

Help-seeking after Domestic Violence: The Critical Role of Children

ABSTRACT

Limited knowledge is available on the factors that contribute to women's help-seeking after domestic violence in South Africa. Qualitative research conducted with seventeen abused women in shelters in South Africa indicate that the best interests of children are influential both in women's decisions to stay in abusive relationships and to seek help. The personal decisions of women to seek help are influenced by powerful social discourses on the best interests of the child. Policy and practice that advocate for the best interests of the child need to prioritize the safety of both mothers and their children in domestic violence situations.

INTRODUCTION

Children are a critical factor in determining women's help-seeking patterns after domestic violence. Whilst it is not the only factor, the children's well-being and needs are primary considerations in mothers' decision-making regarding seeking help after abuse. In many cases, women sacrifice their own safety for what they consider to be the best interests of children (Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2009). These sacrifices are linked to the culturally constructed expectations around the roles and responsibilities of mothers ensuring the best interests of their children. In turn, these expectations create internal conflict for mothers about whether leaving or staying in the abusive relationship is the appropriate course of action for their children.

A study on domestic violence conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2005, which covered 15 sites in 10 countries worldwide, indicated a prevalence estimate of domestic violence that ranged from 23% to 49%. South African statistics on domestic violence are located within this range, since 30% of women in a study conducted in three provinces indicated that they had been abused by an intimate partner (Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Levin, Ratsaka & Schrieber, 1999). While domestic violence is extensive, many women remain silent or do not specifically seek help to deal with abuse until many years after the abusive incident (Meyer, McConnell, Fensham, Groth, Jansen & Phillips, 2007). Recent research from the Medical Research Council and Gender Links in Gauteng confirms that while 51% of women experienced abuse, only 0.3% had reported cases of domestic violence to the police (Gould, 2011). In addition, substantial numbers of women retract from seeking help after one or two attempts, as evidenced by case withdrawals at police stations (Artz & Smythe, 2007; Mistry, 2000) and the failure of women to return for counselling after the first session (Lockley,

1999). The reasons abused women in South Africa remain in abusive relationships for long periods are multifaceted and complex, with factors ranging from the interpersonal to the macro, including notions of love (Rasool, 2012??), forever after marriages, financial dependence, socio-cultural constraints, unresponsive systems??? (Rasool). Nevertheless, extensive investment of resources is being made by the South African government to improve the delivery of formal services, particularly the criminal justice system, and this is marked by the landmark Domestic Violence Act of 1998 (DVA).

The South African domestic violence legislation and relevant constitutional clauses are important and necessary pre-conditions to enable women to exercise their human and citizenship rights. However, legislation such as the DVA (1998) assumes that women will seek formal help, and that when they do, it will be from the criminal justice system. Whilst women who do know about the protection order (that may be obtained in terms of the DVA) may utilise the criminal justice system, in most instances it seems that the first contact women have with formal services are in health settings (Hochfeld, 1995; Hoff, 1989; Rasool, 1995). Very few women utilise lawyers and counsellors to deal with domestic violence in South Africa (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Rasool et al, 2002; Motsei, 1993). It is imperative to understand the thinking and decision making of abused women regarding help-seeking and it is vital to recognise the context within which women make help-seeking decisions. It is also important to establish why women do not readily seek help from formal systems of support and to investigate the turning points at which women become agents of change and utilise these services. Understanding why women do not readily disclose domestic violence and why they do not seek help is vital to the social protection of abused women, since international and local studies indicate that seeking help can lead to the prevention and cessation of further violence (Jewkes et al., 1999; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Nara, & Weintraub, 2005; Meyer et al., 2007).

One of the key reasons women stay in abusive relationships is for the benefit of their children, which is the focus of this paper (Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2009; Edelson, Hokoda & Ramos-Lira, 2007; Hague & Wilson, 2000; Thompson & Bazile, 2000). However, there is also a small body of different research that shows that “many women can and do take action once they realize their children are being negatively affected by domestic

violence” (Kantor & Little, 2003, p.349). As far as can be ascertained, the role children play in determining whether abused women in South Africa seek help for domestic violence or not, remains under-researched.

Addressing women’s ambivalence about seeking help is critical for the social protection of women and children. Attempts at convincing women to seek help or to leave abusive relationships are unlikely to be effective if policy and practice do not account for women’s concerns regarding the well-being of their children. Hence, understanding the role children play in determining women’s help-seeking is critical if policy and intervention aimed at reducing the time between the onset of domestic violence and help-seeking are to be minimized.

Using data gathered from qualitative in-depth interviews with abused women in South African shelters, I argue that children have influenced the decisions of mothers to seek help after domestic violence. Furthermore I contend that the way in which women construct their reasons for staying in abusive relationships or seeking help is influenced by what they consider to be in the best interests of their children. This is important if policy and practice are to be responsive to how the best interests of children influenced abused women’s help-seeking. In order to contextualize these findings, a brief review of the research related to domestic violence, help-seeking and the “best interests of the child” will be presented. Thereafter, the methods and findings of the qualitative research will be discussed. Finally the data will be presented, as well as some conclusions and implications for policy and practice.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HELP-SEEKING

International and South African studies indicate that while woman abuse is widespread, disclosure of violence and help-seeking thereafter are limited (Burgess-Proctor, 2008; WHO, 2005; Rasool, Vermaak, Pharoah, Louw & Stavrou, 2002). Despite the extensive scope and enduring nature of domestic violence, many women remain silent or do not specifically seek help to deal with abuse until many years after the abusive incident (Meyer et al., 2007). This is pertinent as international studies have indicated that seeking help can lead to the prevention and cessation of further violence (Meyer et al., 2007; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Nara &

Weintraub, 2005; Jewkes et al., 1999). This section will focus on the conceptualization of both domestic violence and help-seeking in the literature.

The conceptualization of the phenomenon of domestic violence by the two dominant schools of thought in the literature, namely family violence and feminist theory, are differentiated by the extent to which they emphasize personal as opposed to structural factors. Family violence theorists tend to emphasize individual and personal understandings of domestic violence (Lynch, Kaplan & Salonen, 1997). ~~By contrast, Fine (1989, p.522) argues that individual~~ individual approaches to domestic violence result in explanations that locate “the source of social inequity ... inside [the] bodies and minds” of survivors. ~~(Fine, 1989, p.522).~~ They do not account for how the structures of patriarchy, racism, classism and capitalism mold and constrain women’s choices (Lynch et al., 1997). Feminist theorists, on the other hand, focus on structural factors, particularly the notion of patriarchy, in their explanations of domestic violence (Filcraft, 1997; Hague & Malos, 1993; Kelly, 1988; Hanmer & Maynard, 1987; Dobash & Dobash 1979).

Similarly theoretical perspectives that account for help-seeking, range from the psychological or micro approaches that focus on individual motivations, thoughts, and feelings (Jasinski, 2000), to those that focus on structure. A number of theoretical perspectives consider help-seeking to be a matter of individual choice (Westaby, 2005; Lynch et al., 1997, p.809). These approaches to understanding help-seeking tend to decontextualize the phenomenon of domestic violence since they ignore contextual aspects and focus on individual behavior (Fine, 1989, p.552).

A more inclusive approach to domestic violence and help-seeking that accounts for both agency and structure is advocated in this article, which is influenced by the ecological framework (Heise, 1998). My approach to domestic violence and help-seeking is shaped by a combination of the individual and structural perspectives, the primary argument being that abused women’s personal choices to seek help are embedded and shaped by varying structures in society. A feminist approach to domestic violence and help-seeking predominates since the primacy of power inequalities between men and women and the gendered nature of the violence experienced by women in intimate partner relationships is highlighted.

“THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD”

The discourse of the best interests of the child exists in both the international and the South African policy domain. At the international level, The Convention on the Rights of the Child and The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provide guidelines on how the best interests of the child should be maintained (UNICEF, 1989; OAU, 1990). At the national level, the South African Constitution, Section 28 of the South African Bill of Rights and some key South African social policies such as the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 and the Social Assistance Act of 2004 consider this issue (Theron & Josie, 2007; Bonthuys, 2006; Burman, 2003). The South African Children’s Act 38 of 2005 (Government Gazette, 19 June 2006) in particular highlights the notion of best interests as the overriding principle for decision-making. Various factors are considered in decisions about the child’s interests, including the needs of the child; the “physical, economic, emotional, intellectual, cultural, spiritual, social, moral and religious well-being” of the child (Cronje, Heaton, 2004, p.158). Other factors are the relationship between the child and other caregivers, the attitude and capacity of caregivers, among other practical and emotional considerations (Government Gazette, 19 June 2006).

Even though there are various lists that specify general criteria, the discourse around ‘the best interests of the child’ is complex, contested and without any clear answers as to what is best for children. As Burman (2005, p.218) states,

The concept of the best interests of the child allows for considerable scope as to what criteria should be used to decide the child’s best interests. Reviews of South African law show that, given South Africa’s heterogeneity, there is virtually no agreement on what values should dictate the choice between alternatives for the child even in normal situations.

Hence, even at the legal and welfare level, the notion of the best interests of the child is contested and

complicated. Moreover, there are ethical implications both in relation to women making decisions to stay or leave based on the supposed interests of their children, since it could harm them and/or the child (for further discussions on this issue see ???)

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Although the notion of the best interests of the child has been used primarily in legal and welfare decisions, there is a discourse that exists in communities about what is considered best for children, which is influenced by these broader formal discourses. One of these discourses suggests that a two-parent family is in the best interests of the child. Brandt, Swartz, & Dawes (2005, p.134) suggest that “At one time, certain social arrangements were assumed to be best for children. At the top of the hierarchy was the situation of the child living in a stable home with biological parents married to each other”, which in essence is the two-parent family model. While the two-parent family model is not the only form of family and not the dominant mode of living in countries such as South Africa, the historical and ideological legacy of the two-parent family model as the ideal family type is still prevalent and hegemonic (Kramarae & Spender, 2000). This discourse is influential in the decisions women make about seeking help, since leaving the abusive relationship is seen to undermine this ideal family type (Harrison, 2008). Kearney’s (2001, p. 275) analysis of research from varying social contexts confirmed that all the women in the studies analyzed “faced shame, guilt, and familial and cultural ostracism if they broke up their families”. Hence, women leaving abusive relationships are considered to be challenging the status quo, which prevents them from dealing effectively with domestic violence.

Similarly, the decisions women make about seeking help are also influenced by the discourse that suggests that the interests of children are best served by being in an environment where the father is present. This discourse is reinforced by court decisions in the South African context where there is a “presumption that it is in the best interests of children that fathers have custody” (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2004, p.70). Harrison (2008, p. 383) concurs that in the UK there is also a perceived need to ensure the presence of fathers in the lives of children, which resulted in women and children paying a high price “for the ideological objective of maintaining men in children’s lives as they contend with the long-term implications of domestic violence”. Women face enormous pressure to ensure that fathers are present in their children’s lives to avoid stigmatism because of widespread notions that ‘children need their fathers’ (Edelson et al., 2007), even when fathers are violent, absent, alcoholics or involved in criminal activities and mothers are in any case playing the role of primary caregivers. A key element of the tacit ‘best interests of the child’ discourse holds mothers primarily responsible for the best interests of children, more so than fathers (Edelson et al., 2007). Women are expected to

keep children safe, even when fathers are perpetrators of violence while fathers are rarely held accountable for their behavior. Despite violence, there is considerable pressure on women to keep fathers in the lives of their children while at the same time keeping the children safe. If, however, they try to keep the children safe by leaving, they are chastised for that decision which is presumed to be breaking up the family and hence against the child's best interests. These contradictory expectations that women should stay in marriages for children, yet keep them safe when men are violent, place enormous pressure on women, as will be discussed in the findings of this study. As a prelude to the discussion of the results, the following section will give a brief outline of the methodology used in this research.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology, based on feminist standpoint theory, is utilized in order to understand how abused women seek help. Feminist standpoint theory postulates that knowledge is situated and hence the viewpoint of the participants themselves needs to be highlighted in order to shift perspectives (Narayan, 2004). Consequently, research based on feminist standpoint theory is concerned with "exploring experience as a method of discovering the social world from the standpoint of women's experience" (Smith, 2004). Hence, domestic-violence survivors who disclosed abuse, sought help and utilized support services were interviewed in order to understand the factors that influenced their help-seeking.

Qualitative in-depth abuse history interviews were conducted with seventeen survivors living in domestic violence shelters who had sought help after incidents of abuse. The term abuse history is derived from oral history or life history methodology, but indicates that the interviews focused on the aspect of women's lives when they experienced woman abuse. Women were selected according to the criteria of the following operational definition of abuse: a woman's (over 18 years) experience of systematic and ongoing physical and/or emotional abuse, which may be experienced in combination with sexual, and economic violation, by an intimate male partner. All of the women interviewed had children, although this was not part of the selection criteria. A purposive and volunteer sample of adult women ~~(over the age of 18) who had experienced domestic violence in an intimate partner relationship and~~ who were living in the participating shelters were asked to

partake, since this investigation was concerned with women who had been involved in seeking help. Three interviews were conducted in Johannesburg initially as part of the pilot study in order to refine the interview process. An abuse history approach was utilized in the interviews, where the interviewer took women through a process of charting their abuse histories in a diagrammatic way on a time-line. The interview process was aimed at creating a space for women to think and explain their experiences of help-seeking after domestic violence in their own words after each incident of abuse, whilst still charting turning points.

Accessing this population was also ethically sound since the risk of exposing women to future violence due to participation in the interviews was minimized, as they had already separated from their partners. Shelter workers informed residents of the study and indicated that there would be no rewards for participation and no penalties if they chose not to participate.

This research provides a lens for theoretical generalisation, if not representational generalisation, because it explains “issues in depth and from the perspectives of different participants, with concept, meanings and explanations developed instinctively from the data” (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, p. 267). Producing thick descriptions (Geertz, 1993) of the narratives contributes to the inferential generalisability of this research, since the reader is able to evaluate the validity of the claims being made based on the data presented. - Credibility is established through *prolonged engagements* with participants, as individual interviews were between 2-3 hours long. The researcher, who is a trained social worker with extensive experience in working in the field of domestic violence, research and counselling, conducted all the interviews herself. It is possible ~~am also able~~ to produce an audit trail of the data analysis process through ATLAS.ti, which illustrates the procedures followed in the data analysis process. This means that the possibilities of tracing the meaning and interpretation back to the raw data is possible, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as confirmability.

A content analysis of the data, ~~using Atlas Ti,~~ was conducted based on guidelines provided by Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Denzin (1989). The process of data analysis began through the interviewing and transcribing process, where notes of key themes and ideas were made. Thereafter, the data were entered into ATLAS.ti, a computer package that was used to manage the thematic data analysis. Main themes were developed based on the research questions and a first reading of the data. A fine-grained reading of the

transcripts was then undertaken in order to code the data and add to the themes and create sub-themes. Themes were then allocated codes. Thereafter, another reading of the data occurred in which codes were allocated to chunks of data. The data were then cut out and placed into files created for each theme. I then took the codes and ordered them according to the themes developed from the questionnaire. Thereafter, utilising ATLAS.ti, I developed a diagram on how the various elements relate to each other. The compiled data for each theme was then read to make connections and interpretations. The names of the participants were changed to protect their identities; hence all names utilized in this article are pseudonyms.

THE ROLE OF CHILDREN IN HELP-SEEKING

The critical role children play in the decisions women make about seeking help emerged as a dominant theme in this research. I argue in this article that social discourses on the best interests of children that are centrally linked to ideas about family, motherhood and fatherhood influenced abused women's ambivalence about seeking help. These discourses suggest on the one hand that a child needs his/her father (Mullender, 1996; Bonthuys & Erlank, 2004) and, on the other hand, that an environment in which there is violence is not good for a child (Mullender, 1996; Malik, 2008).

The first part of the article will show that women remain in abusive relationships to fulfill social norms that dictate the conditions for being a good mother to a child. This includes ensuring the financial security of the child and maintaining a two-parent family. The second part of the article will outline how fulfilling their role as protectors of children was central to mothers leaving the abusive relationship. When women see the negative impact of the abusive relationships on their children, or when their children are being ill-treated or abused, they leave. Discourses that exist both in the law and welfare (as discussed above) contribute to women's ambivalence with regard to whether staying or leaving the abusive relationship is in the child's best interest.

WHY WOMEN STAY FOR CHILDREN

Women remain in abusive relationships because they believe that the best interests of children are maintained by remaining in a two-parent family structure, and they sacrifice themselves because they believe

their children are more important than their own well-being or safety. These beliefs are influenced by social constructions of motherhood. One of the interviewees, Shamima, indicates in her narrative that she felt she could not escape the abusive situation because she had to think of her children: "It's like I can't even get away because the children is there I have to think about everyone else except myself." Shamima clearly articulates how she stayed in the abusive relationships because she wanted to be present for her children and felt that as a mother she had to place the needs of their children ahead of her own. This was highlighted in research with Latina abused women who felt caught between "their duty to preserve and maintain the family and their obligations to themselves" (Edelson, Hokoda & Ramos-Lira, 2007, p.8). These personal views of women are aligned with discourses of the best interests of the child which arguably suggest that children's interests are paramount and parents should sacrifice their interests for the betterment of their children (Austin, 2007).

Gender Role Expectations – Motherhood

Fulfilling the role of mother, which is viewed as taking care of children, protecting their welfare and preserving their safety, seems to be a primary consideration in abused women's personal decisions to seek help or leave the abusive relationship. Catherine, for example, was particularly concerned about who would care for her children and be a mother to them if she was not there to help them. She states:

You see before I do something I think about them. Who is going to show them what is right and wrong?

[Translation of Afrikaans]. I'm there, all the time I was there for everything. "Mummy I got homework.

Help me". Who's going to do that for them? "I'm hungry mummy". To feed them, I'm there, I'm there.

The socially constructed roles and responsibilities that are ascribed to mothers (but not always to fathers), largely due to their biologically reproductive role (Gabb, 2001), seem to influence the personal decisions abused women make about staying in abusive relationships (Hargreaves, Vetten, Schneider, Malepe & Fuller; 2006). Fulfilling the role of mother and 'good wife' in some South African cultures is critical to the status and reputation of the family as a whole (Hargreaves et al., 2006). Research on Latina abused women in the US and Mexico confirmed that women "are socialized to be good wives and mothers from a young age" and that any child-related problems that emerge are likely to be blamed on mothers who will be considered to have failed in

their maternal obligations (Edelson et al., 2007, p.8). The social expectations placed on mothers to play their prescribed roles often uphold the notion that mothers need to place the best interests of their children ahead of their own needs when making decisions.

Family Preservation

Staying in the abusive relationship for a number of women in this study was linked to their personal beliefs about preserving the two-parent family form by ensuring their children have a father. The significance women placed on ensuring that their children grow up in a household with a father was articulated by Anna and Jemina:

I was thinking of my baby growing up without a father (Anna)

I didn't want (my children) to grow up without a father (Jemina).

Some of the women in this study explained that they were particularly reluctant to leave the abusive relationship when they were pregnant or had small children because they did not want their children to grow up without a father.

A son needs to know his father than one who didn't care (Rita).

I can't leave him; I've got a small baby, my baby is too small you know (Rehana).

These personal beliefs are influenced by social pressure and possibly stigma associated with bringing children up in a household without a father.

The personal pressure women felt to stay in abusive relationships so that their children would have a father was reinforced by discourses that emphasize the two-parent/nuclear family model. The notion of a two-parent family, where both mother and father are important in a household to raise children, is a socially created notion that has historically been upheld as the universal social reality and desired model of living even though it is not the reality for most people (Kramarae & Spender, 2000). Feminist theorists have, however, argued that the two-parent family form is not always beneficial to women, since mothers are usually primarily responsible for meeting the emotional needs of family members which largely results in them subsuming their personal needs (Elkind, 1995). As Singer (1992, p.79) points out, the nuclear family model has been "a socially cost-

effective way to organize reproduction, since the economic and psychic cost of reproducing the population remain largely lodged in the private sphere”, where women take the largest responsibility for the unpaid caring work. Moreover, as Kantor and Little (2003, p.349) argue, one of the Herculean traps that women find difficult to avoid and that often keep them in the abusive relationship is the notion “but he’s their father”. This notion is accompanied with the “conviction that the batterer loves the children in the face of substantial evidence to the contrary, and the belief, often true, that the children love the batterer”. Hence, one of the key reasons women do not seek help for abuse is related to their personal beliefs about preserving the family, which is strongly influenced by discourses that suggest that even violent fathers are seen as beneficial to the well-being of children.

Cultural Practices

The idea that the father is central to families and mothers need to preserve this family form seems to also be reinforced by certain African cultural practices (Hargreaves et al., 2006). Paige and Paige (1973, p. 664) suggest that in many communities men perform certain “ceremonial duties [such] as cutting the umbilical cord after delivery, preparing a birth feast for relatives, performing sacrifices”, which are also some of the rituals that women in this study alluded to. Two African Zulu-speaking women from Kwa-Zulu Natal, Promise and Anna, related that in their culture, a father had a particular role to play when a child was born and especially when a child fell ill. Both women were concerned that, if they left the abuser, they would not have access to the father who was needed to perform certain cultural rituals for the protection of the baby. Anna relates how she did not want to have the abuser arrested because she needed him to complete the necessary rituals at the birth of the baby:

I didn’t want to go to the police because I thought I’d lose him. Maybe he was going to go to jail. So, I didn’t want the baby to be born without the father ...Who will support my baby? What would the baby do without a father, it’s a sin ...In my culture you know, we believe like that, after the baby is born there must be things they [fathers] must do for the baby. I thought he’d die without those things ...When the baby [is born the father must cut] the umbilical cord. The father must take it and use it for some reasons,

so the baby won't be sick and grow up nicely. [He must] slaughter a goat.

The practice of 'imbeleko', that is the ritual killing of a goat in sacrifice to the ancestors when a baby is born, is historically a common practice in some African cultures (Ngubane, 1977). Anna's fear for her child's safety, if certain cultural rituals were not performed, seems to trap her in the abusive relationship.

The use of traditional medicines and their associated rituals to ensure the health of children is also customary in some South African communities (Abrahams, Jewkes & Mvo, 2002). Cultural rituals to ensure the health of children seem to have had the impact of tying women to their partner to ensure the child's best interests. Promise highlights the important role fathers play in performing cultural rituals to ensure the health of a baby when she states:

[I was thinking] that maybe if I go into the shelter, he will go back home. I don't know where he stays in Newcastle. If the baby needs something ...I don't know what to do. ...If the baby get sick for something that doesn't need a doctor but [the father has to] go to his home to burn impepho ...[We are] still married because maybe if he can get sick now because of those cultural things. I don't know what to do.

The cultural imperatives are so powerful that women even have concerns that the child will be harmed and perhaps even die if the father does not perform the necessary rituals such as 'impepho', which is the ritual of burning of a plant to invoke the presence of ancestors during ritual ceremonies (Pretorius & Jafta, 1997). These practices tie women to abusive relationships despite the abuse, because they believe that their children will be harmed if the father cannot perform the necessary ritual. It seems that the notion of the best interest of the child has been constructed for women both personally and culturally as meaning that the child has to be within a family where there is a father, and this has been reinforced by cultural practices and rituals.

Financial Dependence

The financial dependence of women on their male partners also played an important role in women's help-seeking decisions regarding the best interests of their children. A South African study (Wood & Jewkes, 1998:28) confirmed that "financial and residential dependency" was instrumental in keeping women in abusive relationships.

Abused women tend to stay in abusive relationships for their children because, if they leave, they would be unable to provide their children with adequate food, shelter and other necessities (Hargreaves et al., 2006). Consequently, they are concerned about the poor reflection of being unable to provide for their children will have on them as mothers.

Financially, dependent women find it especially difficult to seek help from the police if the intervention involves removing the abuser, since this means removing their financial base. When Promise was told to go to the police, she responded:

I said “No, I can’t. What if I’m putting him in jail? What would I do with the baby? Who’ll buy me my food, pay rent, all those things?”

The women were particularly concerned about the impact a lack of financial resources would have on their children. Paulina confirms the impact socio-economic constraints had on her help-seeking:-

I couldn’t go to the police, because that time he never used to have an ID, then they are going to arrest him, then who is gonna support my daughter? Where I am gonna live? You see.

Thinking about the best interests of their children in terms of shelter and food was a significant influence in abused women’s decisions to seek help. Hague and Wilson’s (2000, p. 165) research in the UK concurred that women in their study also did not leave abusive relationships, because they “felt that they would not be able to provide a home and family life for their children without a husband and breadwinner”. A number of other studies have reinforced the influence of financial constraints on women’s decisions not to seek help and leave abusive relationships (Burgess-Proctor, 2008; Posel, 2005). Women’s help-seeking is severely affected by concerns that they would not be seen as competent mothers if they are unable to support their children at the same financial level they were used to independent of their abusive partners. This is amplified in a country like South Africa with poor socio-economic conditions, where there are high unemployment rates, high levels of poverty and inequality (Altman, Hart, & Jacobs, 2009), and no secondary housing options for abused women (Rasool, 2011). It is critical that mothers be provided with greater economic assistance to increase the stability and safety of both mothers and their children (Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman, & Hagemester, 2003)

WHY ABUSED WOMEN SEEK HELP

When the women living in an abusive relationship realized the negative impact it has on their children, it was a significant turning point that provided the impetus for them to seek help or leave. Research indicates that living in an abusive relationship has a profound effect on children (Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Hazen et al., 2007; Beckett, 2007; Park & Khan, 2000; Mullender, 2001; Wolfe, Zak, Wilson & Jaffe, 1986). This section will discuss how socio-cultural expectations to establish a 'normal' and violent-free family environment for their children resulted in mothers seeking help to maintain the best interests of their children. In other situations, direct victimization or the ill-treatment of their children by the abuser led to women's decisions to seek help and/or leave the abusive relationship.

Abusers harm or ill-treat children

Protecting children from abusers seems to be a critical factor in women's personal decisions to seek help. This research indicates that the abusers' ill-treatment of children facilitated women's decisions to seek help and/or leave the abusive relationship. Jemina relates how her partner ill-treated her children:-

He's doing nothing good in my life. On the children's side, he walk with them in the rain. He took them to a shebeen [an informal drinking establishment]. They're not eating, in the day while I'm at work. This is not what I want for my children. I will not let them grow up with him.

Similarly, Fatima relates how she left her husband because he was cruel to her children:

He actually treated them like pigs. He chased them out in the rain. My children was going from place to place for the six years. He ruined my whole life, he just shattered everything.

Protecting their children from the abuser is a powerful factor that drove women to seek help and/or leave the abusive relationship.

Concern for the well-being of children is a critical factor in determining women's help-seeking decisions, particularly when abusers utilize controlling tactics to threaten or harm their children. In Paulina's case, the impetus for her leaving was when the abuser threatened to rape her daughter. She relates:-

I was fed up, he really treats me like a dog...One thing it did make me really go to the police because... he said, "you know me when I like, I can rape Maria and there is nothing you can do".

Serious threats to the children help women to overcome obstacles to leaving such as financial dependence.

Similarly, Rita left the abusive relationship when she realized she did not have the power to protect her child while in the abusive relationship. In Rita's case however, the consequences of living in an abusive relationship were dire for her child. The abuser was forcing her to send her baby to her in-laws who were abusing him. When I asked Rita what made it easier for her to seek help, she states:

My kids. I very much don't really give a hoot about myself. My kids come first, they are everything.

When abusers harm children or place them in situations where they could be harmed, women find the courage to seek help to protect their children. Research with mothers involved in child protective services in other countries have indicated that most mothers do engage in a variety of strategies to protect their children in spite of the complications involved in doing so (Haight et al., 2007; Kantor & Little, 2003). In Rita's case, her capacity to protect her child was affected by the abuser limiting her decision-making capacity. Rita tried to make excuses to keep the child away from her in-laws but in the long-term this was unsustainable. The power dynamics in abusive relationships which often result in women's limited control, impact on their capacity to make decisions to protect their children within the abusive relationships, and this eventually helps in the process of leaving.

Often mothers, even in domestic violence relationships, are held accountable for children's exposure to abuse for 'failure to protect' even when they are not the perpetrators, but in fact the victims of violence (Powell & Murray, 2008; Kantor & Little, 2003; Mullender, 2001). Kantor and Little (2003, p. 350) argue that to define

failure to protect in terms of women's behavior may be an error in attribution, which is affected by an underlying bias, and all too frequent truth in our society, that women are the primary parents.

Hence, men are absolved from responsibility for what happens to children, even in domestic violence situations, even though they hold the power and control in families (Eriksson, 2005, p.121).

It makes sense that the safety of children would be an impetus for mothers to leave abusive relationships, because the social discourse around the protection of children and the primary responsibility of

mothers to ensure their safety is rife (Harrison, 2008). Women seem to feel that protecting children from the abuser is seen as a legitimate reason for seeking help and leaving the abusive relationship, while the normalization of domestic violence in communities makes seeking help for the actual experience of domestic violence less justifiable (Kim & Motsei, 2002; Varga, 1997; Wood & Jewkes, 1998). Annette indicates that it was easier for her to reach out for help for her children than for herself.

I had to take care of my kids. It's an easy way to search for help ... I wanted to be somebody the kids can be proud of. So I had to get help.

Annette explains that seeking help also meant that the children could have a better life and she could raise her children in a way that she felt was appropriate. Bettencourt's (1997) research confirms that women are more likely to leave abusive relationships when they see their children are at risk and realize that leaving would create a better life for them.

Building a better life for children Establishing a 'Normal' Family

The notion of 'family' is very powerful, first in keeping women in abusive relationships to maintain the family form which consists of a father. Thereafter, women re-construct the notion of family in terms of leaving the abusive relationship to create an environment within which a 'normal family' life can occur. The extensive controlling and power abusers' display in abusive relationships profoundly affect children and their possibilities for a 'normal' or at least violence-free life, as Bongi's states:

My child was the motivation to sort things out. I never had family. All I wanted was a little girl to have a normal family. I wanted her to have a mother to count on.

As a result, for many women leaving the abusive relationship for the sake of the children was constructed in relation to creating conditions for a 'normal' family. Abused women realize that there is possibly greater social support for leaving the abusive relationship when children are being harmed. Hence, when mothers begin to notice the effects of abuse on their children, it provided the impetus for them to seek help.

The growing realization by mothers that living in an abusive relationship with a father may not be in the best interests of their children was critical to women leaving the abusive relationship. Children's lives are

profoundly disrupted by exposure to an abusive environment, since children and their mothers are often repeatedly forced to leave their home, which impacts on their “schooling, friendships and contact with wider family networks” (Mullender, 2001, p. 36). Shanaaz realized the impact of the abuse on the lives of her children when she was pregnant with her fourth child. As a result, she decided that she could not bear to see yet another child living in an abusive environment. She narrates:

I’m pregnant again. I don’t want this baby to go through what the other one went through ... I thought, “No ways. Here’s another baby. I’m not going to take this”. I sought out help, I went to Crisis Line. I went to get myself into a shelter. He ruined my children’s lives, you know. He ruined my family bond that I had with my children.

Even though Shanaaz was pregnant, which was a time when other women in this study seemed reluctant to leave because of their economic and physical vulnerability (Rasool, 2011), in her case, the pregnancy and thought of another child living in an abusive relationship were the impetus for her decision to seek help.

The importance of building a different life for their children and creating an environment in which to transmit positive values and where they can reclaim a different, perhaps more peaceful life, was the impetus for women deciding to seek help and/or leave.

CONCLUSIONS

This article outlined the ambivalent responses of a select sample of women to help-seeking, based on how they constructed their role as mothers in relation to the best interests of their children. The women’s decisions to stay in abusive relationships were influenced by the need to preserve a socially accepted family form that included the father in the household. This family form was re-enforced by cultural practices, socio-economic constraints, and gender-role expectations with respect to motherhood as being in the best interests of children. Cultural constructions of motherhood that dictate what is in the best interests of the child are rooted in the hearts and minds of mothers and substantially influenced their decisions to seek help. The likelihood of ostracization from communities as a result of women challenging these cultural and gender expectations made leaving or seeking help for domestic violence an unattractive option.

Women did not feel that seeking help for the domestic violence in itself was sufficiently justifiable because of the extent to which abuse is normalized in society, and because women are frequently told to remain in abusive relationships for the sake of the children (Rasool, 2011). Hence, when some of the women in this study saw that the best interests of the child could not be served by remaining in the abusive relationship, they sought help and/or attempted to leave in order to fulfill the motherly role of protector. Taking action to deal with abuse was legitimated once the 'best interests of the child' were being violated. Abusers ill-treating children, or exposing them to danger, was the impetus for women to seek help both to protect their children and ensure a 'normal' family life for them.

However the impact of abuse on children is not always clearly evident, and in many cases women are only alerted to this when the abusers seriously threaten to harm the children, the ill-treatment of children by the abusers intensifies, or the effects of the children living in an abusive environment become more visible.

Research in this area requires further investigation in order to expose the prevalence of this phenomenon and determine when the significance of the effects of abuse on children becomes evident to women. It would be particularly informative to explore the cultural imperatives that are specific to South Africa and influential in keeping women in abusive relationships.

While the importance of both parents in the lives of children should not be underestimated, the safety, well-being and health of women and their children should not be sacrificed for the sake of a particular family model. A pro-fatherhood or two-parent family philosophy in domestic-violence situations underestimates the impact of this phenomenon on women, children and society at large. Professionals and informal resources need to understand the impact of domestic violence on families and encourage women to seek help in a non-punitive manner, even if this means utilizing the powerful discourse of the 'best interests of the child' to motivate them to take action earlier on in the abuse cycle. Public education and awareness campaigns need to highlight the impact of domestic violence on children in order to legitimize help-seeking in a society that is concerned with the well-being of children, but not always the safety of women in domestic-violence situations.

Policy and practice need to encourage safety first rather than focus on perpetuating a particular family form, since research has indicated that living in homes where there is domestic violence increases a child's

propensity for violence, or for being a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence (Shepard & Raschick, 1999). Research has also indicated that, in homes where there is domestic violence, the severity of child abuse and the numbers of child deaths are higher (Shepard & Raschick, 1999). Hence, motivating women to deal with domestic violence at the onset is important for the safety of both women and children. Society also needs to be educated about the effects on children of living in domestic-violence situations to spur action that supports abused women's attempts to deal with domestic violence and to promote women's help-seeking for domestic violence.

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