Abstract

Limited knowledge is available on the conditions that contribute to womens helpseeking 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 womens 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 womens helpseeking patterns after domestic violence. Although it is not the only consideration (see Rasool, 2011, for others), the childrens wellbeing 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 & Bjrkly, 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, PennKekana, 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 Africas provinces, confirms the need to focus on womens 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, sociocultural 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 preconditions 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 & GarciaMoreno, 2002; Motsei, 1993; Rasool, Vermaak, Pharoah, Louw, & Stavrou, 2002). It is imperative to understand the thinking and decision making of abused women regarding helpseeking and it is vital to recognize the context within which women make helpseeking decisions in order to develop intervention strategies that encourage helpseeking 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, TummalaNara & Weintraub, 2005).

One of the key reasons women stay in abusive relationships is for the benefit of their children (Edelson, Hokoda, & RamosLira, 2007; G. Hague & Wilson, 2000; Thompson & Bazile, 2000; Vatnar & Bjrkly, 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 underresearched.

Addressing womens 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 womens concerns regarding the well being of their children. Hence, understanding the role children play in determining womens helpseeking is critical if policy and intervention aimed at reducing the time between the onset of domestic violence and helpseeking are to be minimized.

Using data gathered from qualitative indepth 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 womens helpseeking. To contextualize these findings, a brief review of the research related to domestic violence, helpseeking, 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 HelpSeeking

International and South African studies indicate that although woman abuse is widespread, disclosure of violence and helpseeking thereafter are limited (BurgessProctor, 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 helpseeking in the literature.

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 implications 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 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 twoparent 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 twoparent family model. Although the twoparent 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 twoparent 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 relationship is seen to undermine this ideal family type (Harrison, 2008). Kearneys (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 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 paying a high price for the ideological objective of maintaining men in childrens lives as they contend with the longterm implications of domestic violence. Women face enormous pressure to ensure that fathers are present in their childrens 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.