### Abstract

Limited knowledge is available on the conditions that contribute to women’s help-seeking after domestic violence in South Africa. Qualitative research conducted with 17 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.

### Keywords

disclosure of domestic violence, support seeking, children exposed to domestic violence

# Introduction

Children play a critical role in influencing women’s help-seeking patterns after domestic violence. Although it is not the only consideration (see Rasool, 2011, for others), the children’s well-being and needs are primary consider- ations 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 respon- sibilities 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, as 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). Although 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 et al., 2007). Recent research in Gauteng, one of South Africa’s provinces, confirms the need to focus on women’s experiences of abuse, as 51% of women experienced abuse in their lifetime and 78% of men admitted to perpetrating it (Gould, 2011). However, only 0.3% of the women reported domestic violence to the police (Gould, 2011). Furthermore, 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 counseling after the first session (Lockley, 1999). The reasons abused women in South Africa remain in abusive relationships for long periods are multi- faceted and complex, with factors ranging from the interpersonal to the macro, including notions of love (Rasool, 2013), forever after marriages, financial dependence, socio-cultural constraints, unresponsive systems (Rasool, 2011). 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 (DVA) of 1998.

The South African domestic violence legislation and relevant constitu- tional clauses are important and necessary pre-conditions to enable women to exercise their human and citizenship rights. However, legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) (1998) assumes that women will seek formal help, and that when they do, it will be from the criminal justice system. Although women who do know about the protection order (that may be obtained in terms of the DVA) may utilize the criminal justice system, in most instances it seems that the first contact women have with formal ser- vices are in health settings (Hochfeld, 1995; Hoff, 1989; Rasool, 1995). Very

few women utilize lawyers and counselors to deal with domestic violence in South Africa (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Motsei, 1993; Rasool, Vermaak, Pharoah, Louw, & Stavrou, 2002). It is imperative to understand the thinking and decision making of abused women regarding help-seeking and it is vital to recognize the context within which women make help-seeking decisions in order to develop intervention strategies that encourage help-seeking at the onset of domestic violence. 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 decide to utilize 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, as 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).

One of the key reasons women stay in abusive relationships is for the benefit of their children (Edelson, Hokoda, & Ramos-Lira, 2007; G. Hague & Wilson, 2000; Thompson & Bazile, 2000; Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2009). 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 pol- icy 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 prac- tice are to be responsive to how the best interests of children influenced abused women’s help-seeking. To contextualize these findings, a brief review of the research related to domestic violence, help-seeking, and the “best inter- ests 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 although woman abuse is widespread, disclosure of violence and help-seeking thereafter are limited (Burgess-Proctor, 2008; Rasool et al., 2002; WHO, 2005). Despite the exten- sive 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 interna- tional studies have indicated 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). 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 femi- nist theory, are differentiated by the extent to which they emphasize personal as opposed to structural factors. Family violence theorists tend to emphasize indi- vidual and personal understandings of domestic violence (Lynch, Kaplan, & Salonen, 1997). Fine (1989, p. 522) argues that individual approaches to domestic violence result in explanations that locate “the source of social ineq- uity . . . inside [the] bodies and minds” of survivors. They do not account for how the structures of patriarchy, racism, classism, and capitalism mouldand 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 (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Filcraft, 1997; J. Hague & Malos, 1993; Hanmer & Maynard, 1987; Kelly, 1988).

Similarly, theoretical perspectives that account for help-seeking range from the psychological or micro approaches that focus on individual motiva- tions, 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 (Lynch et al., 1997, p. 809; Westaby, 2005). These approaches to understanding help-seeking tend to decontextualize the phe- nomenon of domestic violence as 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 as 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 (OAU, 1990; UNICEF, 1989). 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 (Bonthuys, 2006; Burman, 2003; Theron & Josie, 2007). The South African Children’s Act 38 of 2005 (Government Gazette, 2006) in particular high- lights the notion of best interests as the overriding principle for decision mak- ing. Various factors are considered in decisions about the child’s interests, including the needs of the child; the “physical, economic, emotional, intel- lectual, 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, 2006).

Although 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) 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. (p. 218)

Hence, even at the legal and welfare levels, the notion of the best interests of the child is contested and complicated. Moreover, there are ethical impli- cations both in relation to women making decisions to stay or leave based on the supposed interests of their children, as both staying or leaving could result in the woman and/or the child being harmed or even killed.

Although the notion of the best interests of the child has been used primar- ily in legal and welfare decisions, there is a discourse that exists in communi- ties 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, and 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. Although 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, as leaving the abusive relation- ship 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 influ- enced 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 cus- tody” (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2004, p. 70). Harrison (2008, p. 383) concurs that in the United Kingdom, there is also a perceived need to ensure the presence of fathers in the lives of children, which resulted in women and children pay- ing a high price “for the ideological objective of maintaining men in chil- dren’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 perpetra- tors 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.

On the contrary, research has indicated that living in homes where there is severe domestic violence has serious negative consequences for the well- being of children (Emery, 2009) and increases a child’s propensity for vio- lence, or for being a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence (Shepard & Raschick, 1999). For example, children living in homes where there is severe male violence exhibit higher rates of behavior problems (Emery, 2009). 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). However, the extent to which there is recogni- tion of the negative impact of domestic violence on children and women in communities and the ethical implications of women remaining seem unex- amined in communities, with a strong leaning toward preserving a two-parent family within one household above all else. 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.

# aConclusions

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 rela- tion 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 moth- ers 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 normal- ized in society, and because women are frequently told to remain in abusive relationships for the sake of the children (Rasool, 2011). There is extensive evidence that family and friends encourage women to stay in abusive rela- tionships (Rasool, 2012), which is ethically problematic as these networks seem unaware of the negative consequences of these situations both for women and children. It is only 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 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 better family life for them.

However, it seems that the negative effects of living in abusive relation- ships on children are not immediately evident to women, or their family and friends, and in many cases women are only alerted to this when the abuser threatens 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 through what Emery (2009) refers to as their external- izing behavior problems.

Research in this area requires further investigation to expose the preva- lence 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.

Although the importance of both parents in the lives of children should not be underestimated, it is unethical when the safety, well-being, and health of women and their children are sacrificed for the sake of a particular family model. A pro-fatherhood or two-parent family philosophy in domestic-vio- lence 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, and be non-punitive in their responses to women, 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 to legitimize help-seeking in a society that is concerned

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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 perpetu- ating a particular family form. Hence, motivating women to deal with domestic violence at the onset is important for the safety of both women and children, and a co-ordinated intervention approach that deals with both these vulnerable groups (women and children) concurrently is needed. 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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