THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF FAMILY ON ABUSED WOMEN’S HELP-SEEKING AFTER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

ABSTRACT

Ideas about maintaining the ‘solidarity of the family’, in contrast to women’s interests, is starkly evident in domestic violence situations, where notions of maintaining the family have been intrinsic to women’s decisions to remain in abusive relationships. Through the narratives of 17 abused women this article will show how socio-cultural discourses that promote the maintenance of the family above women’s safety, by normalising abuse in marriage and expecting women to self-sacrifice, contributes to women’s reluctance to leave abusive relationships. Further notions of ‘forever after’ marriages and making it work at all costs also contributed to limited help seeking in the interests of maintaining the social institution of marriage. Informal networks insistence that women should endure abusive relationships, contribute to abused women feeling an overriding commitment to maintaining the family. As a result of these discourses and a lack of support from informal networks, women are reluctant to disclose abuse to professionals, because seeking help for abuse implies that they are challenging socio-cultural norms that are entrenched at the level of the family and community. These findings emerged from an analysis of in-depth abuse history interviews conducted with women living in Johannesburg and Cape Town shelters. Abuse history interviews are similar to life histories but the interviews only focused on the periods and aspect of women’s lives when they experienced abuse. The aim of the study is to understand the personal, socio-cultural, structural and institutional factors that influenced help-seeking. This article will largely focus on the socio-cultural discourses that normalise domestic violence in order to preserve families. It is argued that socio-cultural norms which serve to perpetuate domestic violence in the name of families at the expense of women’s rights and safety, need to be challenged and the true impact of domestic violence on social life needs to be highlighted.

Keywords: women abuse, help-seeking, marriage, family

INTRODUCTION

Researchers (Artz et al., 1998; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2000; Jewkes et al., 1999; Vetten, 2000; Vogelman & Lewis, 1993) have drawn attention to the endemic nature of gender based violence and women abuse in South Africa. The prevalence rate of woman abuse in South Africa, indicates that one in four women experience physical abuse in their lifetime (Jewkes et al., 1999). Woman abuse
can therefore not be seen as, “a rare and deviant phenomenon that results from the breakdown of family functioning, but as a predictable and common dimension of normal family life as it is currently structured in our society” (Bograd, 1988:14-15). Despite the extensive nature of women abuse in South Africa, help-seeking thereafter is limited (Rasool, 2011). Women’s decisions to seek help after women abuse is complex and influenced by various considerations at the personal, socio-cultural, institutional and structural levels of society (Rasool, 2011, Heise, 1998). This paper will focus particularly on socio-cultural matters related to maintaining the family which influenced women’s personal views and decisions to stay in abusive relationships. A feminist analysis of the narratives underpin this research because it is committed to understanding women’s experiences on their own terms in order to create theory, policy and intervention grounded in the actual language of women themselves.

In this article, based on the analysis of the narratives I will show how abuse is constructed as a normal part of marriage by communities, a view that women seem to have acceded to. Women’s narratives highlight that they felt a commitment to work at their marriages despite the costs, because of notions that they are meant to last ‘forever’ and abuse is a normal part of intimate relationships. Consequently, if abuse is viewed as normal and marriages as lasting ‘forever-after’, than women are expected to endure and work at it despite the harm to their and their children’s well-being and health (Rasool, 2015a; Rasool, 2015b; Evans, 2011; CDC, 2005; Jewkes et al., 1999, Sharps et al., 2001). Further, leaving abusive relationships imply ‘breaking up the family’, which is considered deviant and challenging the patriarchal status quo, and ultimately has huge social implications for women and families. Hence, in order for women to obtain help for domestic violence, they have to challenge deeply entrenched socio-cultural beliefs about the role of women in maintaining families, which are often also embedded in social policies.

FEMINISM AND SOCIAL POLICY

A feminist social policy analysis drives this research, since it considers how policy has constrained or can enhance the life choices of women (Hyde, 2000). Conservative approaches to social policy reinforce the traditional family structure that promotes marriage and traditional gender roles, while liberal and progressive approaches to social policy are gender blind (Hyde, 2000). Feminist approaches to social policy, on the other hand, aim to capture the realities of women’s lives and reveal the “gendered dynamics of policy practice” (Hyde, 2000: 424).

Historically, socio-cultural conceptions of family have shaped social policies. Fabian notions of family and motherhood have underpinned the development of
the welfare state in the UK (Williams, 1989). These ideas have also been influential in shaping the South African welfare system, because of its British colonial and apartheid history (Patel, 2005). Welfare state social policies in the UK were fashioned on a dominant ideology of “familism”, which refers to a (Williams, 1989: 6):

Set of ideas that characterised the ‘normal’ and ‘ideal’ family form as one where the man was the main breadwinner and his wife’s contribution to the family was through her role as mother, carer, and housewife. As a result she was seen as financially dependent on her husband, rather than as a wage-earner. Those households not conforming to this model were seen as deviant or potentially ‘problematic’.

The maintenance of the family was considered to be paramount and integral to the social stability of modern capitalist industrial societies (Williams, 1989).

Although aspects of these ideas may have changed in both contemporary UK and South Africa, preservation of the institution of the family as paramount in South Africa is still clearly articulated in the core document governing social welfare, namely White Paper for Social Welfare (Ministry for Welfare and Population Development, 1997), which suggests welfare services should promote the survival, protection and development of the family as a priority. In this vein, women themselves articulated beliefs about maintaining marriages and the family at all costs due to notions of forever-after marriages (Rasool, 2013), the best interests of the child (Rasool, 2015a), and sacrificial caring as explanations for not seeking help in the South African context. Other reasons are related to the social expectations from informal networks that they should sacrifice themselves by staying in abusive marriages because it is considered to be normal and in the best interests of the children (Rasool, 2015a). The act of leaving an abusive relationship is considered as challenging these expected gender roles and the institution of the family as articulated both in policy and socio-cultural norms and values.

Societal understanding of domestic violence is instrumental in determining and recognising particular acts as abusive or conversely in condoning them. Cultural norms and values therefore impact on how violence against women is defined and the acceptability of various forms of violence. Whilst culture and cultural practices in certain communities can be used by dominant groups to persuade others to accept their moral and political views, cultural practices are contested and challenged (Loots, 2001). Counter-cultures can be developed by oppressed groups to challenge mainstream thought (Loots, 2001). Hanmer (2000, p. 17) argues based on her work in the U.K. that:

Cultural values governing the boundaries of acceptable violence are not static. Gradations of violent behavior may become acceptable or
unacceptable to others as time passes. The cultural boundaries that are threatened with transgression remain intact if values shift to accommodate a wider range of behaviors from the husband/father. Acceptance of violence to wives and children can also increase over time, if family and the interventions of others to limit violence from the father/husband are not successful.

The term ‘socio-cultural’, for the purposes of this study, refers to the values and social norms that determine what is ‘right’ and ‘normal’ in a particular community and/or society (Thompson, 1997) and that help people negotiate “connection, survival, opportunities and obstacles” (Bennett, 2005: 32). Boonzaier and De la Rey (2003: 1004) from South Africa argue that the socio-cultural context provides the boundaries through which women filter their experiences of violence and through which men assess preferred or devalued forms of gender identity.

Socio-cultural in essence refers to the values and norms in varying South African communities that allow for gender based violence to flourish (Bennett, 2005). This paper illustrates the way in which ideas, beliefs, values and norms about gender-based violence operate to maintain the family at all costs and are perpetuated through social and cultural formations. It also illustrates how these social-cultural constructions impact on women’s help-seeking through a feminist analysis.

Feminism informs this study because of the way in which it materialises notions of oppression and discrimination in relation to women as a marginalised group. The particular feminist lens utilised in this study is feminist standpoint theory, which argues that knowledge is situated and that there are multiple standpoints (Hekman, 1999). Feminist standpoint theories challenge the hegemonic reality of those in power, through questioning the notion of an essential truth (Hartsock, 1983). Further it is also a theory of method and a political strategy, that is particularly used by oppressed people to assert their voices (Harding, 2004, p. 3) based on the ‘truth’ of their life experiences (Hekman, 2004). The core argument made by feminist standpoint theorists is that there are multiple perspectives and ways of seeing the world, and that it is important to look at the world from the point of view of the marginalised (Hartsock, 1983). This research specifically focuses on one of the most marginalised groups of women in South Africa, abused women. This framework is useful in this study, since it values the way abused women themselves understand and situate their experiences of help-seeking. Hence credence is given to context and the way women understand and construct their own lives. At the same time, my interpretation of their experiences is also acknowledged as an alternative standpoint, and not the only one. Overall, this study is also “concerned with enlarging the choices that women have in their lives” (Hyde, 2000: 424) through enabling greater access to help-seeking
opportunities and challenging the socio-cultural and policy contexts that disable women obtaining assistance for domestic violence. Garcia-Moreno (2002) and Hague, Mullender and Aris (2003) point out that women themselves, as potential service users, need to be consulted to explore their service needs and how the service provision environment can be made more conducive to help-seeking, hence the methodology is aimed at uncovering how women themselves were constrained or facilitated through their efforts in seeking help.

**METHODOLOGY**

In-depth abuse history interviews which lasted between an hour-and-a-half to three hours long were conducted with seventeen women who have experienced abuse and who sought help from shelters. Abuse history interviews are not an attempt to record life histories in full, but is a technique that uses an oral history approach to explore aspects of the survivors’ lives in which they experienced abuse (Moyer, 1999). The abuse history methodology was useful as it enabled women to articulate the complexity of their help seeking processes from various informal and family systems.

I did not attempt to find a representative sample of abused women, but rather a purposive sample of women who were most likely to have accessed help on numerous occasions, taking into account the ethical and safety recommendations of doing research on violence against women (WHO, 1999). Survivors who had reported woman abuse to a shelter were accessed, in order to understand the conditions under which women sought help as well as those that previously inhibited them from seeking help. Adult women (over the age of 18) who have experienced physical or emotional domestic violence in an intimate partner relationship and who were living in long-term shelters in Johannesburg and Cape Town at the time of the study were invited to participate. Workers at the shelter informed potential participants about the study, to prevent women from feeling coerced into participating and to protect their anonymity if they chose not to participate. This was also a volunteer sample, since participation in the study was voluntary and participants were informed that there would be no repercussions if they chose not to participate.

A semi-structured, in-depth interview technique, with an interview schedule with a list of guiding questions, was utilised. Interviews were exploratory in nature. Women were taken through a process of charting different points over their history when abuse occurred and they were provided with an opportunity to discuss the reasons for choosing to seek or to not seek help at each instance of abuse. Emphasis was placed on factors that influenced their decisions to seek help or not at the various points in their abuse history. The research process and
research questions which focussed on help-seeking from various systems guided the initial stages of coding and analysis, after the data was entered into Atlas. Ti (qualitative research software tool). To obtain a more fine-grained and thematic analysis inductive coding was used. Careful attention was devoted to understanding how women represent, talk and think about their experiences of help-seeking for domestic violence, and how their discourse was influenced by their social environments, based on fine grained reading and analysis of the transcripts.

A pilot study was initially conducted with three women to refine the approach and focus of the interviews; these are excluded from the analysis. Thereafter in-depth interviews were conducted, exploring many aspects of abuse and help seeking, until the data were saturated. I stopped interviewing after the seventeenth interview, as sufficient detail had been documented for the analysis of individual cases and comparing women’s experience of help-seeking. The women interviewed were very diverse, despite the interviews only being conducted in Johannesburg and Cape Town. There were participants from many of the other provinces as well including Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and North-West Province. The limitation of conducting the study in these cities is that more Coloured women, than women from any other Race groups ended up being interviewed, due to the demographics of Cape Town. Of the women interviewed, Six are African, nine are Coloured, one woman is White and one is Indian. The women were evenly spread among the age groups, ranging from 19 to 46. The majority of women interviewed had only a high school education (14), only one had no formal schooling and the other 2 had diplomas. Almost an equal number of women were employed (8) and unemployed (9). Those employed were in insecure and poorly paid jobs. Many (10) of the women interviewed were married, some legally and others only through customary rites. Through the interviews with these women particular socio-cultural issues that are related to maintaining the marriage and family emerged as influential in women’s help-seeking processes as highlighted below.

**SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF ABUSE**

**Abuse is normal in marriage**

One of the social perceptions that normalises abusive behaviour and that is instrumental in keeping women in abusive relationships is the idea that abuse is a part of life and marriage. Many women were reluctant to seek help for abuse because of discourses that suggest that if you chose to marry the abuser, you must

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1 The historical race categories as developed under Apartheid, whilst not unproblematic, are utilised because this is still common practice in research in South Africa.
deal with the accompanying difficulties, as aptly captured by the idiom, “You made your bed, lie in it”. The normalisation of abuse as an expected element of marriage which serves to maintain the family at all costs, seems to be common in the South African context, and is influential in keeping women in abusive relationships.

Discourses about the normalisation of abuse are evident at the community level, where beliefs have prevailed across generations and communities, contributing to the reluctance of abused women to seek help. Anna, an African woman from a township in Johannesburg, states that in her community, “Beating for them is not a big problem. Our grandfather used to do it to them. Most of the people in Thokoza and older people believe in it, they say it used to be done to them”. Also, Catherine, from a different South African community, a Coloured Afrikaans community in Cape Town, indicates:

I was so scared to talk about the man hitting me. Want dit was ’n elke dag se ding, want ’n mens word gewoond om te sien dat ’n man ’n vrou slaan [because it is an everyday occurrence, a person gets used to seeing a man hitting his wife]…. Ja for me it felt like ’n elke dag se ding, die slattery and geskokkel. Hy is maar a bietjie jaloers –[Yes, for me it’s an everyday occurrence, the hitting and arguments. He is just a little jealous].

Catherine also minimised the abuse by suggesting that her partner may have been jealous of her and that it could be an expression of love (see Rasool, 2013). Shamima, a Cape Malay Muslim woman from yet another community, relates how the normalisation of domestic violence made it invisible in her community:

Well they would say it’s a myth, they would say it’s non-existent even though they see it happen because it’s like it’s natural, you know… Men would probably say that, “the women deserve it” and they would also say that “life isn’t just a bed of roses. Everybody makes mistakes and everybody goes through bad patches in their life”. They would actually …say, “it’s like a form [way] of life”.

In Shamima’s community it seems that domestic violence is so prevalent that they can no longer see it happening, since it is constructed as ‘non-existent’, despite its occurrence in public and semi-public spaces (Rasool, 2012a). In a few South African communities it seems that domestic violence is legitimised by naturalising it as a way of life.

The normalisation of abuse was reinforced by ideas perpetuated by informal networks that if you choose to get married, you must tolerate whatever comes. Shanaaz reveals how maxims about marriage and abuse that pervade communities were also the reason for non-intervention by her sister and brother who witnessed her being abused but did nothing to assist her, she explains it thus:
‘No they didn’t actually do anything, it was like between a husband and wife… I spoke to them about it but to them it was, “you made your bed you have to lie in it, he is going to come right”’. 

Shanaaz’ narrative highlights that the normalisation of abuse as a private matter (Rasool, 2012a) leads to family members suggesting women should put up with abuse thereby sending them back to the abusive relationship to maintain the marriage and family.

Paulina similarly relates that, in her community, women are expected to stay in the marriage, irrespective of violence:

They said “bagizela”. It is just like, “you must just stay there, No matter what happened, it is your marriage, one day things will be fine”. So I went back, then every night, every weekend, it was the same story.

Paulina was sent back to her violent home with the false reassurance that things would get better. Paulina feels frustrated by the complicity shown toward abuse when she argues, “Especially black people, they must stop pressuring …they must stop saying, ‘You must hold on, things will be right’”. Paulina says that women in her family and community context are pressurised to go back to the abusive relationship to uphold the family, which illustrates the complicity of communities with abuse. In this regard, Sinclair (1985) suggests that family, friends and the community often support the belief that the woman has done something wrong, rather than the perpetrator, by their actions and statements in order to maintain the family structure.

The normalisation of abuse is strongly linked to ideas about preserving family and marriage, which contribute to women’s reluctance to seek help to deal with abuse. When I asked Sarah about the length of time it took for her to seek help, she said: ‘I didn’t tell anyone. I accepted it as part of marriage. I never told my parents. I thought that everything was the way marriage should be. It’s part of marriage’.

Similarly Shanaaz a Cape Malay woman states, 'Its normal, I actually thought that it’s normal in a relationship, your husband must hit you, it must be like this…’. Two women interviewed from Johannesburg reiterate women’s acceptance of abuse as normal behaviour, which helps them to cope with the situation:

Rita: I don’t know, you [are] just so used to living with everything the way it is that you think it’s normal. I just dealt with it, learnt to live with the whole situation, closed my eyes, get home really late so all that I had to do was shower and go to bed.
Irene: Then he beat me up. All the time he just gets away with it… I never told anybody for many, many years. … I cry it is finished. The next day he goes to work, it is over. I never talk about what he is doing. It was just a normal thing. In the morning everything will be fine …

Many of the accounts of abuse demonstrate that women did not think of seeking help because they saw it as a normal, expected part of marriage, which was echoed by family members and the broader community. Similar findings emerge from other South African studies, in which women describe their resignation to gender-based violence with sayings such as “it’s the way it is” (Andersson et al., 2000: 45). The high level of resignation women felt about their ‘fate’ is also shaped by social expectations of marriage that women must endure the behaviour of their male partners because there is no other recourse, and it is often defined in terms of expected, naturalised gender roles.

Martha, a Coloured woman living in the East of Johannesburg, suggests that she felt that communities are more supportive of abusers since women are expected to endure abuse, rather than leave their marriage. Moreover, for her personally, leaving the abusive relationship, and particularly seeking help from formal service providers, would imply that she is a ‘failure’ and the resultant social scandal of challenging norms was a deterrent to her seeking help:

Martha: We didn’t try, to go seek help from the professionals. [I didn’t want]… everybody knowing that I’m a failure. I thought everybody would say, “she’s leaving her husband and all that. She’s moving out”, things like that. Those were the ones that made me not to move out.

Shahana: But they don’t think it’s wrong if you live in a bad relationship?

Martha: The thing is that you must try, you must do whatever [to make it work].

Powerful belief systems foster maintaining family stability as more important than leaving violence relationships through normalising it has resulted in women believing they have no remedy, even if things go horribly wrong. These social discourses that promote the stability of the family over women’s safety was also constructed through notions of forever after marriages that similarly contribute to women’s reluctance to leaving abusive relationships.

**Women must self-sacrifice since marriage is ‘forever-after’**

In this section it is argued that women, like informal networks and communities, ascribe to social constructions of marriage that contribute to maintaining this institution at all costs. Women stay in marriages because of notions that it should
be ‘forever after’, as produced by fairy tales (Rasool, 2013 Boonzaier, & De la Rey, 2003) and hence women take responsibility for the success of making the marriage survive despite the implications on their health and well-being.

Cultural constructions of marriage as forever-after contributed to women remaining in the relationship to preserve the family despite the abuse, as Rehana an Indian, Muslim woman from Cape Town states, “When I got married I actually thought this is going to be forever”. Similarly two other women confirm that when they got married, they saw it as a lifetime commitment, irrespective of the conditions of the marriage, Fatima a Cape Malay woman reflects, “when I married him …I thought... This is going to be like a lifetime, through thick and thin”. Similarly when I asked Shamima, another Cape Malay woman why she had not left the abusive relationship for ten years, she states, “I was too infatuated with the whole idea of our marriage” (Rasool, 2012a). Hence, leaving the abusive relationship would be challenging this idea of forever after marriages that survive ‘thick and thin’.

As a result of the perceptions that marriages should be ‘forever-after’, women constantly sacrifice and endeavour to make their marriages work. The narratives that follow illustrate the efforts of three women from very different South African communities (Martha is an African woman from Rustenburg; Rita is a White woman from Pretoria; Nita is a Christian Coloured woman from Paarl), to sustain their marriages against all odds:

Martha: The thing is that you must try to [make it work]; you must do whatever [to make it work]. He wasn’t willing to do anything … I was always the one who wanted to get help, always suggesting things. …he didn’t.

Rita: You think …you can try to make it work.

Nita: I pray to God I’m going to make it work.

Hence women often suppress their interests and safety to make relationships work. These social notions of ‘forever-after’ marriages contributes to women feeling an over-riding commitment to maintain the marriage at all costs, which is reinforced by community narratives that suggest staying in an abusive relationships is in the best interests of children (Rasool, 2015).

Social discourses of gender roles and norms perpetuate the idea that wives need to sacrifice their personal needs and dignity to stay and make marriages work. Research (World Bank, 2011) has indicated that many communities still see women and men’s roles as largely fixed, expecting women to be responsible for care of the family and home, whilst men are seen as responsible for decision
making and income generation. In Martha’s situation, the cultural construction of ‘wife’ resulted in members of her social networks being complicit with the abuse. If the abuser was playing his prescribed male role as provider, she was expected to play the dutiful wife that doesn’t ‘talk back’ or complain, even if she was being abused, as Martha narrates:

They think you must stay there and solve the problem. You mustn’t talk back to your husband. [They say], “You [are] always complaining. He’s looking after you, what else [do] you want? You’ve got a car, a house, you got this, and you got that”. …They were saying that I must stay with him because he’s supporting me, with everything. “I’ve got everything. What else do I need you know?” Things like that …my other aunty [has been] married all her life, since she was very, very young. My aunty, she’s just in the marriage. It’s not a healthy marriage.

In Martha’s case, because the abuser was playing the prescribed male role as financial provider, she was expected to be the obedient wife and remain in the abusive relationship. Abuse was seen as a small price to pay in return for food and shelter, especially in a community where domestic violence is not seen as something unusual and where families are financially insecure (Rasool, 2011). Martha’s narrative highlights that she felt that communities are more supportive of abusers since women are expected to endure abuse, rather than leave their marriage. Hence, women’s attempts at investing in relationships seem to have little results, despite their high levels of commitment since the abuse persists, which was also confirmed by the work of Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (1989) in the USA.

Two other participants, Catherine a Christian Coloured from a township in Cape Town and Fatima a Cape Malay woman, confirm that taking responsibility for trying to make the relationship work is often linked to living up to gender expectations of wives to be subservient and perform the expected gender roles. As two participants revealed:

Catherine: I was a person who was only in the church. [When I was] out of church [I was] in the house… making food. I was a homey person.

Fatima: I’m just here to do his cooking and his cleaning.

Catherine and Fatima’s attempts to conform to the gender roles ascribed to them as wives and to create successful marriages made it difficult for them to understand the abuse. They, like women in other studies, also engaged in a variety of strategies to make the relationship work to avoid the recurrence of violence, including submerging aspects of their identity and engaging in activities they may not otherwise have done (Kearney, 2001). Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al.’s (1989) study in the US confirms that husbands who were violent towards their partners
were more likely than other men to report that their spouses provided more quality caring gestures than they were giving. Burgess-Proctor (2008: 57) identified some of the gestures that marginalised abused women in USA engaged in to placate the abuser, which she refers to as “private help-seeking strategies”, such as “complying with their partners’ requests for sex or money (10.5%), [or] avoiding their partner by sleeping in separate rooms (26.3%)”. These attempts to “make it work” at all costs are referred to by Goldner et al. (1990: 358) as “sacrificial caring”.

Despite holding onto the notion of an idealised relationship that is meant to last forever, women find their strategies to make the marriage work have little effect (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). As Shamima indicates, ‘I always tried to travel the extra mile to see if …I [can] make the marriage work. I’d say, “maybe, let’s try this, let’s try this”. But nothing seemed to work, the abuse just didn’t want to stop’. It seemed that for most of the women in this study, despite their efforts to make their marriages/relationships work, through different strategies of ‘sacrificial caring’ over many years, the abuse persisted.

Overall, it seems that the construction marriage as articulated by some of the women in this study, namely that marriage is for a lifetime and that you have to stand together ‘through thick and thin’, stem from socio-cultural discourses and policy approaches that promote the stability of the family, over women’s safety. Families and communities contribute to this general sense of amnesia about the devastating presence and effects of domestic violence by not defining abuse as violence, but merely a ‘mistake’ ‘part of life’ or ‘you made your bed, you must lie in it,’ which intensify women’s reluctance to leaving abusive relationships. Jewkes et al. (2002: 1605) concurs that in South Africa this “widespread tolerance reflects both ideas that the use of violence is often ‘normal’, inevitable … [and serves to] legitimate the use of force by men in establishing hierarchical control over women”. How can women seek help for something that is constructed as a ‘mistake’ or justified as simply experiencing a ‘bad patch’? Rather they too accede to these views and try to make relationships work for a long time, until an alternative option or view is provided to them by informal networks or formal service providers (Rasool, 2011; Rasool, 2012b; Rasool, 2015b)

Powerful belief systems that foster maintaining family stability, through encouraging them to stay in abusive relationships, as more important than leaving violence relationships result in women believing they have no remedy, even if things go horribly wrong. Hence, the normalisation and privatisation (Rasool, 2012) of abuse coalesce to maintain families and hence deter abused women’s help-seeking since leaving is seen as breaking up families.

CONCLUSIONS
This article suggests that it is important to explore notions of family and the way in which ideologies of family are created and sustained in the socio-cultural context, as well in welfare policy and legislation, as these profoundly influence abused women’s help-seeking behaviour and the continued exposure to abuse of both women and their children. Two socio-cultural constructions linked to notions of family were central to reinforcing notions of preserving the family at all costs, namely the normalisation of abuse and that women must self-sacrifice to maintain marriages ‘forever-after’. First, the normalisation of domestic violence in marriage as an accepted component of family life is a persuasive socio-cultural factor in women’s reluctance to seek help. The normalisation of violence is evidenced by suggestions that abuse is an expected part of life and marriage, and this was reinforced by strong views in communities and families. Second, cultural constructions that women should remain in marriages forever and not give up on love are powerful in keeping them tied to abusive relationships (Rasool, 2013). Women are expected to self-sacrifice and endure all obstacles, including violence, since socio-cultural discourses suggest that marriage is not ‘a bed of roses’ and that they should do everything and anything to keep the marriage and family intact. Constructions of loyalty after marriage are reinforced through idioms such as “you made your bed, lie in it” and “grin and bear it”. Hence, notions of ‘normalisation’ and ‘sacrificial caring’ coalesce to accentuate the importance of maintaining families and marriages, above the rights and interests of women to be free from violence.

This paper highlights the contestation between preserving the family - a value underlying socio-cultural beliefs and social policy- and the dignity and safety of women, to be free from violence. If domestic violence is considered a normal and expected part of marriage in order to preserve families, and concomitantly there is little help from family and friends to deal with abuse, there is no incentive for women to seek help to deal with this phenomenon. These socio-cultural discourses contribute to a patriarchal ideological context that promotes the preservation of family and the normalisation of domestic violence, thereby compromising women’s rights as outlined in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). These discourses come together to solidify the structure of a unified family, with the male as the controlling figure in the household, at the expense of women’s rights, which make it complicated for women to seek help. Hence, by constructing abuse as normal, the family system remains intact, and women’s help-seeking is suppressed.

The impetus to maintain the social fabric of society, through keeping patriarchal families intact, even when there is violence that is detrimental to a healthy family environment, needs to be challenged. Rather than seeing women leaving abusive relationships as having a destabilising effect on the social fabric of society, a shift
needs to happen in public thinking whereby domestic violence is viewed as unacceptable and inimical to the healthy development of families. Preserving families in which domestic violence is present as a social welfare imperative should be challenged as this is a violation of the rights of women and children to protection and security as articulated in the constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

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