

# **Racism, 'bad mothers' and child abuse in news media: A role for social work advocacy**

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Social workers are frequently critical of the role of media reporting of family violence. While it is understandable that child deaths become the focus of public scrutiny, in New Zealand a cultural 'story' is told about child abuse. Both mainstream journalists and columnists employ race, class and gender stereotyping in discussing child abuse. Columnists have a special power — their cruel words shock and their status affords their polemic some gravitas. And with the freedom offered by public comment the tone becomes more anti-poor and misogynist. Inflammatory judgements about mothers underscore an ideological deviance narrative that seeks to frame child abuse with a central folk-devil figure—the bad Maori welfare mother. It is likely that the inexplicable behaviour of perpetrators leads to casting about for explanations; mothers are thus an easy target, even if they too have experienced violence at the hands of the abuser. A media focus on deaths of Maori children suggests that Maori families, and specifically Maori mothers, have become central to a moral panic about claims that child abuse is a 'cultural' problem, rather than an outcome of poverty, discrimination and institutional racism. There are consequences for social work in this moral panic discourse: moralistic, individualising and surveillant approaches to families with the greatest need. A focus on 'bad mothers' may cement an artificial divide between adult and child protective services at a time when the needs of vulnerable children and their caregivers may benefit from co-location of child and adult services. Ultimately a focus on cultural 'dysfunction' perpetuates social injustice – ignoring poverty, racism, ingrained sexism and other sources of alienation. To counter this is a major challenge for human rights focussed social work. This paper explores the potential role of social work research in challenging these media narratives.

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