

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Northampton		
Unit of Assessment: 4 – Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
Title of case study: Enhancing children's agency and resistance strategies in situations of domestic violence and abuse		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015 - 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
1. Dr Jane Callaghan	1. Associate Professor	1. 2003 – 2017
2. Ms Joanne Alexander	2. Researcher	2. 2013 - 2019
3. Dr Judith Sixsmith	3. Professor	3. 2011 – 2017
4. Dr Lisa Fellin	4. Senior Lecturer	4. 2016 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - 2021		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies: Children in Situations of Domestic Abuse (UNARS) (2014-15) was the largest qualitative study of children's experiences and coping strategies, after living in situations of domestic abuse. The project brought together partners from Greece, Italy, Spain and the UK. Key findings focused on children's capacity for agency after domestic abuse and highlighted their direct lived experience of domestic abuse and coercive control. It recommended that children's direct experience of domestic abuse needed to be explicitly recognised in policy and practice, to support children's recovery more effectively. Through work with multidisciplinary practitioners and organisations, the project has demonstrably shaped policy and practice in several European countries (e.g. Italy, Spain and England), the USA, and New Zealand. In the USA, UNARS is extensively used in federal social work guidance for families impacted by domestic abuse, and in the UK UNARS has directly shaped the way children and young people are conceptualised in the *Domestic Abuse Bill 2021* for England and Wales.

2. Underpinning research

Dr Jane **Callaghan** was Principal Investigator for UNARS, a two-year project funded through the European Commission's Daphne III programme. With partners in Italy, Greece, Spain and England, it was the world's largest qualitative study of children's experiences of domestic abuse, focusing specifically on how children cope with, and recover from, domestic abuse. Outputs have evidenced how children experience coercion, constriction and constraint, and explored their agency and resistance strategies [3.1, 3.2]. UNARS has challenged the focus in domestic abuse policy/practice on the adult dyad, demonstrating that children are direct victims of domestic abuse and directly impacted by coercive and controlling behaviours in families where domestic abuse occurs.

In each participating country, the project team developed detailed, contextually and culturally nuanced understandings of children and young people's experiences of living with domestic violence, and of the service and policy landscapes within which their experiences were located. 107 children were involved in semi-structured and photo elicitation-based interviews across partner countries. UNARS revealed how children manage experiences of domestic abuse and violence. It highlighted children's resilience and agency in coping in such situations and their

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right to representation in policy/practice [3.1]. Outputs from the project highlighted play, creativity, children's management of disclosure and their use of space [3.3] as resources for coping and recovery, enabling children to retain a sense of relational connectedness and agency, despite violence and control [3.3]. Findings evidenced how children are impacted by violence, but are also resilient and active agents, making purposeful attempts to protect themselves and other family members, to heal and to build positive self-identities during and post-violence. The research identified this as a kind of *paradoxical resilience* [3.1, 3.4, 3.5]: what may appear as 'dysfunctional' and difficult in the eyes of clinically trained adults, is often the way that children have found to cope in highly located, creative and agentic ways.

The research concluded that children directly experience domestic abuse, and cannot be understood as either 'witnesses' or as 'collateral damage' to adult domestic violence and abuse: rather, they are typically articulate, strategic and reflexive communicators [3.4], whose voices and practices should be centred policies, practitioner training and services. Critiquing normative policy and professional discourses that position children as 'damaged' or as 'witnesses', the UNARS identifies the need for the language of national and regional policy to reflect children's agency [3.2]. The research advocated for more dedicated services for families who experience domestic violence and abuse, including more opportunities for children to play away from the gaze of adults [3.3], more services for children to talk about and engage their experiences [3.1], and further training for professionals [3.4, 3.5].

3. References to the research

- [3.1] Callaghan, J., Fellin, L., Alexander, J., Mavrou, S., & Papathanassiou, M. (2017). Children and domestic violence: emotional competencies in embodied and relational contexts. *Psychology of Violence*, 7(3), 333-342. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio000108>
- [3.2] Callaghan, J., Alexander, J., Fellin, L., & Sixsmith, J. (2018). Beyond 'witnessing': children's experiences of coercive control in domestic violence and abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 33(10), 1551-1581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515618946>
- [3.3] Fellin, L. C., Callaghan, J. E. M., Alexander, J. H., Mavrou, S., & Harrison-Breed, C. (2018). Child's Play? Children and Young People's Resistances to Domestic Violence and Abuse. *Children & Society*, 33(2), 126-141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12302>
- [3.4] Callaghan, J. E. M., Fellin, L. C., Mavrou, S., Alexander, J., & Sixsmith, J. (2017). The Management of Disclosure in Children's Accounts of Domestic Violence: Practices of Telling and Not Telling. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26(12), 3370-3387. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0832-3>
- [3.5] Callaghan, J. E. M., Fellin, L. C., & Alexander, J. H. (2019). Promoting Resilience and Agency in Children and Young People Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence and Abuse: the "MPOWER" Intervention. *Journal of Family Violence*, 34(6), 521-537. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-0025-x>

4. Details of the impact

From the outset, UNARS was designed to co-develop research-led impacts with policy makers locally, nationally and internationally; young people who have experienced domestic abuse; and organisations and practitioners who work with them. In England and Wales it has had a direct influence on the development of the *Domestic Abuse Bill*, which will become law in 2021.

Shaping the *Domestic Abuse Bill 2021*

Drawing directly on UNARS findings, Callaghan has played a key national role in lobbying for better recognition of children's direct experiences of domestic abuse in the *Domestic Abuse Bill 2021*. UNARS findings were shared in a wide range of policy/practice fora 2015-2020, and were instrumental in building consensus that children should not be considered 'collateral damage' in domestic abuse, but that their lived experiences should be acknowledged in policy, guidance and practice [e.g. 5.1.1-5.1.4]. Callaghan also presented at the inaugural meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence [5.2.1], re. 'priorities for the forthcoming

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Domestic Violence Act. As meeting minutes show, **Callaghan** stressed ‘that it is critical that our legal and policy framework reflects that children experience domestic abuse and coercive control – they are not only collateral damage’ [5.2.1] and this (based directly on output 3.2), became a guiding tenet of ensuing discussion. UNARS research was specifically highlighted in the Group’s resulting recommendations (*Creating a Truly Transformative Domestic Abuse Bill (2017-2018)*), in which **Callaghan**’s contributions are prominent throughout [5.2.2]. **Callaghan** subsequently provided expert testimony on children’s experiences to the Westminster Home Affairs Select Committee [5.2.3]: in their written report, the Committee drew directly on evidence provided by **Callaghan**, noting: “We are concerned that the Government’s proposed strategy makes no explicit additional provision for children who have experienced domestic abuse... We recommend that the devastating effect of domestic abuse on children is explicitly recognised in the legislation and that the Government develops a clear strategy to ensure that children experiencing domestic abuse are protected and given the support necessary to help them recover” [5.2.3]. The Home Affairs Select Committee Report explicitly builds on UNARS research: “Professor **Callaghan** told us that ‘the problem is too little legislation and too little direct recognition of their (children’s) status as victims’ [5.2.3]. Professor **Callaghan** recommended that the Bill explicitly recognise that, where other members of the family are present, they are also considered as direct victims of abuse. She proposed broader guidance for public bodies and for staff, including police officers, to be trained to respond to children and young people effectively and appropriately, and statutory obligations on local authorities in relation to the protection of children experiencing domestic abuse”. **Callaghan**’s input was drawn upon in detail in the Committee’s recommendations [5.2.4, recommendation 17-18] which directly shaped the subsequent *Domestic Violence Act*. The government response to the Home Affairs report explicitly recognises this importance of recognising children’s direct experiences as victims of domestic abuse, and of not allowing their experiences to be obscured by the emphasis on adult victims [5.2.5].

Building on this evidence-based process, **Callaghan** has continued to work closely with a large collaborative of children’s and domestic abuse charities to lobby explicitly for improved recognition of children’s experiences in domestic abuse legislation, policy and guidance [5.2.6]. This resulted in significant changes to the second and the current draft of the Domestic Abuse Bill, which now incorporates extensive reference to children’s needs and is explicitly guided by **Callaghan**’s research. In particular **Callaghan** has worked closely with the national charity Action for Children to secure a duty on local authorities to provide services that recognise children’s direct experience of domestic abuse. Giving evidence on the re-development of the *Domestic Abuse Bill* following consultation, Eleanor Briggs, Head of Policy for Action for Children, drew extensively on **Callaghan**’s work to argue for the importance of such a duty.

The second reading of the *Domestic Abuse Bill* in the House of Lords (6 January 2021) evidenced the extent to which UNARS evidence had been central in shaping and advocated for the *Domestic Abuse Bill*. For example, Baroness Williams explicitly recognised “that children growing up in a household where one adult is abusive towards another are as much victims of domestic abuse as the person being directly abused... [the *Bill*] expressly recognises this and will help to ensure that such children receive the support they need”. This was supported by Lord Rosser, who noted: “To address this reality, we also need a duty on public authorities to commission specialist services in the community for victims of abuse”, and that this should include specialist services for children, a position further echoed by Baroness Jenkin who noted the importance of community-based services for children and young people in particular [5.2.7]. As of March 2021, the *Domestic Abuse Bill* is undergoing its third and final reading in the House of Lords, prior to Royal Assent.

Inclusion in US Federal Guidance on Child Protection

UNARS findings have been cited extensively in national guidance provided to social workers across the USA by the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families [5.3]. In particular this guidance highlights the importance of recognising children’s direct experiences of domestic abuse and challenging their positioning as passive witnesses or ‘collateral damage’. For example, this new federal guidance includes a practice

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guide on coercive control that extensively quotes UNARS evidence, to highlight the importance of social workers taking time to hear and understand children's perspectives on domestic abuse. For example, directly citing UNARS evidence, the guidance recommends that social workers speak directly to all child victims, recognising their capacity to reflect on and describe their experiences, and that they recognise how the dynamics of coercive control might shape children's relational experiences [5.3]. This guidance was made available to every social worker in the USA.

National and International Policy Impacts

The UNARS project had implications on policy-makers across the EU. The UNARS team provided country-specific policy analysis to stakeholders in Greece, Italy and Spain. In Spain, UNARS findings were incorporated into the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, and in 2016 **Callaghan** was invited to Estonia, to present the UNARS project to the Department of Justice, to influence their implementation of the Istanbul Convention [5.4]. In Puglia, Italy, a chapter on children as victims of domestic violence has been included in regional policy implementation guidance, as a consequence of the knowledge gained in this project.

Callaghan's expertise in family violence and child wellbeing also led to an invitation to provide evidence to Scottish government in 2019, relating to the proposed removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement in child abuse cases (colloquially known as lifting the 'smacking ban'). Drawing directly on UNARS findings, **Callaghan** argued that children's accounts of domestic abuse demonstrated clear associations between parental 'chastisement' and their experiences of other abuse within the family, and that the blurring of boundaries around apparently acceptable parental violence made it more challenging for children to identify domestic abuse when it occurred. This evidence was influential in the removal of the defence in 2019 [5.5]. In 2016, **Callaghan** acted as expert advisor to the Department of Work and Pensions, to secure more sustained financial support for families fleeing domestic violence under the new 'Universal Credit' scheme. This reflected UNARS evidence that children often reported some masking of their responses to domestic abuse in the immediate aftermath, and that the difficulties that they might experience might only begin to **manifest** sometime after the family had fled [5.6].

Impacts on training and social work re. domestic violence

UNARS provided evidence-based training to strengthen methods and strategies for working with young people who have lived in situations of domestic violence to over 700 professionals in the UK (211 professionals in 2-3 day workshops, and 300 professionals in half day and one day workshops). **Callaghan** also included UNARS evidence and resources in training provided by **Callaghan** to social workers through the national 'Making Research Count Programme'. These training opportunities provided practitioners with knowledge and skills to understand and work more effectively with children and young people who have experienced domestic violence, and particularly highlighted the importance of allowing space for children to reflect on direct experiences of domestic abuse. Trainees reported that their practice had been enhanced by the transfer of knowledge and skills facilitated by the training events. They reported positive experiences of the programme and were enthusiastic about applying the ethos and principles of the UNARS project in their own practice and that of their colleagues, organizations and service development [5.1.4].

As part of the UNARS project, **Callaghan** and colleagues used research findings to develop and pilot an intervention for children and young people impacted by domestic abuse that focused on recognising and enhancing their capacity for agency and resilience. 100 children were involved in the original delivery of this intervention across the four participating countries. Their wellbeing and resilience were measured before, during and after the intervention, and these suggested an overall improvement in children and young people's outcomes [5.1.4]. The intervention has also been used as part of the SHE project, a three-year Big Lottery Funded project run by Eve, a frontline domestic abuse charity in Northampton to provide a family centred response to victims and perpetrators of abuse. Training was also provided to practitioners at Bedford's 'Space' project, a Youth Work project that supports children impacted by domestic abuse. Space continues to offer the UNARS intervention and has to date supported 40 children and young

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people through the programme. The intervention developed as part of the UNARS project has therefore benefited both practitioners who developed new methods for working with young people in these situations, and approximately 180 young people who have been supported to further develop resilience and a positive sense of self, as they recover from living with domestic violence.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] Examples of sector-wide consensus building around children's experiences

- [5.1.1] Callaghan, J. (2017) Children's experiences of domestic violence and coercive control. All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence, Consultation on new Domestic Violence legislation. Westminster, 19 July 2017
- [5.1.2] Callaghan, J. (2017) Children's experiences of domestic violence: coercion and control. Women's Aid National Child Protection Conference, 10 March 2017
- [5.1.3] Callaghan, J. (2016) Children's experiences of domestic abuse: implications for children's mental health. BAPSCAN Conference, Birmingham, 2016
- [5.1.4] Callaghan, J. (2017) Childhood and adversity: an issue for CAMHS. All Party Parliamentary Group for Couple Relationships, House of Commons, Westminster, 21 March 2017

[5.2] Shaping the *Domestic Abuse Bill 2021*

- [5.2.1] Meeting minutes, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence, "Transforming our National Response - Priorities for the Domestic Violence & Abuse Act" 19 July 2017, <https://1q7dgy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/APPG-on-Domestic-Violence-Minutes-of-Meeting.pdf>
- [5.2.2] All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence report *Creating a Truly Transformative Domestic Abuse Bill* <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06337/SN06337.pdf>
- [5.2.3] Expert witness: Home Affairs Select Committee, session on the *Domestic Abuse Bill* <https://www.parliament.uk/...-evidence-17-19/>
- [5.2.4] Home Affairs Select Committee report on *Domestic Abuse Bill* <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/1015/101502.htm>
- [5.2.5] Government response to the Home Affairs Select Committee report on *Domestic Abuse Bill* <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/2172/217202.htm>
- [5.2.6] Correspondence/minutes of meetings with NGO group including reading in House of Lords.
- [5.2.7] Reading of Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 in House of Lords, 5 Jan 2021 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-01-05/debates/1384371F-73F4-40BC-A44A-B0358CF839B6/DomesticAbuseBill>
- [5.3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, *Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/domesticviolence2018.pdf>
- [5.4] Callaghan, J. (2015) Children's experiences of domestic violence and coercive control. Raising a Generation Free of Violence Conference, Ministry of Justice, Estonia, 13-14 October 2015.
- [5.5] Expert witness: Scottish Government Evidence Session on removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement, Scottish Government, <https://www.scottishparliament.tv/meeting/equalities-and-human-rights-committee-february-28-2019>
- [5.6] Expert advisor to Department of Work and Pensions, House of Commons: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/150204-0002.htm>