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Battered Women in the Restraining Order Process: Observations on a Court Advocacy Program

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Battered Women, Children, and the End of Abusive Relationships¹

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Much work has focused on the interpersonal dynamics of violent relationships, but less is known about the specific turning points that prompt women at least to try to end them. Using a feminist standpoint method and phenomenological-based analysis of in-depth interviews with mothers in a domestic violence shelter, this article focuses on the role of children in women's decisions to leave abusive partners. It discusses arriving at the decision, the logistics involved in leaving and planning for the future, and it presents policy and advocacy-based recommendations that are aimed at addressing the social welfare of women and children.

Keywords: children; domestic violence; relationships; leaving

Much is known about the interpersonal dynamics of domestic abuse, particularly the ways in which women who choose to end battering relationships are manipulated, threatened, made to feel guilty, or otherwise coerced into staying in them. The physical, psychological, and financial tolls of such tactics are devastating and often debilitating (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Goodwin, Chandler, & Meisel, 2003; Pence & Paymer, 1993). In addition, legal and social responses to battered women who reach out for help are still not fully responsive and appropriate (Karmen, 2001; LaViolette & Barnett, 2000; Moe, 2007; Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). Although many women still manage to end violent relationships, doing so can take much time, deliberate planning, and careful action. Furthermore, upon separating from their abusive partners, women often continue to struggle on several fronts, particularly in terms of finances (e.g., obtaining housing, employment, and transportation) and emotional healing (e.g., building self-confidence, reconnecting with family members and friends, and developing a social support network; Belknap, 2007; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; Logan & Walker, 2004; Varcoe & Irwin, 2004; Zweig, Schlichter, & Burt, 2002).

According to the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), approximately 1.5 million women in the United States are assaulted by intimate partners annually (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Moreover, women with children seem to be at a greater risk for domestic violence. For example, a longitudinal birth cohort study in New Zealand (Moffitt & Caspi, 1999) found that women who had children by age 21 years were twice as likely to be victims of domestic violence as were women who did not. It has been estimated that 3.3 to 10 million children witness their mothers being abused each year, depending upon how the term witness is defined (e.g., seeing an assault, hearing an assault, or observing the aftermath of an assault; Edleson, 1995). Although this estimate reflects a substantial range, McFarlane and Malecha (2005) were more specific, finding that 83% of the children of abused women have been exposed to violence against their mothers. More to the point, the study found that 64% of the children of battered women witness the abuse

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by age 3. In addition, 30–60% of children whose mothers are abused are also directly abused (Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001). According to Kelleher et al. (2006), the lifetime prevalence rate of domestic violence in families who are referred to child welfare agencies for child maltreatment is 45%. Indeed, intimate partner battering and intrafamilial child abuse are highly correlated.

Research has continuously found that battered mothers take their children into account throughout their efforts to cope with, survive, and resist abuse (Haight, Shim, Linn, & Swinford, 2007; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000; Shalansky, Ericksen, & Henderson, 1999; Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). The ways in which women consider their children often depend on what the women deem best for their children, along with the coercive tactics used by their batterers (Buchbinder, 2004; Mohr, Fantuzzo, & Abdul-Kabir, 2001; Oths & Robertson, 2007). In many cases, concern for their children causes women to delay leaving their abusers, particularly when women want to ensure that they maintain custody of their children after separation (Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). Women may also be extremely fearful of an increase in violence and retaliatory assault upon ending the abusive relationships (D. J. Anderson, 2003; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Fleury et al., 2000; H. Johnson & Hotten, 2003; Mahoney, 1991). To be sure, manipulation and harassment involving children have been found to be among the most relevant factors in the prevalence of postseparation abuse (Sev'er, 1997).

Moreover, according to the NVAWS, 35% of battered women fail to report their victimization to authorities so as to protect their partners, their relationships, and/or their children (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Thus, even relying on the justice system, which is one of the most prominent ways in which battered women seek help, may be problematic for battered mothers (Belknap, 2007; Moe, 2007; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Even the process of finding temporary housing when fleeing abuse with children is difficult because many shelters are overcrowded and unable to accommodate large families, adolescent children, or boys (Moe, 2007). For those who do obtain temporary shelter, coping with the constant observation and expectations of staff in terms of “appropriate” mothering tactics, may be daunting (Krane & Davies, 2007).

For women who are able to terminate abusive relationships, concern for the welfare of their children is a driving force behind their decisions to have continued contact with their ex-partners and their attempts to negotiate for material and financial assets from the relationship (Fleury et al., 2000; Varcoe & Irwin, 2004). For instance, in a study of divorced women with children, Kurz (1996) found that child support was particularly salient to the women’s postrelationship status. Although the women’s financial stability was specifically contingent on their receipt of such support, 30% of the women were fearful of negotiating for child support; this fear was most prevalent among those who experienced more severe and frequent abuse during their marriages. Shalansky et al. (1999) also found that fear permeated women’s experiences of parenting and custody negotiations after separation. There is perhaps no other factor as strongly associated with postseparation assault as the need for continued contact because of coparenting (Hardesty, 2002; Slote et al., 2005).

Even for women who rely on other means of financial support (because child support is not available, insufficient, or too dangerous to access), recovering from abuse and/or dealing with postseparation abuse, as well as using domestic violence services, significantly impairs their ability to find employment (Moe & Bell, 2004). Welfare reform efforts over the past 15 years, which often require particular kinds of work to be obtained within specific ranges of time, have only complicated battered women’s efforts to attain financial stability (Goodwin et al., 2003; Meisel, Chandler, & Rienze, 2003). Thus, poverty is all too often a consequence of having been battered and

having left the situation (Baker, Cook, & Norris, 2003; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Owens-Manley, 1999; Zorza, 1991). Approximately one homeless woman in four is in the predicament mainly because of her experiences with violence, and a woman's risk of homelessness increases with the number of dependent children under her care (Jasinski, Wesely, Mustaine, & Wright, 2005). Undoubtedly, being a mother obscures and limits the ways in which women may resist and/or end battering.

Research Questions and Method

Because the presence of children is such a strong theme throughout the literature on domestic violence, further research on the roles that children play in women's experiences, decisions, and actions is merited. Hence, the first question that guided my study was this: How do children affect the decisions that women make to end and/or leave violent relationships? Because the decision to leave is only part of the equation, in that women must also figure out the best way actually to leave and permanently end a relationship, two additional questions were these: How do children affect the ways in which women actually leave or attempt to leave violent relationships? And how do children affect the future plans of women who have left violent relationships?

The data for the study were derived from a larger project on battered women's help seeking and involved semistructured, in-depth interviews with women who were residing in a temporary domestic violence shelter in the southwest. Adhering to a feminist standpoint perspective (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1985; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Smith, 1989), my epistemological stance in the study encapsulated the notion that the experiences and voices of women who participate in research, particularly women of marginalized status (historically, politically, socially, legally, economically, and so forth), ought to be privileged over other, more hegemonic, discourses (Romero & Stewart, 1999). I based this epistemic privilege on the premise that members of such marginalized groups are better positioned than are members of socially dominant groups to describe the ways in which the world is organized according to the oppressions they experience (Hartsock, 1987; Hill Collins, 1989). In short, then, I approached my research with the assumption that battered women serve as experts in their own lives and that their voices hold tremendous validity, in their own right, for understanding the social problem of intimate partner battering. Such an approach also helps fill the gap in research on domestic violence, which has often neglected the perspectives of the women themselves (Buchbinder, 2004; Holden, Stein, Ritchie, Harris, & Jouriles, 1998; Radford & Hester, 2001). The interviews focused on the women's experiences with domestic violence. Each woman was asked to describe the circumstances that had brought her to the shelter, the ways in which she had sought help for her victimization, and responses by social entities to her efforts. The interviews were conducted at the women's discretion, within private rooms of the shelter, and lasted an average of 55 minutes. With the women's permission, the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Each woman was given the opportunity to provide her own pseudonym, as well as pseudonyms for anyone mentioned during her interview, and given a remuneration of US\$10 and access to her transcript.

With a small qualitative sample, the issue of generalizability is an obvious concern, because it poses a challenge to the applicability and relevance of a study's findings. My methodological approach may indeed be criticized because of its lack of generalizability as traditionally conceptualized (applying findings of a random sample to a larger population). However, it is important to note that such a conceptualization of generalizability was not the goal of my study. What I sacrificed in terms of breadth of findings by focusing on a small sample was compensated for by the depth of information obtained on each woman. Indeed, the in-depth interviews provided a wealth of

information on various aspects of the women's lives that may not have been garnered through more traditional means of collecting data (Esterberg, 2002; Kvale, 1996). Moreover, the semistructured nature of the interviews respected the participants' personal boundaries of comfort, safety, and wellbeing because the women were granted the opportunity to shape the flow and content of the discussion in accordance to their wants and needs (Reinharz, 1992). Such an approach honored the standpoints of the women and provided for a richer, more nuanced, set of data. With this approach, it is indeed possible to contribute to a distinct form of generalizability, which is much more appropriate for qualitative research involving small samples. The aim of this form of generalizability, often termed "theoretical generation" or "theoretical transferability," is to contribute to and inform the conceptual undercurrents of future research in an area (Esterberg, 2002; Guba, 1981; J. L. Johnson, 1997; Kvale, 1996).

I relied on a phenomenological approach to data analysis—one that attempts to find the meaning of a phenomenon, in this case, the impact of children on battered women's decisions, perceptions, and actions, on the basis of several women's accounts of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). In this way, my analytical focus was on the "what" and "how" (Moustakas, 1994): What did the women experience with regard to the impact of their children and how did their experiences transpire? On the basis of this approach, a spiraling process of analysis occurred as thematic coding and recoding ensued with regard to each of the research questions and in continual reference to the empirical literature and epistemological literature that guided the study. The findings are thus discussed via "textual" (what the women experienced) and "structural" (how the women experienced) descriptions (Moustakas, 1994) in the following sections, with excerpts from various interviews serving as illustrations.

Profile of the Sample

The larger study, from which this inquiry was derived, involved a qualitative-based sample of 20 battered women. Because the interviews were open ended and in depth, with only partial structure, the women shared myriad experiences. Salient among these experiences were their experiences with mothering and concern for their children. Of the 20 women, 17 (90%) were mothers, and all but one of their children were younger than 18. The majority of their children were at the shelter with them. Of the 17 women, 4 (21%) were also pregnant at the time of the interviews. With little or no prompting, the women talked about their concern for and efforts to protect their children while struggling to survive battering on an individual level. They shared many recollections of the ways in which their children affected their decisions to try to leave their partners or otherwise end the abuse, as well as the logistics and timing involved in doing so. In addition, the women expressed much concern about the future and how they hoped to secure long-term safety and independence from their abusers in light of their children. Such concerns were clearly shared by those whose abusers were the biological fathers of their children. However, they were also salient for those whose partners were fatherlike figures to their children, as well as those whose partners had little to do with their children.

These 17 women were relatively diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, education, and class. Eight (47%) identified as being White, 4 (24%) as African American, 1 (6%) as American Indian, 2 (12%) as Latina, and 2 (12%) as biracial. Four (24%) women were aged 18–25 years, 10 (59%) were aged 26–35 years, and 3 (18%) were aged 36–45 years. Seven (41%) women had less than a high school education, five (29%) had a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma, and five (29%) had completed at least some college. Five (29%) stated that they had been consistently poor and/or

homeless, nine (53%) reported being of lower or working class, and three (18%) described themselves as middle class.

Findings

Deciding to Leave

Children were instrumental in the women's decisions to leave their abusive partners. When the women believed that the abuse was affecting only them, not their children, they found the maltreatment easier to tolerate emotionally. However, at the point when they realized that their children were being affected, the women changed their perspective. For example, Markeelie started to think about leaving when she observed the fear her boyfriend had instilled in her young son. She was further persuaded after experiencing intensified abuse aimed at her pregnancy.

Troy had gotten to a point where he was just terrified. He got to a point where he wouldn't eat when his father was around, he wouldn't sleep while his father was around, and he wouldn't even play or watch TV. He would just sit there like a mummy and wouldn't do anything—that's how terrified he was of his father. And that's a lot for a 2 year old And then Jerrod started raping me and hitting me in the stomach, and I had to make a choice to get us out of the situation What made me up and leave is that I went to the doctor and found out that my placenta was covering up my cervix, which means [that] my doctor told me "no sex." And after I told him [her abuser] this, he still raped me. I was eight months pregnant. He would never hit Troy. He would never hit him, but Troy was just terrified of him—probably because of what he'd seen. Most of the time Troy was not there or he was asleep, but he could hear.

In some cases, it was just the suspicion that a child had been harmed or could be harmed that prompted a woman to decide to leave. Women who recognized this threat to their children and tried to protect them often faced worse abuse. Such was the case for Tazia, whose abuse worsened after she started to suspect that her boyfriend and his family had mistreated their daughter.

So I was in and out of the hospital having a miscarriage, and my daughter was with him and his mom and dad. My daughter got really sick—she was really dehydrated and things like that, and after two weeks, the doctor found that my daughter had fractured ribs. So they placed her in CPS [child protection service] custody until they found out if it was physically done to her. When they took her, I was blaming him and his family, and I was like, "Whoever did this to my baby is going to jail." Evidently it started wearing on him, and he beat me up. In his past relationships, he had domestic violence on his record, but in the six years we were together, he never put his hands on me. I don't know what happened, but I left him. He said "I never hurt my daughter. I wouldn't hurt my daughter." But then he choked me and things like that, and I left.

Even those who had left their abusers previously and then returned to them because of their lack of options and social pressure (an experience that is common in women's efforts to escape battering; see D. K. Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Moe, 2007; Okun, 1988; Oths & Robertson, 2007) expressed a stronger desire to remain separated when they recognized that their children had been exposed to the violence. As Samantha explained,

He had me up in the air, and he dropped me. I was nine months pregnant, and he dropped me on

my foot. I was having cramps. I thought I was going to have a miscarriage. That's why the ambulance came. I got it all documented at the hospital, and I tried to get into a shelter then, but there was nothing available. My parents convinced me I was overreacting, so I went back. The next time it happened in front of my son. That will never happen again. He [her abuser] was spitting in my face. He had ripped my necklace off, pushed me up against the wall, almost knocking the baby over in the process, just following me all over the house, screaming and yelling and calling me every name in the book. Nicholas watched the whole thing. I looked down, and I felt like he was in danger, and there was something about the look in his eyes. Neither one of my children will ever see anything like that again, ever, even if I have to stay alone for the rest of my life.

The Process of Leaving

As Samantha's experience indicates, deciding to leave is only part of the process of ending a violent relationship. The actual process of leaving can be much more challenging. Terri described a typical scenario with regard to the coercive manipulation used by batterers to prevent their partners from leaving.

I left him twice before. I left about six months into the relationship. My sister came to visit, and she packed me and made me leave. She said, "He is a control freak. He is going to kill you. Get out." She got in his face. She made me leave before she left. I came back within 10 days I think. The next time I left, I went to a hotel. I was going to go back with him, but I believe he found the hotel I was at and put something in my tire, a nail or something. I was driving down the interstate, and the tire on my van blew out. It just so happened that his best friend was right there on the other side of the interstate. He called B. J. [her abuser], and B. J. was there within five minutes. He wouldn't let me go. Then this last time when I left, I think he knew I was coming to Arizona. I think he was keeping the transmission fluid drained in the car because it completely ran out. The mechanic was going, "This is impossible, not to blow a seal but to run out of transmission fluid." I honestly believe that is what happened because he [B. J.] is very much that way. To think ahead and set you up. He always told me "A shelter will never accept you. I've never broken a bone. You've never called the police on me." Of course not. That's my death warrant. If he finds me now, I'm dead. I've done it. I've involved people. That was the final step. I truly did not expect the first shelter to take me in . . . I only left because I knew he was going to kill me, and I knew at that point my children were being really affected.

Sometimes leaving meant resorting to illegality. For Lee, theft was justified in her attempt to flee from a man she described as "the bad of the bad."

I stayed in the state for four years after John was born because that was John's dad. No matter what we had, that was still John's dad. He treated John like a king until one day John said, "Mommy, we need to go because daddy isn't daddy anymore. He is going to hurt us. He scares me." I was packed, loaded, changed four tires on my truck, stole a fuel pump, and was out of town within 45 minutes.

Consistent with prior research (D. J. Anderson, 2003; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Fleury et al., 2000; H. Johnson & Hotten, 2003; Mahoney, 1991), even after they successfully ended their abusive relationships, the women were still harassed, stalked, and assaulted by their ex-partners in ways that were directly related to their children. This situation caused many to be constantly fearful and prepared to flee on short notice. Cynthia shared the following with regard to her four children—the father of two of whom (her ex-boyfriend) still wanted to see them even though his parental rights had been legally terminated.

I was in another shelter, but some lady came to the door looking for me—they were probably like trying to get my kids or something. I got out of there, went to another program and a hotel, and then came here, and I've been here for almost a month, hopefully getting transitional housing soon . . . I've been away from my abuser for a year, but he has people follow me and try to steal my children and threaten me, try to keep an eye on me, so that way he knows what I'm doing—where I'm at, who I'm with, all that kind of stuff . . . Somebody will come up to my son and try to get him to go to the car. Sometimes it's not somebody that I know, and they know my children's names. He wants to see my children, and I'm not going to have it!

Others expressed a great deal of guilt because of their abusers' manipulation upon separation and were persuaded to return to them. As Nina described,

He said he wanted to spend Christmas day with his kids and asked if he could stay until the day after Christmas. He had a lot of money. We didn't have hardly anything for Christmas. He stayed for a week instead of two days. That week was totally wonderful. We never fought, he never picked an argument, nothing. He said he wanted to get back with me and promised me he was going to change, promised me this and that. I kept my house and paid the rent up in case things didn't work out, so I'd have a place to go. He said he felt he was walking on eggshells because he knew that I had a house to go back to and I wasn't really trying. He felt like I was hanging it over his head. So I gave up my house. The day I moved everything back here, it all went wrong. It was just a ploy.

Nina went on to disclose the horrible ways in which the emotional toll of the separation had affected her.

I feel guilty leaving him. It makes me angry, and I tried to hurt myself to get out of it. I cut myself—wrists, legs, chest. Once or twice I overdosed—for years of saying it's all my fault. I'd get angry at myself for doing or saying whatever it is that makes him angry.

Indeed, the decision to leave an abuser because of concerns over one's children is complicated by the manipulation and coercion used by abusers (Haight et al., 2007). This continues to be the case as women plan for the future.

Planning for the Future

Concern for their children guided the women's plans, primarily with regard to housing, employment, and providing a safe and nurturing environment (see also Logan & Walker, 2004). Anna Marie, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico with limited English skills, voiced concern (through an interpreter) about employment and housing for herself and her two daughters: “[Q: What do you need to leave here, to be productive, to be safe, to be happy?] I need to work and have a place for my kids. [Q: Have you had any luck finding a job?] No.” Although finding employment was difficult for several women, it was particularly so for Anna Marie, who was working to obtain falsified documents that, she hoped, would allow her to find work in the United States.

Relying on social services and the legal system for financial support was also difficult. Markeelie looked into applying for child support benefits from her ex-boyfriend only to find out that doing so would mandate her to disclose her whereabouts. Her ex-boyfriend had previously shown no interest in parenting their child and was actually legally barred from visitation because of his criminal record. Despite this situation, Markeelie was told that she could not collect child support without disclosing where she was living, thus endangering her safety.

I'm supposed to be receiving child support from my child's father, but they won't help me because I don't want to tell him where I'm at. If he pays his child support, he has the right to know where his son is. They're asking me to choose between my life and receiving child support benefits for my son. I feel that my son deserves the benefits whether or not I want to give my address, and I feel that if my ex-boyfriend's visitation rights are revoked, why should he know where my son is anyway? I mean, there's a reason.

Such contradictions have been noted previously (Varcoe & Irwin, 2004) in terms of custody arrangements, whereby women are expected simultaneously both to preserve their children's relationships with their fathers and to protect the children from their fathers. Legal battles like Markeelie's, or the anticipation of them, plagued many of the women as they planned for the future. Melissa, a mother of seven minor children, whom she was not able to bring with her to the shelter because of space constraints, shared her plan for getting the children back, filing for divorce, and moving into transitional housing. Her narrative is indicative of the level of detail and planning that the women went through in this regard.

I'm going to go when he's at work. I'll get the four at the house and then go to school and pick up the other three. I know a couple of police officers from work that are going to go with me. The grandmother will be there, but I'm not worried about her because she's not going to realize what I'm doing. It's nothing unusual because when I go visit during the week, I take the youngest ones out. If she sees me walk out with the clothes, I'll tell her I'm taking the kids. It takes 20 minutes to get from his work to there, so I'll be out of the school by the time he gets there. [Q: Do you think he will contest the custody stuff?] He already said he would. . . . he's like, "I want to take full custody of my kids." I don't think so. That's why I'm trying to get my kids before he goes to the court system and says I abandoned my children. I'm going to try to hurry up, so I can have the upper hand. So what I'm doing is getting my divorce papers and having them all filled out, and then the day that I get my kids, I'll submit my divorce papers and my restraining order. So I'm going to go get my kids, and then he can get hit with all the other stuff after.

Discussion and Conclusion

The interpersonal dynamics of abusive relationships have been widely studied, although less is known about the process of ending such relationships and/or leaving batterers, particularly with regard to the role of children. Focusing explicitly on the lived experiences and perceptions of the women who are ensnared in such circumstances, my study relied on a phenomenological-based analysis of semistructured, in-depth interviews with women in a domestic violence shelter. The narratives highlight several concerns and barriers that abused mothers face as they leave violent relationships and plan for the future. Among these barriers are fear, threats, stalking, harassment, emotional manipulation, unemployment, homelessness, legal battles, and criminality. The overarching theme of these women's narratives was the concern for children in terms of short-term protection, as well as long-term financial and emotional stability (see also Buchbinder, 2004; Hilton, 1992; Radford & Hester, 2001; Strube, 1988; Ulrich, 1991). The women reported staying in abusive relationships as long as they believed that doing so was in their children's best interests (e.g., ensuring contact with a father or father figure and economic stability), despite having to endure prolonged abuse in the process. They decided to leave such relationships when either their children asked them to or it became obvious to them that the emotional, physical, and financial repercussions of staying outweighed those of leaving.

Deciding to terminate an abusive relationship was clearly only the first step, because the women faced several struggles financially, emotionally, and socially for doing so. Fear was a typical emotion, along with guilt and hesitation about the decision to remove the children from their fathers or fatherlike figures. Some women faced unwelcome pressure from family members to leave, whereas others faced harassment and stalking by their abusers (or their abusers' friends) after they decided to leave. All such responses took an emotional toll on the women, which caused them to question and regret their decisions. They also complicated the women's efforts to plan for the future. Finding housing, employment, and child care, as well as negotiating divorce, custody, and child support proceedings, were among the challenges the women faced.

Although the women in this study were heavily influenced by concern for their children, this is not to suggest that these women were willing to act complacently as martyrs or that they hastily and immediately acted on their children's wishes or their own intuition (although some did act relatively quickly once they decided to leave). They did not always have the best foresight or make the most informed decisions when leaving either (e.g., stealing engine parts to repair a broken truck). They were, like all of us, human, as well as under tremendous duress and crisis because of abuse that had often been prolonged and multifaceted. They were also subject to the various social, political, and legal influences that continue to encourage heterosexual partnerships (preferably via marriage), shared parenting, and fathers' rights. From their standpoint, they were doing the best they could with the resources, information, and circumstances surrounding them. As previous research has found, they believed they were acting out of concern for their children's welfare (Haight et al., 2007; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2000).

Also consistent with prior research, the women were aware of the effects of their abuse on their children, particularly in terms of their children's relationships with other family members, including the abusers. The women were also aware of the effects that their abuse had on own parenting skills, which they viewed as compromised because of victimization (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2000; Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996; Ritchie & Holden 1998). It is interesting to note, however, that according to the most current research, few significant differences exist between the parenting styles of battered and nonbattered women, except with regard to consistency in discipline, which has been shown to be aggravated by intimate partner abuse (Rossman & Rea, 2005). In social work practice, appropriate strength-based assistance (see Postmus, 2000; Saleebey, 2005; Van Wormer, 2001) may thus go a long way toward helping battered mothers heal from their victimization and adapt accordingly in their parenting obligations.

As the narratives presented here suggest, battered women exhibit much agency in their efforts to survive and end victimization, and their reasons for remaining in violent relationships are complicated and interconnected. When they decide to seek help and/or leave, their actions are, for the most part, deliberate, well planned, and cautious. Indeed, these findings may be useful in discrediting stereotypical images of battered women as masochists or helpless and passive—enjoying or otherwise remaining complacent about their abuse (Browne, 1993). Thus, social-, legal-, and advocacy-based responses to battered women would be well served by policies that support comprehensive programming, are cognizant of the numerous obstacles that women face in leaving and/or ending violent relationships (Owens-Manley, 1999), and recognize the overlapping nature of women's needs (Shim & Haight, 2006). A model may be found in “coordinated community responses” (Uekert, 2003), which aim to synchronize the services of agencies and institutions that often remain disjointed in their responses to battered mothers (e.g., victim services, child welfare agencies, criminal justice systems, civil law processes, and health care providers). Throughout all services, economic stability, safety, and social supports ought to be of paramount concern, because

they are foremost on the minds of the women involved (Edleson, Mbilinyi, & Beeman, 2003; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001).

Such recognition is critical because battered women are increasingly subjected to illinformed assumptions about the importance of family preservation (Edleson, 1995)—a political agenda advanced primarily by fathers' rights activists (Levin & Mills, 2003). Such assumptions are used as fodder for family court decisions about coparenting and joint custody, regardless of the harm done to one parent by the other, and with little to no recognition of the effects of witnessing such victimization on children (Varcoe & Irwin, 2004) or the links between intimate partner violence and child abuse (Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001; Haight et al., 2007; Ross, 1996). Along with the concurrent trend in child protection cases to hold women accountable for failing to protect their children when trying to negotiate violent relationships (Jones, Gross, & Becker, 2002), battered mothers are indeed facing a double-edged sword like never before.

Future feminist-based research could help elucidate the interconnectedness of battered women's needs across various social entities by examining women's help-seeking behavior; responses to such help seeking by social service agencies, criminal justice entities, child welfare offices, and victim-based programs; and critiques of the legal system as it is related to child dependence, divorce, paternity, custody, child support, and protective orders. An important component of such research and corresponding social work efforts would involve consideration of the social-structural factors (e.g., criminal records, drug abuse, homelessness, and mental illness) that often impose barriers to women's ability to reach out for and obtain appropriate help (Moe, 2007; Zweig et al., 2002). Focusing on, recognizing, and validating the role of children in women's decisions and actions during and after abusive relationships are critical to efforts to prevent and respond to woman abuse.

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