# Learning Network

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

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## Mothering in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence: Realities and Resilience

Many women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) must endure the harms and impacts of the violence they experience while navigating mothering and keeping their children safe.

Though there is significant research on the impacts of IPV on survivors and children, there remains a lack of deeper understanding of the ways that IPV influences mothering. Survivor-mothers are often faulted for remaining in abusive relationships or not being able to protect their children's safety and wellbeing against the violence inflicted by abusive partners. In comparison, survivor-mother's protective and resistance efforts may go unrecognized.



This Brief examines the impacts of IPV on the survivor-mother and child relationship, the realities of mothering that survivor-mothers face, and considerations for service providers supporting survivor-mothers and their children.

A nuanced approach to understanding IPV and mothering must consider the negative impacts of violence and the barriers that survivor-mothers face, as well as the resilience and resistance they actively demonstrate to protect themselves and their children.

A Note on Language: This Brief focuses on survivor-mothers given the disproportionate impacts of IPV on women. We recognize parents of various genders face violence. We also recognize that mothers may be biological, adoptive, social, or psychological. We use the term "survivor-mothers" to describe survivors experiencing IPV and we use the terms "mothers" and "women" when referring to specific research findings.

#### Impacts of IPV On Survivor-Mother and Child Relationships

The individual impacts of IPV on survivor-mothers and children are well-documented and include mental health challenges, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and behavioural difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

The survivor-mother and child relationship is often affected by IPV. It is important to recognize that survivor-mothers' parenting capacity and relationship with their children can be greatly undermined due to their partner's violence and abuse. For instance, experiences of IPV can leave survivor-mothers emotionally and physically exhausted impacting their emotional availability, attachment experiences, or disciplinary strategies.

Emerging research demonstrates that survivor-mothers display strong acts of resilience and strength as they parent through ongoing violence and abuse.<sup>4</sup> For instance, they may be more determined to encourage healthy relationships, social support, and academic success for their children.<sup>5</sup>

Survivor-mothers also play a key role in supporting their children's resilience from exposure to IPV, particularly through warm and responsive parenting practices.<sup>6</sup>

Learn more about the impacts of IPV on children in this issue:

Trauma- and
Violence- Informed
Approaches:
Supporting Children
Exposed to Intimate
Partner Violence

#### **Diana's Story**

Diana and Tim share a 6-year-old daughter, Isabella.

Tim has become verbally and physically abusive towards Diana over the last few years. He yells frequently about the "mess" and "noise" in the house. Diana has been experiencing severe migraines and depression.

Isabella is becoming increasingly aware of the violence in the home and often sees and hears her mother getting hurt.

Diana recognizes the impacts that the violence is having on Isabella and is worried about her. Isabella has become withdrawn and fearful, especially when her dad is home. Diana makes sure to keep Isabella busy with activities, games, and snacks in another room when her dad is home. She also arranges frequent playdates at a neighbour's house.

At night, Diana lays in bed with Isabella and talks to her about Isabella's fears. She tells her the violence is not her fault, that it is not okay, and that it is an adult's job to fix it. She then tells her bedtime stories until Isabella falls asleep.

Diana goes into the living room where Tim begins criticizing her parenting and responsibilities at home.

As you reflect on Diana's story, consider these questions:

- 1. What are some ways that Tim's violence is impacting both Diana and Isabella?
- 2. What are some strategies that Diana uses to protect Isabella and limit her exposure to the violence?
- 3. What key messages does Diana share with Isabella?



#### The Realities of Mothering in the Context of IPV

Discourses around mothering are often framed through constructions of "good mothers" and "bad mothers." These discourses frequently emerge when examining the experiences of survivor-mothers and their parenting, largely from a deficits-based approach.

Deficit-based approaches of understanding IPV and parenting are harmful and problematic. They often fault survivor-mothers for the violence and the harms of IPV on themselves and their children. They also perpetuate the narrative that parenting capacities of survivor-mothers are at risk, and therefore, the development and wellbeing of their children is at risk. Such models undermine the strategies, abilities, and capacities of survivor-mothers used every day to keep themselves and their children safe.

To better support survivor-mothers, it is important to understand the realities within which they experience IPV and parent their children. Below, we explore some of these realities:

Impacts of IPV on parenting can begin during or prior to pregnancy.

Survivor-mothers' experiences of violence and parenting can begin prior to children being born, even prior to conception. For instance, IPV can take place in the form of reproductive coercion as well as unplanned pregnancies.<sup>8</sup>

Research suggests that pregnancy can be a trigger for increased violence, with those who experience violence during pregnancy reporting significantly higher rates of physical and sexual assault, and physical threat. Physical harms to mothers can result in their unborn children experiencing fetal trauma. 10

For women who are experiencing IPV and become pregnant, they may face further stressors and doubt their parenting abilities as they feel they are unable to protect the unborn child from the physical and psychological effects of IPV. This may increase the risk for mental health issues such as postpartum depression.<sup>11</sup>



Survivor-mothers who have access to informal and formal resources are more likely to be better supported throughout their experiences of IPV and pregnancy. For those who have challenges in accessing supports, remaining in an abusive relationship may feel safer than experiencing pregnancy alone.<sup>12</sup>

Pregnancy can also be a turning point for survivor-mothers, promoting them to seek assistance from others to support their desire for safety.

### Survivor-mothers are actively engaged in protecting their children's safety and wellbeing.

Survivor-mothers often use different strategies to protect their children from the violence and abuse taking place in the home. For instance, they may try to hide the violence, reduce the exposure and its effects on children, or communicate with their children about the violence. They may also be hypervigilant and look for "warning" signs that indicate their partners will become violent.<sup>13</sup>

Tactics to hide the violence or reduce the exposure can include ensuring that the children are not left alone with their abusive partner, sending their children to another room in the home, sending them to their neighbour's house, or calling the police and obtaining restraining orders.<sup>14</sup>

Survivor-mothers also try to ensure that their children do not feel responsible for the abuse that can occur in the home. For instance, an abusive partner may blame the child by saying they were being too noisy or difficult thus leading to the violence against their mother, but a survivor-mother may respond to the child by reaffirming that it is natural for children to play and have fun so they are not at fault – responsibility lies with the one who harms.

Survivor-mothers are constantly in a state of risk assessment and their decision to stay in or leave a violent relationship often depends on their view of what would be in the best interests of their children. Abusive partners often use children against survivor-mothers to coerce them into remaining in the abusive relationship and to ensure that they are compliant by threatening the child's health and safety.

For many survivor-mothers, remaining in an abusive relationship is a strategy used to protect themselves and their children from further violence and harm. <sup>15</sup> This can result in keeping the abuse private to not attract involvement from external organizations such as law enforcement, immigration officials, or child welfare due to the fear of family separation.



### Survivor-mothers can demonstrate strong and positive parenting interactions with their children.

Experiences of IPV perpetrated by abusers can impact parenting capacity and the survivor-mother and child relationship. Still, that does not mean that survivor-mothers are unable to offer strong and nurturing positive environments for their children.

Some studies have found that IPV can impact survivor-mothers and children as mothers may demonstrate harsher parenting due to emotional exhaustion or fear of children setting off the abuse. 16

Other studies have found the opposite to be true. For instance, research findings from two large-scale Canadian studies did not find that mothers experiencing IPV were affected in their parenting responses when it came to positive interactions and behaviour management.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Learn From Survivors**

"I did things to make them feel good about themselves.
[It's] helpful to create confidence [and] be more aware, so they won't put up with violence the way I did."<sup>20</sup>

Rather, survivor-mothers attempted to protect their children through their parenting practices and frequent emotional support. This emotional support can consist of communicating to children about the violence and their feelings, as well as offering reassurance, support, and hope. Providing such support can be exhausting and suggests mothers themselves need additional support.

Importantly, as parenting practices of survivor-mothers are largely influenced by their own wellbeing and coping, interventions to better support survivor-mothers and their mental health benefit children and their wellbeing as well.<sup>19</sup>



### Survivor-mothers often face multiple systems of oppression that can affect their experiences of IPV and parenting.

Survivor-mothers often parent within intersectional systems and structures of oppression that influence their experiences of IPV (e.g. help-seeking) and parenting.<sup>21</sup> These can include child welfare, criminal justice systems, medical institutions, and family courts.

Child welfare, criminal, and health systems often judge mothers on the basis of discriminatory biases and assumptions that construct survivor-mothers as "bad mothers" who have willingly made the decision to live with violent partners.<sup>22</sup>

#### Consider:

- For Indigenous women, Indigenous leaders and advocates continue to assert that the child welfare system in Canada is a continuation of colonial intervention in their lives designed to separate Indigenous families based on negative perceptions of Indigenous mothering.<sup>23</sup>
- For survivor-mothers in same-sex relationships, experiences of mothering and IPV are often further complicated by the heterosexism, homophobia, and associated judgements that can create barriers to access to IPV supports or harsher judgements of their parenting.<sup>24</sup>
- For those living in rural and remote places, isolation is a challenge that prevents access to employment, education, and social interaction and keeps women entrapped in abusive relationships.<sup>25</sup>
- For newcomer and immigrant women, barriers related to institutional racism, immigration law, culture, religion, and a lack of diversity in frontline services make it difficult to access help.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of these systems of oppression and biases, survivor-mothers with intersecting identities face further isolation, decreased access to supports and services, and fear of children being taken away from them.<sup>27</sup>

There is a need to shift from blaming survivor-mothers for perceived "personal troubles" in raising children to recognizing the systemic, colonial, and racial roots of these issues that impede seeking help for themselves and their children.



#### **Learn From Survivors**

"Every time I wanted to leave, he would tell me 'If you say something I will go to immigration and accuse you. If you talk with the police, I will tell them that you are illegal and you won't ever see the boy again."<sup>28</sup>

### Abusive partners deliberately target mothering and the mother-child relationship.

Abusive partners often use children to exert power and control over survivormothers. Children may be used as "pawns" in a competition with survivormothers, or they may be asked to report on the survivor-mothers' activities.<sup>29</sup>

Abusive partners seek to undermine survivor-mothers' parenting abilities by portraying themselves as a "better" parent.<sup>30</sup>

This can occur especially during separation as daily routines and parenting responsibilities often change. For instance, they may begin to insert themselves aggressively into their children's everyday lives. This level of involvement may not always be in ways that are appropriate for children and their stages of development and is different than parents who become involved in ways that support children and their best interests.

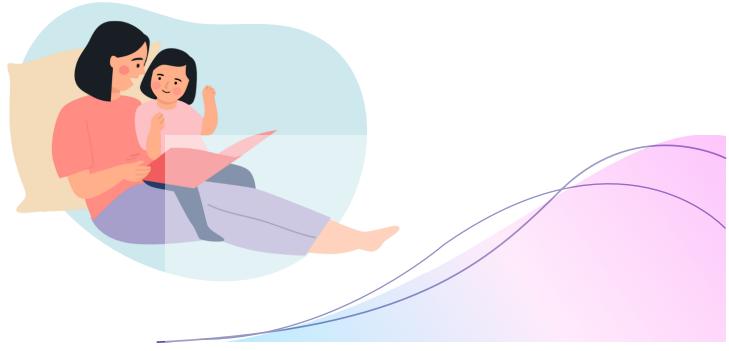
Abusive partners also often target the parenting abilities of survivor-mothers through frequent criticism, blaming them for their children's challenging behaviour, and undermining them in front of the children.<sup>31</sup> They may inflict violence on children in front of survivor-mothers as a means to control both, coerce survivor-mothers to watch or take part in the abuse, or threaten to report survivor-mothers to child protection.<sup>32</sup>

Such coercive control and abuse tactics impact survivor-mother and child relationships as well as they can make survivor-mothers feel like they cannot adequately protect their children and also may make children feel that their protective parent is not able to protect them.<sup>33</sup>

Learn more about children's experiences of coercive control in this Issue.



Lastly, abusive partners can limit parenting choices and decision-making for survivor-mothers as part of their abuse and control tactics. For instance, survivor-mothers may not be able to access certain social groups, informal supports, or even financial resources for necessities for their children. These tactics can continue beyond separation into the contexts of litigation and contact with children.



IPV can affect survivor-mothers and their children following separation from an abusive partner.

Survivor-mothers are often faulted for failing to provide safe homes for their children and it is often assumed that leaving an abusive relationship will cease the violence and harms once and for all. Yet, it is now well-known that survivor-mothers and their children can still be impacted by violence and coercive control even after they leave the relationship. In fact, a woman's risk of experiencing IPV increases post-separation.<sup>34</sup>

Abusive partners often use coercive control (e.g. intimidation, isolation, threats of violence) as a way to further harm survivor-mothers and their identity as mothers, particularly through the court system.<sup>35</sup> Children who are involved in separation, custody and access issues involving IPV can experience significant trauma.<sup>36</sup>

Risk assessment, safety planning, and supports remain critical even after separation. As survivor-mother and child relationships have been found to improve following separation from an abusive partner, such services could further support survivor-mothers to build on their parenting strengths and help their children recover from the violence and harms.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Learn From Survivors**

"...once you leave, it still continues, it turns onto the children, and they're put in the middle, and all the stuff you tried to shelter them from is now directly aimed at them".<sup>38</sup>

#### Check out these related resources!



Learn more about how litigation abuse is used to harm survivor and children in this Family Violence Family Law Brief: When the Family Court Becomes the Continuation of Family Violence After Separation: Understanding Litigation Abuse.

Access the brief



Youth survivors of coercive control in the context of IPV share their experiences in this Learning Network & Knowledge Hub Webinar: Living with Coercive Control: Youth Perspectives.

Access the webinar



Learn more about how allegations of parental alienation harm children and survivor-mothers in this Learning Network resource The Misuse of Parental Alienation in Family Court Proceedings with Allegations of Intimate Partner Violence

Access this resource

#### Considerations for Supporting Survivor-Mothers and Children

#### Focus on the Behaviour of Abusive Partners

Too often, survivor-mothers are exclusively held responsible for child safety and well-being. This focus on the parenting of survivor-mothers in the context of IPV dismisses the role of abusive partners who engage in ongoing abusive behaviour and the negative impacts of this behaviour on their children and parent-child relationships.

There are increasing calls for all-of-family approaches to support children exposed to IPV.<sup>39</sup> The term "all-of family" does not mean family therapy; instead, this approach emphasizes the need for responses that make all family members (children, victim/survivors, and perpetrators of violence) visible in policy and service responses and that centre child safety and well-being.

Primary principles include:40

- Focus on accountability and change in men who use violence and their impacts
- Support and collaborate with mothers to promote safety
- Expect the same standards of parenting and co-parenting from fathers as for mothers and other primary caregivers
- Keep children safe, and where possible, together with a protective parent
- Recognize and harness the power of informal support networks

Supporting the parenting of survivor-mothers and enhancing the well-being of children exposed to IPV requires that abusive partners, often fathers, cease abusive behaviour and be accountable for the impacts of their abuse.

#### Acknowledge the Role of Mothering for Survivor-Mothers

The role and identity of mothering largely influences survivor-mothers' decision-making and help-seeking in experiences of IPV. Service providers must recognize this role and the existing caregiving protective strategies used to support children's safety and wellbeing that may fall outside of accessing formal supports or that seem inconsistent and contradictory. Survivor-mothers need to be acknowledged as experts of their own experiences.

As well, motherhood as an identity plays a key role in survivor-mothers' resilience. It provides survivors with a sense of agency, purpose, and confidence and can support internal strength. 41 Often, supports and services focus on housing stability, employment, financial stability, and connection. While such resources are critical to supporting survivor-mothers and children, the survivor-mother and child relationship must be considered. Supports and services should consider offering programming that focuses on strengthening the survivor-mother and child bond.



### Programs supporting mothers and children exposed to IPV across Canada:

#### Mothers in Mind

Mothers in Mind® (MIM) is a mother and child program at the Child Development Institute in Toronto, Ontario specifically designed to meet the parenting needs of survivor-mothers who have experienced family violence, childhood abuse, neglect, or sexual assault, and have children under the age of four.

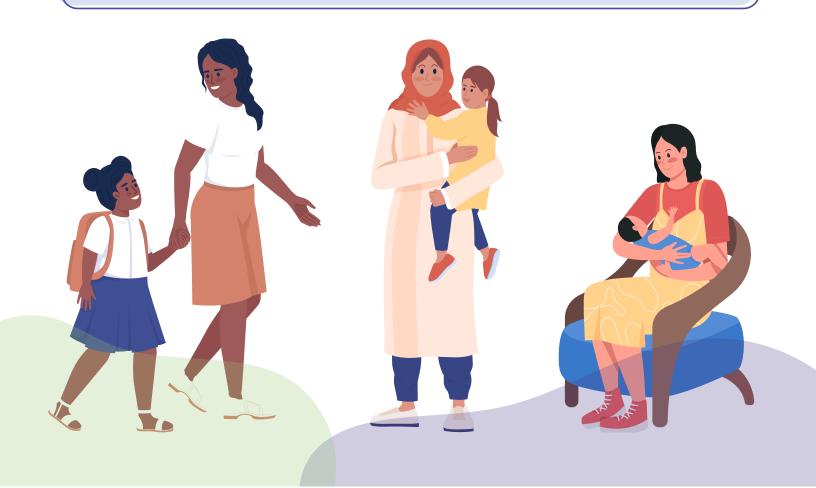
The program focuses on supporting survivor-mothers with parenting through a 10-week program offered throughout Ontario.

#### Kids Club and Moms' Empowerment

Kids Club and Moms' Empowerment is a 10-session concurrent program for children aged 6 to 12 and their mothers exposed to intimate partner violence. The program is located at the Beausejour Family Crisis Resource Centre in Shediac, New Brunswick.

#### Connections: A Group Intervention for Mothers and Children

Connections is a group intervention for mothers and children experiencing family violence at Mothercraft Society in Toronto, Ontario. The group helps mothers think about family violence and its impacts on their use of alcohol and other substances, parenting, and children's development. The Connections intervention manual is available in English, French, and in a version for use in Indigenous communities.



### Use strengths-based approaches to better understand and support survivor-mothers

Adopting strengths-based approaches that recognize the complex interplay between the challenges faced by survivor-

mothers and their parenting capacity is critical to supporting survivor-mothers' experiences of resilience, resistance, and healing.<sup>42</sup> For instance, strengths-based approaches can leverage the skills and strategies used by survivor-mothers to support their children (e.g. communication about the violence, providing emotional support).

Strengths-based approaches are not meant to diminish the experiences faced by survivor-mothers and their children. Rather, they are used to avoid labels, pathologizing language, and victim-blaming. Instead of asking, "what's wrong with them?" strengths-based approaches ask "where do their strengths lie?"

Learn more about strengthsbased approaches and supporting survivor-mother and child relationships <u>from this written resource:</u> <u>Nourishing Mothers from</u> <u>Strengths-Based Approach</u>

Programming and intervention must also consider the strengths of communities that survivor-mothers are part of. Collaborating with community leaders and culturally relevant organizations to create, implement, and deliver programming can leverage existing resources used by survivor-mothers who may rely on informal supports (e.g. friends, family members, faith organizations).

#### Please evaluate this Issue

Let us know what you think. Your input is important to us. Please complete <u>this brief survey</u> on your thoughts of this Issue

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