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The Women's Housing Caucus

Victims or Villains?

A presentation by

Caroline Hunter and Judy Nixon

*(Centre for Research into Social Inclusion
Sheffield Hallam University)*

sharing a study of stories from women caught in the crossfire of conflicting public policy positions. Their housing security, their well-being and their capacity to participate all suffer. How can policy and practice promote housing success and minimize the costly impacts of housing disruption?

Biographical sketches

Caroline Hunter is a Senior Lecturer in Housing Law and a senior researcher in the Centre for Social Inclusion at Sheffield Hallam University, Yorkshire. Before turning to academia she worked in practice as a barrister, specialising exclusively in the area of housing and local government. As an academic she has written and researched extensively on matters relating to the interaction of housing policy and practice with the law. She is deputy general editor of the *Journal of Housing Law*, the *Encyclopaedia of Housing Law and Practice* and the *Housing Law Reports*.

Contact: c.m.hunter@shu.ac.uk

Judy Nixon is a Senior Lecturer in Housing Policy and a senior researcher in the Centre for Social Inclusion at Sheffield Hallam University, Yorkshire. She has extensive experience of teaching, researching and writing in the fields of housing policy and socio-legal issues. Her areas of interest have included responses to domestic violence; international housing systems; housing management issues and evictions. For several years now she has been specialising work around anti-social behaviour.

Contact: j.nixon@shu.ac.uk

Working together, Judy and Caroline have established a profile as one of the UK's leading housing research partnerships. They have undertaken several leading studies on 'precarious' tenancies and, more recently they have worked extensively on issues concerning anti-social behaviour. Significant projects include: a project funded by the Office of Deputy Prime Minister into good practice in tackling anti-social behaviour in mixed tenure areas; an evaluation of what 'works' for victims and witnesses of anti-social behaviour and a major piece of research that examines innovation in the provision of support for families involved in anti-social behaviour. Today's presentation was based on material from the last project.

Presentation Abstract:

Judy Nixon and Caroline Hunter have recently completed a two year evaluation of a small number of pioneering Anti-social Behaviour Projects providing support to predominantly to lone parent women at risk of losing their home as a result of anti-social behaviour. The research findings are fascinating and highlight the contradictory ways in which women are portrayed as both 'villains' and 'victims' in anti-social behaviour policy debates. Talking to women about their experiences we found that the term 'anti-social behaviour' was seen as carrying with it a host of negative connotations and was associated with bad parenting, out of control children and disregard for neighbours. Being labelled as anti-social was described as 'embarrassing', 'upsetting' and 'humiliating'. Here the focus of attention is on lack of responsibility and the culpability of women for the behaviour of members of their household and visitors to their home. The research however, also showed that as well as being the subject of complaints women were just as likely to be 'victims' of the behaviour of others in a number of different ways, e.g. in terms of the high incidence of family violence, as the target for youth nuisance, and the focus of harassment and victimisation from neighbours.

The fact that women can be both simultaneously 'victims' and 'villains' has not been recognised by New Labour politicians or the media who predominantly portray perpetrators of ASB in negative and demonising ways. Thus in the ASB policy discourse lone parent women are held to be responsible for the behaviour of their sons and partners in both public and private spaces. Failure to exercise control is attributed to irresponsible behaviour, fecklessness and regardless of the circumstances women are held culpable. In contrast to this negative construction of women's behaviour a brief examination of the policy debates around family violence shows there to have been a shift away from the portrayal of women as responsible for the behaviour of their violent partners and children towards recognition of the damaging impact of male violence. A comparison of the different responses to ASB and domestic violence raises interesting questions about how social problems are gendered and the way in which concepts of blameworthiness, culpability and responsibility are variously employed in relation to lone mothers.

Links to the Interim Evaluation Findings published by the Office of The Deputy Prime Minister January 2006

<http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163014>

<http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163035>

Background context material

The importance of working with perpetrators of ASB to help them change their behaviour has been recognised by both policy makers and practitioners and in 2003, a small number of pioneering, local authorities, housing associations and charities set up specialist ASB rehabilitation projects to work with families who are at risk of homelessness or who have been evicted from their homes due to anti-social behaviour. The projects support service users to help them address the underlying causes of their behaviour and aim to:

- Prevent repeat cycles of homelessness and family breakdown arising as a result of anti-social behaviour;
- Address unmet support needs and ensure that families are able to sustain a positive lifestyle without being the cause of anti-social behaviour;
- Promote social inclusion for families and assist in providing better outcomes in relation to health, education and well being;
- Increase community stability by enabling and supporting families to live peacefully and to fully participate in their communities.

In early 2004, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned a team of independent researchers led by Judy Nixon and Caroline Hunter from Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a two year evaluation of the impact of such projects in terms of costs and benefits, effectiveness and lessons for wider dissemination. Drawing on Summary Research Findings from the evaluation, based on an analysis of statistical data collected in relation to 99 families consisting of 131 adults and 259 children who had worked with Intensive Support Projects up to July 2004 supplemented by detailed qualitative data drawn from interviews with a sample of referral agencies and families working with the projects, we found that:

- Families referred to the projects tended to be large with one in five families (22 %) consisting of four or more children. Eight out of ten families were headed by lone parent women.
- High levels of family violence were noted with violence in the home affecting over a quarter of families (28%). Violence was not always perpetuated by adult family members and in a number of cases it was reported that teenage children had assaulted their mothers. Often lone parent women found it hard to access help to deal with the violence as one mother explained:

“It was like when I first phoned up social services, I said to them ‘it’s going to be him or me’ because he had a knife up at me at one point, just it’s going to be a case of him or me, that’s how it was going next with things getting that bad and he was that violent towards me...but even then ...they [social services] didn’t want to know”.

- The complex, multi-layered reality of ASB was reflected in the fact that in just under one in five cases (19%) as well as being the alleged perpetrators of ASB family members had also been the victims of ASB by others. Lone mothers, who felt particularly powerless to prevent the anti-social behaviour, often took avoidance action rather than confront the ‘perpetrators’ about their behaviour:

“I have been a victim, yeah. At the beginning, when I first moved in there I had, because I were having a lot of trouble about the balls banging against

this garage and I kept going out. And they were like 16, 17 year old lads these, there were about 18, 19 of these hanging around on the street, just where I lived. ... I had spray paint on me door, things being put through me letterbox, all me washing pulled off me line, all ripped... Yeah. I were on antidepressants and everything from doctor. Put everything in [to the landlord] and said 'Look I need a move' and that. [The landlord] weren't interested. Never, so I just kept me gob shut, let them carry on doing what they're doing, just kept the kids in."

Case Study examples illustrating how women are often both 'villains' and 'victims'

Case study 1

Sarah, her partner John and two of her four children who were living with her became homeless following a number of serious incidents caused by groups of visitors to the family home which resulted in violent confrontations and serious criminal damage. Several times most of the windows in the home were smashed and on one occasion the house was ransacked. Sarah and John were both regular amphetamine users and had a volatile and violent relationship which subsequently broke down leaving Sarah on her own with her children. As a result of her multiple support needs and the lack of stable accommodation, her youngest child was placed in the care of relatives by social services. Following a 'child in need' conference it was agreed that a local social landlord would re-house the family as long as Sarah agreed to work with the local Intensive Support Project. Initially Sarah resisted the referral to the project viewing it as an unnecessary imposition but when she realised it was her only option to secure permanent accommodation she reluctantly agreed to the referral. The project support worker worked with the family over an 11-month period and helped them settle into their new accommodation, assisted in arranging schooling for the children while also helping Sarah develop parenting skills and address her problem of drug addiction. At the time Sarah was interviewed she was still working closely with the project worker and felt that the help provided had been invaluable in enabling her to achieve major changes in her life including overcoming her addiction to drugs. Since working with the project there have been no complaints about the family's behaviour and Sarah's youngest child is now living with the family again.

Case Study 2

Jane, a lone mother of six children, found it increasingly difficult to control the behaviour of her three teenage sons who were subject to ASBOs as a result of their violent and abusive behaviour. Jane, who suffers from a long-term health problem, found the situation increasingly stressful and as a result she often stayed with a relative, leaving the children without supervision. In Jane's absence, the situation deteriorated further as groups of young people gathered at the house drinking and using drugs. There were also concerns about the younger children failing to attend school. Eventually Jane's landlord served her with an eviction notice but prior to possession action being taken; the family were advised by the police to move into temporary emergency accommodation following serious threats of retaliatory action by local residents. It was while the family were in interim accommodation that they were referred to one of the projects. Jane was wary about working with the project at first, fearing that her children would be taken into care. However, as she developed a relationship with her project worker her fears were dispelled and she found the support offered by the project to be a great help. Interventions focussed on helping Jane develop parenting skills, keeping the children to the terms of their ASBOs, and trying to get the children back into mainstream education.

Although Jane has engaged with the project and has attended a parenting course, Jane's teenage sons have failed to change their behaviour and further complaints have been made against them. As a result, the family continue to face eviction from their current property. Jane is very frustrated at this situation as she and her younger children are settled and happy in the new property. She feels at a loss to know how to rectify the situation as both she and the project have done all they can.