

## Women's abuse of their children in the context on domestic violence: reflection from women's accounts

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### ABSTRACT

**This paper draws upon the findings of a study that looked at women's experiences of mothering in the context of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse, and considers the issue of women's violence towards children – while acknowledging the fact that men are the main perpetrators of violence towards women and children in these families. The paper first explores the relationship between women's victimization and women's violence, and suggests that women's abuse of their children can be seen as a consequence of their own experiences of domestic violence. The findings nonetheless suggest that abused women have agency, and therefore have responsibilities when they chose to use violence towards their children. The paper also considers the feelings of guilt and blame that tend to arise in these circumstances. Implications for research, policy and practice are identified.**

Is violent behaviour an expression of power, or powerlessness, or both? (Featherstone 1997a, p. 428)

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, there has been growing awareness regarding the fact that domestic violence affects not only women, but also children. Research evidence demonstrates that children living with domestic violence may be affected by their exposure to the violence (Jaffe *et al.* 1990; Mullender & Morley 1994; Holden 1998; Edleson 1999a; Kitzmann *et al.* 2003; Wolfe *et al.* 2003; Sternberg *et al.* 2006a,b; Ybarra *et al.* 2007) and are at greater risk of being 'directly' abused (Bowker *et al.* 1988; Appel & Holden 1998; Edleson 1999b). Based on a review of the

research literature in this field, Edleson (1995) suggested that in 32–53% of all families where women are being abused, children are also victims of abuse by the perpetrators.

The literature on children and domestic violence has primarily positioned women as a determining factor in the protection of children and in how children are affected by the violence (Mullender & Morley 1994; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann 2000; Letourneau *et al.* 2007). This narrow construction of women has been criticized for its tendency to lead to mother-blaming, if not accompanied by a commitment to developing a complex and holistic understanding of women's experiences of mothering in these circumstances (Radford & Hester 2001, 2006; Lapierre 2008). Moreover, Featherstone and Trinder

(1997) stressed the need not to assume that women's and children's interests always coincide in the face of domestic violence:

This is not to argue that women do not often fight for their children's well-being. But there is a problem in assuming that they always do, and there is a further problem in developing policies which assume they will. (p. 153)

Indeed, various dynamics are present in families where there is co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse. For instance, Appel and Holden (1998) reviewed the research literature on the co-occurrence of spouse abuse and physical child abuse and identified five models depicting the directionality of abuse in these families. Although there is a wide recognition that men are the primary perpetrators of violence in families, three of the models identified by Appel and Holden (1998) involve some forms of women's physical abuse of their children.

A small number of feminist scholars have considered the issue of mothering in the context of domestic violence (Radford & Hester 2001, 2006; Krane & Davies 2002; Lapierre 2007, 2008), but so far limited work has focused on women's abuse of their children in this context (Lavergne *et al.* 2001). We argue that feminist scholars need to address this issue to ensure that questions of power and gender will not be evacuated from the discussion in this area; such work calls for a multi-levelled and multi-dimensional conceptualization of power, which considers gender inequalities as well as inequalities based on age and generations (Kelly 1988; Lavergne *et al.* 2001) – alongside inequalities based on ethnicity, sexuality, disability, etc.

This paper draws upon the findings of an empirical study of women's experiences of mothering in the context of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse, and concentrates on the findings that relate to the issue of women's violence towards their children in these circumstances. The first section of the paper examines the feminist literature on mothering in relation to domestic violence and child abuse. The second section presents the main methodological aspects of the study and a description of the sample. The following sections consider men's violence as a context for women's mothering, and then present the findings related to the women's abuse of their children.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Feminist scholars have highlighted the need to take into consideration mothering in the field of domestic

violence, and to explore women's experiences as mothers in this context (Radford & Hester 2001, 2006; Damant *et al.* 2008; Lapierre 2008). This work has emphasized women's oppression, and the way it shapes and constrains individual women's lives. First, research evidence demonstrates that abusive men tend to target mother-child relationships and women's mothering as an integral part of their violence strategies (Kelly 1994; Bancroft & Silverman 2002; Radford & Hester 2006; Lapierre 2007). Mullender *et al.* (2002) point out that 'it is not an accident that abusive men attack women's abilities to mother, they know that this represents a source of positive identity, the thing above all else that abused women try to preserve, and also that it is an area of vulnerability' (p. 158). In this regard, it is important to understand the 'double level of intentionality', which means that a violent act directed towards either the mother or the child may be at the same time intended to affect the other (Kelly 1994). This includes abusing the woman in front of her child or abusing the child in front of her or his mother in order to control both, or making the woman watch, or participate in, the abuse of her child.

Moreover, men's violence may affect all aspects of women's lives, including their physical and mental health, and thus makes it more difficult to perform the already hard and time-consuming work involved in mothering (Radford & Hester 2006; Lapierre 2007). In a study of women's experiences of mothering in the context of domestic violence in the United Kingdom, Lapierre (2007) argued that the difficulties that abused women face in relation to their mothering are due to the particular context created by the violence, but also to the fact that this context is at odds with the high expectations that are placed on women as mothers more generally. In these circumstances, women tend to report an increased sense of responsibility in regard to their children, and simultaneously a loss of control over their mothering. Notwithstanding these difficulties, research findings reveal a wide range of strategies that abused women develop in order to protect and care for their children (Radford & Hester 2001, 2006; Lapierre 2007), which challenges the notion that women who have experienced domestic violence are always inadequate mothers and ascertains the fact that women have agency.

Feminist activists and scholars have also been concerned with the pervasiveness of mother-blaming in the delivery of services for women and children experiencing male violence. Indeed, research evidence shows that abused women are routinely seen as 'failing

to protect' their children in cases involving domestic violence (Magen 1999; Lavergne *et al.* 2001; Radford & Hester 2001, 2006; Kantor & Little 2003; Lapierre 2008). Women are also blamed in situations where their partners have sexually abused their children (Hooper 1992; Humphreys 1994; Davies & Krane 1996; Krane 2003). These realities illustrate the extent to which women are seen as responsible for their children, and how the focus tends to shift away from men's violence onto women's 'deficiencies' as mothers. Again, this can be seen as a manifestation of male domination and women's oppression.

In contrast, feminist activists and scholars have been reluctant to look at the issue of women's abuse of their children (Wise 1990; Featherstone & Fawcett 1994; Featherstone 1996, 1997a; Lavergne *et al.* 2001). Indeed, Fitzroy (2001) states that 'women's violence has historically been a taboo subject within feminist practice and contemporary feminist literature on violence' (p. 7). On the one hand, women's violence has been considered through the lens of male domination and women's oppression (Rich 1979; Bowker *et al.* 1988; Stark & Flitcraft 2005), and Parton (1990) argued that 'the fact of women's abuse in part reflects their role as the primary parent, the lack of support for parenting/mothering, and a whole range of issues around women's inequality in the home and outside it' (p. 42). However, Featherstone (1997a) pointed out that 'whilst explorations of the oppressive conditions under which women mother and of the links between violences are vital factors and should be integral to any analysis, it can be argued that they are not sufficient' (p. 427). Featherstone (1997a) stressed the need to address issues such as women's autonomy and agency – even in the context of domestic violence – and to unpack notions of responsibility. In this regard, Fitzroy (2001) suggested that

Women's choices and actions may be understood to emerge out of their experiences within a generally oppressive and often extremely personally abusive context. However, it can also be argued that we have a responsibility to view some women as active agents who can and do make clear choices to perpetrate violence against others who are defined as 'inferior' or less important than themselves. (p. 9)

In the same vein, Featherstone (1996) argues that women may occupy a range of subject positions. They may be victims in relation to their partners, while holding a position of power in relation to their children: 'they can therefore be both victim and victimizer and these positions themselves shift' (Featherstone 1996, p. 183). A multi-levelled and multi-dimensional

conceptualization of power is therefore required in order to understand women's abuse of their children in the context of domestic violence, and this conceptualization needs to account for the interaction between gender inequalities and inequalities based on age and generations (Kelly 1988; Lavergne *et al.* 2001).

Making sense of women's abuse of their children remains nonetheless a particularly complex undertaking, as it challenges some of the foundational assumptions about women and mothering. Indeed, Fitzroy (2003) pointed out that

To explore the reality of women hurting their own children requires us to question a number of foundational beliefs that we hold dear. These beliefs have become 'truths' which underpin many of our social and familial systems. A couple of examples of such truths include the view that mothers naturally love and nurture their children, that children are safe with their mothers and that women are naturally passive and caring. (p. 1)

In order to challenge these popular assumptions, feminist authors have put forward the concept of maternal ambivalence to explain women's behaviours in relation to their children (Featherstone 1997b; Parker 1997; Davies 2008). Parker (1997) defined maternal ambivalence as 'a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side' (p. 17). She argued that when ambivalence is manageable, 'the pain, conflict and confusion of the coexistence of love and hate actually motivate a mother to struggle to understand her own feelings and her child's behaviour' (p. 21), but when it becomes unmanageable 'the potential for ambivalence to foster thought and spark concern is overwhelmed by the anxiety generated when hate no longer feels safely "mitigated" by love' (p. 21). It is then a source of distress for women and a potential danger for their children. This literature focuses on the relationship between women and children and accounts for the power inequalities based on age and generations, but one needs to be cautious not to lose sight of the more structural levels of power.

The paper looks specifically at women's abuse of their children in the context of domestic violence, and proposes a reflection that stems from the accounts of the women who were involved in the research project. It does not assume to offer definitive answers as to why some women hurt their children, but seeks to contribute to the critical conversation that has been initiated by feminist scholars in this arena.

## THE STUDY

The research project that is reported in this paper has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and has been conducted in the Province of Quebec. The objectives of the study were the following: (a) to identify the conditions in which women perform their mothering; (b) to examine the effects of domestic violence on mothering, and how this related to child abuse; (c) to explore women's experiences of contact with health and social services; and (d) to examine how women's views on mothering influence the relationships they have with their children and their contact with health and social services. This section of the paper presents the main methodological aspects of the study, and a description of the sample.

### Methodological aspects

Twenty-seven women took part in the study, on a voluntary basis. The initial selection criteria were the following: (1) they had experienced domestic violence at some point during the 24 months preceding the data collection; (2) they had at least one child aged less than 18 years, who was victims of maltreatment; and (3) they had access to health or social services, either on a voluntary or on a statutory basis. In accordance with the theoretical framework, a particular attention was paid to the inclusion of women from diverse social locations, according to their age, ethnicity and class. As a result of difficulties in recruiting participants, the first selection criteria has been modified, including women who have experienced domestic violence at some point during the 60 months preceding the data collection.

Access was negotiated with professionals in domestic violence and child welfare agencies and was initially negotiated in two urban areas, but the research site was extended to semi-rural and rural areas because of difficulties in recruiting participants. Eleven women were recruited through community centres (CLSC), 11 through domestic violence shelters and two through child protection agencies. Despite contacts with several voluntary organizations working specifically with First Nation women, only one participant was recruited through these organizations. The remaining two participants were recruited through one of the researchers' social network. All the participants were given 20 dollars for taking part in the research project.

This research project draws upon a qualitative methodology (Reinharz 1992; Maynard 1994; Skinner *et al.* 2005). This methodological approach

has the potential 'to enable silenced women to tell their own stories in their own voices' (Davis & Srinivasan 1994, p. 248) and to 'capture the contextual complexity of women's lives, to capture divergent perspectives among women' (Davis & Srinivasan 1994, p. 248). The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, which addressed the following themes: (1) the conditions in which women perform their mothering; (2) women's experiences of mothering; (3) women's relationships with their children; (4) women's relationships with their children's fathers; (5) the ways in which domestic violence and child abuse affect women's experiences of mothering; (6) women's experiences of contact with health and social services; and (7) the social constructions of motherhood, fatherhood and childhood.

The interviews were conducted between February 2006 and July 2007, and each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The analysis was conducted according to the procedure developed by L'Ecuyer (1990), which involves the preparation of the data, the construction of categories and the codification of the data. The analysis was conducted using N\*Vivo. The selected quotes were translated from French into English for the purpose of the paper.

### Description of the sample

The women who took part in the study were aged between 26 and 50 years old, with the medium age being 38.4 years. The large majority of the participants were Quebec-born, and among them one was from a First Nation community. Only two participants were migrants, originating from Eastern Europe. Nineteen participants talked about their academic background and training: four hold a university degree, eight had a college degree, five had completed high school and two had other trainings.

Three women had only one child, 13 had two children, five had three children, three had four children, two had five children and one had seven children. The children were aged between 1 and 26 years at the time of the interviews. At the time of the data collection, the large majority of the participants ( $n = 23$ ) were no longer in an intimate relationship with their violent partners, and only one woman was living with the perpetrator. The remaining three women were in a shelter at the time, and it was unclear whether or not they would maintain an intimate relationship with their violence partners.

The violent incidents reported during the interviews had been largely perpetrated by the participants' partners. In regard to domestic violence, all the women who took part in this study had experienced psychological or verbal abuse. Sixteen participants reported incidents of physical abuse, ranging from 'indirect' violence to more severe violence, and nine participants reported incidents of sexual violence. Finally, four participants mentioned financial abuse. As mentioned above, the majority of the participants were separated at the time of the data collection, but several women had experienced post-separation violence, namely stalking.

In addition, 24 participants reported that their partners had been psychologically or verbally abusive towards the children. Sixteen participants reported that their partners had been physically abusive towards the children, including smacking, slapping and hitting. Three participants also reported incidents of sexual abuse. The next sections turn to the specific issue of women's abuse of their children in these circumstances.

#### EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S VICTIMIZATION AND WOMEN'S ABUSE OF THEIR CHILDREN

Although the men in the lives of these women had been primarily responsible for the violence perpetrated towards their children, 11 participants talked about their own abuse of children. While all the participants talked at length about the difficulties involved in mothering in the context of domestic violence, it seems that for some women the fear and exhaustion had led to the adoption of abusive behaviours:

I was also louder when I was talking. I was less patient, because I was always scared. (Participant 11)

I was shouting. I was more tired. Sometimes, I was grabbing her [daughter's] arm, and sometimes I was shaking her . . . But I wouldn't hit her. (Participant 16)

In the same vein, one participant explained how the context created by the violence had resulted in the feeling that she was losing control over her own behaviours, with her children being the first affected by her violent behaviours. This woman used the term 'explosion' to illustrate the situation:

I exploded. Things could be thrown, you know . . . Lost control. And it started with the children. (Participant 15)

According to these accounts, the women's violence can often be seen as a direct consequence of their own experiences of domestic violence. Moreover, the pressure placed on these women's mothering is linked to the social expectations generally attached to motherhood. Indeed, the participants talked at length about being responsible for the care and protection of their children, and the context of domestic violence made these tasks particularly challenging. For some women, it appears to be this burden of responsibility that led to the adoption of abusive behaviours towards the children, as illustrated in the following quote:

When he [partner] was going too far, I was becoming violent too. In fact, I was violence, I was shouting. I was going over the top. At one time, by the end, I was shouting, but I didn't know why; I was getting crazy! . . . Perhaps it was because there was a lot of pressure on my shoulders . . . The picture that I had in mind was to be walking on a beam with my two kids behind me . . . If I was falling, they would fall too. So I was feeling extremely responsible, and I was thinking I need to be strong and brave. I was thinking I need to get out of this situation. (Participant 2)

These findings are consistent with the work of feminist scholars, who have highlighted the significance of women's oppression and victimization in women's violence towards children (Rich 1979; Parton 1990; Stark & Flitcraft 2005). These findings also echo the work of Lapierre (2007), who argued that the difficulties that abused women face in relation to their mothering are due to the particular context created by their partners' violence, but also by the fact that this context is at odds with the high expectations that are placed on women as mothers.

To recognize that women's violence is a consequence of their own experiences of domestic violence does not mean that these women did not have agency and did not have responsibility for their actions (in fact, the various actions that the participants had developed in order to care for and protect their children in these circumstances is also testimony of their agency). However, this conceptualization of women's violence is consistent with the fact that women's behaviours appear to be positively modified once domestic violence stops. Indeed, a number of participants stated that their relationships with their children had changed after they had left their abusive partners:

I would say that it was mainly when I was with my ex-partner that I was shouting . . . But when he was gone, when I got him arrested, I was so stressed . . . For a while I was shouting quite a lot, sometimes for no reason . . . We were getting up in the morning and there was a storm in the house . . . But it has been calmer for a while. (Participant 19)

Overall, the findings that have been reported in this section support the feminist discourse that argues that women's violence arise from their victimization, as well as from their oppression as women and mothers. The data gathered in this study also provide interesting insights into mother-child relationships in these circumstances, and this constitutes the focus of the next section.

### WOMEN'S ABUSE AND (UNEQUAL) MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Although the women's behaviours cannot be abstracted from the context in which they take place (the domestic violence appears to have had a significant influence on the women's abuse of their children), the participants' accounts suggest that they had also adopted violent behaviours in order to control over their children:

Of course, I wasn't patient sometimes . . . My voice is loud, so for me it's how it goes. I shout, 'I told you not to do that'. (Participant 4)

You don't want to say bad words, but then you do. But I don't often say things like that to my children, like, 'You're stupid, you're so annoying, you're disgusting'. It is rare. (Participant 3)

Again, the data demonstrate that the women had agency, and that their position as adults and parents enabled them to exercise power over their children; their violence can be seen as an extension (or abuse) of this power. In this regard, the issue of discipline and the complex links between discipline and abuse are of particular interest – and constituted important themes in the interviews. Indeed, several participants mentioned difficulties in using 'appropriate' discipline with their children, as illustrated in the following quote:

My son does things that annoy me, so I am less patient then . . . It's not helpful, it doesn't help him to have better behaviours; it doesn't make him feel like he wants to improve his behaviours. Instead he tends to isolate himself, and to be scared of me. (Participant 10)

A particularly contentious issue refers to the use of smacking, and there was no consensus among the participants in regard to the 'appropriateness' of these behaviours as a discipline technique. In the following quote, one woman explained that she had used smacking, and decided it as an appropriate discipline technique:

I've given him [son] five warning, 'Mum is starting to get angry, mum is getting angry; you know when mum is angry,

you often get smacked . . . be careful, I'll smack you' . . . I explained him that I was getting more and more angry, and he contributed to it . . . Then smacking was legitimate, for me it was. (Participant 15)

To establish a judgement on the 'appropriateness' of these actions is particularly complex in the context of domestic violence, as even the strategies that women develop in order to protect their children from the violence perpetrated by their partners can be perceived as abusive behaviours. For instance, a number of participants explained that they had shouted at their children in order to keep them quiet, hoping that it would prevent incidents of more severe violence:

I was looking after them. I was shouting for them to stop . . . 'Stop, otherwise your dad will get angry'. (Participant 15)

Overall, these findings suggest that women are often in a position that enables them to exercise power and control over their children, but highlight the need to be cautious in the assessment of women's behaviours towards their children, particular in the context of domestic violence. These findings echo the work of Krane & Davies (2007), who argue that women's behaviours towards their children cannot be examined through the same lens as we understand men's behaviours towards their partners in cases of domestic violence, which is marked by a heightened sensitivity to the use of power and control. This leaves women with little or no space to discipline their children, and is likely to lead to blame and guilt (see below).

Furthermore, it is important to note that mother-child relationships are neither unidirectional nor static (see Featherstone 1996, 1999). Indeed, several women explained that their children's behaviours had influenced their own actions:

I smacked my kid once. He answered me in such an insulting way! I just turned around and I smacked him. I told him, 'You don't talk to me like that! You're not allowed to talk to me like that'. (Participant 3)

Some participants also reported that their children had been physically violent towards their mothers, and that it is in these circumstances that they had used violence towards their children. In some case, this can even be seen as a mean of self-defence:

Sometimes I was asking my son to stop and then he would have a tantrum. On one occasion, I was pushing him against the wall, and I was saying, 'look, you need to stop'. But sometimes . . . Once he even told me 'you suck dicks and you sniff coke'. Then I was shaking him . . . He affected me in a negative way, you know. I thought, 'look, I was tired of living with violence, and I am experiencing it again'. I couldn't put up with it anymore. (Participant 22)

Overall, the findings that have been presented in this section highlight the importance of engaging with a complex understanding of power, which operates simultaneously at different levels. The complexity of the dynamics underpinning situations where there is co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse is illustrated in the fact that men's violence can affect children's behaviours, which in turn influence women's actions. This is illustrated in the following quote:

It's when my son started to be abusive towards me, he was adopting like a father position, modeling his father. It started when he was adolescent, and I didn't have any authority, because they were allies his father and him . . . I recall grabbing a baseball bat, a plastic one, because my son was threatening to assault me. (Participant 1)

The next section examines how the participants' abusive behaviours towards their children frequently lead to feelings of guilt and blame.

## FEELINGS OF GUILT AND BLAME

Issues of guilt and blame constituted significant themes in the participants' accounts of their own violence towards their children, even when they had used it as a mean of protecting their children from their partner's violence. For these women, there was a clear sense of their own responsibility in regard to this issue. In the following quote, the woman explained that she had felt sorry when she had been verbally abusive towards her children in an attempt at protecting them from violence:

Once I had screamed at them because they were loud, I was going to see them in their bedroom at night, I was telling them 'mum is sorry to have shouted; I don't have the right to do that'. I was apologizing to them, because I was feeling guilty. (Participant 13)

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, addressing women's violence challenges some of the foundational assumptions about women and mothering (Fitzroy 2003). Women are first and foremost expected to care for and protect their children, and these expectations are generally seen as inconsistent with the fact of being abusive towards them. It is therefore not surprising that a number of participants saw these behaviours as indicators that they had not been 'good enough' mothering in these circumstances. In the following quote, the woman talked about her feeling of having 'failed' as a mother, because of the fact that she had hit her child:

I was seeing that as a failure . . . I had told myself, 'I'll never hit my child, never; I'll never cross that line'. So when I did cross that line, I wasn't proud of myself. I felt bad; I thought that I wasn't good at all. (Participant 15)

That means that although women's adoption of violent behaviours towards their children can be understood in terms of their own agency and power in these circumstances, it also appears to have the opposite effect of undermining their self-confidence as mothers, and more generally. As illustrated in the following quote, the women's use of violence and their sense of 'failing' as mothers can exacerbate their already impoverished view of themselves as women and as mothers:

This was undermining me even more, because now I was also a violent woman. (Participant 15)

These feelings of guilt and blame can prevent women from accessing services. On another hand, this discomfort with their own behaviours can lead women to seek help and support. Indeed, the data gathered in this study demonstrate that several participants had reached out for assistance for their mothering, rather than for their experiences of domestic violence. Again, this highlights the importance of understanding the complex power dynamics that underpin situations where there is co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse, as well as the difficulties that women face in relation to their mothering are due to the particular context created.

## DISCUSSION

This paper has drawn upon the findings of a study that looked at women's experiences of mothering in the context of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse. While acknowledging the fact that men are the main perpetrators of violence towards women and children in these families, the paper has considered the issue of women's abuse of their children in these particular circumstances. So far limited work has focused on this issue, but it appears that researchers, policy-makers and practitioners need to pay more attention to this issue, particularly from women's own perspectives. Indeed, the analysis that has been proposed in this paper has implications for research, policy and practice.

The paper has first explored the relationship between women's victimization and women's violence, and the findings suggest that women's abuse of their children can be seen as a consequence of their

own experiences of domestic violence. In this regard, policy-makers and practitioners working with abusive mothers should be attentive to the circumstances in which these women perform their mothering, given that they may also be victimized by their partners. (see also Edleson 1995; Mullender 1996; Humphreys & Stanley 2006). Indeed, the findings demonstrate that these women may be more inclined to reach out for support for their mothering rather than for their experiences of domestic violence. Therefore, intervention strategies that aim at modifying women's behaviours need to take this into account in order to be effective.

Although the women's behaviours cannot be abstracted from the context in which they take place, the findings suggest that the women had agency and that their position as adults and parents enabled them to exercise power over their children; their violence can be seen as an extension (or abuse) of this power. They therefore have responsibilities when they chose to use violence towards their children. In this regard, the issue of discipline and the complex links between discipline and abuse are of particular interest, and this requires further reflexion. In addition, it appears necessary to pay more attention to the children's (abusive) behaviours in this context, and to conduct research with children on this particular issue.

For practitioners working with these families where there is co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse, it is crucial to be attentive to the complex interactions and power dynamics present in the families, and to intervene simultaneously on different problems. This calls for a multi-levelled and multi-dimensional conceptualization of power, which considers gender inequalities as well as inequalities based on age and generations (Kelly 1988; Lavergne *et al.* 2001) – alongside inequalities based on ethnicity, sexuality, disability, etc. As pointed out by Kelly (1996), 'being victimized does not remove all responsibility, but it places actions and choices in a particular, constrained context' (p. 36).

Overall, the findings that have been presented in this paper highlight the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the difficulties that abused women face in relation to their mothering, which are at odds with the high expectations that are placed on women as mothers. This helps to make sense of the women's abuse of their children, as well as the feelings of guilt and blame that tend to arise in these circumstances. Practitioners' sensitivity to such feelings is likely to affect abused women's willingness to seek help and to engage in the intervention process (DeVoe & Smith 2003; Peckover 2003).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has drawn upon the findings of an empirical study that looked at women's experiences of mothering in the context of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse, and has focused on the issue of abused women's violence towards their children. The analysis that has been proposed in the paper feeds into the yet unresolved feminist debate that focuses either on women as either victims of male violence or perpetration of violence towards their children. Further work is required in this field, but this work should try to move away from such a polarized view in order to embrace the complexity of women's experiences in these circumstances, and develop policy and practice that will account for this complexity.

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