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Intimate partner violence, family court, and assessment: a qualitative study of the experiences of women’s advocates

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Krystal Culver

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Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a pervasive problem throughout New Zealand. Approximately a third of all women will experience some form of abuse from their partner in their lifetime. Literature on IPV highlights the difficulties these women face when they enter the Family Court system and the lack of understanding regarding the dynamics of IPV. Of particular concern are those women who undergo a psychological assessment as part of the custody dispute. The Family Court has posited the movement to collaborative parenting may outweigh the need to keep women and children safe. Consequently, women may not only be re-victimised, but both their safety, and the safety of their children, could be at risk. The purpose of this study was to provide a greater understanding of women’s advocates experiences of issues of IPV, Family Court, and psychological assessment in New Zealand. Four advocates from Women’s Refuge were interviewed and a thematic analysis conducted. Four superordinate themes emerged from participants’ accounts: process difficulties, conflict, lack of expertise and gender-based issues, while a fifth theme of cultural differences emerged from one of the participants. These experiences were supported by the existing literature, and added valuable knowledge from a New Zealand context. Unexpected issues also arose, including the difficulty women with children face in being granted the right to relocate. This will help form the basis of continued research into the area, with the aim of gaining a more discerning picture of key issues that arise for women who have experienced IPV and who are embattled in a custody dispute in the Family Court.
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# Table of contents

Intimate partner violence, family court, and assessment: a qualitative study of the experiences of women’s advocates ................................................................. i

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iii

Chapter 1: Literature Review ............................................................................................ 1

1.1 Definitions ............................................................................................................... 1

1.1.1 Intimate partner violence. ................................................................................. 1

1.1.2 The Family Court ............................................................................................. 1

1.1.3 Custody ............................................................................................................ 1

1.2 Women’s Refuge ..................................................................................................... 2

1.3 Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence: a New Zealand Context ......................... 3

1.4 Best Interests of the Child ....................................................................................... 4

1.5 The Family Court .................................................................................................... 5

1.5.1 Pre-court services ............................................................................................. 8

1.6 The Hostile mother .................................................................................................. 9

1.7 Continued Abuse ................................................................................................... 11

1.8 Court professionals and assessment ...................................................................... 16

Chapter 2: Research Methodology .................................................................................. 21

2.1 Aims ...................................................................................................................... 21

2.2 Participants ............................................................................................................ 21

2.3 Ethical Considerations ........................................................................................... 22
2.4 Method.......................................................................................................................... 23
2.5 Qualitative research...................................................................................................... 24
  2.5.1 Thematic analysis. ............................................................................................... 26
Chapter 3: Results ........................................................................................................... 27
  3.1 Process difficulties ............................................................................................... 28
    3.1.1 Long, negative process. .................................................................................. 29
    3.1.2 Continued abuse. .......................................................................................... 32
    3.2.3 Financial issues. .......................................................................................... 34
    3.1.4 Changes in protection orders over time. ...................................................... 35
  3.2 Conflict .................................................................................................................. 38
    3.2.1 Access versus safety. ...................................................................................... 38
    3.2.2 Law versus reality. ....................................................................................... 43
  3.3 Lack of expertise .................................................................................................. 47
    3.3.1 Psychological assessment. ........................................................................... 47
    3.3.2 Dynamics not understood. ........................................................................... 49
    3.3.3 Lack of education and acknowledgement of Women’s Refuge. ................. 52
  3.4 Gender-based issues .............................................................................................. 55
    3.4.1 Kept in the same geographic area as abusive ex-partner. ......................... 55
    3.4.2 Responsibility. .............................................................................................. 57
    3.4.3 Judgements...................................................................................................... 61
  3.5 Cultural differences ............................................................................................... 63
    3.5.1 High-end physical violence. ....................................................................... 64
3.5.2 Avoidance of court system ................................................................. 65
3.5.3 Shame .................................................................................................. 66

Chapter 4: Discussion ...................................................................................... 68
4.1 Family court .............................................................................................. 68
4.2 A Gender-based/ Gender-biased issue? ....................................................... 74
4.3 A cultural issue ......................................................................................... 79
4.4 Will it ever change? .................................................................................. 81
4.5 Strengths, limitations and future directions of research ............................ 86

Chapter 5: Conclusion .................................................................................... 90
5.1 Reflexivity ................................................................................................. 91

References ....................................................................................................... 92

Appendix A ..................................................................................................... 108
Appendix B ..................................................................................................... 110
Appendix C ..................................................................................................... 111