Discourses emerging from the experiences of the women mothers, victims of violence

Mary Koutselini, Professor
Floria Valanidou, PhD Candidate

Department of Education, University of Cyprus

Abstract
The paper discusses the main discourses emerging from the experiences of women mothers who have suffered violence. It challenges the several conventional frames used to describe victims, such as the heroine model of a woman victim who has the courage to leave the abusive relationship and, conversely, the blameful model of a woman victim who, as research points out, prefers to remain in the marriage (or relationship) and tolerate violence. Findings concern the first phase results of the VICTIMS project (2009-2011), which was designed and conducted in four European countries with co-funding obtained by the DAPHNE III programme. The paper particularly discusses the findings that have emerged from a series of seventeen in-depth interviews that were conducted with mothers from Cyprus, who have been victims of violence. All these seventeen case studies are explanatory, since they aimed to explore causation in order to find major thematic elements and underlying discourses shaping the identities of the women victims. Data have been analyzed mainly qualitatively. Results indicate that the woman’s attitude as a victim of violence is mainly determined by the discourses of powerlessness, tolerance, denying, blaming self, compassion, and dependency.

Keywords: violence; women victims; discourses; experiences.

Introduction
Three years ago, when we came up with the idea of the VICTIMS project on violence against women and its effects on children, and first started to think about it, it seemed to us logical enough to say that ‘no tolerance’ would be the only solution for women mothers who suffer violence. At that time though, we didn’t realize as researchers that the attitude and the identity of a woman who suffers any form of violence is a more complex construct than it looks to be and can be determined by a lot of factors, that is, personal, emotional, psychological or even societal factors. Thus, adopting the view that making sense of domestic violence is different for victims and non victims (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007), that is, researchers, we aimed to examine the attitude of women who have suffered violence within the abusive relationship and how they respond to this violence in order to cope with the physical and psychological damage caused both to them and their children by being exposed. In this article, we argue that the prism of discourses surrounding the attitude of a woman suffering violence incorporates a range of approaches, all subject to each woman’s experiences. Therefore, the study described in this article aims to develop a picture of the discourses that mainly shape the identity of a woman who suffers violence, and to uncover the woman’s attitude as a victim in relation to her mothering role, through a series of seventeen in-depth interviews with mothers, victims of violence, from Cyprus.
**Theoretical Background**

There is a large body of research on how women mothers who are victims of violence behave, how they respond within the abusive relationship and what coping strategies they adopt in order to cope with the problem of violence. What is accepted as a fact is that women mothers who experience intimate partner violence in the family setting are under duress, either due to their circumstances, their relationships, or even their social and biological conditions (Greaves, Varcoe, Poole, Morrow, Johnson, Pederson & Irwin, 2002). So, the different women’s experiences with violence usually determine their attitude as victims and also their coping strategies. Accordingly, coping strategies and strengths may have a greater effect on women’s emotional responses to violence (Parker & Lee, 2007).

Several studies have shown a number of coping and resistance strategies adopted by women, victims of violence (i.e., Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998). The most effective ones are the active, engaged, and behavioral coping strategies since, as Zakar, Zakria Zakar and Krämer (2012) have suggested, women who use them try to address the real causes of abusive relationship. Moreover, women victims of violence, who consciously and purposefully decide to react, can make active attempts to cope with their problematic situation (Campbell et al., 1998).

According to Buchbinder and Birnbaum (2010) there are two contradictory narratives for understanding women who suffer violence: a) the narrative of victimhood, and b) the narrative of survivorship. Both of these narratives explain abused women’s reality. Still, violence against women mostly results in the adoption of a survivor behaviour focused only on ensuring survival (Baker & Jaffe, 2007). This behavioural characteristic greatly determines the woman’s tolerant attitude as a victim behaviour, which, as Berns (2004) maintains, is learned within a given cultural and social context. That is the reason why many women in abusive relationships may come to evince a learned behaviour of helplessness towards violence, thus actually reflecting the traditional views on abuse against women (Alexander, Moore, & Alexander III, 1991) with which they were raised. Therefore, it looks like these women mostly use emotion-focused strategies, that are usually considered to be ineffective, since it seems that by doing so women deny the problem, or avoid the stress (Zakar et al., 2012).

Some women’s attitude as victims of violence may also be defined by feelings of fear along with denial. Accordingly, more than half of the abused women respondents in a study conducted by Caralis and Musialowski (1997), did not tell anyone about the violence they were suffering and did not go to a doctor because of fear or ignorance. So, women may use private strategies, such as relying on their own resources to appease or resist the perpetrator (Goodman, Dutton, Weinfurt, & Cook, 2003). Still, they do have the choice to use more public strategies, such as involving significant others - family and friends - to change the abuser’s behaviour or have more options for escape, as they attempt to deal with the abuse (Goodman et al., 2003; Zakar et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, the woman victim may indeed see herself as highly assertive in the violent relationship in reaction to a violent partner or husband. Nevertheless, this liberal view of herself may paradoxically help her justify her staying in the relationship even though it is abusive (Alexander et al., 1991). Still, there are cases of women victims who choose to stay and fight for their family without adopting a “leaving” attitude. Others may feel so desperate that they choose to deny the whole problematic situation and act as powerless and helpless victims (Alexander et al., 1991). This
powerlessness and helplessness a woman feels within the abusive relationship gets more irrational when she starts blaming herself for the situation she is involved in. As a consequence, intimate violence is normalized (Berns, 2001). That is, women feel that this is how it must be.

But, what happens in the cases where women have children, who are also exposed to violence against them? Is their attitude as victims affected by their mothering role? According to various studies, there are women mothers, victims of violence, who do not even recognize that their children’s exposure to violence against them has negative effects on their children (Baker & Jaffe, 2007; Osofsky, 1999). Thereby, the woman’s attitude as a victim of violence cannot be one-dimensional, since women’s behavioral characteristics at the time of suffering violence, which define their attitude as victims, are controversial (Berns, 2004). However, these behavioral characteristics can be affected by various factors, such as tolerant attitudes towards violence (Grampa, 2000), learned within a given cultural and social context.

As Berns (2004) asserts, there are several frames which are used by the popular media to present victims, and which have become a part of the social context. Such may be, for example, the celebrated model of a woman victim who has the courage to leave the problematic relationship and, conversely, the blameful model of a woman victim who prefers to stay and tolerate violence (Berns, 2004). The way mass media present abusers and victims may affect women’s attitude as victims of violence. For example, many women victims of violence blame themselves for the violence they suffer from their partners. This blameful model can be explained by the way mass media are trying to gender the blame by holding women victims responsible for their role in their own victimization (Berns, 2001). Irrespective though of the attempt of degendering the problem and gendering the blame (Berns, 2001), when suffering is considered, violence is primarily a problem of victimized women. Studying various media stories about domestic violence, Berns (2004) concluded that through these, victims were held responsible for getting in the abusive relationship in the first place and for provoking the abuse. Thus, the mass media often challenge whether a woman is completely blameless for the violent incidents; the women victims are often criticized for not leaving the abusive relationship; there are even suggestions that the women may actually enjoysuch relationships, since they deny their own role in the destructive relationship and fail to protect others (Berns, 2001), such as their children.

Apart from the media, the women’s constructions of violence and abusive relationships can be influenced by wider social and cultural discourses (Baly, 2010). For example, denial, minimization, and victim-blaming, which seem to be common attitudes among domestic violence perpetrators who have undergone treatment (Levesque, Velicer, Castle & Greene, 2008) can affect public opinion and consequently the way women choose to respond within the abusive relationship. In addition to that, the general public, who mostly rely on media frames for victims to form an opinion, can be distanced, and not emotionally involved, when trying to understand violence against women (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007) and the discourses shaping victims’ attitude. In addition, there are also societies, like Pakistan, with harshly patriarchal regimes, where violence against women is embedded in the social, political, and legal structures of society and where women cannot effectively resist violence by themselves (Zakar et al., 2012).
The Study

The present study is part of the European project VICTIMS on violence against women and its effects upon their children when exposed, titled “An indirect harmful effect of violence: Victimizing the child and Re-victimizing the woman-mother through her child’s exposure to violence against herself”. The project VICTIMS was designed and conducted in four countries (Cyprus, Italy, Romania, Slovakia) with co-funding obtained by the European Commission - DAPHNE III programme (action grants 2007-2013), and coordinated by the University of Cyprus - UNESCO Chair in Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment from 2009 to 2011. The project mainly aimed to address the problem of the indirect harmful effect of violence against women mothers upon their children, if exposed, as well as the mothers’ consciousness of that effect. In particular, this study concentrates on discussing the findings that have emerged from a series of seventeen in-depth interviews that were conducted with mothers from Cyprus, who have been victims of various forms of violence. The study aims to challenge the framework of the woman, victim of violence by, a) developing a portrait of discourses that mainly shape the identity of the woman who suffers violence, and b) uncovering the woman’s attitude as a victim of violence in relation to her mothering role.

Research Questions

This study intended to give answers to the following questions:

a) What are the main discourses shaping the identity of the woman mother who suffers violence?

b) How do women respond to violence in relation to their mothering role?

Methodology

For this study, data were drawn from 17 in-depth interviews with women mothers, who were currently or had been victims of violence by their partners. Women were selected through the purposive sampling method from different districts all over Cyprus, in both rural and urban areas, with the help of two regional organizations specializing on domestic violence.

For the recruitment of participants, women were firstly identified by the Police Criminal Investigation Department and specifically by the Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Office (Nicosia, Cyprus), and by the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence (Nicosia, Cyprus) that made the first contact with women telephonically, informing them about the project and asking them if they wanted to participate in the interviews. After that, the research team communicated with all the potential women participants so as to arrange the date, the hour and the place for the interviews. Interview organization took a lot of effort, since the date and time of the interviews had to be customized to participant convenience and preference (i.e., some of the interviews took place during the weekend or in the evening hours). What is worth mentioning is that access to women mothers victims of violence willing to participate in the interviews was a difficult task, given the fact that Cyprus is a very small society, where most people consider the subject of violence as taboo and deal with it almost superstitiously. According to the information provided, the women who eventually agreed to be interviewed represented less than 50% of the women contacted, with the percentage of refusal being very high.

All seventeen audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim into written form. Discourse analysis was employed for the identification of both the situated meanings
and discourses, and important words/phrases in the transcripts had been underlined: a) verbs and actions indicating forms of violence, b) adjectives describing the perpetrator’s profile, c) phrases indicating the causes of violence, d) phrases indicating the effects of violence, e) phrases indicating the woman’s reactions and coping strategies, f) phrases indicating the woman’s feelings, g) verbs indicting reactions of the children been exposed, and h) phrases indicating mother’s conscience and awareness on the indirect impact of violence upon her children, when exposed. Emphasis was given both to the form and content of discourses emerging in the women’s narrations; the functions and effects of each discourse were also sought (Gee, 2005), whereas logical contradictions, correlations, included and excluded words were also taken in mind and interpreted.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted during an 8-week period from June to July 2010. The place that the interviews were carried out was neutral so as to avoid the problem of data reliability. At any rate, the research team did not visit women for interview in their homes, neither were the interviews carried out in the presence of others, i.e., the women’s children and friends. Twelve interviews were carried out in a private room in the Education department of the University of Cyprus, and five were conducted in a private place at a central hotel. During the interviews, women participants were informed regarding the project’s aims, their voluntary participation and the scientific, anonymous and confidential use of data. The written and informed consent of each participant was also obtained. In addition, women were interviewed in private, and the interview was conducted in a confidential manner.

A semi-structured interview guide was used that allowed the researchers to follow certain themes and open up new lines of inquiry. Open-ended questions were formulated on the basis of data obtained by 28 written testimonies from women, which were analyzed before the interviews, and of a review of the existing literature on the topic. Questions were formulated under four main themes, which were: a) violence against the woman, b) the child’s exposure and reactions, c) mother and child, and d) child and school. At the beginning of the interviews, socio-demographic characteristics were obtained. The questions then moved to more specific themes of inquiry, that is, women’s personal experiences of any form of violence from their husbands, their feelings, their coping strategies, their resources of support, their consciousness of the effects of violence on their children and their methods of managing the problem. Women participants were encouraged to express their views sincerely. Taking into consideration that violence is a sensitive issue, questions about women’s experiences, feelings and coping strategies were asked politely and in a nonjudgmental manner. The duration of the interviews ranged from 0.45 to 1.5 hr; some were audio-recorded whereas written notes were taken during all the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

During the in-depth interviews, audio-recording was used, though not in all cases; some women refused to have audio-recording, so written notes were taken instead. All audio-recorded interviews were later transcribed verbatim into written form. Transcripts were then analyzed. The constant comparative analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used through the systematic examination of similarities between the women’s views in order to identify emergent thematic units (categories) within and across the transcripts. In addition, content and discourse analysis techniques were used
in order to elicit situated meanings and main discourses determining the woman’s attitude as a victim of violence.

Participants
Age, education, family situation and financial wellbeing varied for the women. With regard to the interviewee sample, there were both Cypriot (n=13) and foreign women participants (n=4) -- that is, women from Cuba, Russia, Greece and Romania, who have all lived in Cyprus for many years. Five of the women (4 Cypriots and 1 Russian) were still married with the abuser at the time of being interviewed, ten out of them were divorced, and twelve out of them were in a phase of separation from the abuser and waiting for divorce.

Findings
The analysis of the interviews’ data was an ongoing process, open to the researchers’ interpretations, with the main directions given by the research questions. Our data showed that women responded to violence in a number of ways, which were determined mainly by the discourses of denying, blaming self, powerlessness, tolerance, compassion, and dependency. In the women’s narrations, some discourses coexist and/or become interrelated; thus, they do not stand on any clear hierarchical order. For example, all seventeen women admitted being tolerant for a number of reasons, that is, because of feeling powerless, feeling blameworthy, still being in love with the perpetrator, being unable to perceive violence as a problem, or even because of being dependent on their husband both emotionally and economically.

Main Discourses Shaping the Identity of the Woman Victim of Violence
Analysis of data allowed the researchers to develop a picture of the discourses that mainly shape the identity of the woman suffering violence.

a. Discourse of denying. In seven cases, women frankly confessed that, when suffering violence, especially at the start, they were unable to react in any way, denying what was happening to them (e.g., “...when you are suffering violence, it is very hard to talk to someone about it... I can remember that I also couldn’t, I denied what was happening...” [I.14], “…I was doing what I had to do without expecting anything from him. For example, I could have a shower only the time he would take the girls at the park. I had accepted that this would be our reality...” [I.8], “…I was acting like a robot, I didn’t know what life is, what it means to be a human being with feelings, needs and beliefs. I kept telling myself that what I live, is reality...” [I.11]). The same seven women stated that they tried to rationalize violence, since they could not even realize that they were involved in a problematic, abusive relationship, thinking that this was normal and ordinary (e.g., “…I had a hope that things would change with time, but years pass, you get into a routine and you move on. But the situation was wrong from the first years of our relationship... I couldn’t see it. I should have taken a divorce...” [I.11], “…I wondered whether this was normal or not and for what reason was this happening...” [I.14]).

b. Discourse of blaming self. A fewer number of women reported that they were blaming themselves for the abusive relationship they were involved in (e.g., “…I was blaming myself; I was trying not to irritate him, thinking that I gained something...” [I.14], “…I thought it was my fault, that I provoked him...” [I.5]). One of these women also said that she felt she had to take the blame for her husband’s abusive behaviour, since her husband made her feel that way (e.g., “…My husband was always accusing
me. I had it always in my mind that all this violence was my fault; I didn’t know though how to stop the fights; I was the black sheep...” [I.13])

c. Discourse of powerlessness. Eight women stressed that they felt powerless to react dynamically, that is, to actively fight back or call the police or even someone else for help when suffering violence, especially severe forms of violence, that is, beating (e.g., “...I was afraid, I was trying to keep a balance at home so as not to irritate him...” [I.11], “...I was very afraid of my husband. I slept with my kids, locking the door every night...” [I.7], “...Most of the times, I was trying to have people at home so as to be protected since this would stop him from yelling and making trouble. At other times though, when I was home alone, I have suffered enormous violence...” [I.8]). The emergent feeling of fear and powerlessness in the narrations of women who have suffered violence is justified by the threatening behaviour of the abuser, that is, the threats he would make against theirs and their children’s lives (e.g., “...What can I do? He is threatening me that if I leave, he will take my children away from me...” [I.4], “...I was afraid of his reactions in front of the children. I had to give a meaning to my daughters’ lives...” [I.9], “...I felt that at the end he would hurt me, I had a strange feeling that he would kill me if I kept sustaining this situation...” [I.14]). In addition, the data made obvious that some women felt powerless to react due to social constraints (e.g., “...I was constantly afraid and insecure. I obeyed him. I wouldn’t dare to say anything; this would be a shame...” [I.10], “...What could I do? I would go to the police and tell them what? That he was violent? That he was threatening me? I thought the policeman would think that I was crazy. This is the reason I didn’t go. And also the social environment prevented me from going...” [I14], “…The first time I went to the police, the policemen kept asking me about my husband’s job. When I told them that he was a professor, they discouraged me from pressing charges against him; they even told me to feel sorry for him because he might lose his job...” [I.8]). For women who came from other countries to Cyprus and were married to Cypriot men, the discourse of powerlessness was more evident in their words (e.g., “…I was alone in Cyprus. Creating a family was a dream for me. So, I had to get through...” [I13], “…Because I am alone in Cyprus and my family lives in Africa, I said to myself that every man is unfaithful and behaves that way, so I accepted him back...” [I.16]).

d. Discourse of tolerance. All seventeen women stated that, at the beginning, they were very tolerant with the abusive behaviour of their husband, whereas some of them demonstrated increasingly passive behaviour and apathy. Women’s narrations showed that they behaved that way because of many reasons, that is, because of feeling powerless, feeling blameworthy, still being in love with the perpetrator, being unable to perceive violence as a problem, or even being dependent on their husband (e.g., “...No, I didn’t react to his violence... only lately when I took pills for depression, I could see the bad situation at home. I knew something was wrong, but I couldn’t react. I wanted to kick him out of the house but I couldn’t...” [I.1], “…I was withdrawing into myself, in my room or even in the bathroom and I was crying. I would leave the house to go for a walk...” [I.14], “I was always tolerant without saying anything. I talked to my priest confessor and he kept telling me that I had to stay in my marriage, that this situation is my cross that I have to carry...” [I.15], “…I kept crying, I would tell him that I fell in love with a person who was someone else, and that now he has become a stranger I have to live with, but he wouldn’t heed me... I could do nothing...” [I.4], “…I thought I should save my marriage, thus I wouldn’t react...” [I.7]). The majority of the women, reflecting upon their experiences, admitted that being tolerant towards violence didn’t help them after all, but rather devastated both
towards herself. They also noted that they couldn’t abandon him or their child just yet. They kept trying to save their marriage for the sake of their children; they kept being tolerant and did not dynamically react (e.g., “…I need to be very careful with him because I do know that he could send me to the hospital with a broken head…” [I.4], “…I need to save my marriage to prove to my parents that I am happy, because my father didn’t agree with my marriage in the first place…” [I.10], “…I don’t want to get a divorce, what will the people think and say?” [I.15]). Therefore, these five women remained victims because they were not yet convinced that there was a way out.

e. Discourse of compassion. Many of the women confessed that they felt sorry for the perpetrator and would repeatedly give him second chances, hoping that he would change his violent behaviour (e.g., “…I kept compromising. I even took him to a psychologist to help him. To my mind, family was everything…” [I.9], “…I felt sorry for him, hoping he would change in the end…” [I.1]). Women seem to express their compassion for the abuser in two ways: i) by protecting him from suffering negative consequences, such as receiving a jail sentence (e.g., “…I was still in love with him and I didn’t want him to be hurt” [I.16]), and ii) by “protecting” the abuser’s image as a paternal model for his children (e.g., “…I don’t say anything negative to the children about their father; they love him a lot. So, I tolerate his violence for the sake of my children…” [I.4], “…I kept giving him chances for the sake of our daughter. I didn’t want to separate her from her father. She loved him a lot…” [I.12]). Thereby, the emotional complexity of the relationship between victim and abuser was evident in the interviews.

f. Discourse of dependency. The discourse of dependency was the less frequent in the data since only four women stated that they felt dependent on their husband and thus couldn’t abandon him from the start of the violent incidents (e.g., “…I was waiting to find a good job and then leave. I couldn’t do it right away; I wanted to be economically independent…” [I.3], “…I was alone in Cyprus, having a family was always my dream, I had to hold on…” [I.13], “…I depend on him, he threatened me that he would take away my children…” [I.4], “…We had a relationship based on dependence, both economically and emotionally. I asked for love because I didn’t have love during childhood. I was asking for his love…” [I.14]). Therefore, for the women who feel dependent on their husband either economically or emotionally, leaving the abusive relationship is not that easy.

The data analysis shows that women’s feelings stand on a common emotional axis in terms of how they felt at the beginning of the abusive relationship: desperate and depressed, incapable of reacting, afraid and tolerant, obliged to sustain the violent relationship for the sake of marriage and children and by hoping that something would change in the future (e.g., “…I always lived in fear, I didn’t have a voice, I was in silence…” [I.14], “…he was beating me, I was trying to get away to ask for help, but I couldn’t…” [I.16]). During the interviews, the twelve women who left the abusive relationship, stated that they felt hopeful and that they were determined to take their lives into their own hands. These women took the decision to get a divorce so as to ensure a peaceful life both for them and for their children. They also noted that they were conscious of what they have been through, felt lucky to have coped with it but
also guilty for the traumas they caused to their children, who were exposed to violence (e.g., “...Now I am decided; there are days that I am not but I say to myself that I have to win...” [I.16], “...The trauma I caused to my daughter was enormous; I feel responsible... but when you are hurt, you cannot understand that you are hurting the others around you too...” [I.7]).

Regarding the woman’s attitude as a victim of violence in relation to her mothering role, ten of the women participants stated that at the beginning they couldn’t realize that violence did not victimize only them but also their children, when they were exposed. Their first concern was to think how to cope with the problem and what strategies to adopt in order to ensure their survival, especially in cases where there was intense physical violence (e.g., “...He was beating me all day, he was offending me with offensive words, he was never happy with anything I was doing and he was always judging me... I couldn’t react; I was acting like a robot...” [I.11], “...Most of the times, I was trying to have people at home so as to be protected since this would stop him from yelling and making troubles. Other times though when I was home alone, I have suffered enormous violence...” [I.8]). Many of these women stated that they needed time, even years, to realize that violence against them was also affecting their children, both emotionally and psychologically (e.g., “...children are not in the room where we are fighting...sometimes they are in their own room. They are just sitting in their room scared but still, they continue with their studying...” [I.4], “...My daughter does not participate in class and she doesn’t have a lot of friends. My son beats her and she accepts it. He is jealous of her...” [I.7], “...I could see that my daughter did not smile. She totally withdrew into herself, she didn’t want to make friends at school and during breaks she preferred to be alone...” [I.12]).

During the interviews, women have been purposefully asked to reflect upon the indirect impact of violence against them upon their children when exposed. Therefore, all women had de facto stressed some negative effects which they observed in their children’s behaviour. Some of these negative effects were: a) their child’s adoption of antisocial and violent behaviour both at school and at home (e.g., “...my son is very aggressive at school, he always had trouble with the school headmaster...” [I.16]), b) their child’s low school performance (e.g., “...my son doesn’t care about his lessons or his homework, he has many difficulties and all he cares about is football...” [I.10]), c) their child’s adoption of tolerant behaviour towards violence (e.g., “...I suddenly went to school and I saw my son to be beaten by some of his classmates without reacting, I was shocked...” [I.17]), d) their child’s low self-esteem (e.g., “...she is always complaining about herself, she doesn’t love herself...” [I.1], “...she was very self-contained, you could see the sadness in her eyes...” [I.8]), e) their child’s feelings of depression and isolation (e.g., “...my daughter was isolated, she wanted to take pills so as to kill herself...” [I.15], “...I started to realize that my daughter wasn’t smiling, she was feeling lonely, she didn’t want anyone else to approach her, and she didn’t have any friends...” [I.1]), and f) the child’s alteration of feelings towards mother (e.g., “...my daughter is more closed with her father, she always blames me for being separated from her father, she doesn’t want me...” [I.16], “...my son wants to know where I go and he always tries to be with me feeling that he needs to protect me...” [I.13], “...my daughter tries to do all her homework at school so as to spend all her free time with me at home...” [I.12]).
Conclusions
This study aimed to examine the various discourses surrounding the attitude of a woman suffering violence and the ways these are subjected to each woman’s experiences, while also uncovering the woman’s attitude as a victim in relation to her mothering role.

Findings showed that the woman’s attitude as a victim of violence is mainly determined by the discourses of powerlessness, tolerance, denying, blaming self, compassion, and dependency. All seventeen women interviewed stated that they adopted several coping strategies to prevent or deal with the abusive behaviour of their husband. The majority of the women participants said that at the beginning of the occurrence of violence they could not admit that they were involved in a problematic and abusive relationship; they would deny what was happening to them by trying to rationalize violence, thus making themselves the legitimate victims of that violence. Also, most of the women could not react in any dynamic way, for example, actively fight back or call the police, because of several reasons, such as social constraints. From the data, we also noted that some women, especially the ones who were still married with the perpetrator at the time of being interviewed, felt sympathy and compassion for the abuser whereas others could not leave the abusive relationship since they had at the time been emotionally, socially and economically dependent on the abuser.

At the same time, all women participants reported that they would make attempts to minimize the psychological effects of violence firstly on themselves and secondly on their children, when being conscious about the emotional and psychological pain a child is going through when exposed to violence. As the women argued, however, it was harder to realize that their children were also victimized when exposed to violence than it was to perceive themselves as victims.

It is worth mentioning that there are limitations to this study that must be taken into account. Firstly, the data obtained by the interviews were self-reported and partly retrospective, since some women had already left the abusive relationship at the time of being interviewed. Therefore, some time had passed since the suffering from violence, thus many other life experiences could have affected women’s current views. Secondly, women participants did not suffer the same forms of violence and to the same extent; thus, women’s experiences were different, something that may prevent the generalization of results. Future research in the field of discourses emerging from the experiences of the women mothers, victims of violence, could benefit from longitudinal analyses to compare attitudes and feelings of the women victims during the time they suffer violence and after they leave the abusive relationship.

The findings do, however, identify the main discourses surrounding the attitude of a woman who suffers violence in relation to her mothering role and provide clear indications as to how women respond within the abusive relationship. Findings also provide a foundation for further empirical work on the identity(ies) of the women victims of violence in relation to the coping strategies they adopt in order to respond within a situation of violence.

References


