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Rethinking Domestic Abuse in Child Protection (RDAC): What does the research tell us?

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The **Rethinking Domestic Abuse in Child Protection (RDAC)** has three aims:

1. To address gaps in our knowledge on the nature and characteristics of Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) that come to the attention of Child Protection (CP) services.
2. To examine the relationship between Domestic Violence and Abuse, Child Protection responses, and intersectional inequalities, and how these shape experiences and outcomes.
3. To co-produce frameworks, in partnership with families and practitioners, to support new approaches in policy and practice.

As part of the RDAC set up we carried out a focused review of the international literature. We looked at peer reviewed international journal articles published 2017–2022, which discussed domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in the context of child protection (CP). This led us to various sub-groups of research which examined the impact of structural factors including, gender, poverty, race, class, and the immigration status of children and adults, in the context of domestic abuse and child protection.

Why review the international research? Two key motivations for engaging with the international picture.

- > We know that legal frameworks and social, cultural and political contexts in different countries fundamentally shape perspectives and responses to domestic abuse and child protection. Nevertheless, we wanted to explore whether research from other countries points to similar challenges to those that we encounter here; challenges we have become familiar with through the project teams' extensive work on these issues in the UK (Ferguson et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2020). In examining the international research, we also hoped to identify new pathways for responding differently.
- > *'If you don't have a lens that's been trained to look at how various forms of discrimination come together, you're unlikely to develop a set of policies that will be as inclusive as they need to be'* (Crenshaw, 2019).

The policy and practice application of intersectionality is at the heart of the RDAC project approach. Kimberlé Crenshaw (Professor of Law at Columbia Law School and Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of California) coined the term in 1989 to enable an understanding of how inequalities of race, class, gender, and other characteristics 'intersect' and interlock with one another. Her work, and that of other Black scholars and activists in the US amplify the experiences of Black women survivors of intimate partner abuse and illuminate deeper understandings of racism and sexism in this context. The RDAC project aims to mobilise this foundational thinking as it considers the experiences of, and practice responses to, families impacted by DVA who become involved with the child protection system.

What did we find?

There is an extensive international literature that applies intersectionality to explore the convergences of multiple forms of power, discrimination and disadvantage. Crenshaw and others have made powerful contributions to this body of work, especially in relation to intersectionality and violence against women. But we found limited application of an intersectional lens to domestic abuse in the context of state child protection systems. There was acknowledgement of the complexities of lived experiences owing to structural inequalities, with a growing appreciation of the relationship between DVA, substance use, mental health and childhood abuse and trauma. A number of studies also examined the role that socioeconomic circumstances occupy in peoples' lives, influencing both lived experiences and responses to interventions. These explore the roles of poverty and education (for women and men) and there is evidence of some focused attention on structural inequalities including gender and race.

Key learning from the Review

- > **Women as mothers:** Dominant or typical understandings of gender shape the research literature on domestic violence and child protection in a number of ways. Most notably the sustained focus upon women as mothers - both through service responses and the actions and concerns expressed by women about their children.
- > **Supporting women, protecting children:** Help seeking by mothers is tempered by concerns about child removal. This theme cuts across location, culture and geography and has significant consequences for safety, well-being and mothers' help-seeking. However, while these concerns are broadly shared, issues specific to certain groups of women (such as those with insecure immigration status) are not a sustained focus of inquiry. *For example:* an abusive partner may tell his partner that if she makes a report to services, their child will be removed due to her insecure immigration status.

The literature is also heavily focused upon the experiences of heterosexual, cis gender people. Child protection responses to DVA in the context of LGBTQ+ families and parenting is therefore an underexplored area.

- > **Where are the men?** The experiences and behaviours of men who cause harm is particularly underdeveloped in the field of DVA and child protection. A limited number of studies examine specific topics (such as contact and family courts) but there is a scant literature that examines the way inequalities shape men's lived experiences and how intersecting aspects of identity such as race, poverty and gender interact when men come into contact with the child protection system in the context of domestic abuse. There is, however, some investigation of the intersectional identities and experiences of men who use violence in the context of perpetrator interventions as part of a child protection response.

- > **How and why does domestic violence become a child protection concern?** The nature of DVA in child protection is insufficiently interrogated and deconstructed. Studies provide little insight into the everyday experiences of families in which there is a perpetrator of abuse. With this, is a lack of investigation of how structural factors operate differently in the lives of women, children and men and the resulting implications for practice.
- > **Co-occurring and complex experiences.** Studies explore the interplay of DVA with issues such as substance addiction, disability and mental health challenges. Within this there is a small body of literature that situates the examination of multiple individual and family difficulties in relation to socio-economic circumstances. The absence of robust data about the adults within families – certainly in UK child protection systems – means it is very difficult to interrogate patterns and trends, or to accurately describe profiles of those needing support and intervention. RDAC aims to build upon previous research activities of team members and extend these analyses to explore the implications for DVA CP policy and practice.
- > **Innovative responses.** We found a few studies that highlighted examples of where the applied understanding of structural and social inequalities – for instance race, culture, poverty and citizenship status (in particular for migrating and relocating families) – has led to innovative policy and practice responses to DVA in the context of child protection.

Some studies recognised the value of varied and intersecting experiences, and how those experiences inform responses to state interventions. Most of these were local and culturally specific developments that built upon contextual knowledge. Few examined how localised responses might inform developments elsewhere. There is considerable thinking needed about the methodological issues that might be involved in evaluating the translation of effective local approaches into broader policy and practice, or indeed the importing of ‘models’ into different contexts and settings.

- > **Drawing on the insights of lived experiences.** The literature reviewed provided insights into how social and economic histories as well as cultural traditions can fundamentally shape families’ help seeking and routes to services. There is therefore a need for services to engage with and understand these lived experiences when delivering interventions. *For example:* studies have shown that immigrant women are more likely to go to their English teacher for help than statutory services.

But the Review also raises questions for future research, including for RDAC. A key question relates to the ethical challenges of bringing in a range of diverse voices into policy, practice, and research development. Especially how to respond to and accommodate opposing perspectives on the lived experiences of DVA and child protection. Central to this is the importance of always foregrounding the voices of children and families as well as ensuring that their safety and wellbeing during the research process is prioritised.

Where next?

The review strongly supports the starting point of our RDAC project – that an understanding of the ways in which structural inequalities shape experiences of DVA within child protection is underdeveloped and that it requires further investigation. As the Crenshaw quote above reminds us, inclusive policy and practice responses will be informed by better understanding the complex interplay of structural and personal factors that shape lived experiences of DVA that result in child protection interventions.

This briefing note draws together the common themes emerging from this first wave of the review. The review is an ongoing process, and the summary will be periodically updated as themes emerge. You can keep track of developments and emerging learning from the study, by going to [the RDAC website](#) and [social media pages](#).

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, R-DAC brings together researchers from the Universities of Sheffield, Huddersfield, Kingston, with Research in Practice, SafeLives and FutureMen. The team will work to better understand and improve the national response to domestic abuse and child protection.

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