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# Motherhood, moral authority and the charismatic matriarch in the aftermath of lethal violence

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crj)**Elizabeth A Cook** 

City, University of London, UK

## Abstract

Images of maternal suffering are an evocative and powerful means of communication in a world where the private grief of victims has increasingly become subject to commodification and public consumption. This article looks at the influence of bereaved mothers as symbols of respect, peace and dignity in the aftermath of violence, and as a result their persuasive presence in family activism. Drawing upon two case studies, this article explores the importance of victims' stories in public life and, in particular, the presence of the charismatic matriarch in creating communities of solidarity, raising awareness of harms that have previously gone unheard and prompting policy change. It considers the 'canonical' story of the mother in public life and concludes by arguing that more attention should be paid to victims' stories and their influence on policy-making, politics and eventually in becoming public grievances.

## Keywords

Charisma, cultural victimology, family activism, mothers, stories, victims

## Introduction

The grief of a bereaved mother is an evocative image in public life. Images of maternal suffering sometimes stir up unanswerable demands for a renewed sense of safety and security to that which is simply incomprehensible to many of us. For the most part, acts of lethal violence have been suffered privately within the confines of the home. However, images of maternal suffering are a powerful and persuasive means of communication in

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### Corresponding author:

Elizabeth A Cook, Violence and Society Centre, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK.

Email: [elizabeth.cook@city.ac.uk](mailto:elizabeth.cook@city.ac.uk)

a world where the private grief of victims has been increasingly subject to public gaze and public consumption (Corcoran, 2019; O'Leary, 2018). Rather than treat victims as suspect, criminal justice policy has instead professionalised and 'formalized the use of the victim's voice', with a number of scholars noting the new symbolic currency of the victim in contemporary politics (McGarry and Walklate, 2015: 104).

The role of family activists as part of this movement has become particularly visible, where the onus and responsibility for securing accountability in the aftermath of lethal violence has primarily fallen to the bereaved to maintain awareness of the issues in the public domain. The move towards responsabilisation has only further dissolved welfare accountability, placing more emphasis on delegating responsibility and managing harm than confronting structural problems (Duggan and Heap, 2014; Garland, 2001). Many have voiced concern over the risk of political exploitation of the plights of victims, the scope for punitive populism and hidden neoliberal agendas where concern for victims is fuelled more by 'economic imperatives than empathy' (see Barker, 2007; Christie, 2010; Duggan and Heap, 2014: 2; Harper and Treadwell, 2013). The early influences of feminism and civil rights have been equally important catalysts, representing one of the first moves towards the politicisation of these experiences which has seen victims of crime converted 'into an identifiable and coherent group, with evident political potential' (Miers, 1978: 51). Victims, as Garland (2001) has argued, now make normative claims on behalf of the wider collective concerning the nature of victim needs, what victim rights should look like and how the criminal justice system should respond, with it becoming increasingly clear that 'where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says' (Alcoff, 1992: 6). If victims are to play a greater policy role in the criminal justice system, more attention must be paid to *why* particular stories resonate in public and political life more than others.

This article explores the story of two bereaved mothers and, in particular, their influence in communicating stories of lethal violence in the public sphere. Although it is important to note that family activism in response to lethal violence can extend to a broad range of issues, including state corporate violence, deaths in police custody and prison, and domestic abuse, this article specifically focuses on two types of lethal violence through case studies: that of supposedly 'private violence' of fatal family violence and 'public violence' in the form of gun violence in an inner-city community. The article falls into three parts. The first part briefly outlines the growing importance of family activism before moving on to consider the gendered dynamics of these movements. The second part explores the role of the charismatic matriarch and argues that they may take two forms within victim policy: first, that of the solo campaigner who has become a symbolic reminder of institutional failures and whose public biographies have woven into them normative claims of expressions of grief and claims for criminal justice reform; and second, that of the matriarchal leader of collective efforts who is able to assemble communities of solidarity and draw upon the collective strength of those who share the same experience. An empirical case study is presented here to illustrate the power of one charismatic matriarch in creating communities of solidarity before drawing comparisons with a second case study to highlight how differences in identity influence the role of charismatic matriarch. The final part critically considers the 'canonical' story of the mother by comparing the two case studies and discussing the limits imposed

by narratives of ‘good mothering’ and maternal ideals on the efforts of bereaved mothers in the public sphere.

## **Maternal activism, peace and violence**

The aftermath of lethal violence presents families with unfamiliar and uncomfortable ground, characterised by instability and uncertainty. For many, the effects of lethal violence can be overwhelming and disruptive, yet there are many examples of family activism that have emerged to address these harms. There has been increasing focus on the family as a site of responsibility in the aftermath of lethal violence, and the role of family activism has proved to be an important impetus in struggles for accountability, truth and justice. The efforts of bereaved families are grounded in ties of kinship, social bonds and blood ties and have been driving forces in attempts to share their experience, to provide services they feel they should have access to, to voice concerns they feel that other victims need to hear, to share information or to give meaning back that victimisation might have disrupted. The stories of families in the aftermath of lethal violence offer an important insight into how families address harms privately and publicly, the potential that family activism holds in reconciling the uncertainties and insecurities that lethal violence imposes, and the traction that different victims’ families gain in public life.

The figure of the bereaved mother is a recurring feature in family activism and has provided an effective platform for engaging broader public interest and recognition within victim policy. In the United Kingdom, there are a number of examples of bereaved mothers becoming influential public figures in response to criminal injustices. Doreen Lawrence, the mother of teenager Stephen Lawrence who was murdered in 1993 in London, represents an influential example. For over two decades, Doreen Lawrence has campaigned for accountability of racial injustices and has been a significant driving force in shaping modern criminal justice policy and practice (see Rock, 2004). Sara Payne, whose 8-year-old daughter was murdered in 2000 in West Sussex, has shared a similar high-profile status and, from this position, has campaigned for changes to Child Sex Offences Disclosure Scheme which allows parents to enquire as to whether individuals with access to their children have been previously convicted or suspected of child sex offences (Harper and Treadwell, 2013).

The ‘cultural story’ of motherhood in public life, as Wright (2016: 329) describes, marks out mothers as strong and independent while also unthreatening. Personal responsibilities and expectations of care, guardianship and protection from harm associated with ‘good’ mothering are made explicit within these public responses, offering a salient and relevant story for many to identify with (Walklate et al., 2019b). Although, as Sara Ruddick (1989: 156) has argued, a ‘pure maternal peacefulness does not exist’ and mothers invariably encounter conflict in practice, she nevertheless continues to write that ideals of (‘good’) maternal thinking regarding preservation, care and nurturing are conducive to working towards peaceful politics and encouraging nonviolence. The role of mothers and mothering in activism has been variously described as ‘maternal activism’ and ‘motherist movements’, which each speak to women’s deployment of the maternal identity in activism for the purpose of social and political change (Nathanson, 2008). The transformative potential of this public political role for mothers has been noted by a

number of scholars interested in feminist politics, social movements and social policy who note the importance of maternal identities in raising the visibility of issues where maternal work moves from a private sphere to a public one (Lawson, 2018).

There are a number of notable examples of this phenomenon that have emerged across the world, although perhaps one of the most prolific and renowned ‘motherist movements’ is the *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which emerged in response to a military-enforced Junta government and systematic political repression between 1976 and 1983. The *Mothers* organised following the ‘disappearance’ of their children during the war and campaigned during the dictatorship for their ‘return’ through the public performance of motherhood, public expressions of pain and a ‘cultural vocabulary that resonated with their society’ (Bouvard, 1994; Brysk, 2013: 64). Many scholars have read this public performance of maternal suffering and collective expressions of grief as a powerful means of prompting change, observing the links between the significance of *marianismo* in Latin America, the symbolic use of the Virgin Mary in a Catholic society and the status of mothers (Fabj, 1993; Schirmer, 1989). Public figureheads such as Hebe de Bonafini, Estella de Carlotto and Nora Cortiñas have maintained a strong presence in Argentine politics over the past five decades and represent further examples of matriarchal power.

This is not to sentimentalise or idealise motherhood. Rather, these representations of motherhood have been used to engage in political debates on peace and violence. Many have argued that these movements are so successful *precisely* because they mobilised around maternal identities in politics (Bouvard, 1994; Charman and Savage, 2009). Helms (2013) explores this in her ethnography of women’s organisations campaigning for victims of sexual violence in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. To avoid feminised victim identities and gender essentialisms, she argues that ‘affirmative essentialisms’ of women as nurturers, mothers and caregivers were employed, which shaped their participation in peacebuilding. Similar arguments have been explored by Fabj (1993) who contends that imageries of motherhood are unthreatening and apolitical and therefore can afford mothers some sense of immunity in politics. However, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996) argues,

Many feminists argue that motherhood carries an implicit moral authority, and that when women speak from the position of their most ‘traditional’ roles they often exercise extraordinary political power. But maternal identity has no essential position; instead it may be used ambiguously to structure very different, even antagonistic, political positions – from promoting peace to advancing war to mobilizing political resistance. Women have fought, sometimes fiercely, under the banner of motherhood and in the name of protecting the ‘female’ domains of family, household, kindred and community from a broad spectrum of political loyalties and ideologies. (p. 356)

These ‘appeals to motherhood’, as Scheper-Hughes (1996: 357) writes, can therefore have a variety of effects and take shape in a number of ways. Maternal identity is structured by other conditions of personal experience and political allegiances, and intersects with positions of class, race and gender. The stories shared by the bereaved draw upon shared anxieties about parenting, loss and grief, but also represent an opportunity to speak out and challenge the expectations of motherhood. The remainder of this article

will illustrate the importance of maternal thinking in family activism through the analysis of two case studies of charismatic matriarchs and highlight the different ways it is deployed in public life.

## Methodology

With the rise of debates regarding ‘victim cultures’ more recently, concerns have been raised that victimology has become preoccupied with labels and representations of victims’ experiences rather than the realities themselves (McGarry and Walklate, 2015). With an emphasis on the public nature and visceral imageries of suffering, a cultural victimology has since emerged which ‘foregrounds suffering, our exposure to it, how it is presented to use, and what sense we make of it’ (McGarry and Walklate, 2015: 18). Cultural victimology proposes that we move away from how such experiences are *represented* and, rather, towards what they *mean* to those who are affected.

As a means to ‘foregrounding’ the victim, this article draws upon a qualitative methodology, combining interviews and participant observations with those involved in *Mothers Against Violence*: an anti-violence charity based in Manchester in the North West of England which emerged in response to rising trends in gun violence. A total of 15 in-depth narrative interviews were conducted, which were contextualised by a series of participant observations of meetings, public events and informal conversations. The narrative interviews employed in this research responds to a call within cultural victimology to understand issues of crime and injustice through victims’ sense of self and attempts to situate experiences of harm within their life story (see Pemberton et al., 2019). Victims’ stories have been the interest of politicians, policy makers and the public for some time. However, they have only recently become the concerted focus of victimology with various calls being launched for a ‘narrative victimology’ which highlights the importance of victims’ stories in making sense of suffering (Pemberton et al., 2019; Presser and Sandberg, 2015; Walklate et al., 2019b).

Exploring the topic of lethal violence is an inevitably sensitive area of research which requires particular attention, maintaining a sensitive interviewing technique and avoiding re-victimisation. Interviews were opened with questions such as ‘Could you begin by telling me your personal story?’ and were developed to ask interviewees specifically about family relationships, bereavement and support. With these more exploratory, open-ended questions, a natural flow of conversation was encouraged where answers could be provided at the interviewee’s own pace and tone, using their language. This interview methodology, drawn from Riessman’s (2008) narrative methodology and the recent turn in narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg, 2015) and victimology (Pemberton et al., 2019; Walklate et al., 2019b), elicited rich, in-depth and detailed reflections on victims’ experiences in some cases lasting over 3 hours. Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed by the author. A method of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was employed which consisted of the reading and re-interpreting of narrative texts according to themes identified by researchers. This method of analysis allowed for both flexibility in giving coherence and structure to data and remaining open to either theory-driven or data-driven analysis.

To establish a better understanding of the life and development of *Mothers Against Violence*, attempts were made to interview a range of participants who had witnessed different phases of the charity's development. Over half of participants had lost a relative to lethal violence, while a further third of participants had lost a friend or had been witness to violence. A majority of interviewees therefore shared some familial or social bond with the deceased. While the charity *Mothers Against Violence* expressed a desire to remain identifiable, any personally identifying details were removed and participant names were anonymised. This broad ethnographic approach garnered a rich dataset in which participants were asked to share stories spanning their life before *Mothers Against Violence*, their experience of lethal violence and the impact of their involvement in family activism.

### Charismatic matriarchs

The notion of charisma was first explored by Max Weber (1922, 1947) and borrowed from theological arguments to denote a divine or extraordinary authority of God. Borrowing from a secular reading of this term, Weber employs the concept of charismatic authority as a form of organic leadership at odds with the technical nature of modern institutions. Weber (1947) used the term 'charisma' to explain 'a certain quality of an individual . . . treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities' (p. 241). Meyers (2016) has explored a similar notion in her concept of the heroic victim:

Heroic victims are admired for their strength of character, especially their allegiance to their followers, and for their courage, despite the abuse they are known to endure. Their resolute commitment to their beliefs secures their integrity and preserves their dignity. Abused for their supererogatory self sacrifice, they are honored as moral exemplars. (pp. 259–260)

There are a number of recognisable, charismatic matriarchal figures that have acquired public importance in response to issues of peace and violence and represent visible, familiar faces to what can sometimes seem impersonal or distant issues. However, they have done so to different ends and with the purpose of engaging different audiences and communities. There are two types of charismatic matriarch that can be identified from the literature and can be highlighted through the use of two case studies. The first type of charismatic matriarch is that of the solo campaigner who has become a symbolic reminder of institutional failures and harms. These figures have become high-profile, recognisable representatives emerging at the forefront of public debates on crime and punishment and are often stand-alone figures, working for a wider community of victims. The second type of charismatic matriarch, in comparison, represents a different public figurehead, embedded within communities of solidarity which are bound by ties of shared violent experiences and communicate their loss through public expressions of maternal suffering. These figures are not only able to reinforce but also draw strength from a close community of family activists who have shared experiences of violence. To illustrate these two types of charismatic matriarchs, the case study of 'June' in *Mothers Against Violence* is presented below before drawing a comparative example with the case study of Rosie Batty in Australia.



## June

June's story takes place in the context of debates on 'gangs' and gun violence, which have been symbolically associated with area of South Manchester in the United Kingdom since the 1980s. The communities of Moss Side, Longsight and Hulme have borne the brunt of this association, becoming firmly fastened, as Fraser (1996: 55) describes, to 'a (racialized) iconic status as the epitome of "Dangerous Britain"' which has typically seen the 'gang' label deployed disproportionately to police Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and to conceal the harms that occur within them (Williams, 2015). Situated within a wider national debate and moral panic of the 'gang' problem, gun violence in Manchester has fuelled a polarised image of Moss Side as the racialised 'urban 'Other'' (Fraser, 1996: 52). The consistently negative media portrayal of Moss Side as a 'problem area' or a 'hotspot' has continued, despite the efforts of local charities to challenge this, and has provided fuel to the notion that gun violence is a crisis isolated to a particular area or community.

The 1980s and 1990s saw marked increases in gun violence in Manchester. In August 1999, Moss Side bore witness to a series of shootings resulting in the deaths of three young men in the space of just over 2 weeks. Dozens of concerned mothers gathered to discuss the impact of recent events, share concerns and agree on a way forward. *Mothers Against Violence* was established shortly after. Over the past two decades, *Mothers Against Violence* has provided a space for sharing experiences, finding support and 'being heard' by those who shared similar experiences. Jane, who lost her brother to gun violence, spoke to this when discussing how the process of sharing stories with other victims had affected her:

I think having that sense of belonging with like – I don't want to say likeminded people – but people who have been through it really helps. Because *I think that unless that has happened to you, I don't think you can possibly understand*. I think you can empathise. And that's what empathy is, being alongside somebody and being there but that feeling is like something – there's nothing to describe it when that happens to you at all. And being around those that it's happened to and seeing that they're able to move forward and carry on, is so powerful. Honestly, it's so powerful. (Jane; emphasis added)

The story of lethal violence in *Mothers Against Violence* has endured as an important locus for personal identification and recognition, with the image of motherhood strengthening this identity during the charity's early years. Several members discussed how the label of *Mothers Against Violence* invoked a political neutral image, with mothers conferred as symbols of respect, dignity and independence. The status of motherhood is or can be, as Wright (2016) argues, 'assigned to all women' (p. 329). This was a notion echoed by Tara when discussing how the image of the mother came to feature in the early life of *Mothers Against Violence*:

So that was debated and it was a good few weeks before it was decided it would just be women. And mothers, because *anyone can take on the role of a mother* or be a sister, an aunt, a cousin, a friend, anyone can be that motherly role. (Tara; emphasis added)

Alison made a similar point in her discussion of the image of the mother:

But I think the mum figure, everyone can relate to a mum figure, when most people can relate to a mum figure . . . (Alison)

The image of the mother in public life draws others in, demanding urgency and expressions or gestures of empathy. If ‘everyone can relate’ to the image of a mother, witnesses are compelled to recognise the proximity or possibility of suffering. Motherhood represents an effective platform for engaging other audiences beyond private grief and to those in the public sphere where we are encouraged to situate ourselves besides the victim. As Wright (2016) argues, ‘. . . we look upon the grief of the mother with horror, not only in sympathy for her, but with agony for the possibility that her pain could one day be our own’ (p. 327). Such stories also present normative claims about what responses to violence should or can look like. Stories tell us how to act or how we should act, and create communities, as Frank (2010) states, ‘because people know the same stories and make sense of these stories in the same way’ (p. 159).

The charismatic matriarch in *Mothers Against Violence* emerged in the form of June – one of the founders of the charity who lost her son to gun violence and subsequently emerged as the public figurehead for the group. For many of those involved in *Mothers Against Violence*, June represented a model of humility, inspiration and dignity. Many members would draw upon their conversations with June, describing them as humbling experiences, offering a grounding for their own lives. Alison and Jane alluded to this in their discussion of their admiration for June:

But then when you meet June there’s just – it’s like she puts a spell on you. I can’t even describe it. People have to do it to see it y’know you have to meet her to understand *the aura that she’s got around her* and I remember hearing her story and another couple of stories, I’m just full of admiration for her of what she does and what the others do. Just gobsmacked really, just thinking wow what a woman, I want to be part of this. (Alison; emphasis added)

I’ve never met anyone like June. And she was almost like the mum of the group back then y’know. And the centre of the group. She was very endearing. And she was a nice energy to have around . . . (Jane)

Jane and Alison both described their captivation at June’s ‘aura’ echoing a somewhat spiritual charisma. June was revered for her dignity in her grief with others, seeing her resilience as inspiring yet seemingly impossible if it were to ever happen to themselves. Others were able to draw strength and confidence from June’s experience. Peter spoke to this when recounting his first meeting with June as he arrived at *Mothers Against Violence*:

I think it’s through meeting people like June that you stand and look in the mirror at yourself and say well . . . can I be more like you? . . . So, she is a very, very good role model . . . it’s my belief in her that the belief in the work that I do has been reflected. So that’s to me – she is the prima donna. (Peter)

. . . it's because of her, *she's been my catalyst* in her own particular way . . . (Peter; emphasis added)

The influence of June's story on Peter is evident in his admiration of June who offers grounding and humility. The role of men during the early years of *Mothers Against Violence* was particularly limited as the charity was primarily driven by mothers, although this later changed. Three men were interviewed as part of this research, of which two voiced concern that they might not be able to contribute in ways which mothers were able to:

I think the other thing is that it appeared to be for mums as well. So, family members like myself wouldn't really . . . but it was for us. And I think that that came after, hence the name really, it's *Mothers Against Violence*, and actually if you weren't a mother you didn't really felt like it fit for you. (James)

. . . and it's like well I can't do that y'know, they'd expect Mothers Against Violence, you're expecting a mother and I'm just some white [anon] who's not lost anybody to gun crime, I was not a mother, I'm a bloke, y'know what can I do? (Matthew)

While Peter and Matthew had not been violently bereaved, both still made reference to the importance of June's presence as a model of humility and inspiration. Peter describes above how June's presence strengthened his resolve in *Mothers Against Violence*. It is not necessarily that Peter shares June's belief or experience. Rather, as Peter describes, it is his 'belief in her' that confirms his 'belief in the work' that he does. For others, hearing June's story was empowering and could open dialogue. Andrea discussed this when commenting on the empowering qualities of June's story for those in a similar position:

But June has experienced that and I think she refused to die and decided to live and because she made that choice she is helping many, many others to live also but not just live, but to live an abundant life, to have hope again, to embrace the future and I greatly admire that and . . . it's such an honour and a privilege to work alongside her because she's so special, she really is. (Andrea)

To some extent, this speaks to Frank's (2013) expression of a 'wounded healer' who, through telling stories of suffering and hearing the stories of others, works through 'ending silences, speaking truths [and] creating communities' (p. xvii). As a grieving mother, June's story was looked upon with concern from others in *Mothers Against Violence* that it might happen again but also hope that life can resume normality even after such violent disruption. She was engaged in a number of public commemorative marches, such as the Million Mothers March, in the early years of *Mothers Against Violence* and frequently made appearances in the local, and occasionally national, media to comment on the impact of gun violence on the local community, raise awareness and campaign towards the 'eradication of gun violence' (Mothers Against Violence, 2019). However, June's story resonates particularly at a personal level for those involved in *Mothers Against Violence* and did not take on an explicitly political capacity despite being involved in early policy debates such as gun violence roundtables. The role of the charismatic matriarch as drawing in other followers to the cause was also acknowledged by Stephanie:

. . . I always believe that when people need help there's always someone there to help them. I believe that God always uses people to help other people, so *he won't do something himself, he'll use someone else to do it*. Just like Moses in the Bible, he had to help free all those slaves. God could have done it himself but he always actually uses one person to go and help others and I see my aunt as being like a Moses kind of figure and going to help the community and she's able to do that 'cause she's got a strong spiritual background herself . . . (Stephanie; emphasis added)

Stephanie expresses her admiration for June through the notion of 'the saviour', influencing the direction of others and helping in times of need. June's story draws upon powerful motifs of sacrifice, duty and courage which are persuasive qualities to those who look on in the public sphere.

However, there are other aspects of June's identity which moderate her role as a charismatic matriarch and her relation to the community such as race and religion. June's story was not necessarily ordinary, as she was a passionate Christian with particular faith-based understandings of suffering and agency. However, it is her followers' 'belief in her' as a charismatic leader that confirms their belief in *Mothers Against Violence* and ties its members together in a quasi-familial way. Therefore, while not all those involved in *Mothers Against Violence* may have shared or identified with the same religious grounding as June, her followers did take inspiration from her sense of resolve and belonging that religion provided for her. As an older, Black British woman in the community in Moss Side, June's role as a charismatic matriarch was also shaped by a broader effort that challenged the hostile treatment of young Black men in inner-city Manchester (see also Lawson, 2018). Her role and purpose in this sense became part of a wider project to encourage and rebuild relations between police and the local community which had historically been lacking. Therefore, there were other features of June's identity and position which characterised her role as a charismatic matriarch and ability to work within and outside her community.

## Rosie

Rosie Batty's story, in contrast, emerges from a very different history of violence against women and family violence in the context of Victoria, Australia. Debates on family violence in this context are strongly rooted in discussions on community attitudes towards masculinity and gender norms. Although historically managed as a form of 'private' violence, family violence has become increasingly politicised and recognised as a significant public issue which is explicitly gendered (Stubbs and Wangmann, 2017). With estimates reporting that at least one woman is killed by a man, most often by a current or former partner, every week in Australia, there has more recently been a call for family violence to be recognised as a priority of national security (Cussen and Bryant, 2015; Walklate et al., 2019a).

Rosie Batty's story and the policies it has triggered have been considered by some as a 'turning point' for responses to family violence (Lillebeun, 2015). On 12 February 2014, Rosie Batty's son, 11-year old Luke Batty, was murdered at cricket practice by her ex-partner and Luke's father Greg Anderson with a cricket bat. The influence of Rosie Batty's story on public debate and policy trajectories on family violence has been widely acknowledged (Walklate et al., 2019b). Rosie has given more than two hundred speeches in the

media and political forums, published news articles and released a biography, *A Mother's Story*, documenting her life in the wake of her son's death (Hawley et al., 2018). In addition to becoming an important voice in challenging public discourses and attitudes that support family violence, Rosie has also become involved in a number of policy responses. She was involved in establishing the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria in 2015, which calls for early intervention to prevent family violence such as changing school curricula, and campaigning for reform to the family law system. Most recently, Rosie was named Australian of the Year in 2015 and Officer of the Order of Australia in 2019 in recognition of her services. Rosie Batty has therefore become a vocal family violence campaigner, bringing a high level of visibility to the effects of family violence and endemic culture of victim blaming and violence against women.

As a mother who has lost her son, the story of Rosie Batty embodies deep-seated fears and anxieties that many parents share about the loss of a child. As she writes in her biography on the achievement of the Australian of the Year Award, Rosie's life as a mother has taken on a new trajectory, involuntarily:

And then the sadness hits me. The only reason I am in this position, the only reason I am standing here holding this trophy and receiving this ovation is because I have endured the kind of tragedy that makes people recoil. I've become Australian of the Year because I am the person no one wants to be, the mother who has suffered the insufferable. (Batty and Corbett, 2015)

The dignified and poignant manner that Rosie Batty displays provides a humanising image to suffering and a somewhat 'morally persuasive' story for the public to identify with (Valier and Lippens, 2004; Walklate et al., 2019b: 13). Rosie Batty was a consistent and visible presence in the debates on responses to family, emerging just the day after Luke's death to meet journalists to state:

I want it to be a lesson to everybody that family violence happens to everybody no matter how nice your house is, no matter how intelligent you are, it happens to anyone and everyone. (Rosie Batty cited in Hawley et al., 2018; Walklate et al., 2019b)

Rosie's story brought attention to the unfortunate ordinariness of family violence, highlighting that the problem was not confined to a particular race, class or community. Her position as a White, middle-class woman who was well-educated and articulate in her experiences raised the profile of the issue across different communities. There were particular features of Rosie's identity, therefore, that informed her role as a charismatic matriarch, namely race and class, which as Hartzell (2017: 66; Lawson, 2018) and others note is an important feature that moderates the 'good motherhood' story in public:

Because 'good motherhood' is culturally valued, activist mothers who strategically recite norms of 'good motherhood' can productively elicit identification and empathy – yet, because 'good motherhood' is implicitly coded as white, these productive capacities are significantly limited for mothers of color.

Upon her visit to Djarindjin, an Aboriginal community in the north-west of Australia, to speak with women who had also been affected by domestic violence, Rosie stated that

I want you to know that there are women like me, white, privileged, living in a fancy house in a big city, and we feel the same pain.

You may be here, in very remote communities, but as women, and mothers, we share the same feelings. (Rosie Batty cited in Parke, 2017)

The story of maternal suffering evoked here is an important catalyst for recognition and a mechanism for bringing the problem of family violence out of the confines of the home and beyond being perceived as a 'private' issue (Hawley et al., 2018). Observing the privileged stance of some mothers, as Rosie Batty acknowledges here, provides an insight into, as Hartzell (2017) writes,

how white mothers can work within and against their racial privilege to challenge dominant constructions of racialized motherhood and form coalitions with mourning mothers of color in protest of the conditions of injustice that continue to claim the lives of their children. (p. 66)

Despite the heavy personal toll of speaking publicly about her grief, as she has repeatedly alluded to previously, Rosie has continued to speak openly about her position. Nevertheless, she has also spoken frankly about how she engages in this public persona and the difficulties of acquiring and managing this 'strange celebrity status' (Rosie Batty cited in conversation with McKenzie-Murray, 2019). Rosie has previously voiced concern over this:

'I have to be careful', she said to me, with her wry grin, 'that my little halo doesn't slip down and strangle me'. (Rosie Batty cited in conversation with Garner, 2016: 128–129)

## **The canonical story of the mother: Comparing June and Rosie**

The story of the 'good mother' is able to bridge divides between different communities and speak to broader cultural and political sensibilities of a society regarding motherhood, maternal ideals of caring and protection of children from danger. By publicly fulfilling and performing the responsibilities assumed of mothers, these figures, as Gilmore (2007) writes, make 'critical the activities of mothering as necessary, social, and consequential' (p. 200). While the stories of bereaved mothers represent the most harrowing and unsettling of experiences for parents, they also speak to the 'ordinariness' of mothering which represents a point for public identification and empathy (Walklate et al., 2019b: 4; Wright, 2016).

This 'canonical' storyline, as Polletta (2006) writes, helps us to understand how family activism emerges and appeals to concerned audiences, and how these movements overcome issues in identification and interact with other storylines in policy, media and public debate. However, some canonical plots can also limit stories. A number of critics have pointed to the potential that maternal activism might unintentionally reinforce maternal essentialist notions of mothers as the primary caregivers, as self-sacrificing and selfless (Dietz, 1985; Roberts, 1995). These points tap into a broader concern that the efforts of mothers in a public setting might be subject to manipulation. Such examples are explicitly organised around maternal suffering and tap into deeper cultural stories of

guardianship, parental responsibility and other ideals which expect that mothers protect and guard their children from harm. Motherhood holds its own set of expectations and, as Wright (2016) points out, is a social status that is conferred upon women with conventions of 'good' and 'bad' mothering (May, 2008). These public expressions of maternal suffering are measured by ideals of 'good' mothering where peacefulness, care and protection are worthy characteristics (Ruddick, 1989). As Goc (2009) argues in her investigation of media narratives of 'good' mothers, the expressions of mothers in public life are measured carefully against a canonical story, marking out those who

. . . transgress what is considered appropriate maternal behaviour, and how in the most horrific circumstances society can turn on the mother who does not fit into standard perceptions of what it is to be a 'good' mother. (p. 42)

The methods by which June and Rosie engaged in public expressions of motherhood have changed over time, doing so through a range of different platforms, and have received different varying political and media attention as explored above. Both were able to articulate their stories in composed and dignified ways and began to share their stories soon after the deaths of their sons. However, June's story remained at its most powerful in the local community in which it was heard, often featuring in local media stories on the problem of gun violence, while Rosie's story became part of a national debate on public attitudes and the prevention of family violence. June's story emerged as the humanising, charismatic matriarch in *Mothers Against Violence* to whom others have aspired. June was not overtly or openly political in the way she shared her story, doing so at a distance from social media and political platforms. She was able to draw upon and reinforce the collective strength and fabric of a community of people that shared the same experience and to encourage public identification. June's story as a charismatic matriarch is no less powerful, but the 'work' that this story does is markedly different to that of Rosie Batty. June's story remains of high consequence for the local and regional public, with a small *p*, and is able to encourage everyday participation and empowerment on the ground. Rosie's story engages a different Public, with a big *P*, as she prompts a political debate and voices a demand for national policy reform on the issue of family violence.

Although these stories may feed into canonical plots or assumptions we are familiar with around mothering, care and nurturing, they are also able to challenge the 'status quo' (Gilmore, 2007; Polletta, 2006: 169). For many, motherhood carries authority which is perhaps politically unthreatening but, as is evident in so many instances, capable of prompting changes in criminal justice policy and challenging assumptions. The moral authority of a mother's grief was able to consolidate differences and divides between communities by speaking to those universal anxieties of many parents.

## Conclusion

The charismatic matriarchs discussed in this article are all motivated by the pains of maternal grief, a sense of injustice and the ambition for truth and acknowledgement. The charismatic matriarch in public life, as the stories of Rosie Batty and June demonstrated, is virtuous, dignified, inspiring and persuasive in the ways in which she communicates

her story but is, however, bound with its own expectations of acceptable mothering and interacts with other aspects of race, class and age (Ruddick, 1989). She is a recognisable figure who has come to symbolise wrongdoing and harm and holds a unique moral standing in her ability to speak for the dead, often able to articulate her story in a frank and open way. However, these public figures differ markedly in what they 'do' in public life with their experiences and how other features of their identity, such as race and class, mediate their role as a charismatic matriarch.

Speaking on behalf of others is an inherently risky project, particularly if the voices of some are seen to be louder than others. However, the practice of speaking on behalf of others is at the core of much collective action. Victims 'attain unparalleled experiential knowledge, a unique and irreproachable moral authority to speak for and about the living and the dead, and a mission to act', and their stories can become personally and politically relevant depending on how they are told, with who and in what context (Rock, 1998: 128). More attention should therefore be paid in the future as to *how* victims' stories make an impression upon policy-making and public debate and *why* particular victims' stories hold more moral authority than others.

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### ORCID iD

Elizabeth A Cook  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7608-8702>

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### Author biography

Elizabeth A Cook is a Lecturer in Sociology at the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London. Previously, she worked at the Universities of Oxford, Manchester and Sheffield. Her research interests include fatal violence, victims and the experiences of bereaved families in the aftermath of violence.