Chapter Ten

FATHERLESS SONS - A REVIEW OF THE VOICES

by
Jill Chrisp

1. INTRODUCTION

'Fatherlessness' has attracted increasing attention over the past several years as a matter of urgent social concern. Numerous books have been written on the subject, conferences held, large amounts of material made available on the Internet and new organisations of men have emerged across the Western World. The media has also intensified its focus on fatherlessness linking it with negative statistics for adolescent males reporting that unemployment, suicide or bad health, long term psychological problems, disproportionate contribution to crime statistics among young men are the results of a lack of ongoing contact with their fathers.

This chapter draws from the data gathered during a doctoral thesis which is in progress. The thesis has involved a four year participatory action research project with a group of mothers raising sons, individual interviews with mothers of sons throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand and a projective drawing project involving 176 males aged five to seventeen years.

The voices of two groups are included here - those of the mothers and those of the sons. Investigation of the fathers has not been part of this research. They, themselves, I believe, can more appropriately undertake their own research into these issues. The mothers voices, section one, come from interviews with mothers of sons, including those involved in the longitudinal study. The second section describes the voices of the sons that have been elicited from research involving the interpretation of drawings. The final section, provides a critique of the fatherlessness phenomenon and links the contemporary highlighting of it with a political agenda.

2. THE MOTHERS' VOICES

Although the voices of the mothers[1] represented here do not claim to be representative, they come from a variety of family situations – single-parent, two-parent, lesbian and heterosexual. The commonality among them is that they are mothers of adolescent or

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1   For the purposes of this chapter the referent 'mother/s' indicates mothers of adolescent/post-adolescent sons.

post-adolescent boys. There is no room in this chapter to provide a comprehensive representation of all the views of the mothers who participated in the research, and so, as indicated by the title, I have selected one key area – fatherlessness. There is extensive use of quotes in this section as I believe the respondents speak best for themselves. Those selected are a representative sample from the thesis participants.

The publicly held and promoted view that boys are severely disadvantaged without a father who is present, is not congruent with the findings of this research. This does not mean that some of the mothers raising adolescent boys on their own did not experience enormous difficulty. They did. The following themes raised by the participants highlight the complexity of the 'fatherlessness' construct and hopefully provide a broader perspective than has been evident in literature published to date.

I have categorised the themes into three groups – (1) all groups of mothers, (2) single mothers and (3) lesbian mothers.

ISSUES RAISED BY ALL GROUPS OF MOTHERS

Amidst the mélange of mothers' voices, there was strong agreement that the presence of positive males in the lives of their sons was an important factor to the sons' sense of self and wellbeing. They saw that men had a role in reinforcing positive values:

> "...they [the sons] see that what I've been telling them all this time actually might be right?"[2]

> "my son has a sense that I hold very strong values of social justice, equity, respect, fairness but this is emphasised by the people that he looks up to in his life acting like that as well and because he's a boy he looks up to other men in his life"

Mothers also felt that the need for initiation of the sons into the male culture made the absent father an issue. One thought that 'maleness' is:

> "what they're growing up to and they need to feel, to understand it and know I",

another that:

> " the bottom line is they are males and I think they need the male influence",

another that:

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[2]   All quotes unless otherwise indicated come from individual and/or group interviews with the participant mothers

> *"there's a certain amount of truth that they* [the sons] *do need a role model and the best time for them to have a role model, is when they really start questioning their masculinity"*

and yet another that:

> *"fathers need to get involved because boys need to be able to understand and play the rules of the male"*

There were varying opinions about whether the males present needed to be the father. Those who felt that it was the father who needed to be present, and that their absence impacted negatively on their sons, said the following:

> *"I think it* [father absence] *is about the pain and the rejection, it's being rejected, it's been ignored, it's not being given those positive messages about themselves and their importance"*

> *"the lack of continuity of visits* [from the father]*, of support, of being there when they're needed so I don't think it's just because there's not a man in their life or that the woman doesn't give them enough, I think because there's someone who's important to them who's treating them like shit really and like they're unimportant"*

> *"I suppose I would hate to see the children, both sons and daughters, grow up without contact with the father even if the father is less than ideal"*

Those who felt that the significant males in the lives of the sons did not necessarily need to be the father said that:

> *"they* [the sons] *need male contact to some degree so they can have someone there to join them but it doesn't have to be the father"*

and:

> *"I don't think it matters whether it's a grandfather or whether it's an uncle or a male friend but it there's somebody there if the father can't be there"*

There were others who felt that merely being male wasn't enough and that what mattered about the fathers/male role models was what sort of role model they were. The qualities the participants saw as important were:

- Valuing the boys – taking an interest, offering quality time, being prepared and able to listen, to enjoy their company.

- Communicating - talking with a level of openness, intimacy and honesty, for whom conflict is normal and the resolution of that conflict is important.
- Modelling respect for women and expecting the boys to do the same.

One participant commented:

> "*It* [feeling valued by a male] *did actually make a difference to him, a big difference and what happened then was he began to value me. His increased self-esteem allowed him to step out of the victim role.*"

On the other hand, one of the negative aspects highlighted by a significant group of these participants was that of the collusion between the father and the son/s in the subjugation of who they were as women.

One described it as follows:

> "*Once they [the boys] got older he* [father/husband] *started to tell jokes with them...shit this and bloody that ... occasional reference to penises and...breaking of wind...he was undermining* [my parenting] *… I used to feel very uncomfortable...made me very tense.*"

She also describes how she was ignored in her protests and how, as a result, her "*self esteem suffered*" and she felt as if she was "*becoming a whinger*."

Another talked about the direct diminishing of her in front of the children:

> "*He* [father/husband] *used to go chook chook chook chook chook chook chook chook, there she goes again, there she goes kids listen there she goes again chook chook chook chook chook chook chook*"

Another discussed having her authority as a parent undermined:

> "*One of the things that I remember most was him saying, '*[Mother] *how can you let the children talk to you like that' in front of the them. So the children learnt that if they misbehaved their mother was growled at, their mother was told off for their misbehaving*"

Another spoke of the modelling of disapproving behaviour by her sons:

> "*'Mum why don't you do this, you're not doing it properly'. So they learnt to actually criticise me seeing what their father had done. So I kind of took on this whole belief that I was weak and I couldn't do this and I wasn't a very good mother*"

Another felt her views were attacked:

> " *… like my more feminist stuff which I blabbered on about for years with them where they would roll their eyes and look to the ceiling and say 'Mum's going on about her thing.'"*

The use of *'blabbered on'* in this last comment is indicative of the self criticism demonstrated by some of the participants when reflecting on their own ability as mothers and, I suggest is, in part, engendered by the ongoing faultfinding directed at them. This is further expressed by other mothers who described themselves as follows:

> *"I remember feeling at that stage … god I'm a terrible mother"*

> *"I became very guilt-ridden, horrendously guilt-ridden" …* [about not being good enough as a mother]

> *"I was such a domineering cow … I look back on it now and I keep thinking if I'd been, maybe if I'd been maybe a little bit more …"*

These issues were common to all groups of mothers. The following two sections address those specific to single mothers and to lesbian mothers.

ISSUES SPECIFIC TO SINGLE MOTHERS

As with all the voices represented, those expressed by single mothers must be seen in context. Their perceptions of fathers are influenced by their circumstances - at some point they have chosen, or have had the choice made for them, not to live with the fathers of their sons.   However genially, or acrimoniously, the separations occurred these mothers have had to battle against poverty, isolation, self-doubt, fear and exhaustion.

The 1996 Census counted 168,255 one-parent families, accounting for 17.7 percent of all family structures. Of these 83.1 percent, or a total of 139,819 one-parent families, were headed by women. (Statistics, New Zealand, 1999). The experiences of these mothers raising sons must be accorded due recognition.

The views of the single mothers can be grouped into five general themes:

a.   The desire to parent effectively on their own

Some felt the pressure of making sure they did it right and that their sons were not disadvantaged:

> *"I feel like there's a little bit more pressure on me to make sure nothing goes wrong and that everything's smooth"*

and:

> *"I get into a little panic every-time something goes wrong or if he does something or he seems to go very quiet, I get really scared that …I've*

made a mistake ... that maybe be would better off if I'd left him with [father]"

and:

"it quite often worries me a bit...stuff inside him and I know it's there ... there's not a male there he doesn't have anyone to unload it on to"

A common question asked by the single mother participants was:

"is this teenager acting out behaviour with a result of being brought up by a single parent family or is this just the usual part of the process of growing up teenage behaviour?"

b. Fear of homosexuality

Participants also expressed their own concern, and that of others, that parenting boys as mothers on their own would encourage homosexual preferences in them.

"I have lived the past years thinking that because I'm bringing my son up ... my son is going to turn into a poof. I get all these masculine things for him like guns etc ... I even thought twice about getting him to piano lessons."

"I think that one of the messages that we get given is that if we are close to our sons, we're going to turn them into queers ... homosexuals."

"The fear that if they don't play rugby and are being raised by their mothers that they'll turn out to be gay ... you've gotta get them into doing blokes things."

"I've got this fear- you hear the odd comment or read the odd thing about homosexuals and transvestites and things like that and that these are usually children who have been brought up in a single parent family. How right those comments have been I don't know but it worries me."

"I do think that a lot of mens' behaviour has slightly homophobic aspects to it where they're worried that you know that their sons you know might have tendencies to be gay or you know sort of homosexual tendencies or something like that"

b. Fatherlessness and father-absence

The mothers were vociferous when it came to this issue. Referring to media coverage one said:

> *"it makes me feel really bad, sometimes I feel like shit when I watch some of it"*

and another:

> *"the newspaper clippings and the talk on the radio about fatherlessness and the statistics of suicide because their fathers aren't with them makes me feel like crap. I just don't agree with it."*

Other participants felt that the highlighting of the fatherlessness phenomenon gave:

> *"kids ammunition to chuck it at their mother's face because all kids are going to act ...adolescence is riddled with kids that are acting out"*

or created a victim mentality:

> *"when people talk about 'these poor boys they haven't had their father with them.' I think that it's absolutely bullshit and it makes them more disempowered. It disempowers these boys because they think oh I have to stay a victim now for the rest of my life because their Daddy wasn't around."*

A number of the single mothers spoke of how their sons had sought out other males:

> *"he just has so much respect for his grandfather and for my two brothers and I just figure that he wouldn't need a father at all - that he gets everything he needed from the other males in my family"*

> *"this one significant other for* [son] *was an amazing young man and he just let* [son] *all over him"*

> *"actually learning from that one person in particular- he's a coach"*

> *"He* [son] *had a couple of really good role models at the school, one was a young teacher and the other was a tutor."*

Some of the mothers had experienced particularly negative circumstances with the fathers of their sons and expressed relief when he was absent:

> *"We did not want to have anything to do with him ... he was particularly unhealthy, destructive, bad, violent"*

and:

> *"my kids have not suffered from not having their particular father on the scene, I think they would've grown up to be very unhappy, mentally unhealthy people had he stayed around."*

c. Stress

Another key theme expressed by the single mother participants was that of the exhaustion and stress of parenting on their own. One stated that she felt:

> *"big disappointment that we* [father and self] *haven't been able to share the role of parenting cause I feel I take the larger share of it."*

and another that she *"had to put the male dominant side"* into her parenting.

Others felt that the presence of a father would command more respect from the sons than they received. One asked:

> *"Are these boys giving me a hard time simply because I'm their mother and I don't have in their eyes as much authority as perhaps a man might have or is it just usual teenage argy bargy"*

 and another:

> *"would he do this if his father standing in front of him, would he answer a father, back this way, would he dare do it to a man?"*

d. Socio-economic factors

Although the research did not specifically investigate socio-economic factors, and their relationship to the wellbeing of the family structure, the comments of this group of participants have indicated that the lack of resources and their experiences of poverty were a major debilitating factor in their ability to parent. A sample of the comments made were as follows:

> *" I think it's really a critical issue because we've had a lot of stress around money in our family and at times it hasn't been very healthy for the kids in terms of the stress"*

> *"It can be thrown back at these women as an abuse issue for example - we had a neglected childhood because you didn't provide us with the financial ability to do this, that or the other therefore we had deprival and abused childhood but in fact the women are in a catch 22 situation, they've no money to do what their children want."*

> *"Poverty is the biggest issue not having enough money for lunches, for adequate clothing, shoes and the winter and stuff like that it's not*

whether or not Dad's around. Low self esteem in particular because they don't have enough lunch, they don't have enough clothes, they can't bring the money to go on the school trip and it's really hard for those kids"

"I'd feel guilty if he hadn't gone [on a school trip costing $12.00] *and he'd rant and rave."*

"I've seen so many women do a great job and the reason that that we fall down sometimes is not because fathers aren't around it's because there's not enough resources."

"I guess the situation I had was ideal for me in that I had an income, I'd never know what it was like to be really stretching for money and I guess that puts a totally different perspective on it."

These effects of socio-economic hardship on the ability of single mothers to parent their sons effectively cannot be underestimated. Although not the subject of this piece, it is one that requires scrutiny.

ISSUES SPECIFIC TO LESBIAN MOTHERS

Additional issues raised by lesbian mothers indicated that there was another set of factors that needed to be negotiated – homophobic attitudes toward the mother and her lifestyle, the affect it could have on the sons' choices, the added isolation of parenting as a lesbian mother of sons and the difficulty of establishing partnerships

"[Son] *used to come out with all of it just repeat it.. I was a dirty filthy rotten lesbian out of* [Son's] *mouth.* [Father] *was going to fight custody on the basis of the lesbianism. He said he'd never have* [his son] *growing up surrounded by women.*"

"[Father] *had had the whole stereotypical thing that it would be very very, very sick for* [Son] *to grow up in my lifestyle - he ran the risk of becoming homosexual"*

" I do worry and I wonder what on earths going to happen when he starts going out with girls if - he goes out with girls, I suppose - I don't wanna pre-empt anything but that freaks me out … how do you explain to your girlfriend that your mother's a dyke?

"He's got good reason to be [nervous] *because my oldest daughter just got sheer shit at the school she was at when they found out that her mother was gay."*

"I think it gave me a particular sort of added feeling of self-hatred. How was I going to integrate the bits of me that were important because I have no doubt, my kids are really important to me."

*"My partner wanted me to live with her and she couldn't take the
package deal which was my teenagers as well so my relationship ended."*

During these interviews a number of the mothers described an attitudinal change of
their pre-adolescent sons toward them. The boys reportedly became increasingly
negative toward their mothers as they entered their pubescent years. I was interested to
find out whether these feelings stemmed from the need for mothers to come to terms
with the normal processes of separation of their sons from them or whether 'the sons'
began to perceive their mothers as inferior and insignificant at this stage of their lives.

I realised that it could be difficult for me to determine the perceptions of young males
by interviewing them. I was certain that the results would be influenced by their
knowledge that I would be a subject of my own questions. I recognised also that, as the
sons were not the focus of the overall project, I did not have the scope or resources to
gain more than a superficial awareness of their viewpoints.

Given these parameters, drawing-interpretation seemed one method of working with
large numbers of young males. By interpreting young males' drawings of their families
and of themselves in relation to their families, and by eliciting sub-conscious
representations from these drawings, I was able to gain an understanding of the
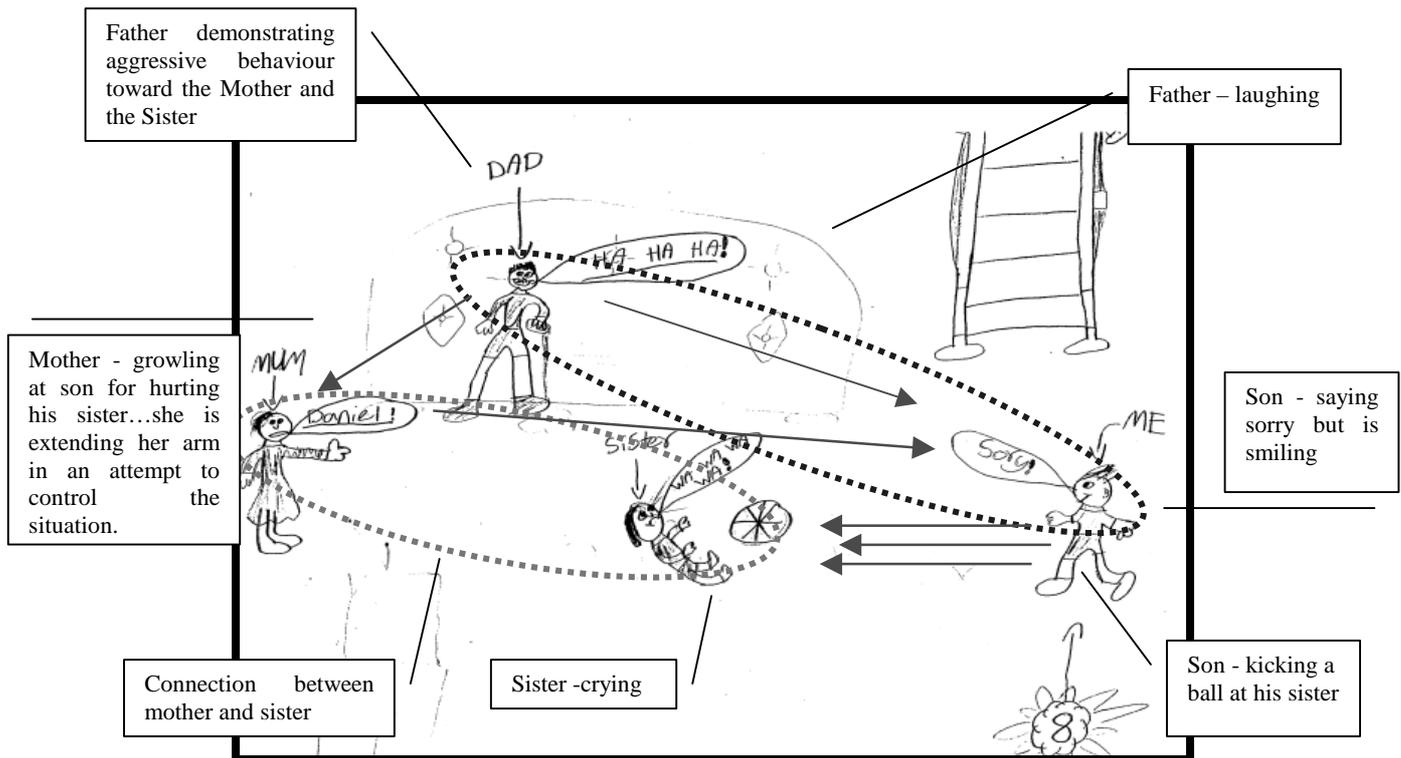perceptions of a large group of boys and young men.

3. THE SONS' VOICES

Although there is not the opportunity here to describe the research processes or results
in any detail, this section will give an overview of the key findings. The drawing-
interpretation project involved the performing of two drawing exercises[3] by 176 male
students (5 - 17 years). Three separate tools of interpretation and analysis were used
with the drawings and generalities were elicited from these by comparing results within
and between age cohorts. The male participants were divided into three age categories:
childhood from 5 to 9 years (inclusive), pubescence from 10 to 13 years and
adolescence from 14 to 17 years.

The 1996 NZ Census statistics, for the area from which the participants were gathered,
indicate that 32% of all families are one-parent families. The principal of the
intermediate school involved in the project stated that 95 boys from [the school] came
from single parent families. Of these, 16 lived with a male caregiver and 79 with a
female caregiver. This ratio is endorsed by the national statistical average that shows
that men head 17% of sole parent families (Statistics New Zealand, 1999).

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[3]   The choice of drawing interpretation tools was made under the supervision of Auckland art
        therapist, Maureen Woodcock.

Kinetic-Family Drawing: An example of techniques used in the first analysis.

Father demonstrating aggressive behaviour toward the Mother and the Sister

Father – laughing

Mother - growling at son for hurting his sister…she is extending her arm in an attempt to control the situation.

Son - saying sorry but is smiling

Connection between mother and sister

Sister -crying

Son - kicking a ball at his sister

Commentary: This eight-year-old boy has some anger with his little sister and is demonstrating that. His father is connecting with him and by doing so, reinforcing a dominance over the son's mother and sister.

Drawing Analysis Techniques Used:
1. *K-F-D Actions:* Movement of energy between people as highlighted by arrows and dotted lines.
2. *K-F-D Characteristics:* Distinguishing features of figures –extended arm, smile on the face.*K-F-D Styles:* The use of space. Father dominant at the top of the drawing and semi-encapsulated by the couch

Key Outcomes for Project: Self and Father connected and dominant. Self actively aggressive. Father passively aggressive. Gender segregation within the family.

The findings of the drawing project have indeed reflected the mothers' reported experiences of an attitudinal change by their sons toward them at pubescence. The results of the first analysis identified how the participant had represented the mother and/or father and/or self (and/or any other family member highlighted) using the descriptors *dominant, connected, insignificant* and *absent.* The summary of results is as follows:

- Connection: The connection between the mother and the self was depicted most strongly in the childhood period whereas the connection between the father and the

self was lowest at this time. The connection with the father was portrayed as strongest pubescence dropping way in adolescence.

- Dominance: The father was portrayed as the more dominant than the mother and the self at all periods, with the self more dominant than his mother at pubescence and adolescence. The sons saw themselves as increasing in dominance from childhood to adolescence

- Absence: The mother was most absent at pubescence, although overall the level of depicted absence of the mother was small. The father's highest level of absence was during the childhood period and was the lowest at pubescence. This was also the period where the son's depicted connection with him was the highest

- Insignificance: The mother was depicted as least insignificant in the childhood period and the highest at pubescence. The father is not depicted as insignificant at all until the adolescent period when it is still very low. They sons portrayed a consequential trend as they depicted their perceived insignificance. That is, they saw themselves as more insignificant than the mother and the father at all periods, with a dramatic increase at adolescence.

I was concerned at the self-perceived *insignificance* of the young males and the way that the *insignificance* increased as they moved through each age period. Although the occurrence of *insignificance* correlated with that of *dominance*, I assumed that these two trends were identified by two different groups of boys. The concern led me to question whether the proportion of single mother families in the geographical area, within which the young males resided, was a factor.

By rearranging the results of the first analysis and linking *connection* with *insignificance*, however, there was little difference between the depicted sense of self as insignificant when connected with either the mother or father. The adolescent period is traditionally one where young people are negotiating a plethora of challenges and tensions, and so this result, of increased *insignificance* at adolescence, may not be surprising. The notable outcome as it relates to this project is that it does not appear that lack of contact with the father *contributes* to a perception of insignificance for the son.

RHETORIC OR REALITY

The data from the drawing project does not explain *why* there is a marginalising and minimising of the mother at pubescence and through adolescence, but confirms that it does happen. The interviews with mothers suggest that factors such as poverty, isolation, stereotypical messages, lack of self-esteem and the lack of positive male role models have a major impact on the well being of the family and its members. To my knowledge there has been no work initiated to determine the effects that the diminishing of the mother and degradation of her world has on the son. This requires further research.

There has been much discussion nationally and internationally about the importance of the involvement of the father with the son. While I have unmitigated support for the right and need of a boy to have a beneficial relationship with his father, I also defend, and advocate for, his right to the benefit of a healthy interdependent relationship with his mother. (Chrisp, 1998a, 1998b, 1999)

There are many questions left still unanswered. The complexities of the mother/son relationship in this society have not yet been effectively addressed. The principal of the primary school involved in the drawing project endorses the comments of a number of the mothers interviewed with this observation. *"When the behaviour problems begin many of the* [single] *mothers feel they do not have support, don't know where to turn for help, feel inadequate. Meanwhile, the boys learn it is easy to win, dominate and set their own rules."*

I do not believe we can ignore this observation. As a society, we need to find ways of supporting the mother as she parents her son, of intervening as soon as there are signs of breakdown in the relationship between them and of challenging current populist, and un-researched, thinking that the major cause of the problems for young men is the absence of the father.

Numerous commentators over recent years have argued that the rights of children and the task of raising them has not been perceived to be of value in this country. The late Laurie O'Reilly, recent Commissioner for Children, made this explicit in a radio interview with Brian Edwards (20.09.97) when he described what he saw as legislative, economic and social apathy toward children and families. He spoke of his unsuccessful attempt to strengthen the advocacy role of the commission by bringing it out from under the umbrella of the Ministry of Social Welfare and establishing it as an independent office of parliament.

Statistically the well being of New Zealand children is low on the international scale for developed countries. The report[4] written by a coalition of non-government organisations and considered by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Geneva, 1997) was critical of this government's record of compliance. It outlined four key areas of concern for this country - child poverty, fragmented and poorly resourced services, violence against children and the high youth suicide rate.

Economically we do not value the task of parenting. Although described as a career it does not attract a wage unless the parent is single in which case the state provides a disproportionately small income on which the family is to survive.

One of the public responses emerging from this situation is an incongruent need for 'father', focused particularly on boys and accompanied by urgency and concentration.

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[4] Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child New Zealand is required to regularly report on its record of compliance. As part of the reporting process the Committee on the Rights of the Child encourages an alternative report written by NGOs.

The wider and more endemic issues of poverty, child abuse, emotional and physical ill health appear to be disregarded.

I suggest that part of the government agenda, as it moves from a public to a private ethos of social and economic responsibility, is to mandate the father to take up his individual obligation for his children thereby lessening the requirement for state support. As the government has been captured by an individualistic monetarist philosophy so too the social context of the country is being influenced by right wing-pro-family precepts with an accompanying persuasion for the reinstatement of traditional family values and the father as head and protector of his wife and children.

The focus on 'fatherlessness/father absence' as a societal ill sets up a no-win situation for the father, the mother and the son. I question seriously the motivations behind this accentuation.

A common theme generating from the project fieldwork shows that it is more important for a parent to have self-esteem intact, the ability to show love and affirmation and also with a belief about who they are as an adult and a parent than it is to be a parent of either gender. It tears a child apart to have one parent devalued by the other. My concern and the thesis that underpins my work is that as they develop, sons learn to devalue their mothers and the world that women inhabit. 'Father-absence' speak and the call for the return to traditional nuclear family values can serve to further perpetuate this. One of the complexities of the fatherlessness phenomenon is that it is articulated by a wide spectrum of political and social sectors, with a diversity of agendas and as many solutions. Superficial reproach for the increase in negative statistics for male youth is aimed at the single mother family. We have not yet effectively considered more complex reasons underlying issues such as poverty, emotional wellbeing, lack of social support and isolation of the caregiving parent. These issues must be judiciously investigated, and thoroughly addressed, if environments are to be created that will enable boys to develop into healthy men who have negotiated the challenges of their adolescence and are accordingly able to contribute to a rapidly changing society.

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