

Men, Violence and Parenting: The need for rehabilitation programmes in Seychelles as a child protection strategy

Susan Alderson

Introduction

As men's intersecting identities as fathers and as perpetrators of domestic violence is increasingly acknowledged in research and practice in the UK and US, the issue of safe parenting has gained heightened attention on the social work agenda. In recent years there has been an increased recognition that working with male perpetrators can result in positive outcomes for both women and children where such work is included as part of a holistic, coordinated response to domestic violence (HM Government, 2009). In England and Wales this work is provided through two routes: criminal justice based programmes in probation-led community settings; or community based programmes that take self-referrals, partner-mandated referrals or statutory referrals such as children's services. In the Seychelles context however, whilst significant strides have been made in recognising the problem of domestic violence, there is a need for more interventions to address violence in the home and its impact on children. To date, there are no community based rehabilitation programmes running in the country as a response to domestic violence. This paper will examine the challenges for social workers in Seychelles regarding the paucity of interventions available, to successfully engage with domestically violent fathers in order to address violence against women and its impact on their children, and the feasibility of introducing such programmes in Seychelles. The paper will also incorporate findings from my doctoral study which investigated the extent that children themselves benefit from their fathers' participation on a rehabilitation programme, thus providing a unique perspective regarding the nature, scope, and adequacy of this intervention and the outcomes for children. It should be noted that whilst I am not disputing the fact that women are also capable of using violence against men, a recent systematic review of the literature found that many men may be over-reporting instances of being victims of domestic violence, while simultaneously perpetrating domestic violence themselves (Hester, 2013). For the purpose of this paper therefore, my focus will be domestically violent men rather than women. The term 'fathers' in this paper refers to men who are father *figures*, stepfathers, or other men who are significant in a child's life.

Prevalence and impact of domestic violence on children

A lack of published aggregated data poses difficulties in estimating the true extent of domestic violence in Seychelles. However, a nationwide survey undertaken in Seychelles by the Gender Secretariat during 2000-2005 revealed that reported cases of violence against women rose significantly during this time with 28 percent of the sample of women experiencing severe physical violence. This figure is slightly higher than recent figures revealed by The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) who estimate that 27.1 percent of women have experienced *any* domestic violence (this includes coercive control, emotional abuse and financial abuse) since the age of sixteen (cited in Woodhouse and Dempsey, 2016). In Seychelles, child protection is regarded by the government as a *central* priority (Seychelles Ombudsman, 2015). This concern is warranted given that Seychelles National Bureau of Statistics show that around one in four children under the age of fifteen are also exposed to domestic violence. In addition, a plethora of international research has found a clear overlap between domestic violence and child abuse. In the US for example, research by Appel and Holden (1998) estimates that the overlap between domestic violence and child physical or sexual abuse ranges from between 30 to 50 percent. Given this evidence, it is also likely that a significant number of Seychellois children who live in violent homes are at increased risk of physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect. The negative effect of this instability clearly has an impact on children. For example, behavioural, social, and emotional problems such as higher levels of aggression, drug and alcohol misuse, anger, hostility, oppositional behavior, disobedience fear, anxiety, withdrawal, depression, and poor peer, sibling, and social relationships. Children can also suffer cognitive and attitudinal problems such as lower cognitive functioning, poor school performance, lack of conflict resolution skills, limited problem-solving skills, acceptance of violent behaviors and attitudes, and a belief in rigid gender stereotypes and male privilege. In the long term children can go on to experience higher levels of adult depression and trauma symptoms, and increased tolerance for and use of violence in adult relationships (Butchart 2006, Krug et al., 2002). These problems have not gone unnoticed in Seychelles. The Seychelles Drug and Alcohol Council are concerned about the strong positive social and cultural view of cannabis that is seen to be prevalent amongst young people (Seychelles Drug Control Master Plan 2014-2018, 2015). According to a research report by Confait (2014), teachers in Seychelles also face problems in the classroom due to students' disengagements and misbehavior. A United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education suggests that, globally, these problems can lead to a decrease in the number of people entering the profession and the retention of existing teaching staff (Singh et al., 2014). There are also concerns regarding the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and girls, including child sex tourism (US Department of State, 2015). The exact prevalence of these problems amongst children and young people in Seychelles is difficult to establish both at a local and national level given the hidden nature of such behaviour and a lack of aggregated data on the issues.

Yet, despite a recognition that these problems exist in Seychelles, they tend to be viewed in isolation and without consideration of the underlying issues of a child's microsystem, the smallest and most immediate environment in which the child lives: the home.

Social work, law, policy, and practice

Traditionally, social service professionals tend to adhere to a traditional discourse of domestic violence that focuses on a gender-neutral family approach. This invariably involves work with mothers and seldom involves a response to the violent father. While social workers do recognize that domestic violence is often perpetrated by fathers, it is usually mothers 'failure to protect' that gains most attention. Women are expected to leave a violent partner or are threatened with the removal of the child (Humphreys and Thiara, 2002). Attention is thus shifted from the violent father to the abused mother who is labeled as a struggling parent heading a family with 'complex needs'. While leaving the perpetrator may, for some women, be the only option, it has been well documented that some women simply do not want to separate or, because of their situation, they are forced to remain in contact with their ex-partner due to shared child-care arrangements or other matters determined through Family Law (Bagshaw et al., 2010). Davies (2011) questions the adequacy of policies and services that focus on assisting women to end abusive relationships or encouraging them to use civil protection orders. It has been well documented that both routes do not necessarily bring an end the violence (Dobash and Dobash, 2009), and that most perpetrators go on to abuse in future relationships (Gondolf, 2000).

Seychelles is further impeded in its ability to tackle the issue of domestic violence by the lack of legal force to criminalise the act. While the enactment of domestic violence legislation was proposed as far back as 2007, to date only a draft bill has been developed. The issue is complicated further for social workers and the criminal justice system by the fact that laws giving protection to women and children are scattered under several pieces of legislation, namely, The Constitution of Seychelles, The Children Act, The Penal Code, The Civil Code and The Criminal Procedure Code. While the Family Tribunal, set up in 1998 following the enactment of the Family Violence (Protection of Victims) Act 2000, has powers to determine custody, maintenance, access, and care of minor children, it is extremely limited in its power to hold violent men accountable given that the main disposal available is the issuance of a civil protection order. Protection orders are issued to prevent perpetrators of domestic violence contacting, harming, harassing or stalking their partners or children. However, despite the political rhetoric that suggests civil remedies work to empower the victim and stop the violence, anecdotal evidence from both victims of domestic violence and social workers in Seychelles suggests this intervention is failing victims, because the ability of the system to protect victims is severely impeded by barriers enforcing protection orders.

This subsequently culminates in a significant number of perpetrators violating such orders with impunity.

Clearly a paradigm shift is needed that centres the responsibility of violence on to men and holds them accountable for their behaviour, rather than focusing solely on victims. This shift has already been set in motion by the Seychelles government, who have recognized the importance of introducing domestic violence rehabilitation programmes to the country. The issue was first addressed in a wide consultation with stakeholders during the development of the National Strategy on Domestic Violence in 2008. This strategy was fully in alignment with the development of the government's social renaissance campaign adopted in 1995 following the World Summit on Social Development. The Social Renaissance campaign and the ensuing National Strategy on Domestic Violence 2008-2012, and the National Action Plan for Gender Based Violence 2010, appeared to have future wide-reaching consequences for victims of domestic violence. Objective two of the four strategic objectives in the National Strategy, makes specific reference to '*the introduction of rehabilitation programmes*' (point 2.1, p10), while point 2.2 argues for '*legislative provisions empowering judges to make orders sentencing perpetrators to attend a domestic violence rehabilitation programme*' (p11). To date however, while significant strides have been made in highlighting the issue of domestic violence in Seychelles, and the recognition of its impact on women and children, the issue of rehabilitation programmes for violent men has been sadly neglected. The lack of attention to abusive men as fathers leaves children in Seychelles increasingly vulnerable and in need of protection. Without well-constructed ways to respond to domestic violence, social workers can be left with a sense of powerlessness which can, in effect, make them susceptible to explanations that, at best, blame the victim for making poor choices or, at worst, construct her as co-author of her own abuse. These paradigms, underpinned by a sense of powerlessness or blame will of course be self-fulfilling for victims (Blacklock and Phillips, 2015).

Rehabilitation programmes as an intervention for domestic violence perpetrators

The overall premise of programmes for perpetrators is to develop interventions that can reduce the incidence of repeat cases of violence against women (or, 'recidivism') by the men involved in interventions. There is a commonly accepted belief that the Duluth model (Buzawa et al., 2015) is the most appropriate model for working with perpetrators. This is a broad, cognitive-behavioural approach combined with gender analysis. Programmes are mostly run in groups in order that group members have a chance to learn from and support each other. Sessions take place weekly and the number of group sessions varies depending on the provider. This can vary from a period of twelve to fifty-two weeks. Research by

Gondolf (2004), however, has shown that there is often a three-month threshold, and that longer programmes are not necessarily more effective. This is partly explained by the fact that men who are motivated to change will normally begin to do so within the three-month period, while those who need longer, generally drop out of the programme within that time frame. Group sessions are dedicated to reviewing the abuse that participants perpetrated, learning about non-violent alternatives to resolving conflict, studying the ways in which social norms or gender roles influence behaviour, and examining ways in which substance abuse, stress, and negative attribution may exacerbate violent behaviour (Rothman et al., 2003). All accredited rehabilitation programmes in England and Wales provide a Women's Support Service for partners of violent men. This serves two important functions: provide support for women, and provide a reliable measure of men's progress given that the self-reporting of perpetrators has been found to be subject to denial and minimization (Gondolf, 2004). A core feature of the accreditation standard is for programmes to address children's safety and the harmful parenting of domestically violent fathers (Respect Accreditation Standard, 2008, p77).

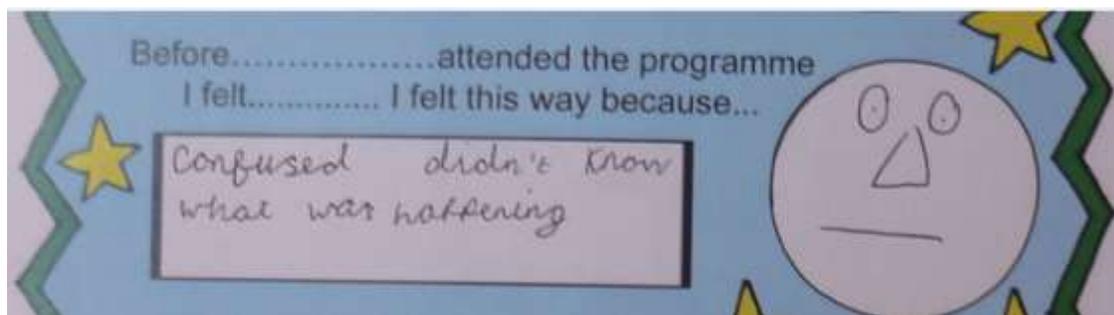
Rationale for my research

In recent years, perpetrators of domestic violence who are also fathers have emerged onto social work practice agendas in a way that was unprecedented, and there have been significant increases in referrals to rehabilitation programmes from child welfare agencies (Featherstone and Peckover, 2007). The rationale for my research related to the fact that despite numerous international evaluations of perpetrator work and the difficulties over definitions of success, sources of data, follow-up periods, and research design, I was concerned that children of domestically violent fathers had not been given a voice. Through a review of the literature it became evident that there was a distinct lack of integration of children's views directly. In the main, it is the views of women (mothers) that are used as a proxy for children's experiences. This is often to do with the reluctance of researchers to undertake this type of work with children due to the sensitivity of the topic of domestic violence. I thus embarked upon incorporating the views of children into my own research on the impact of their fathers participation on a rehabilitation programme. My aim was to provide evidence on whether children benefited from this intervention or not. Taking a unique methodological approach, I designed a bespoke child-friendly, task-based 'research book' and interviewed thirteen children (six boys and seven girls) between the ages of seven and sixteen years old. The research book was bright and colourful and was presented in a cartoon format with animated pictures and space for children to draw their own pictures. Where the child did not want to complete the drawing tasks (i.e. older children) the research book was adapted but the same questions were asked. The research book took the children through questions such as what life was like before their father attended a rehabilitation

programme, how they were informed about his attendance, how safe they felt before he attended the programme, and how safe they felt on his completion.

Research findings

The data reveal that prior to intervention, and while children were living in the midst of domestic violence, they had complex feelings towards their father, with many children still feeling emotionally attached to him despite being afraid of his violent outbursts. (Groves et al., 2007).



Jodie (age nine)

While the complex feelings brought about by domestic violence caused children to feel confused, sad, and angry, the data illustrated how much they care and want their father to 'get better' (a significant number of children in the study referred to their father as 'getting better', illustrating how children believe the source of violence lies in individual pathology). Over the course of their fathers' engagement with the programme, children reported that the progress and processes of change in their father became visible to them over time.

As men began to acquire an enhanced ability to empathise and communicate, children noticed a marked improvement in the father/child relationship. Findings suggest that as these changes unfold, children begin to feel safer, with an improved sense of wellbeing. Children were asked to give me an example of how situations of potential violence differed since their father attended a domestic violence rehabilitation programme. One child described how his father uses the technique of 'time out' and is now able to 'walk away' from a situation that would previously have turned into a violent rage. The extract from my interview with Kieran (age fifteen) below, illustrates the changes he noticed in his father since he attended a rehabilitation programme:

Kieran: Yeah it's better than it was before. I've noticed that he walks away.

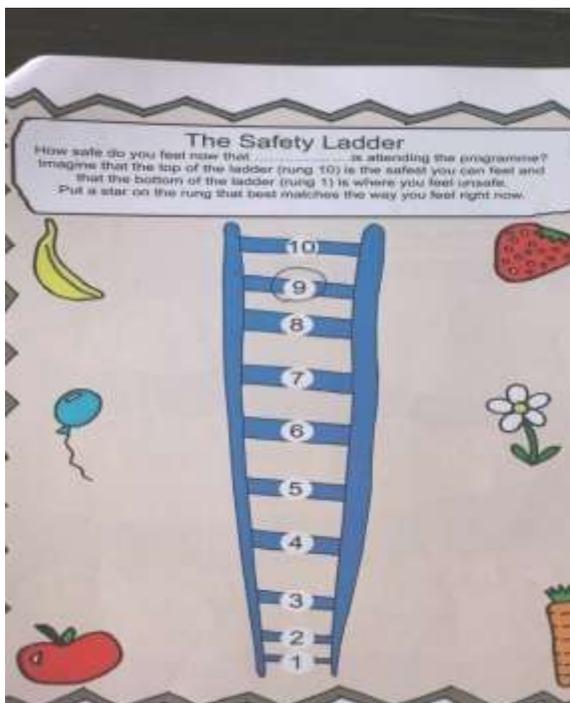
Susan: So do you think that he has more control now?

Kieran: *I think so yeah.*

Susan: *How do you feel around him now?*

Kieran: *I feel ok.*

The issue of their father's new found self-control as a catalyst for trust was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews, leading to feelings of increased safety. The issue of safety runs far deeper than physical safety, it encompasses physical and emotional health and wellbeing, happiness, freedom from fear, and freedom from having to protect their mother or siblings. One of the tasks for the children was to indicate on a ladder scale, their perception of how safe they felt before their father participated on a rehabilitation programme and the level of safety they currently felt. Rung 1 on the ladder indicated feeling 'very unsafe', and rung 10 indicated feeling 'extremely safe'. Before their fathers attended the programme all of the children indicated that they thought their level of safety was at, or around, level 1 or 2 (very unsafe). When asked how safe they felt at the time of interview, one child circled rung 5 (unsafe/fairly safe), two circled rung 9 (very safe) and four children circled rung 10 (extremely safe).



Archie (age 11)

The children in this study were overtly articulate in their accounts of the positive changes seen in their father's behaviour and about how they felt about him since the changes had taken place. Children reported feeling safer, spending more quality time with their father,

having more trust in their father, and an overall enhanced sense of a father/child relationship. Overwhelmingly, the evidence presented suggests that children's quality of life has improved during and since their father's participation on a domestic violence rehabilitation programme. Threaded through this, children were feeling a greater sense of stability in their lives. There is a caveat here however, in that running parallel to their fathers' intervention programme, all of the children participating in this study were receiving an integrated children's support service. Given that evidence from previous studies shows the importance of enabling children to talk about the domestic violence in their lives, and have their experiences acknowledged and validated (McGee, 2001), it is crucial that children's support would need to be included in any future development of domestic violence rehabilitation programmes in Seychelles. One-to-one or group-work support is essential in enabling children to rebuild their self-esteem, ventilate their feelings about the violence in a safe environment, and importantly to receive reassurance that the violence was not their fault. The support the children in this study received from children's support workers appeared to be crucial in their building of resilience. Given that the quality of mothers' parenting can be diminished in the context of domestic violence, it became clear that the relationship that the children had with their support worker was a key component in their recovery and resilience.

Conclusions and proposals

Domestic violence is a social and individual scourge worldwide that impacts on children's lives both in the present and in the future. Violent fathers are still far too often invisible in domestic violence interventions, leaving children at increased risk of harm, both emotionally and physically. For too long, children's needs have been overlooked while a focus on child protection has resulted in mothers' inability to protect their children. The data presented from children in this study show evidence of positive change in the impact of their fathers' participation on a rehabilitation programme. Responses illustrate that men's engagement in this intervention can bring about meaningful improvement in behaviour that promotes the safety and wellbeing of children.

As social workers in Seychelles have become increasingly aware that children exposed to domestic violence are at serious risk of harm, the need for an effective social work response has become pressing. The introduction of social work interventions that can eliminate or significantly reduce a child's exposure to domestic violence is critical to improving outcomes for children in Seychelles. It is vital that a strategy for implementing rehabilitation programmes as outlined in the National Strategy for Domestic Violence (2008) are developed as a matter of urgency. These programmes need to be clearly founded on state-of-the-art knowledge of topics, and a grounded methodology on how to achieve change in

violent behaviour. For abusive men who are also fathers, rehabilitation programmes can have far-reaching consequences on the safety and wellbeing of Seychellois children exposed to domestic violence. In terms of a child protection strategy, rehabilitation programmes would be a welcome alternative intervention for both social services and the judiciary who, anecdotal evidence suggests, are challenged by the limitations imposed on them for dealing with domestically violent fathers. It is also timely for the long standing Domestic Violence Bill to be enacted into Seychelles law in order to criminalise the act of domestic violence and fulfill the obligations of the international conventions that government has signed and ratified. In order for the dream of social renaissance to be realised, the protection of Seychellois children is paramount. The time is right for Seychelles to lead a paradigm shift that focuses on placing the responsibility of violence onto men as fathers, while putting children at the centre of initiating social change for the country.

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