - entitled to a service - often arises out of a context where they, or their partner, has a troubled history where there is a real risk of the children being taken into care. A younger father, Sean Whelan (see also chapter 5), struggled to have a relationship with his child while his partner was in a special unit, trying to prove to social workers that she was a 'fit mother'. Her first child had already been taken into care and Sean's presence was not viewed as a positive thing by social workers which led him to maintain a low profile, despite his great commitment to his child and partner. Thus he too never challenged the





Leaving Fathers Out

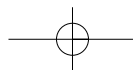
social worker - or indeed his partner - as they disappeared into the kitchen to talk exclusively. A further powerful reason for not wanting to be 'seen' by state officials was that because it ensured the family had more money to live on the mother claimed lone-parent allowance and officially the couple were not co-habiting.

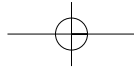
If a father has a questionable past or present in terms of, say, violence this aspect tends to overwhelm all other professional perceptions of him, including, and perhaps especially, his capacity to parent . . .

If a father has a questionable past or present in terms of, say, violence this aspect tends to overwhelm all other professional perceptions of him, including, and perhaps especially, his capacity to parent. The most effective father-inclusive practitioners are able to accommodate a complex notion of masculinity as multi-layered. They recognize that there are many sides to men and masculinity and that they need to go beyond representations of dangerous (and feckless) masculinity - what we call 'toxic masculinities' - to give the other (nurturing) parts of him a chance. This does not mean avoiding the dangerous or irresponsible elements of what is understood about the man, but needs to involve directly confronting and, where necessary, working with these toxic aspects in tandem with a focus on the man's capacities to actively care for his children well enough.

Our data suggests that we need to move away from simple dichotomies of 'bad man-good woman'. However resistant and difficult men often are to engage, some/many workers regarded women generally as just as, and sometimes more, aggressive and threatening. Significantly, stories about 'dangerous women' simply do not circulate around the system in the same way as they do about men.

The very notion of a 'dangerous woman' is not openly articulated in this way, despite there being women who are experienced in this manner by professionals. This appears to relate to the mythical dimensions of constructions of gender which are embodied in violent imagery about men and caring stereotypes of women. Professionals feel they have to work with women if children are to remain in the family which means attempting to access their caring side, even if it appears distant and submerged. They are disposed to looking for signs of generativity and nurture in women, while in men they struggle to get beyond the often mythical signs of danger. There is a material basis to this in that professionals know some men to be capable of very serious violence, especially against women.

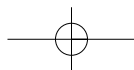


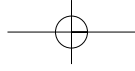


Chapter 2

Underpinning all these exclusionary influences is the powerful dominant belief that men don't care about or for children, that they can't care, won't care. This exclusion is unwritten by the law as well as by cultural practices. Many of the men in our sample were unmarried fathers who have no automatic legal rights as fathers and have to apply for guardianship. The logic of the social welfare system also discriminates against men as women exclude them so they can claim single-parent benefit. Men collude in this as, with his single-person state benefit, the combined income of the couple surpasses what they could get as a cohabiting or married household. There is also the significant pattern of the man's name being omitted from the birth certificate to make it difficult for state agencies to identify the father and them as a cohabiting couple. The net effect is that marginalised men are officially written out of the script of family life. Layer upon layer of powerlessness become piled upon one another to produce an outcome where the man accepts what he's got, living a shadow existence outside of the gaze of officialdom. While this survival strategy works on one level, as the family unit is together, it fails in other ways because it leaves the man without any supports - he does not really exist - as far as the outside world is concerned. This endangers the very integrity of the family that it is intended to preserve. This is rarely seen as a loss, as men in general tend not to be viewed as nurturing beings or seen as having any capacities to develop as carers. The gendered corollary of this is that women do care, should care, and through intervention will be made/helped to care.

The exclusionary dynamics we have set out here can appear singularly or in combination. The more there are, the greater the struggle to include the man. When all are present the exclusionary dynamic is immensely powerful. Yet our data suggests that even in those circumstances it is still possible for workers to reframe their definition of the case, and construction of the man, in purposeful ways, to enable father-inclusive practice, and we will show in this report how this can be made to happen.





Leaving Fathers Out

