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**WOMAN ABUSE: EXPLORING WOMEN'S NARRATIVES  
OF VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE IN  
MITCHELL'S PLAIN**

Floretta Boonzaier

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## ABSTRACT

Woman abuse is a pervasive social problem and there is a paucity of South African research exploring women's experiences of violence. This study focused on how women endure abusive relationships by examining how women construct and give meaning to their experiences, within a particular socio-cultural context. Interviews were conducted with 15 participants who volunteered participation in response to advertisements. All research participants resided in Mitchell's Plain or surrounding areas. In-depth, narrative interviews were used to investigate women's experiences of violence from their partners. The interview topics included women's daily concerns and problems, their experiences of and responses to their partners' violence, and their feelings toward their partners and staying in the relationships. The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interview data was analysed by utilising a narrative approach, taking the content of women's stories into account. A close attention to language and discourse also shaped the analysis of women's narratives. In their narratives, women named their experiences of violation and abuse, explored the impact of abuse, and discussed their help-seeking attempts. Women also constructed particular gendered identities for themselves and their partners. Hegemonic gendered identities were sometimes adopted or resisted and reflected contradictory subjective experiences. This study showed how women in abusive relationships utilised a variety of strategies to end the violence in their lives and challenged constructions of women as passive victims of abuse. The meanings women attached to their experiences of abuse were filtered through the particular socio-cultural context (characterised by poverty and deprivation) within which their experiences occurred. An important contribution of this study was the acknowledgement that change occurred as a result of the abuse. Women named their experiences of abuse, questioned a husband's violence against his wife, and made connections between their experiences and those of other women, thereby shifting toward a gendered consciousness.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### DEFINITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Violence against women is a widespread problem that takes many forms and affects all societies. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women defines gender violence as:

“Any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” (United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women cited in Vetten, 1999, p. 4).

This definition recognises that violence against women (or gender violence) pervades women's lives and may occur in the context of intimate relationships or in the public sphere. These types of violence include (but are not limited to) sexual harassment, dowry-related violence, female genital mutilation, forced prostitution, and woman abuse (Jacobs & Suleman, 1999).

The focus of this study is on the form of violence directed at women in particular, which occurs in the context of intimate relationships. The definition of woman abuse adopted in this study is:

“A form of trauma, contextualized within an intimate relationship, which includes emotional, verbal, physical, sexual, and economic abuse. It is generally perpetrated by a male partner and perceived by the woman as harmful and destructive to herself” (Keen & Silove cited in Jacobs & Suleman, 1999, p. 2).

My decision to utilise the term ‘woman abuse’ is informed by feminist principles recognising the significance of patriarchy. The use of the term is intended to

acknowledge the gender-specific nature of the violence and the power disparities between the perpetrators and victims (Bograd, 1990). 'Domestic violence' is used to refer to violence encompassing any domestic relationship and may not be directed at women in particular. 'Violence against women' is used to refer to the broader context of violence occurring both in public and private.

### **THE PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE OF WOMAN ABUSE**

The impetus for this study is the magnitude of the problem of violence against women, and woman abuse in particular. International statistics attest to the fact that woman abuse is a widespread phenomenon that affects all societies. For example, 20% of Columbian women, 60% of women in Papua New Guinea, and 33% of women in Peru experience abuse from their partners (The National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO), 1998). Further, a 1993 Canadian survey revealed that more than one quarter (of a nationally representative sample of 12300 women) experienced violence from current or past partners (Statistics Canada cited in Duffy, 1995) and that every week two Canadian women are killed by their intimate partners (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women cited in Duffy, 1995). In the United States, Barnett and LaViolette (1993) cite data from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) estimating that for the period 1979 to 1987, males perpetrated 5.6 million violent attacks on their female partners. More recent FBI statistics estimate that every nine seconds a woman in the United States is physically abused and everyday four women die as a result of woman abuse (Domestic Violence Project / SAFE House cited in Westlund, 1999).

In Africa there is a scarcity of reliable statistics but some studies have provided an indication of the enormity of the problem. In a district in Kenya, 42% of 733 women surveyed in 1990 reported being regularly beaten by their partners (Raikes cited in Watts, Osam & Win, 1995). It is also estimated that 60% of Tanzanian women report being physically abused by their partners (Sheikh-Hashim & Gabba cited in Watts et al.). Almost 50% of 73 women interviewed in Kampala in 1991, mentioned physical abuse by an intimate partner (Wakabi & Mwesigye in Watts et al.).

## WOMAN ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Reliable statistics on woman abuse in South Africa and elsewhere are difficult to establish for a number of reasons. Under-reporting has been identified as a significant problem and the reasons include fear, a lack of adequate support structures, shame or embarrassment, and economic dependence on abusers (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991). In South Africa these problems are exacerbated by the particular socio-political history and the oppressive system of apartheid. During apartheid a complex relationship, characterised by distrust and fear, existed between the police and the oppressed (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991). Thus, incidents of violence were not readily reported to the police. More recently, the manner in which the criminal justice system records statistics of violence contributes to a lack of reliable statistics. Woman abuse incidents are concealed in reports of common assault, assault with the intent to do grievous bodily harm, pointing a firearm, and other crimes (Vetten, 1999). In addition, no large-scale national study on the incidence of woman abuse has been conducted. Available estimates are reported from police records, hospitals, and social service organisations (Segel & Labe, 1990) and should be viewed in light of the problems discussed above.

Available estimates suggest that one in four to one in six women in South Africa are abused by their male partners (NICRO, 1998) and that a woman is killed by her partner every six days (People Opposing Woman Abuse cited in Human Rights Watch, 1995). Furthermore, recent South African research endeavours reveal alarming increases in the incidence of woman abuse. The Crime Information Analysis Centre of the South African Police Service (SAPS) (cited in Vetten, 1999) estimates that 80% of women living in rural areas are victims of woman abuse. In 1998 the Medical Research Council (MRC) conducted a survey that aimed to describe the prevalence of physical, sexual, financial, and emotional abuse of women. In this study 1306 women in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, and the Northern Province were surveyed (MRC cited in Statistics South Africa, 2000). Approximately 30% of the sample reported violence from their male partners. Another study (*The Victims of Crime Survey*) conducted in 1998 (cited in Statistics South Africa, 2000) found that 64% of rapes occurred either at home or near

home and that relatives or intimates committed 34.6% of all rapes, whereas only 24.4% of victims did not know their attackers. In the same survey, 54% of assaults occurred in and around the home while 33.8% of perpetrators were known to the victims. In 1998 the Department of Health and the MRC conducted *The South African Demographic and Health Survey*. African<sup>1</sup> women represented the largest proportion of women who reported being raped (66.7%), followed by 'coloured' women (19.5%), white women (11.4%), and Indian women (2.1%) and one in eight women reported having been beaten by a partner (cited in Statistics South Africa, 2000). Jacobs and Suleman (1999) found that 48.5% of 412 women attending a community health clinic in Mitchell's Plain reported current or past abuse by their male partners. Vetten (1999) investigated the nature and extent of abuse suffered in a sample of 269 women who presented at helping agencies in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban. She found that large proportions of women experienced emotional, physical, sexual, and economic abuse and that 42.5% of the sample had experienced all forms of abuse.

In sum, South African estimates confirm that the problem of violence against women is a widespread phenomenon, that violence against women often occurs in and around the home and the perpetrators are often known to the victims.

### **THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT**

In South Africa, with our history of racial oppression and violence, gender violence has not been a major issue of public concern. Violence against women has only recently become a form of public and social discourse. Since 1994, the post-apartheid government has addressed the issue of the quality of South African women's lives (Vetten, 2000b). The issue of violence against women started receiving attention, along with transformative measures to address the problem (Fedler, Motara & Webster, 2000; Vetten, 2000b).

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<sup>1</sup> The racially defined terms (African or black, coloured (mixed race), white, and Indian) are used to refer to apartheid classifications of the same. These categories are used because they still remain relevant to the living circumstances of women in South African society.

In 1993 the Prevention of Family Violence Act (133 of 1993) was passed to permit women to apply for an interdict to stop abuse by their partners (Vetten, 2000b). The Prevention of Family Violence Act did not address violence by partners who are not cohabiting and same-sex partners. Further, the act did not address verbal and emotional abuse as a form of domestic violence (Human Rights Watch, 1995). These problems led to subsequent revisions and the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act (116 of 1998). The Act provides a definition of domestic violence which includes, "physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, harassment, stalking, damage to property, entry into the home without the complainant's permission, and any other abusive, controlling behaviour" (Vetten, 2000a, p. 51). In terms of the Act, women (or any other person experiencing domestic violence) may apply for a protection order to stop the abuse. Furthermore, the courts and police have specific duties and responsibilities to enforce the protection order. Court officials are compelled to inform the woman of her rights in terms of the Act. Police officers have greater duties and responsibilities which include informing a woman of her rights, assisting her with alternative shelter and medical attention, and retrieving her clothing or personal belongings. Police officers are also obliged to arrest the abuser if s/he has committed an act of violence or violated the protection order. It is clear that the Act attempts to protect the rights of victims of domestic violence by providing adequate assistance and terms of responsibilities. However, there has been a lack in the training of law enforcement officials regarding the Domestic Violence Act. Although many training initiatives have taken place, there has been no national strategy co-ordinating all training initiatives (Vetten, 2000b) and problems persist. For example, police officers are trained around enforcing the Act and fulfilling their duties and responsibilities but ongoing training projects addressing perhaps stereotypes or challenging their attitudes about women and domestic violence are difficult to implement without financial support or large-scale government strategies. Moreover, the scarcity of shelters as alternative places of accommodation for women (especially in Cape Town) makes it more difficult for police to carry out their duties in terms of the Domestic Violence Act. In South Africa, there are only 25 shelters for abused women (Park, 2000). Although there have been

important legal advances, there is much room for improvement in the provision of comprehensive services for abused women.

### **The consequences of woman abuse**

The World Health Organisation (cited in Jacobs and Suleman, 1999) estimates that violence against women is a greater cause of poor health than traffic accidents and malaria combined. Despite women being particularly vulnerable during pregnancy, there is evidence to suggest that beatings do not cease. The 1985 *National Family Violence Survey* in the United States found that 15% of pregnant women were assaulted by their partners during the first trimester and 18% during the last two trimesters (Gelles cited in NICRO, 1998). Women who are beaten during pregnancy suffer stillbirths, miscarriages, or low birth-weight babies.

Motsei (cited in Human Rights Watch, 1995) found that the most common abuse injuries requiring hospitalisation were head fractures, broken limbs, sternum and ribs, scalp and facial lacerations, and chest wounds. Women are also at risk of developing somatic symptoms such as headaches, backaches, fatigue, abdominal pain, vaginal infections, disturbances in sleeping and eating patterns, and sexual dysfunctions (Motsei cited in Human Rights Watch, 1995). Abused women are also at increased risk of contracting HIV/AIDS since they are often not able to negotiate sexual behaviour with their partners who may have been unfaithful. Consequently, the link between woman abuse and HIV/AIDS has begun to receive attention (Pendry, 1998). Violence from intimate partners also negatively affects women's mental health with women experiencing anxiety, depression, suicide ideation or attempts, panic attacks, and other negative psychological and emotional consequences (Vetten, 1999).

At the extreme, woman abuse also results in murder. In 1987, 62% of women murdered in Canada, were killed by their intimate partners (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics cited in Watts et al., 1995) and almost 73% of women murdered in Papua New Guinea between 1979 and 1982 were killed by their partners (Bradley cited in Watts et al., 1995). It is estimated that more than one half of the women murdered in South Africa die at the

hand of their husbands or partners (People Opposing Woman Abuse cited in NICRO, 1998). During 1994, male partners committed 56% of murders identified in the Johannesburg magisterial district and at least 119 incidents of intimate femicide took place between 1993 and 1994 (Vetten, 1996). Women are at greater risk of being murdered in their homes by known perpetrators than by strangers. Abuse negatively impacts on women's overall well-being affecting both physical and mental health.

### **WHY DO WOMEN STAY?**

My interest in the area of woman abuse emerged out of my work as a counsellor with abused women in the Community Victim Support Project at NICRO. I often encountered women who had endured abusive relationships for lengthy periods of time and this sparked my interest in how women make sense of their experiences in these relationships.

It is estimated that woman is likely to stay in an abusive relationship for an average of 10 and a half years (Rape Crisis in NICRO, 1998) and will risk being beaten an average of 39 times before seeking outside assistance (Burman, Katz & Partners cited in NICRO, 1998). In the United States, Strube (1988) reviewed research addressing women's decisions to leave abusive relationships and found that 50 to 80% of women who have been abused by their partners are either still living with them or have returned after a period of staying at a shelter. Despite methodological flaws (for example, selecting samples of women who sought help at shelters) the research addressing women's decisions to leave or stay with abusive partners, shows that substantial proportions of women stay with or return to their partners, even after periods of help-seeking (Strube, 1988). As illustrated above, woman abuse poses serious risks to women's mental and physical health, thus the large proportion of women who stay in abusive relationships or return to abusive partners, is of great concern to professionals in the field.

Research addressing why women stay in abusive relationships has focused on psychological deviance (Gayford, 1975), learned helplessness (Walker, 1979, 1984), and traumatic bonding (Painter & Dutton, 1985). These studies have typically represented women as either psychologically deviant or as passive and helpless victims of abuse.

Little attention has been paid to the context of abuse and how women negotiated their decisions to leave or stay with abusive partners. Reasons for staying are multiple and may include fear, economic dependence, emotional commitment, lack of support, or religious and cultural constraints (Schornstein, 1997; Sikhitha, 1997; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). While contextual issues are sometimes mentioned, the psychological meanings women attach to their relationships have not been fully explored.

The current literature does not clearly examine the experiences of women who stay in abusive relationships. In recognition that leaving an abusive partner may posit further dangers (Fleury, 2000) and that many women do not leave, this study focuses on *how* women stay in abusive relationships. I aim to examine how women construct and give meaning to their experiences in abusive relationships.

Internationally, there has been a recent upsurge in theorising on domestic violence and issues of culture. In 1999 the *American Journal of Psychology* devoted a special edition to the dialogue on domestic violence around the world. This included submissions from Japan, Russia, Chile, and Nicaragua. Walker (1999), the Editor, stated that all contributors highlighted similar issues faced by women around the world. However, she also asserted that the idiosyncrasies of individual cultures and societies should be taken into consideration when examining women's experiences of violence. In a similar vein, Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1993) suggested that a gendered analysis of violence against women would acknowledge women's active choices, strengths, and survival strategies as well as take account of immediate social conditions and constraints. This study, therefore, examines the socio-cultural context (issues such as culture, class, race, and religion) informing women's subjective experiences of the abusive relationships. The focus on psychological meanings and broader socio-cultural issues is meant to provide a holistic account of women's experiences at a particular historical moment.

#### **THE CONTEXT OF ABUSE: MITCHELL'S PLAIN**

Mitchell's Plain, which is approximately 27km away from the Cape Town Central Business District, was created during apartheid, as a result of the Group Areas Act of

1950. People from formerly cohesive communities were relocated and dispersed away from the city centre and the more affluent suburbs. According to the planners, Mitchell's Plain was created to improve people's living conditions and huge campaigns were launched in order to 'sell' the area (Lawrence, 1984). Construction began in 1974. Contrary to the goals of development, problems began to emerge soon after residents moved to the new area. In 1982, NICRO (cited in Lawrence, 1984) conducted a fact-finding study into the social and economic conditions of the lives of residents in the area. This study revealed many hardships experienced by the residents including a lack of adequate facilities (for example, schools, recreational and health-care facilities); a lack of police control; little community cohesiveness; geographic isolation; increasing unemployment; a shortage of housing; and an increase in crime. Other problems included alcoholism, woman abuse, and isolation from supportive family networks. Mitchell's Plain was not fully developed as an industrial centre and most residents had to travel great distances for employment opportunities. High transport costs exacerbated residents' problems and poverty was a prevalent feature of life in Mitchell's Plain. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of the area and amongst residents resulted in a lack of community cohesiveness – people from all over the Western Cape were lumped together in what was supposed to become one 'community'. In 1983 the government announced the creation of a new 'black city' called Khayelitsha, situated next to Mitchell's Plain (Lawrence, 1984). Mitchell's Plain, Khayelitsha, and other areas on the Cape Flats were beset with similar problems created by the apartheid policies of the time.

Twenty-seven years later, Mitchell's Plain is not very different. Mitchell's Plain and other similar areas (for example Manenberg) are still beset by the problems created apartheid policies and are notorious for high crime rates, high unemployment, prevalent poverty, and gangsterism. The SAPS' rape statistics are high and for the period January 1996 to January 1999, there were 928 reported cases of rape and attempted rape in Mitchell's Plain (C. De Kock, personal communication, June 20, 2000). As mentioned earlier, statistics of woman abuse are concealed in reported cases of common assault and other crimes. For the period January 1996 to January 1999, Mitchell's Plain had the highest reported incidence of common assault in the Western Cape (15 114 cases),

excluding the Southern Cape and Boland areas. As Vogelman and Eagle (1991) noted, the general level of violence in society reflects the incidence of violence directed at women in particular.

In South Africa, NICRO is a national organisation concerned with crime prevention and offender rehabilitation. They have service-points nation-wide and projects ranging from an offender rehabilitation project to an economic opportunity project. The Community Victim Support Project provides counselling and legal support to abused women. NICRO Mitchell's Plain has the largest caseload of clients compared to all other service points in the Western Cape and they assist approximately 200 clients per month (NICRO, 1999). From December 1999 to April 2000, Mitchell's Plain, Wynberg, and Cape Town magistrate's courts had issued nearly 4 500 protection orders, up to 30 per day (*Cape Argus*, 26 April 2000). Taken as general indicators of the socio-cultural context, the above provides the background against which women's experiences of violence is analysed.

In chapter two I posit a feminist analysis of violence against women and review some of the theories accounting for male violence against women. The chapter includes a feminist analysis of woman abuse, taking account of broader issues such as race, class, religion, and other forms of difference. I also review the literature focussing on women's agency, negotiation, and resistance in abusive relationships. In chapter three I provide an outline of the research design and methodology of the study. In chapters four and five I present and discuss the results of this investigation. The thesis ends with a discussion of the conclusions and recommendations in chapter six.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **WOMAN ABUSE: A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK**

The current study is situated within a feminist analytical framework. The varieties of feminist philosophies ensure that no unitary explanation of male violence against women exists. Feminist theories are however, unified by the attention accorded to gender and power (Bograd, 1990). A feminist understanding of violence against women stresses that violence is gender specific and directed at women in particular. Theorists recognise that violence against women stems from a patriarchal culture that maintains men's domination both within the family and in society at large (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Yllö & Bograd, 1990). Feminists propose that an answer to the question of why men abuse women lies in the interrogation of social dynamics and ideology (particularly patriarchy).

#### **WHAT IS 'GENDER'?**

The area of feminist theorising has been characterised by much debate and controversy over gender relations and the source/s of women's oppression. In this regard, a frequently cited debate is the contestation between essentialist and constructionist views of gender. Essentialism espouses a belief in the 'true' essence of individuals. It assumes that gender is inherent in individuals and that gender traits are internal and consistent (Bohan, 1997). Thus women and men are described as inherently different, with biological differences taken as the starting point (Fuss, 1989). Within feminist theory, an essentialist standpoint is seen in the assumptions of universal female oppression and the assumption of a unitary female as the object of feminist inquiry (Fuss, 1989). Critiques of essentialism include challenges to the universalistic assumptions about 'women/woman' as a fixed category and to the lack of attention accorded to diversity among women and similarities between women and men (Bohan, 1997; Fuss, 1989).

Essentialist views of gender ignore social, historical, and cultural processes and gender is assumed to be the same across time and location. Systems of power and oppression that differentially affect the lives of women (and men) are not addressed. Bohan (1997), in

her discussion of essentialism and constructionism in feminist psychology, argues that essentialist theories have implications for the practice of feminist politics. For example, if one assumes that women and men have fixed essences, facilitating strategies for change might be challenging and could perpetuate the existing oppressive social order. By the same token, Flax (1990) asserts that any feminist standpoint will be partial and that the category 'woman' does not exist "except within a specific set of (already gendered) relations – to man and to many concrete and different women" (p. 56). At this point social constructionism enters the debate.

### **The social construction of gender**

A social constructionist perspective does not assume a fixed, unchanging reality informing our knowledge. Rather, knowledge reflects how reality was constructed within a particular context. For example, the categories male and female have been agreed upon within particular communities. What it means to be male or female is not trans-historical or the same in all cultural contexts. Furthermore, the categories 'male' and 'female' cannot exist without each other and are therefore defined in relation to the 'other'. Thus, our agreement on 'truths' constructs particular realities at particular social, cultural, and historical moments (Bohan, 1997).

Within feminist theorising, social constructionism has been utilised as a framework for the analysis of gender. Theorists such as Crawford (1995) have identified the inherent biases in sex difference research and advocated the use of social constructionism as an alternative approach to gender relations. From this perspective, gender is described as a system of relations operating at the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels (Crawford, 1995). At the individual level social constructionists may analyse how definitions of femininity and masculinity are enacted and conform to or resist socially agreed upon standards. At the interpersonal level, gender affects how we relate to others, either male or female. And at the social structural level the role of power in the construction of gender is acknowledged (Crawford, 1995). A constructionist approach shifts away from essentialist notions of gender and the view of men (masculinity) and women (femininity) as dichotomous distinctions. This approach strengthens our

theorising since diversity (arising from particular contexts) is acknowledged. The focus shifts from the individual to the social and the role of power in the construction of gender is examined (Bohan, 1997). A social constructionist approach shapes the understanding of gender in this study.

### **WHY DO MEN ABUSE WOMEN?**

The question of why men abuse their partners has been given some attention in the woman abuse literature. However, scholarship in this area is limited by a somewhat individualist focus that ignores gender. Individualistic theories focussed on the psychological conditions (personality traits and psychopathology) that predispose men to the use of violence. Men who abuse their partners have been described as hostile, having low self-esteem, extremely jealous, having an increased need for control, and passive-aggressive (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986; Hydén, 1994). The personality development and childhood history of men has been emphasised as explanatory variables for the violence (Hydén, 1994). Theorists propose that violence is a result of individual-psychological characteristics, individual background factors or a simple interaction between individuals. These analyses have been the site for much debate and controversy in the areas of violence and gender studies.

### **Masculinities and violence**

More recently, the question of why men abuse has shifted to a focus on men and masculinity. These shifts are located in the recent proliferation in studies on men, variously called Men's Studies (critiqued by Hearn, 1998) or Critical Men's Studies (Morrell, 2001). These studies critique men's power and domination by focussing on men and masculinity (Hearn, 1998). Masculinity has been described as shifting, dynamic, and socially and historically constructed (Morrell, 2001). Connell (1995) showed how all men do not equally benefit from patriarchy and how certain forms of masculinity have become culturally dominant. Hegemonic forms of masculinity emphasised certain characters at particular social and historical moments. Traditionally, masculinity has been associated with aggressive, assertive, and authoritarian ideals. In addition, socially constructed gender roles define men as powerful, strong, and aggressive

(Lorber, 1997) and violent behaviour is valorised as symbolic of masculinity and male authority (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Within a patriarchal culture, men are socialised into keeping women subordinate through the use of violence, thus male violence is a reflection of male authority and domination over women. The use of violence by men is seen as intentional and functional – as a way of maintaining male control and authority. Culturally defined feminine roles are passive, caring, and submissive – making it more ‘acceptable’ for men to exert power and authority over women, in both the social and private spheres.

Literature focussing on men’s violence against intimate partners has considered how men account for and explain violence against their partners. Ptacek (1990) conducted in-depth interviews with 18 men who sought assistance at a programme for male abusers in the United States. In his study, men used excuses and justifications in order to minimise or deny their use of violence. They explained their violent behaviour as a loss of control, temporary insanity, accumulated frustration, or by blaming the victims (Ptacek, 1990). These explanations have been employed by perpetrators, victims, and clinicians working in the areas of male violence. Men’s violent behaviour is therefore justified and excused at the individual and societal levels.

Also in the United States, Stamp and Sabourin (1995) interviewed 15 men in order to examine how they accounted for their violent acts against their partners. The men were asked to describe the most recent episode of violence and their accounts included the nature of the abuse, ‘reasons’ for the abuse, and information about their relationships. Stamp and Sabourin found that men typically attribute their use of violence to external factors. These included the behaviour of their wives, jealousy, verbal or physical abuse by their wives, and a loss of control. By making external attributions, men were able to minimise their responsibility for the violence. Furthermore, in their accounts of violence, men also excused, justified, and denied their abusive behaviour.

In Britain, Hearn (1998) analysed how men talk about and understand their violence against women. Hearn conducted two-part interviews with volunteers for the study

recruited through the police, probation officers, men's programmes, prisons, and welfare agencies. In the first interview, he encouraged men to tell their stories by using open-ended questions. The second interview was structured in order to obtain biographic details, patterns of social support, and agency responses. Hearn found that men excused, denied, minimised, and justified their violence against their partners, results that are congruent with the studies described above. Men in his sample set the context for their violence by describing their own difficulties (stemming from the family or social spheres). However, they did not describe the violence in terms of the broader context of their relationships, rather, violence was depicted as an isolated or insignificant part of their stories.

In sum, research focussing on the perpetrators of violence, show how they explain their violence by using justifications, excuses, and denials. In South Africa, literature on abusers' explanations or accounts of violence is virtually non-existent. Research has started to address this space by questioning the relationship between violence and constructions of masculinity (Wood & Jewkes, 2001). For example, Wood and Jewkes explored how young men discussed their experiences of practising violence against their heterosexual partners. They found connections between men's talk about violence and predominant forms of masculinity (associated with violence and domination) available in a particular community. Further research, particularly in a national context, should directly examine the relationship between masculinities and woman abuse.

### **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ABUSED WOMEN**

The earliest psychological theories examining women's experiences in abusive relationships focussed on women's pathology. Following from Freudian constructions of femininity, women who stayed with abusive partners were portrayed as masochistically desiring or provoking the abuse from their partners. In 1964 in the United States, Snell, Rosenwald, and Robey (as cited in Hydén, 1994) published an article based on a study of 12 couples where wife abuse had been present. They described the women as aggressive, efficient, masculine, and sexually frigid, with controlling and dependent tendencies. Men in the study were described as passive, indecisive, impotent, and alcohol dependent.

Snell et al. inferred that the combination of the passive man and aggressive woman was the cause of violence in those relationships.

A decade later in the United Kingdom Pizzey (cited in Stark & Flitcraft, 1996) founded the first shelter for battered women, Chiswick Women's Aid. Based upon her work at the shelter, Pizzey argued that domestic violence was transmitted intergenerationally and that battered women had an abnormal need for violence (Pizzey & Shapiro cited in Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). In 1975, Gayford, a British psychiatrist, published an article based upon surveys with 100 women at the Chiswick shelter. Gayford (1975) provided descriptive data, particularly focussing on background information such as pregnancies outside marriage, premarital sex, and extramarital affairs. Gayford popularised the view of battered women as psychologically and socially deviant. The following illustrates:

“Often they need protection against their own stimulus-seeking activities. Though they flinch from violence like other people they have the ability to seek violent men or by their behaviour to provoke attack from the opposite sex.”  
(Gayford, 1975, p. 197)

The work of these 'experts' became the popular representations of battered women because there was a paucity of research in this area and the problem of woman abuse was virtually invisible (Kirkwood, 1993). These representations of psychological deviance or abnormality have pervaded the literature on woman abuse. For example, women have since been diagnosed with battered women's syndrome, self-defeating personality disorder, and co-dependency (Westlund, 1999).

Research has also focussed on women's responses to their partners' violence. In this area, women's responses have been represented as maladaptive and deficient. Models of women's behaviour emphasised cognitive distortion and passive behavioural responses (Hamby & Gray-Little, 1997). For example, Walker (1979, 1984, 2000) posited the theory of learned helplessness to describe the psychological disposition of women in abusive relationships. In terms of this theory, adapted from Seligman's (cited in Walker,

2000) experiments with laboratory dogs, women are unable to escape from abusive relationships because they are deficient in problem-solving skills and they perceive their chances of escape as impossible.

Walker also proposed the theory of the cycle of violence that describes different phases of the abusive relationship. Firstly, the tension-building phase may include minor violence or verbal abuse. More severe abuse characterises the explosive or abusive phase. This phase is often followed by a calm, loving, or honeymoon phase during which the abuser becomes apologetic and manipulates the woman with promises of change. Walker (1979, 1984, 2000) used an explosion metaphor in her description of the cycle of violence. This suggests a loss of control on the abuser's part (Eisikovits, 1999; Ptacek, 1990). In this respect, it seems that the violence is beyond the control of the abuser who therefore cannot be held fully accountable for his actions. In terms of Walker's work, the combination of women's 'learned helplessness' and the cycle of violence trap women in abusive relationships.

At a time when there was a dearth of literature on women's experiences of violence from their partners, Walker's (1979, 1984) research made a valuable inroad. Her theories also provided an alternative to explanations of abused women as masochistic or personality disordered (Walker, 2000). Despite these contributions, the passive representations of women in Walker's work cannot be overlooked. The learned helplessness model has since been contested and studies have shown a lack of support for its application to women's experiences (Hoff, 1990; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Profitt, 2000; Russell, 1990). More recent studies have shown how women employ various strategies at their disposal to resist violence from their partners. Some of these studies will be explored at greater length later in this chapter.

Dutton and Painter (1993) challenged the predictability of Walker's cycle of violence and suggested that the abuse is intermittent rather than predictable. Painter and Dutton (1985) contended that there are two common features in abusive relationships. These are the intermittency of abuse and a power imbalance between the individuals. They discussed

women's negative self-perceptions and perceived lack of power. While it is important to acknowledge that hegemonic patriarchal discourses have powerful effects on women's lives, the power imbalances Painter and Dutton discussed are unidirectional. Women's strategies for coping with the violence are largely ignored by these theories. Based on the two conditions described above, Dutton and Painter theorised that traumatic bonding plays a role in abusive relationships. They described it as the formation of strong emotional ties between a victim and an abuser. This theory then, concurs with the phases of Walker's (1979, 1984, 2000) cycle of violence. In terms of both theories (the cycle of violence and traumatic bonding), women form an attachment to, or bond with the affectionate side of the abuser. Although they discussed psychological entrapment and passivity on the part of the women, Dutton and Painter recognised that women experienced abuse as well as love and kindness from their partners.

Mashishi (2000) examined the experiences of 14 women at two shelters in Johannesburg, South Africa. Although this issue was not explored at length due to methodological limitations (such as the use of structured questionnaires to explore women's experiences of violence), the majority of the women (n=71%) cited their reasons for staying as loving their partners and hoping they would change. In the examination of women's experiences in abusive relationships, it is important to theorise the competing dynamics of love and abuse and to consider the different dimensions of the relationship. The theory of traumatic bonding, however, is limited by the focus on psychological issues at the expense of other levels of analyses such as gender, power, and the socio-cultural context of abuse.

## **IDEOLOGY OF THE MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY**

### **Family violence studies**

Family violence approaches focus on socio-demographic variables and family dynamics in an attempt to explain violence against women (Anderson, 1997). In 1974 Gelles (cited in Kirkwood, 1993) collected data from violent and non-violent families in the United States. Gelles proposed that social conditioning, prior experiences of violence, and stress contributed to the development of a violent family. In 1975 and 1985 Straus, Gelles, and

other researchers conducted the *National Family Violence Surveys* in the United States (Hydén, 1994). They utilised nationally representative samples and measured the incidence of family violence by using the *Conflict Tactics Scale*. They found correlations between violence and variables such as age, cohabiting status, unemployment, and socio-economic status (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz cited in Anderson, 1997). In their acknowledgment of social and demographic variables, these and similar sociological studies have shifted the emphasis from individual-psychological explanations of violence.

In the *National Family Violence Surveys*, Straus and his associates found similar rates of violence by husbands and wives. These findings led to the assumption of sexual symmetry in domestic violence. This approach has been vehemently criticised by feminist researchers (Browne & Dutton, 1990; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Saunders, 1990) who contend that methodological flaws in the survey techniques as well as the use of the *Conflict Tactics Scale* did not allow for the exploration of whether women used violence in self-defence. Dobash et al. (1992) asserted that the scales simply focussed on the violent acts and did not measure the actors' intentions. Many family violence approaches therefore ignored gendered power dynamics and women's acts of self-defence were concealed in the statistics generated by these methods. Although these studies consider the unequal distribution of power in society by focussing on a range of socio-demographic variables, they are 'gender-neutral' and consider violence to be a problem of both sexes (Bograd, 1990).

Given its limitations, is unlikely that family violence approaches can provide the sole explanation for woman abuse. Anderson (1997) used self- and partner-reported data from the *National Survey of Families and Households* in the United States in support of her proposition to integrate family violence and feminist approaches. She found support for both theories, in that elements of the structural environment such as age, cohabitation, education and income resources were associated with woman abuse. However, these risk factors differed by gender, with men being more likely to engage in violence against their partners. It thus follows that, although structural elements are important, an analysis of

woman abuse cannot be successfully accomplished without the critical interrogation of gender and power.

### **A feminist critique of the family**

Feminist theorists (largely from within the radical school) view the social institutions of marriage and the family as contexts that promote and maintain men's use of violence against women (Bograd, 1990). Some theorists assert that because women and girls are often victimised within the family, it is the most dangerous and violent institution in society (Duffy, 1995). It has come to the fore that women are more likely to be violently attacked in their homes by someone they know than by a stranger. The recognition of female victimisation within the family (and society) provides a justification for a gendered analysis of woman abuse.

Dobash and Dobash (1979) were the first to base an analysis of violence against women on the idea of male domination (*Violence against wives: A case against patriarchy*). They focussed on how traditional ideas about marriage, the family, and gender roles support patriarchy and male control. Their views challenged the limitations of the family violence approaches discussed above (Kirkwood, 1993). Dobash and Dobash found that men resorted to violence when they perceived that their wives were not performing their duties in terms of socially scripted patriarchal gender roles or living up to notions of the 'good wife'. They also showed how the terms used to describe such violence might mask the gendered nature of the violence (Bograd, 1990). For instance, the terms 'spouse abuse' and 'family violence' do not make the direction of the violence explicit, neither does it highlight the role of women in these violent relationships (Kirkwood, 1993). Feminists suggest that we rather employ the terms woman or wife abuse (while recognising that violence also occurs in relationships where partners are not married, or in lesbian relationships).

Historically the family has been viewed as the basic unit of society, with males being afforded authority over women and children (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Husbands were viewed as the heads of the households with wives' roles scripted as obedient and

subservient. Within the family, wives were also viewed as the property of their husbands and the sanctity of the family was maintained as the private domain of the husband. The notions of male authority in the family were reinforced and supported by other social institutions, such as the law and religion. Dobash and Dobash (1979) proposed that the husband's use of violence was an expression of his authority and power and that this violence has largely been accepted as appropriate.

Feminist theories of violence against women recognise that intimate relationships are not always safe for women since they are more likely to be victimised within the family. Thus, it is acknowledged that the family is not randomly violent but that the violence is directed at women in particular. Hence, feminists propose a critique of the ideology of the family and male authority by recognising how women are oppressed within this context and why women are the likely victims of violence in families (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Violence against women cannot be theorised without acknowledging male privilege and historically and socially institutionalised relations of power (Angless & Maconachie, 1996).

### **THE CONTEXT OF WOMAN ABUSE**

More recent work on gender and violence has begun to recognise the saliency of multiple sites of power and oppression. There has been a shift away from the analysis of patriarchy as the only source of women's oppression. Theorists have begun to focus on race and class (Callaghan, Hamber & Takura, 1997; Mama, 1996; McCloskey, 1996; McKendy, 1997; Miles-Doan, 1998; Reid, 1993; Richie & Kanuha, 1997; Tiefenthaler & Farmer, 2000), sexuality (Shefer, Strelbel & Foster, 2000; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993), culture (Abraham, 2000; Haj-Yahia, 2000; Horne, 1999; Kozu, 1999; Lui, 1999; McWhirter, 1999; Perilla, Bakeman & Norris, 1994; Walker, 1999; Zaman, 1999), and other forms of oppression impacting upon women's lives. Bograd (1999) discussed race, class, sexual orientation, and gender, showing how a lack of attention to these constructs could result in the invisibility of certain victims of violence. She recognised that single factor explanations do not account for the multiple sites of power and oppression impacting on women's lives. In effect, the shifts in theorising woman abuse have

mirrored black feminist challenges to a narrow western feminist preoccupation with patriarchy as the only form of oppression. As Mama (1996) noted, black feminists have called for an integration of race, religion, class, culture, and other forms of oppression into the analysis of violence against women. In the following section, I review the broader context of violence against women by examining the confluence of race, class, sexuality, and other forms of difference informed by a feminist analysis.

### **Race, culture, class, religion, and power**

Notwithstanding the limitations of earlier studies, psychological theories highlighted some important issues faced by abused women. It is necessary to study the psychological effects of violence in the lives of women (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997) but the preoccupation with psychiatric labels and psychopathology, as the only way to describe women's experiences is ultimately flawed. Psychological theories should not be studied in isolation and need to be interweaved with social and cultural explanations of violence. The cultural domination of men creates expectations for both men and women. Men are accorded more power in the public domain and this power is often exerted in the private sphere of the home. In this manner a husband's violence against his wife is socially sanctioned and legitimised. Poorman (in Sikhitha, 1997) indicates that a woman may stay in an abusive relationship for fear of being alone or without a partner. Social and cultural norms prescribe that, at a certain age, women should be married and the social stigma attached to divorce may restrict the possibilities of leaving abusive partners. Recent research has acknowledged that the focus on why women stay limits possibilities for theorising and that it may be more productive to consider how women stay by focussing on the macro-context in which women's experiences of violence occur.

Woelz-Stirling, Kelaher, and Manderson (1998) investigated the high prevalence of woman abuse in marriages between Filipino women and Australian men. A large proportion of Filipino women immigrated to Australia and married permanent residents of the country. These marriages were characterised by high rates of violence and the incidents were often unreported. The authors recognised a number of factors contributing to violence in these relationships. They examined the unequal distribution of power

within the marriage as well as within society. Filipino women married mostly for economic security and Australian men had the image of Filipinas as powerless, subservient, and compliant. These perceptions and expectations immediately created an inequality within the relationship. The marriages were often stigmatised and women were reluctant to report incidents of violence that could further stigmatise their marriages. The powerlessness of Filipino women within the home and society therefore accorded men more control and made it relatively difficult for these women to leave the abusive situations. Filipino women's decisions to stay were further complicated by boundaries such as their Catholic values that discouraged divorce. This study acknowledged both relationship and social power and provides a concrete example of the impact of the socio-cultural context on women's experiences of abuse.

The above study provided some insight into religious constraints faced by women in abusive relationships. Religious and cultural constructions cannot be easily separated. Just as cultural practices reinforce and sanction violence against women, so too do religious institutional practices. In South Africa, Govinden (1997) focused on the abuse of women in Christian homes. She illustrated how the 'Sundaybest' culture of the church resulted in women remaining silent about the abuse in order to project a respectable image to outsiders. Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2000) examined the process of recovery for abused women situated in a conservative religious culture in Canada. They illustrated that although the church could provide social support and spiritual encouragement, the abuse was often minimised and denied. Within these contexts, religion reinforced stereotypical gender roles and divorce was strongly discouraged. The five participants in Giesbrecht and Sevcik's study were forced to renegotiate their spirituality and religious identities subsequent to leaving their abusive partners.

Haj-Yahia (2000) explored the relationship between wife abuse and the socio-cultural context of Arab society. He conducted research with married Arab women in Israel, investigating their definitions of violence, awareness of the problem, justifications or condemnation of violence, awareness of risks, and their perspectives on coping with violence. In his analysis, Haj-Yahia recognised masculine cultural constructions and the

power accorded to men in Arab society. Furthermore, values in this society emphasised family unity and reputation. In accordance with this, most respondents in his study advocated that women firstly approach their extended family for assistance with regard to woman abuse. There was a strong emphasis on getting help from within the family and a stigma attached to seeking help from outside agencies. Similarly, Lui (1999) investigated woman abuse in a rural village in southeast China. She revealed how institutions in Chinese culture reinforced the oppression and subservience of women. Here, the family was viewed as the basic unit of society, resulting in strict cultural sanctions against divorce. Within these contexts, women are forced to negotiate these cultural boundaries and find alternative means of coping with the violence in their lives.

Definitions of violence against women vary in different cultures. For example, Koza (1999) described family violence in Japan as children's violence against their parents. It is therefore important to examine the cultural context and sanctions for violence in order to highlight varying definitions of violence against women. In South Africa, Vetten (1999) attempted to elicit women's experiences of emotional, economic, sexual, or physical abuse. A significant proportion of her sample (42.5% of 269 women) reported that they had experienced all types of abuse simultaneously. Vetten attempted to elicit women's perceptions of the worst incident of abuse suffered and found the distinctions (between emotional, economic, sexual, and physical abuse) to be insufficient in accounting for the complex range of women's experiences of violence.

The literature on culture and domestic violence illuminates a range of issues that include the positions of women in different societies, cultural justifications for violence against women, and varying definitions of violence. In different cultures, women are oppressed to varying degrees. Women's positions range from blatant oppression as in Bangladesh where girls are discriminated against from birth (Zaman, 1999) to situations where societal institutions and cultural practices legitimise and sanction violence against women (Horne, 1999; Koza, 1999; McWhirter, 1999). Ellsberg, Caldera, Herrera, Winkvist, and Kullgren (1999) cite an example where, until recently, the Nicaraguan Penal Code did not criminalise the violent act but rather the physical injury sustained by women. The injury

sustained had to be severe enough requiring 10 to 15 days to heal. In Nicaraguan culture violence against women is widely accepted and justified and clearly, social institutions also reinforce the subordination of women by denying them adequate legal protection from abuse.

An analysis of the socio-political and historical context is also important in the theorising of woman abuse. In societies that have experienced large-scale, state-sponsored violence (for example Chile under the dictatorship of Pinochet and apartheid in South Africa), there is an increased tolerance for the use of violence as a means of maintaining authority and control (McWhirter, 1999). The use of violence (particularly against women) may become normalised in these societies. Dangor, Hoff, and Scott (1996) conducted ethnographic interviews with 37 health-clinic employees, church members, community workers, students, and professionals in South Africa. All the participants in their study commented on the relationship between the oppressive system of apartheid and violence against women. Within the authoritarian and violent system of apartheid women were particularly vulnerable, with black women experiencing multiple forms of oppression (based upon race, class, and gender). This example emphasises the importance of the socio-political and historical context of violence against women.

According to Schornstein (1997), the highest reported incidence of woman abuse is amongst the poor but this could be because they have little alternative except to seek help from public agencies. Middle or upper class women are more likely to have a range of options available to them. Miles-Doan (1998) used law enforcement and census data to explore whether neighbourhood context was important in explaining variations in the incidence of violence. Her results indicated that deprived or disadvantaged neighbourhoods have higher rates of violence between intimate partners. These neighbourhoods had a high concentration of residents living in poverty and high rates of unemployment. She attributed the higher rates of violence to the issue of differential reporting and concluded that further studies should explore these issues in greater depth.

Studies that examine class issues yield conflicting results but there is consensus that poor women's options are constrained by the lack of access to and assistance from social institutions. Richie and Kanuha (1997) examined the role of social institutions in the perpetuation of violence against women of colour. They asserted that the effects of racism systematically disadvantage black women. In the South African situation, with the reality of poverty and racism, many women from underprivileged communities have limited options and support. According to Callaghan et al. (1997), women who are living in disadvantaged conditions are at increased risk of violence. They also indicate that the relationship between poverty and violence is not a direct one but poverty should be considered when attempting to understand violence against women. Poor women often have limited access to social and institutional support, may be financially dependent on their spouses, and therefore lack the alternatives to leaving a violent relationship. The lack of institutional support is sometimes evident in the ineffectiveness of police when assisting women with problems of violence in their relationships. In South Africa, only four percent of women who sought help from police said they would return to them for help (van Zyl cited in NICRO, 1998). Maconachie, Angless, and van Zyl (1993) discussed external constraints faced by women attempting to leave violent relationships. These include a lack of social and economic support, with all the women in their sample indicating that having nowhere to go was a major reason for not leaving the abuser sooner. Women's choices and options are clearly limited in the social sphere by a lack of social and institutional support.

Medicine, like other social institutions, has also been implicated in woman abuse. Often, women first approach medical practitioners for injuries resulting from abuse by their partners. Some authors have focussed on how medicine as a social institution perpetuates and sanctions violence against women, often resulting in secondary victimisation (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). In South Africa, Jacobs and Suleman (1999) examined the prevalence and patterns of woman abuse in women who presented at Mitchell's Plain Community Health Clinic. They found that of 103 cases of abuse in the sample, only 31 were documented in the medical records. In addition, health-care workers did not directly enquire about women's experiences of violence from intimate partners. Motsei (cited in

Blumberg, Swartz & Roper, 1996) found similar patterns of poor detection at Alexandra Health Clinic in Johannesburg. These findings have led to an acknowledgement of the inefficiency of the health sector to identify and assist women who have been abused.

The reviewed research examining multiple sites of oppression and power has provided supporting evidence for the inclusion of these constructions into the analyses of violence against women. Hanmer (1996) suggested that women's attempts to deal with violence involve personal strategies as well as cultural boundaries. Women's personal strategies are filtered through boundaries set by culture, religion, education, class, and language. The decision to leave or stay with an abusive partner is therefore negotiated within a set of boundaries and women negotiate and resituate themselves within and across cultural boundaries. In the following section I examine recent scholarship focussing on the strategies women employ to resist violence from their partners.

#### **AGENCY, RESISTANCE, AND NEGOTIATION**

The shifts in the literature on women as survivors rather than victims acknowledge the active coping strategies and mechanisms employed by women (Gondolf & Fisher cited in Hampton, Vandergriff-Avery & Kim, 1999). Women have been described as survivors who experience excessive trauma as a result of the abuse but who also use strategies to resist the abuse from their partners (Browne, 1997). As discussed in the previous section, earlier psychological theories depicted women as deficient in coping strategies and focused on women's anxiety, depression, and passivity (Finn, 1985; Nurius, Furrey & Berliner, 1992). Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1993) postulated a gender analysis that describes coping as a process and focuses on the social context. In this section I review shifts in the literature focusing on women as survivors, rather than as victims, recognising active strategies and negotiation.

Mills (1985) conducted a qualitative study with 10 women who had recently left their abusive husbands. She described how women employed strategies to manage the violence from their husbands. These strategies included placating their husbands, resisting or defying him, and seeking temporary shelter. Early in their relationships,

women provided justifications for maintaining the relationship by minimising the seriousness of the violence or defining the husband as the victim. Mills contended that women change as they respond to and deal with violence from their partners and she described a process where victims of abuse come to view themselves as survivors who endured violent relationships.

Hoff (1990) conducted an in-depth study starting from the premise that battered women are survivors rather than victims. She explored women's experiences of violence and distress, while taking account of broader social and cultural issues. She suggested that the consideration of why women stay should involve an interaction between the meanings women attach to their experiences, the social and cultural context, women's social networks, and practical realities of women's lives. Hoff found that almost all the women in her study expressed and channelled anger toward their abusive partners. This finding contradicts traditional views of battered women as passive and accepting of the abuse. Hoff recognised that leaving an abusive partner is a process and she attempted to follow the nine participants through this process. The decisions and options for each woman were somewhat different and Hoff acknowledged that women were able to manage the violence and make decisions based upon their personal experiences.

In San Francisco, Russell (1990) investigated marital rape and discussed how some wives employed effective strategies to stop their husbands' violence. Some of the strategies included leaving the husband (either permanently or temporarily), fighting back with physical violence, using the threat of physical violence, calling or threatening to call the police, getting support from relatives, and giving the husband an ultimatum. Because the focus of her study was on marital rape, Russell did not explore these issues at length. However, she made a contribution to the dialogue by showing that women are able to play an active role in these relationships.

In a cross-national study, Kirkwood (1993) conducted research in England and the United States with 30 women who left their abusive partners. She initiated her study from the perspective that women were survivors of abuse. Kirkwood used the term "survivor" to

describe the: "active positive action women take to continue functioning within an abusive relationship or to free themselves from abuse" (p. 135). She described the shifts in power and control in abusive relationships where, at different times, women were either powerless or regained some measure of power and control. The regaining of control encompassed women's awareness that personal change occurred as a result of the abuse. Women experienced anger and fear as a result of this awareness. These emotions provided the impetus for action, which included leaving the abuser, gaining support from others, seeking resources, or threatening the abuser. Kirkwood described women's leaving and returning as gaining more power and control, since they returned with more experience. Her contribution to the literature on women as survivors is significant. Like Hoff (1990), her work showed how women's attempts to leave an abusive partner should be viewed as a process that occurs over time. Further, Kirkwood acknowledged that relationship power is not unidirectional and that, at certain times in the relationships, women also gained a measure of power and control.

In South Africa, Waldman (1995) investigated woman abuse on two farms in the Western Cape, showing how these farms were characterised by male dominance exercised by the farmers and the male farm labourers. The farmers and the male labourers controlled most aspects of the women's lives, including their labour and sexuality. High levels of violence were also characteristic of gender relations on the farms. Waldman illustrated how women on these farms employed strategies to resist male control to a certain degree. Some women resisted male control in their decisions to remain single and thereby be economically independent. Another example was the use of contraception, although their partners discouraged its use, some women did so without their partners' knowledge. Waldman's study illustrated that women (even in those blatantly oppressive situations) were able to make active choices governing their own lives.

Lempert (1996) examined women's strategies for coping and surviving abusive relationships and conducted in-depth interviews with 32 women. She described a number of strategies employed by women to initially keep the violence invisible and later, their strategies were aimed at self-preservation. During the 'invisibility' phase, women

utilised face-saving and problem-solving strategies to contain the violence. These included rationalisation, minimisation, and self-blame. Lempert interpreted passive resistance as a strategy of strength aimed at survival. Self-preservation strategies included fantasies of suicide or murder, telling others about the violence and seeking outside assistance. Lempert's contribution illustrated how women adapted their methods of coping to their immediate contexts and experiences. Based upon the success or failure of previous methods, women devised new strategies for coping. In Lempert's analysis, the 'spiral' of power and control (described by Kirkwood, 1993) is evident as women devised certain strategies in order to regain a measure of power in their lives.

In her qualitative study, Baker (1997) emphasised the level of agency of women in abusive relationships. She initiated the study from the premise that a new cultural script urged women to leave abusive partners, maintain restraining orders, and co-operate with the police. From the perspective of a participant observer at a shelter and through her analysis of interview and archival data, she illustrated how women employed active, reasoned strategies and resisted this dominant cultural script. Many women in the study chose to stay in the relationship, ignored or lifted restraining orders, and refused to call or co-operate with the police. Issues that mediated these decisions were fear of harassment from their partners, emotional connections to partners, children, economic dependence, and a lack of institutional support or viable alternatives. Rather than blaming women for the abuse, Baker's study highlighted the agency of women and their capacities for making reasoned choices. The study also emphasised contextual issues that influenced women's decisions to leave or stay with their partners. Baker's study was one of the few that directly examined women's agency in abusive relationships.

In Stockholm, Sweden, Hydén (1999) examined the experiences of women who left abusive relationships. She proposed a distinction between psychological and physical break-up and viewed break-up from abusive partners as a process that occurred over time. Hydén asserted that some women psychologically distanced themselves from their spouses long before they physically ended their relationships. The central themes explored in her study were fear and resistance. She explored fear as a constant emotion

during the process of breaking up. Fear dominated the lives of many of the women in her study and served the purpose of protection and resistance. Hydén interpreted the act of breaking-up as a resistance strategy and she suggested that resistance in abusive relationships was always present but seldom showed openly. She therefore described it as a 'hidden transcript'. Hydén's study provides a criticism of the question of why women stay. Her decisions to focus on the process of breaking-up, showed how leaving should not be considered as an isolated event and concurs with the assertions made by Kirkwood (1993) and Hoff (1990).

Abraham's (2000) study with South Asian immigrants in the United States focused on the intersections of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and citizenship in women's experiences of intimate violence. By using unstructured interviews with 25 participants, Abraham showed how these issues were implicated in intimate violence amongst minority groups in the United States. Women faced difficulties in negotiating cultural norms that prescribed gender stereotypical behaviour. The violence experienced from their partners was exacerbated by the lack of proper assistance from social institutions as well as fears surrounding their immigrant status. Abraham showed how, in these situations, women utilised a number of strategies, challenging passivity and submissiveness. Women either employed personal resources or sought outside assistance. Personal strategies included, placating and avoidance, talking back, using violence in self-defence, attempts at a degree of financial independence, and contemplating suicide. Abraham acknowledged that some strategies were self-destructive but women often negotiated their options and sought alternative solutions when personal strategies failed. Women in the study also sought help from family, friends, neighbours, women's organisations, police, or the courts. In sum, this study revealed how women were attempting to take control of their own lives to stop the violence or ultimately leave their abusive partners. Studies such as these show how women negotiate cultural, social, and personal boundaries in their attempts to gain control and power over their lives.

Also in the United States, Proffitt (2000) investigated how survivors of abuse made connections between their experiences of violence and political activism. She examined

the process of change from women who were victims, to survivors, to becoming politically active. These questions were explored through the stories of 11 survivors involved in collective action as well as interviews with educators and activists in the antiviolence movement. Her analysis and interpretation yielded six main themes. These were: the complexities involved in naming experiences of violation as violence or abuse, women's struggle with contradiction in shifting their consciousness, the psychic dynamics evoked in the change processes, participants' development of a critical analysis of their personal experience and encounters with social institutions, changes in women's sense of self, and the relation between changes in women's consciousness and subjectivity and their participation in collective action for social change. Profitt's study is a valuable one, allowing us to recognise that women who have experienced violence from their partners are able to institute action to change their conditions and develop an activist consciousness regarding violence against women. Profitt also acknowledged the effects of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and ability on women's experiences of violence. This recognition includes the voices of all women, which may have been otherwise silenced.

Studies have also shown that although some strategies used by women may be self-defeating, women are able to negotiate their options and employ other strategies at their disposal. For example, women who attempt to fight violence with violence, often realise that it may result in further danger and they resort to other means necessary to deal with the abuse. Campbell, Miller, Cardwell and Belknap (1994) provided an example of how women's strategies were sometimes successful. In their sample, women's attempts to stop the violence resulted in either the cessation of violence or termination of the relationship. Other studies have shown that ending the relationship does not necessarily end the violence and that women may often be at greater risk for violence after leaving their partners (Fleury, 2000). The reviewed research shows how leaving an abusive partner involves a process of negotiation that occurs over time. The leaving may be psychological (Hydén, 1999) or physical and allows women to evaluate and negotiate alternatives to staying with an abusive partner.

A feminist analysis of violence against women takes account of the structural oppression of women. Central issues are male power and women's subservience. Recent scholarship has acknowledged that these positions are not static as women display agency and actively resist male dominance. Gavey (1996) illustrated the same in her study about sexual coercion. She argued that the traditional heterosexual account emphasises women's passivity and submission to men's desires. However, her examples illustrated that these scripts are often contradicted when women experience desire, pleasure, and power in their sexual relationships. Based upon this, Gavey inferred that relationship power is not unidirectional and fixed. She also argued that, although it is necessary to acknowledge male dominance and female victimisation - we should also emphasise and theorise competing discourses that offer positions of resistance for women. Studies such as these have provided the foundation for a feminist post-structuralist analysis of gender and woman abuse.

### **FEMINIST POST-STRUCTURALISM**

Feminist post-structuralism is defined as: "a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change" (Weedon, 1987, pp. 40-41). Post-structuralism is a body of critiques levelled at hegemonic constructions of knowledge. Forms of post-structuralism vary but fundamental assumptions about language, meaning, and subjectivity are shared (Weedon, 1987). Post-structuralism rejects the possibility of absolute or static truth and knowledge. From this perspective, knowledge is characterised as socially constructed, temporal, historically specific, and embedded in relations of power (Gavey, 1997).

Various authors have expressed the value of post-structuralism to feminist theorising and epistemology (for example Gavey, 1997 and Weedon, 1987). Similarly, Flax (1990) argues that "feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of post-modern philosophy" (p. 42). She contends that feminist notions of the self, knowledge, and truth fundamentally challenge the assumptions of enlightenment thought, as do post-structuralism. In her opinion, the deconstruction of reason, knowledge, and the self will

reveal the effects of gender arrangements. The feminist critiques emerging out of the 'difference debates' (that acknowledge and theorise differences amongst women) share many commonalities and are therefore congruent with a post-structuralist framework.

The deconstruction of the category 'woman' was thought to have a negative or devastating impact on feminist politics (Gavey, 1997). However, Gavey asserts that, "feminist post-structuralism maintains an emphasis on the material bases of power (for example, social, economic, and cultural arrangements) and the need for change at this level of discourse" (p. 54). From this perspective, feminist post-structuralism overcomes the reluctance of earlier feminist theories (such as liberal and radical feminism) to deal with differences among women. Both Gavey and Weedon (1987) have illustrated how adopting a post-structuralist framework might strengthen feminist theorising.

The proliferation of studies addressing feminist issues from a post-structuralist perspective, show how this project does not undermine feminism but results in new possibilities for feminist scholarship. For example, studies have focussed on women's heterosexual desire and negotiation (Gavey, 1996; Hollway, 1995; Shefer, 1999), women's aggression (Squire, 1998) and narratives of romantic love (Jackson, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000). These areas illuminate new possibilities for theorising, which acknowledge multiplicity and variability in women's experiences. Feminist post-structuralism has become a field of scholarship in its own right – addressing the inequalities, biases, and exclusionary assumptions based in hegemonic production of knowledge.

### **Feminist post-structuralism and woman abuse**

As an epistemological framework, feminist post-structuralism emphasises the deconstruction of taken for granted categories, calling into question notions that (gendered) identities are stable and coherent (Gavey, 1997). Feminist post-structuralism recognises "discursively constructed subjectivities" (Henwood, Griffin & Phoenix, 1998, p. 5), grounded in women's experiences and located in particular social and political contexts. Views of self as stable, consistent, and unitary are thus rejected.

Researchers working from this perspective have re-visioned the traditional psychological meaning of identity. For example, Mama (1995) rejected the concept of identity, which she described as psychologically constructed to be static and unitary. Rather, she posited the notion of subjectivity that acknowledges multiplicity, contradiction, and change.

Weedon (1987) characterised subjectivity as, “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). Similarly, Gregg (1993) defined subjectivity as a continuous process of experiencing the world and making sense of our experiences through an interaction of material, structural, and interpersonal encounters. Post-structuralism therefore posits a subjectivity that is fluid, contradictory, and multiple. Realities, experiences, and meanings are neither fixed nor essential and are constituted through language, which also constructs subjectivity for the individual. Language offers us various subject positions (or a range of ways of interpreting our lives) that we can take up in order to construct our realities and meanings (Weedon, 1987). What an event means to a particular individual depends on the ways of interpreting the world and the discourses available to her/him at any particular moment. To illustrate this point, Weedon discussed an example of woman abuse. She suggested that the ways a woman will respond to and experience abuse are linked to her access to the ways of understanding. Those include her self-image, beliefs about masculinity and femininity and about marriage and family life. Therefore, if she endorses constructions of masculinity as inherently violent and blames the abuse on her own provocation – then she will be likely to accept the violence. These issues are pertinent to the current research since I aim to examine how women's re-constructions of violence either resist or accept socially defined norms of gendered behaviour. Thus, by attending to how women talk about their experiences of violence (the language used), the meanings they attach, selves they construct, and subject positions they take up will be open to scrutiny.

Meanings of experiences are not inherent in language but are shaped by broader systems, institutions, and relations of power (Parker, 1999). This premise establishes a connection between meaning, language, and power. For example, the manner in which certain

qualities such as passivity and aggression come to be defined as feminine or masculine, are linked to patriarchal power dynamics which accords men power, control, and dominance over women. These qualities by themselves have no inherent meaning, however the way they are defined within particular communities are linked to discursive power relations. The social relations (of power) will determine the range of subject positions immediately open to any individual on the basis of gender, race, class, age, and culture (Weedon, 1987). Using Weedon's example discussed above, if a woman views the violence as a reflection of unequal gender relations and an exercise of male authority and sees herself as blameless, she would be more likely to view the violence as unacceptable. Once again the plurality of language and the lack of fixed meaning is emphasised, showing how any interpretation is temporary and contingent upon the context in which it is produced.

This study's focus on how women's constructions of meaning are shaped by broader systems of power accords well with a feminist post-structural framework. Furthermore, I also examine how women's constructions of their identities are informed and constrained by their particular contexts and how gender relations are maintained and enacted in language. Because this approach is comfortable with ambiguity, multiplicity, and contradiction, it is thought to be appropriate to the aims of this study that attempts to shift away from universalising or fixed notions of experience.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & METHODS**

Research located within critical perspectives such as post-structuralist framework acknowledges the difficulties of separating discussions of methodology and methods (De la Rey, 1999; Shefer, 1999). Harding (in DeVault, 1999) distinguished between epistemology (assumptions about the foundations of knowledge), methodology (theory informing research practice), and methods (the strategies or tools for conducting research). However, as noted the intersections and overlap of these terms are not easily resolved and are synonymous with 'new paradigm' research (Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove in Shefer, 1999).

#### **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Given that this study is concerned with the analysis of meaning in abusive relationships, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. Qualitative research defies clear definition and is often juxtaposed to quantitative approaches (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). The two approaches are based upon different foundational philosophies of knowledge. Psychological research has traditionally been dominated (and to a large extent still is) by quantitative methods (Henwood et al., 1998) based in the positivist paradigm. Critiques emerging out of the enlightenment and modernist periods (largely post-modern) have called into question the basic foundations of psychology as a science, which supports the quest for truth through utilising methods purported to be rational and empirical. These methods have included laboratory experiments and standardised tests. Critiques have encompassed a re-visioning the foundations of psychology as a science (addressing individualist and cognitivist biases) and the modifications of research tools. These critiques show how research embedded in a positivist paradigm, which endorses individualism, minimises the social context and obscures systems of oppression (Wilkinson, 1996). Furthermore, the methods employed are inherently hierarchical and the researcher's power is not acknowledged or theorised sufficiently (Crawford, 1995).

Parallel to these critiques, qualitative methods have emerged as a valid form of scientific inquiry in its own right.

Qualitative research is mainly concerned with the role of interpretation and the central role of the researcher (Banister et al., 1994). Interpretation, as the core of qualitative research focuses on the meaning of human experience. The focus is thus on understanding human experience rather than explaining and predicting behaviour. It is also acknowledged that meaning and behaviour occurs within particular social and historical contexts. Furthermore, as Denzin (1998) noted, qualitative research inescapably involves interpretation, because nothing speaks for itself. Qualitative interpretations are not inherent in the interview texts but are constructed by the researcher. Thus, the role of the researcher as 'interpreter' is significant. Just as subjects/women/others construct meanings of events from the range of discourses and subject positions available to them, so too does the qualitative researcher. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the particular positions from which the researcher interprets experience and constructs meaning.

Rather than attempting to minimise researcher bias, qualitative approaches acknowledge that we are not removed from the contexts we study. Researchers are encouraged to examine their roles and impact throughout the research process. Thus, it is acknowledged that a "gendered researcher speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural, and ethnic community" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 23). Reflexivity has been described as the process whereby a researcher continually reflects upon the entire research process and her/his role in the shaping of it (Banister et al., 1994; Steier, 1991). Reflexive researchers should be continually aware of how their values and life experiences affect the research process and decisions. According to Denzin and Lincoln:

"The gendered, multiculturally-situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways" (p. 23).

In this manner the researcher's roles, positions, experiences, and assumptions inform every aspect of the research process.

### **The reflexive researcher**

I am convinced that all my life experiences have in some way contributed to my research choices. These however are impossible to delineate. Foremost in my mind at the time of writing, is my undergraduate training in psychology. As an undergraduate student, I was oftentimes uneasy with the universal assumptions of psychological theories. I was compelled to digest the grand-narratives of human experience (such as Freud's psychosexual stages) but questioned the real-life applicability. I was often uneasy with the ways in which women were depicted in, and sometimes ignored by these theories. My interest in gender and feminism was sparked here.

In my personal relationships, I often questioned and challenged gender roles. As a daughter, I would continually question the different standards applied to my brother's upbringing as compared to my own. In this manner I had to challenge my parents' (and my own) assumptions about 'boys/men' and 'girls/women'. My stereotypes and gender constructions are reflected in the following:

"Sugar and spice and all things nice, that's what little girls are made of.

Snakes and snails and puppy dog's tails, that's what little boys are made of".

My upbringing typically reflects the first line of this rhyme. My grandmother, who taught me the rhyme, also taught me to be a 'nice little girl' in every sense of the construction. At this (rather late?) stage in my life I now challenge these constructions and don't want to be (but still am) complicit in the reproduction of hegemonic constructions of gender roles. My reading of women's power and agency is, at some level a reflection of this challenge and is resonant in my personal (gendered) experiences.

This (somewhat) personal account is not meant to give token acknowledgement to reflexivity, rather to highlight how some of my experiences have contributed to the particular lenses through which I construct the world. Furthermore, it was aimed at showing how 'Floretta' has developed as a critically aware researcher/student/woman/girlfriend/daughter.

Issues of power and reflexivity are also central to feminist research. Considering the vast amount of shared ground between qualitative and feminist methodologies, it may be germane to now turn to a discussion of the latter.

### **FEMINIST RESEARCH**

Feminist research is grounded in feminist epistemological critiques of dominant (masculinist) conceptions of knowledge (Banister et al., 1994). In response to the hegemonic positivist tradition in social science, emphasising the experiences of a particular privileged group (white, middle-class, heterosexual males), feminist researchers utilise a variety of methods and social scientific practices that incorporate women's previously silenced voices.

In general, three feminist epistemological/methodological critiques have emerged in response to the positivist research paradigm namely, feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theories, and feminist post-modernism or feminist post-structuralism (Harding in Banister et al., 1994). Feminist empiricists argue that sexist biases in research are a result of "bad science" (Harding, 1994) and they assert that the methods that have devalued women's experiences can be improved by being attentive to women's experiences. They operate within the positivistic paradigm of conducting research and assert that if science is conducted properly, women's experiences will not be marginalized. Harding addresses the shortcomings of the feminist empiricist argument by noting that it challenges the incomplete way science has been practiced and not the logic and values of science itself. Thus, the feminist empiricist paradigm falls short of providing an adequate framework since hegemonic epistemological assumptions and male-centred paradigms are unchallenged.

Feminist standpoint theories focus on difference or separatist notions of female experience (Banister et al., 1994). From perspective, theorists recognise that the dominant scientific paradigms (developed by men and incorporating masculine ideals) do not account for women's experiences and that research should aim to develop theories that address these shortcomings (Harding, 1994). Research should therefore be initiated by starting from the experiences of women in order to lead to a less biased view of science. The revaluation of women's qualities and experiences contributes to the emancipatory goals of feminist research (Bohan, 1997). However, these standpoints have been critiqued for the essentialist views of gender (invoked in the essentialist/constructionist debate, discussed in chapter two).

Harding (in Banister et al., 1994) asserts that feminist research is concerned with gender as its central focus, research questions derived from women's experiences, and incorporates reflexive research practices. The aim of feminist research has typically been to redress the marginalisation and suppression of women's lives. This is done by 'bringing women in' and focussing on women's distinctive experiences (DeVault, 1999). The feminist debates on difference and equality (among women and between women and men) have destabilised the notion of 'women's experience' (Shefer, 1999). Experiences are no longer based on assumptions of similarity among women. From a post-structuralist perspective, experience does not have essential meaning and is expressed and understood in the language used to describe it (Weedon, 1987).

A second concern of feminist research is to acknowledge and theorise the roles of politics and power in the research process (DeVault, 1999). By incorporating reflexive research practices, feminist researchers seek to minimise harm and level relations of power. Politics and power is suffused at every level of the research process. At the initial stages, feminist researchers should choose topics that are pertinent to women's lives. Research should therefore have pragmatic implications for feminist politics as well as social applicability (Shefer, 1999). At the level of conducting research and negotiating access, power and politics are once again implicated. Feminist researchers have attempted to

address power disparities in research relationships in various ways. Collaborative or participatory research projects attempt to involve participants at many levels of the research process. It is acknowledged that even endeavours such as these cannot level the power disparities between researcher and the researched. The former is affiliated to an institution, decides on the research topic, obtains the funding, authors, and receives acknowledgment and recognition for the research. At the level of theory generation, politics are also important. Feminist researchers acknowledge that theory is gendered and that women have been excluded from the generation of theory. Works that have gained recognition and hegemony within the academy are seldom those of women (Lutz, 1995). According to Lutz:

“There are historical processes by which subordinate groups are allowed access to writing and through which the general or theoretical value of their writing is assessed” (p. 251).

The above illustrates how issues of power and politics are fundamental to feminist research. This study accords with feminist principles by focussing on women's experiences of violence and by highlighting gendered power relations.

### **NARRATIVE RESEARCH**

Both narrative and discourse analysis have emerged out of post-structural developments in interpretative theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Narrative research is an extension of the ‘interpretive turn’ in the social sciences and takes the story as the object of investigation (Riessman, 1993). In line with post-modern views, narrative research is less concerned about a universal ‘truth’ re-presented in peoples’ storytelling. Rather, the manner in which people tell their stories, represent particular truths at particular historical moments. Narratives are therefore shaped by social, political, and cultural forces. Because narratives are context-bound, meanings are open and shifting. Narrative analysis thus establishes a relationship between methods of analysis and theories of discourse and meaning (Mishler, 1986). The functions of language used in narrative therefore become an important source of analysis. Riessman discussed the ideational,

interpersonal and textual functions of language. The ideational function focuses on the specific content of the language in terms of the speaker's experiences. The relations between individuals are important when analysing meaning at the interpersonal level. At the textual level, one should pay attention to the structure of the narrative. Riessman suggests that the broader context within which language provides meaning should also be a point of analysis.

As Riessman (1993) suggests, there is no distinct definition of a narrative. A necessary feature of a narrative however, is sequence. Narrative sequence could either be chronological, consequential, or thematic. A chronological narrative discusses the order of events through time. Consequential sequencing involves the discussion of events as caused by each other. A thematic narrative is cohered by a particular theme (as in the present case). In this study women's narratives were structured by their narrations of episodes of violence or abuse. Consequently, the narrative genres were topic-centred (Riessman, 1993).

A focus on narrative highlights how individuals construct meaning and identities through narratives (Riessman, 1993). Mishler (1986) asserts that answers to questions (in non-traditional interviews) often display features of narrative and that individuals make sense of their experiences in narrative form.

“We live out stories in our experiences, tell stories of those experiences, and modify them through retelling and reliving them.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 160).

According to Clandinin and Connelly, individuals make sense of, and understand their experiences through narrative. In an attempt to explore how women talk about their experiences of violence and how they understand and construct meanings out of their experiences, a narrative analytic approach is deemed most appropriate. Moreover, a narrative approach acknowledges that women's stories are not simply aimed at conveying

meaning but at constructing identities. Women therefore, not only tell stories about violence, they construct themselves in those stories.

Riessman (1993) suggests that reliability does not apply to narrative research and that issues of validation should be reconceptualised. As indicated earlier, a narrative research does not purport a fixed or essential 'truth'. According to Riessman, the 'trustworthiness' rather than the 'truth' of our research should be validated. She suggests four approaches that include: persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic use. Persuasiveness depends on how reasonable or plausible the researcher's interpretations are. Interpretations are taken back to research participants in order to fulfil the correspondence criterion. The validity of the researcher's interpretations is therefore tested by 'member checks'. Coherence involves 'thick' description at the local, global, and thematic levels. Pragmatic use refers to the extent in which the study becomes the basis for the work of others in the field. The current research is intended to conform to the persuasiveness and coherence criteria of validation.

## **SAMPLE**

Given that qualitative research is less concerned with universalisations and more concerned with generating meaning, studies of this nature usually employ a relatively small sample size (see Baker, 1997 and Hydén, 1999). From September to December 2000, I conducted interviews with fifteen research participants. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted at shopping centres, churches, libraries, community centres, at the local police station and the Mitchell's Plain magistrates court (see Appendix A). I published a poem (see appendix B) and an article (see appendix C) in a community newspaper. The sample was therefore self-selected and potential participants called me, either in response to the advertisements, poem, or the article. The only qualification placed on potential participants was that they had been abused by a partner. I aimed to contact a diverse group of women and focus on their experiences and meaning of violence in their relationships. I did not attempt to find a representative sample of abused women with the aim of generating a generalisable account of their experiences.

After providing potential participants with a brief description of my research, all women who called me, agreed to an interview. The interviews were arranged at the convenience of participants. Most of the interviews were held at respondents' homes and were often interrupted by family, friends, or visitors.

The following represents the sample demographics in tabular form. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

Name	Age	Marital Status	Relationship Length	No. of Children	Employed	Ever left relationship
Mary	43	M	18yrs	3	Yes	Yes
Diane	52	D	10 & 6*	2	Yes	No
Gail	38	M	14	2	No	Yes
Serena	38	D	9	2	Yes	No
Theresa	34	M	11	3	No	Yes
Faith	47	M	26	2	Yes	No
Merle	33	M	7	1	No	No
Barbara	34	M	14	3	Yes	No
Roslyn	34	D	7	2	Yes	Yes
Sally	34	M	14	3	Yes	Yes
Rachel	40	M	5	2	Yes	Yes
Kathryn	33	M	6	2	Yes	No
Sindiwe	38	M	15	4	Yes	Yes
Letitia	47	M	20	3	No	Yes
Sandra	30	M	10	2	Yes	Yes

M = married

D = divorced

\* Participant was married twice before

Three participants were no longer living with their abusive partners, two of who had left within the past year (Roslyn and Sindiwe). Participants ranged in age from 30 to 52 years (with a mean of 38.33 years) and had been married from 5 to 26 years (with a mean of 11.8 years). Seventy-three percent of the sample was employed outside the home. Only four women (n=26.67%) had completed their high school education. Of those women, three had a higher educational level than their partners. At the time of the interviews, 4 (n=26.67%) women (2 of whom had left their partners) were not living in

permanent housing – they were either living with family, or in informal structures on others' property. For a fuller description of the research participants, refer to Appendix D.

### **QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING – A NARRATIVE APPROACH**

In traditional interview methods, the interviewer sets the agenda and the interview is guided by the researcher's meaning frame (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). My research questions and theoretical foundations framed my choices regarding interviewing style. I aimed to gain a comprehensive picture of women's subjective experiences of violence from their partners. The open-ended approach was suited since it refrains from a structured question and answer approach, which suppresses women's stories (Mishler, 1986). It allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive picture and stay in touch with participants' meaning frames.

Further substantiation for the use of open-ended interviewing techniques was provided by other studies on this issue. For example, Vetten (1999) found that participants were traumatised by their experiences of violence and were unable to focus on a single event. They also struggled to report fully on their experiences. A structured questionnaire would therefore not have been suitable in this instance.

At the start of the interview, all women were informed about the nature of my research. I told women that I was interested in their experiences of abuse from their partners and that they could explore any issues that were of relevance to them. We also read and discussed the consent forms (see Appendix E) together. After describing the research procedure, I addressed participants' questions and enquired whether they were still willing to participate in the interview. None of the women refused participation. The general topics explored in the interviews included women's everyday experiences, their experiences of abuse, their responses to the abuse, their feelings toward their partners, and their insights about staying in the relationships. I used the interview schedule (see Appendix F) as a rough guide framing the interview and thus, the questions were not strictly followed. I initiated the discussion with an open-ended, narrative style question –

("Can you tell me about your life with your husband?") – and, as I had anticipated, the interviews progressed from there. This technique enabled me to gain rapport with the participants who started by speaking about the issues that concerned them most. In this manner, I was able to empathise with participants and stay in touch with their meaning frames. Most of the research questions were answered as women told me their stories. My research questions were best answered by this style of interviewing and I would not have obtained the same responses by employing traditional structured interviews.

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, including basic units of speech such as pauses and exclamations (see transcription conventions, Appendix G). During some of the interviews, I was very aware of the tape recorder and at times I switched it off after the actual 'interview'. At these times, women were mostly asking for advice or we were having 'informal' discussions. My uneasiness with the tape recorder was mainly due to the style of the interviews – which to me were more like conversations, as well as in response to the deeply personal and intense nature of the topic. After the tape recorder had been switched off, women often requested advice, information, or asked questions about my research. These conversations enabled me to better understand the needs of the women and gave me the opportunity to give something back to the research participants by referring them to appropriate sources of assistance.

### **The role of power in the qualitative interview**

Fontana and Frey (1998) suggest that a researcher's decisions about self-presentation are important since it leaves certain impressions on the interviewees and has a great influence on the success of a study. At times during the process of interviewing, I was explicitly aware of power differentials between the participants and myself. Although similarity could be claimed since we resided in the same area and were of the same 'race' (except in Sindiwe's case), I could not deny my privileged position compared to the participants. The role of sameness or shared identity in research has been questioned (Lewin, 1995) because identity (from a post-structuralist perspective) is no longer defined as stable and coherent. The notion of 'shared identity' would therefore rest on individual meanings

and constructions and would depend on which forms of identity are salient (Lewin, 1995). I concur with Shefer (1999) who noted:

“I find myself questioning the notion that it is possible to ever be anything but ‘other’ to the participants of one’s research. There are so many lines of difference in the social realm, it is virtually impossible to define a group that is not ‘different’ to oneself in at least one dimension of subjectivity” (p. 158).

The participants and I were different in multiple ways including age, education, and to a certain degree, class. I am well educated (university degree), and somewhat economically privileged, compared to most of the participants in my research. Further, I am not living with violence or the immediate threat thereof. I also had prior knowledge and training around issues of woman abuse. Hence, my roles as student/researcher/counsellor immediately set the tone for most of the interviews, with many of the participants requesting assistance or advice of some sort. Further, by describing one of my roles as a NICRO counsellor, I might have been attempting to add legitimacy to my claims about the validity of listening to women’s accounts of violence.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The interview data was analysed using narrative analysis, which takes participants’ stories as the objects of investigation and pays attention to how participants construct meanings. My decision to utilise narrative analysis was not made during the initial stages of the research process. These decisions were informed by certain challenges and complications, which became evident after working and interacting with the data. During the early stages of the analysis process I found it extremely difficult to disengage from preconceived theories and categories. As suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), I felt that the only way I could honour respondents’ experiences was to maintain a commitment to their views and to develop my theories based upon this. This became quite challenging and I felt that, in the analytic process, I was being ‘blinded’ by my preconceived theories and readings on woman abuse. In some respect, I felt that I was trying to ‘fit’ the data into the categories I had prior knowledge of. My difficulties were

compounded when I attempted to follow traditional modes of qualitative data analysis, such as thematic analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I felt that, by coding and separating women's stories into distinct themes, I would be losing valuable information. I also became aware that women were telling me stories about their experiences of violence. My line of questioning (described above) actually invited these stories and women explored their relationships, often going back to the beginning, and then returning to the present. These realisations pointed me in the direction of narrative analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993). By familiarising myself with this area of research, I was enabling myself with the tools to analyse women's stories through different lenses. In order to stay in touch with women's meaning frames, I could pay attention, not only to the content of their women's stories but how, in telling their stories they were constructing their realities and identities.

Taking the analytical approaches posited by Lieblich et al. (1998) called holistic-content and to some extent, holistic-form analysis, I read women's narratives by attending to the foci of their stories, while attempting to be open to the meaning of the text (or not being blinded by theory). The interview transcripts were read numerous times, paying particular attention firstly to the content of women's narratives. By attending to the content of the stories, I was able to explicate similarities and differences across and within cases. I then interpreted the narratives by paying attention to the larger structures organising their accounts.

Furthermore, the attention to language and discourse shaped my reading of women's narratives. I was interested in the particular function of language in shaping women's accounts of violence. In line with a post-structuralist view of discourse, I was attentive to the discourses women drew upon to describe their experiences, as well as how they took up, or resisted those discourses. In particular, I was also concerned with another interpretive level recognising contradictions, silences, and disturbances in women's accounts. As suggested by Hydén (1994):

“A deconstructive reading relies on gaps in consistency and contradictions in the text, and even on metaphorical associations for revealing meanings present in the text but outside any immediate level of awareness” (p. 63).

Borrowing from Riessman (1993), my analysis was aimed at creating a ‘meta-story’ about women’s experiences of violence from their intimate partners. I intended to show what the narratives signify and how issues of politics and values enter. In line with a postmodern view, I have to contend that my interpretations of these women’s accounts are but one of a variety. My interpretations are based upon my particular readings located in this historical moment. Furthermore, I recognise the assumptions about the formation of narrative as a co-construction between the researcher and researched. Narratives are always being reconstructed and reinterpreted, implying change (Hydén, 1994).

#### **ETHICAL ISSUES IN FEMINIST RESEARCH ON SENSITIVE TOPICS**

Research on sensitive topics challenges the researcher and participant on many levels. These include the emotional impact on the researcher and participants. Renzetti and Lee (cited in Robertson, 2000) describe sensitive topics as those that examine the private sphere and often have potential costs to the researcher and participant. Sensitive topics therefore carry an element of risk to both. In this research women described traumatic and painful memories of abuse by their partners (and sometimes childhood experiences of abuse as well). Within this context, care was taken to establish rapport, empathy, and sensitivity geared at creating an environment conducive to safe disclosure.

The following ethical principles guided my research with women discussing their experiences of intimate partner violence: informed consent (autonomy), non-maleficence (do no harm), beneficence (benefits outweigh risks), and fair and just research practices (Robertson, 2000). Research participation was entirely voluntary and potential participants were fully informed of the aims and process of the research. Further, participants were also informed that the interview involved the discussion of a sensitive topic and that they could decide the boundaries and parameters of discussion. I attempted

to obtain informed consent through an open communication process (by reading and explaining the informed consent forms, see Appendix E). The minimisation of harm to participants was also an ethical concern. I was aware and attentive to any negative emotional consequences that may have resulted as a consequence of the interview.

After the interviews, I initiated a debriefing session involving interaction and discussion around the interview process. In this manner women's questions or concerns surrounding the research process were discussed. During these times women often spoke about the relief of being able to talk to someone (often for the first time) about their problems. Moreover, women who requested or were identified as requiring further assistance were referred to appropriate sources of assistance. Maconachie, Angless, and van Zyl (1993) suggest that when researching women's experiences of violence from their partners, a clear distinction between the interview and a counselling situation may be impossible because traumatic memories of abuse may be invoked. The debriefing session allowed me to provide some form of closure to the women who had discussed painful and traumatic experiences of violation. I also informed participants that I would be available if any of them needed to speak to me in the future. My intentions were in line with feminist research principles emphasising that the researcher cannot simply leave the research setting untouched, and not give anything back to the participants.

Participants' rights to privacy were also respected. I informed participants that they would remain anonymous and their identities would not be revealed to anyone. They were also informed of their rights to refuse participation and request to have the tape-recorder switched off at any time during the process. Participants' real names or identifying details were excluded from any reports or research documentation.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE**

In the following two chapters I present my analysis of women's narratives of violence. In this study all participant's accounts of their relationships conformed, in structure to a 'traditional' narrative with a beginning, middle, and end as well as a logic of the story (framed by the interview topic) (Hydén, 1994). There are no recipes or prescriptions for conducting narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993). Riessman discussed three practical models of narrative analysis, namely, the analysis of narrative plot lines or the sequencing of the narrative account (conducted by Ginsburg in Riessman); attending to the language narrators use as well as focussing on the structure of the stories; and the analysis of poetic structures and meaning in narratives. In this analysis, I compare the content and to some extent, the plot line of women's stories as utilised by Ginsburg (cited in Riessman, 1993). Furthermore, this approach was supplemented by a close attention to language and how realities and identities are constructed in talk.

Most of the participants in this study spoke a non-standard English dialect reflecting a combination of English and Afrikaans. As narrative researchers, it is crucial to acknowledge that much is lost in our presentations and re-presentations of different levels of analysis (Riessman, 1993). Moving from the spoken word, to the transcribed text sometimes preserves the accuracy of what was said but not the manner in which speech was conveyed (Maher, 1997). In the excerpts in this chapter, where women spoke Afrikaans (or a mixture of English and Afrikaans), I have included my translations in the text and the original transcribed extracts as footnotes.

#### **NAMING EXPERIENCES OF VIOLATION AND ABUSE**

The demarcation of different types of abuse varies from study to study. For example some studies discuss verbal abuse as a separate category (Jacobs & Suleman, 1999), while others include it as a type of emotional abuse (Vetten, 1999). These differentiations are contingent upon the definitions of woman abuse used in each case. In

this study the categories of violence and abuse are closely linked and emerged from participants' experiences and descriptions thereof. Although the distinction is drawn here for the purposes of clarity and analysis, it is important to note that women's experiences do not always fit predefined categories. For instance, Vetten (1999) attempted to elicit women's experiences of emotional, economic, sexual, or physical abuse. She found these distinctions to be inadequate in accounting for the range of complex experiences because women in her sample experienced multiple forms of abuse simultaneously. This analysis will therefore acknowledge the interrelatedness of different types of violence.

All participants in the study named their partners' actions as abuse. The abuse women experienced ranged from subtle verbal degradation, humiliation or controlling behaviour, to sexual violence and severe physical abuse. The following examples illustrate how some women named their experiences of violation.

He actually abuses me, all the abuse there is: physically, mentally, sexually, that's everything I get from him. (Merle)

You know, if I wanted a dress, I had to cry for a dress. And you know how I had to pay him? I had to pay him sexually<sup>2</sup> to get a dress. And that's how I got things. And that's one of the abuses that I also went through. Sexually. (Gail)

Gail described the different types of abuse she experienced as well as the mechanisms the abuser employed in order to control her. Throughout her narrative, Barbara, who had knowledge about women's rights and was politically involved through a worker's union, verbalised the conflict she experienced between her political consciousness and the abuse. She questioned her activism, indicating that she spoke to other women about abuse while dealing with the same issues in her life. Barbara's husband used her relative power and knowledge as a way to further degrade and humiliate her. The following illustrates:

He would tell me: "You know all the rights, you think you can bring me an interdict. Bring that interdict. You'll see what I'll do to you and that interdict."<sup>3</sup>  
(Barbara)

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<sup>2</sup> Underlining indicates vocal emphasis by the participant.

Barbara's questioning of the relationship between her personal and political experiences may have been a means of making sense of, or understanding those experiences. By attempting to come to terms with this contradiction in her life, she might have been able to mobilise effective resources to either end her husband's violence or end the marriage. Many women also grappled with the question of why men abuse, seemingly trying to deal with their experiences. Profitt (2000) established that as women name their experiences as abuse, they begin to question their lives, identities, and ways of being. The questioning behaviour may therefore provide the impetus for change.

Women's abilities to name the abuse they experienced may have been linked to greater public awareness around issues of violence against women, and woman abuse in particular. There has been an increase in media coverage on issues relating to woman abuse (Gray & Sathiparsad, 1998) and people are becoming more literate in the language of violence against women (Vetten, 2000a). Stark and Flitcraft (1996) provide a cogent discussion of how the naming and politicisation of woman abuse has historically been linked to social, political, economic, and other processes. Thus, research has shown that an examination of women's experiences of violence cannot be effectively accomplished without being attentive to the socio-cultural context within which these experiences occur and the structural and institutional constraints that inhibit women's options.

The issue of naming experiences of abuse is not separate from issues of power and control, which are discussed throughout women's narratives. Women recognised that their husbands' abuse was aimed at exerting power and maintaining control in their relationships. By attending to discourses of power and control, I will illustrate how power in abusive relationships is not always unidirectional and shifts according to changes in the relationship, women's social conditions, and subjectivity. A focus on agency and resistance permits the re-visioning of the traditional script that depicts women as passive victims of patriarchy and other structural forces. In this attempt to draw

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<sup>3</sup> He would tell me: "Jy ken al die regte, jy dink jy kan 'n interdik vir my bring. Bring daai interdik. Jy sal sien wat maak ek met jou en daai interdik." (Barbara)

attention to women's agency and resistance, I am aware of the dangers of neglecting structural constraints based in oppressive social conditions (Davis & Fisher, 1993). This analysis has therefore attempted to create a dialogue between these positions.

### **Emotional abuse**

All participants in this study experienced emotional abuse of one kind or another. Emotional abuse is defined as, "any act associated with psychological, spiritual and other forms of abuse that relate to an individual's sense of integrity, freedom of expression and well-being" (Vetten, 1999, p. 4). The emotional abuse included isolation or social deprivation, coercion, harassment, interrogation, and the effects of their partners' marital infidelity. Furthermore, the emotional effects (Kirkwood, 1993) of other types of abuse were a salient feature in women's accounts of violence. Although accounts of emotional abuse are separated for the sake of clarity of discussion, it is acknowledged that the different types of abuse are inextricably linked. Taking the analogy of a web (used by Kirkwood, 1993), women's experiences should be analysed as "network of interrelated behaviours and emotions" (p. 58). Thus, the overlap in the different 'types' of abuse ensures that no strand of the web can be viewed in isolation from the others.

In order to maintain control over women, their partners tended to isolate them from a supportive network of family or friends. This type of isolation was a common feature in all participants' accounts. The following extracts provide examples:

... men like this, they tend to isolate you. You don't worry with people, like family or friends and at the end of the day you are at their mercy. (Merle)

He wanted me for himself, not for anybody else. Like even with friends too, I don't have friends, I don't have friends. He's got a lot of friends here in Cape Town but I don't have friends. (Sally)

Sally also described how her husband complained when she visited friends or family, and how he prohibited her from playing sports. Sally's statement: "He wanted me for himself, not for anybody else" relates to the discourse on male propriety rights. From this perspective, the wife is viewed as the husband's property over which he exerts his

male power and authority. In the extract above, Sally's repetition of: "I don't have friends", serves to emphasise her sense of isolation.

Below Merle shows how the isolation was aimed at rendering the violence invisible.

You see everybody likes him, if I must tell somebody this is what I get from (*husband's name*), they will probably think I deserve it, or I like it. (Merle)

In Merle's account, her husband's kind demeanour serves as a front to his abusiveness in their home. Her fears about not being believed are in response to stereotypical masochistic discourses about woman abuse (Gayford, 1975) and why women do not leave abusive partners. It is thus assumed that women are somehow responsible for the abuse and do not leave since they take perverse pleasure in it. These fears serve to further isolate her and inhibit her chances of confiding in someone about the abuse. Similarly, Diane, Barbara, Sally, and Letitia did not confide in anyone about the abuse.

As shown above, the abusers isolated women from a supportive network of family or friends. Often, their partners spent a great amount of time away from the home, with friends, family or other women. Women were therefore not provided with the emotional support and companionship expected from a marriage partner. For example:

Most of the time while we were living there, my son and I had to be alone in the house because he was hardly there. There were nightclubs and he was in town, he had a whole group of friends that were smoking. (Faith)

The abuser's tactics aimed at isolation further reinforced his control in the relationship. If women were isolated, their chances of leaving the abuser and finding support from friends and family were minimised. Additionally, isolation decreased women's chances of confiding in others about the abuse and maintained traditional beliefs surrounding the sanctity of the marriage and the family. The isolation and social deprivation enforced by their husbands' constituted a form of emotional abuse.

Harassment and interrogation constituted another form of emotional abuse. Diane, Serena, Faith, Roslyn, and Sindiwe described situations where they were forced to stay up nights and listen to their partners' talking, complaints, harassment, or verbal abuse. On many occasions, their husbands came home from a night of drinking or drug taking and woke them in the early hours of the morning. Women were compelled to go to work the following day and it is likely that their partners' behaviour affected their performance at work. In these situations the fear or threat of physical harm were always present if women refused to submit to a partners' wishes. Roslyn illustrates:

... man, you know what he used to put me, he used to put me down. Like he would tell me it's because of my mommy that my daddy hanged himself and things like that man. And um, then he will tell me: "It's because of your mommy, hey?" Then I tell him: "No, it's not because of my mommy." "Now why did your father hang himself? You also probably want me to hang myself, why did your father hang himself? Because of your mother, hey?" Then I tell him not to talk nonsense. Then he says: "It's because of your mother that your father hung himself, hey?" Now I must say: "Yes, its because of my mother that my father hung himself." I mean just to like, so that he can stop it or that he can keep quiet.<sup>4</sup> (Roslyn)

The above exchange can be described as an act of verbal torture or interrogation. Kirkwood (1993) described the distortion of subjective reality as a form of emotional abuse. In terms of this men attack or shake women's foundations of knowledge aimed at decreasing their self-worth. Roslyn's husband deliberately focussed on an issue that was very sensitive to her, and by attacking her subjective reality in this way he could make her more susceptible to his control. Furthermore, her husband employed an excuse or justification for male behaviour. He explained her father's behaviour as a result of or in reaction to her mother's personality or actions. By rationalising in this manner, he was also able to excuse or justify his own abusive behaviour. The following illustrates:

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<sup>4</sup> ... man, you know what he used to put me, he used to put me down. Like he would tell me it's because of my mommy that my daddy hanged himself and things like that man. And um, then he will tell me: "Is deur jou ma ne" – then I tell him: "Nee is nie deur my ma nie". "Nou hoekom het jou pa vir hom gehang? Jy wil ook seker hê ek moet vir my hang. Hoekom het jou pa vir hom gehang, deur jou ma ne?" Then I tell him, "moenie nonsense praat 'ie." Dan sê hy vir my: "Is deur jou ma wat jou pa vir hom gehang het ne?" Now I must say: "Ja, is deur my ma dat my pa vir hom gehang het." I mean just to like, so that he can stop it or that he can keep quiet. (Roslyn)

- Roslyn: And it was always-<sup>5</sup> I was always to blame for everything, I was the reason he smoked ...<sup>6</sup>
- Floretta: So he never admitted responsibility?
- Roslyn: No, oh no. Whatever happened it was always me.

The above showed how abuser's enforced isolation, harassment and interrogation minimised women's freedom of expression and psychological well-being, thereby comprising forms of emotional abuse.

### **Infidelity as abuse**

In more than one half (n=53%) of the sample, women's husbands were unfaithful at one time or another during their marriage. The woman abuse literature does not fully explore marital infidelity as a type of abuse. The husbands' marital infidelity might be described as emotional abuse because of the impact that it had on women. The effects of the husband's marital infidelity and abuse were multiple. Women experienced insomnia, weight-loss, nervous system problems, and other stress related symptoms. For example:

My hair started to fall out, my hair was long and it started to fall out, patches. And I went to the day hospital and to a doctor. And the doctor said: "Lady you need to go to a psychologist or psychiatrist. There's definitely something wrong with you. [...]"<sup>7</sup> You suffer from stress." (Faith)

Women's narratives suggest that the effects of the husband's infidelity and other forms of emotional abuse cannot be easily separated from each other and that the negative consequences of abuse were compounded by their husbands' infidelity. Extra-marital affairs sometimes resulted in desertion from the husband, leaving women with the full burden of household and family responsibilities.

The indication that several husbands had been unfaithful to their wives illustrates how interpersonal relationships are patterned along social norms. Since masculine identities

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<sup>5</sup> A hyphen indicates a sudden breaking off of speech.

<sup>6</sup> Ellipses indicates a pause.

<sup>7</sup> [...] indicates talk omitted from the extract.

are constructed as dominant, it becomes justifiable for men to have multiple partners, in order to exercise their power and to objectify women. Gendered constructions of sexuality give rise to a sexual double standard (Vetten, 2000a). In terms of this, men are encouraged to have multiple partners while women are expected to be faithful to one partner. In this sample men who were unfaithful to their partners, but questioned their wives' fidelity illustrate the 'sexual double standard'. These constructions create a rivalry amongst women for men's affection. If it is acceptable for men to have multiple partners, then the onus is on women to compete to keep their male partners. This 'rivalry' amongst women has been described as the 'have/hold discourse' (Hollway, 1995). Theresa's narrative is illustrative.

Theresa described the process of discovering that her husband was being unfaithful (with her best friend). The manner in which she told her story and the derogatory terms she used to describe the other woman suggested that she blamed her for the indiscretion.

Theresa illustrates:

She was also married but told him so many bad things about her husband so that he could feel sorry for her. He must take her. (Theresa)

Theresa indicated that her friend was jealous and wanted her husband and her house. She created the impression she accepted her husband back because of a degree of competitiveness between herself and the other woman. She stated that when her husband returned, he told her the "truth" about how the other woman tried to lure him away from his wife and family. In Theresa's case the have/hold discourse is made explicit by her taking an abusive husband back to prove that she has been victorious and managed to hold on to her husband.

The have/hold discourse should be examined within the material and structural constraints that shape women's experiences. In the following extract Theresa illustrates the complexities involved:

I had a house, a very big house. It had everything, fully furnished house, we bought the house like that. And I mean, shame, she didn't have that, now she wanted to have what I had. [...] She wanted him to chuck me out of the house that she can move in. (Theresa)

Ramphela (cited in Foster, 1991) showed the additional forms of women's oppression where wives in a male hostel in Cape Town were forced into a dependent-submissiveness in order to continue staying with their husbands. Unmarried women in the hostels competed with other women for access to accommodation. In a climate where economic resources such as housing are extremely scarce, Theresa's 'fight' for her husband should be viewed in a context where she was attempting to maintain stability and her hold on material possessions.

Women also exemplified a link between infidelity and other types of abuse.

For example, Theresa described how her husband deserted her and their two children, at a time when she was unable to work. In this respect, his infidelity and the economic abuse were linked. In many other cases, men provided financially for other women while neglecting their financial responsibilities toward their families. For example, Faith described how she struggled to support her children financially, while her husband provided for the other woman and her family. In this context, the competition over economic resources becomes paramount.

As a result of the affair, women's partners were often unavailable to assist them with raising the children and accepting family or household responsibilities. Diane illustrates:

But he wasn't there, you see. So I reared them, if they look, in the morning, they see my face. He's gone to work. When he leaves in the morning, they in pyjamas, if he comes home, in pyjamas. It's from Monday to Saturday ...  
(Diane)

In other instances, women connected their husbands' infidelity to their experiences of physical and emotional abuse. Sindiwe described how her husband became physically abusive when she questioned his fidelity. Both Serena and Theresa described how, when

their husbands were being unfaithful, they were often argumentative and looked for a 'reason' to use physical violence.

Compared to other types of abuse, marital infidelity is often viewed as less serious. Below Diane recalls the advice she received from her sister.

Diane, don't worry, if he doesn't hurt you. He doesn't hit you, he gives you money, don't worry. (Diane)

The advice given to Diane with regard to her husband's infidelity reflects societal views that this behaviour is less damaging than other types of abuse. Furthermore, this perception relates to the sexual double standard, making it acceptable for men to have multiple partners thereby excusing marital infidelity.

In sum, women experienced varying degrees of negative emotional consequences as a result of their partners' infidelity. The husband's infidelity was also linked to other types of abuse. In light of the above, both the act and consequences of marital infidelity constitute a form of abuse.

### **Verbal abuse**

Verbal abuse included verbal attacks, constant verbal degradation, swearing, screaming, humiliating remarks, and accusations of marital infidelity. This behaviour was enacted in order to erode and attack women's self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. For example:

You know, he's always degrading me. Now I tell him okay fine, I'm stupid, I'm the ignorant one, fine, you know. (Rachel)

He hits me, he says I'm a whore in front of the children – "go and look for a man, you've got another man."<sup>8</sup> (Barbara)

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<sup>8</sup> He hits me, he says I'm a whore in front of the children – "gaan soek vir jou 'n man, jy't 'n man." (Barbara)

Many participants recalled being called a “whore” by their partners. Men’s use of this term to denigrate and humiliate women is tied to cultural and religious constructions of femininity. Cultural representations of women vacillate between the extremes of either the virgin or the whore (the Madonna/whore dichotomy) (Macdonald, 1995). Cultural and religious symbolism of the Virgin Mary evokes admiration and reverence (Maeckelberghe, 1992) and her image is juxtaposed with the Eve as the impure and evil woman. Within Roman Catholicism women are supposed to follow the example of the Virgin Mary, emphasising qualities of sexual purity, caring and nurturing motherhood. By referring to women as “whores” (implying impurity), men attack women’s lack of conformity to hegemonic religious and cultural norms of femininity. These constructions may be pertinent to some of the women in this study as many (such as Diane, Gail, Serena, Theresa, Merle, Sally, Sindiwe, and Letitia) described firm religious beliefs and practices.

Attacks on women’s femininity were also enacted in other ways.

He’ll swear and he’ll tell me certain things. He’ll tell me I’m untidy, I don’t keep things they way it should be. And he’ll maybe break a wind and he’ll tell me that is what I am in his eyes, a fart ... (Letitia)

In the above extract, Letitia describes her husband’s verbal degradation. He criticised her lack of conformity to the role of a ‘good wife’ or ‘good woman’. Letitia’s husband assumes that it is her wifely duty to maintain the household and be responsible for the housework.

### **Physical Abuse**

“Physical abuse is considered to be any deliberate physical assault on an individual’s body that harms the recipient in any way” (Vetten, 1999, p. 5). All participants at one time or another experienced physical violence from current or past partners. They reported being hit, slapped, kicked, choked, pushed, punched, and thrown with objects. The following extract provides some of the shocking details of the violence Roslyn was exposed to.

He first threw me with beer bottles, and when all the beer bottles were broken he took the heads of the bottles and he started stabbing me on my legs. And to him it was, no, he doesn't see enough blood. Then he went to fetch the knife and stabbed me in my back. And then he threw the knife away and went to fetch one of those iron bars that they hang the towels over, he went to fetch that, and he hit me with it. (Roslyn)

A majority of the sample (n=87%) were still living with the threat of physical violence from their partners, including those who had already left their abusive partners. Living under the threat of violence from an abusive partner is shown to be extremely disconcerting. After more than one year away from her husband Roslyn is still at risk of violence.

But um, you know he doesn't know where I'm staying and he's still looking for me. I mean like um, now about a month ago, I went up to my mommy she stays in Town. I came back and he was standing at the taxi rank and I told her, "mommy that's (*husband's name*) going there". In her mind she thought I was now talking nonsense. And then we got in the taxi, when we got in the taxi, he um knocked at the window. And then you know like the both of us looked up – "you're dead if I catch you", he reckons to me. And then he just moved away. And um, a friend of mine, he's like, every time when he gets so then he will like ask her if she didn't see me, don't she know where I'm working. So she told him no but she like think I'm working out in (*name of place*) man, but I mean like whoever he gets, whatever friends of mine, he will like ask them if they haven't seen me or things like that.<sup>9</sup>

As shown in Roslyn's case and supported by literature (Fleury, 2000; Herbert, Silver & Ellard, 1991), violence (or the threat thereof) does not necessarily cease after leaving an abusive partner. Furthermore, the language Roslyn used to describe her husband's violence ("... he doesn't see enough blood" and "you're dead if I catch you") conveys the

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<sup>9</sup> But um, you know he doesn't know where I'm staying and he's still looking for me. I mean like um, now about a month ago, I went up to my mommy she stays in Town. I came back and he was standing at the taxi rank and I told her, "mommy that's (*husband's name*) going there". In her mind she thought I was now talking nonsense. And then we got in the taxi, when we got in the taxi, he um knocked at the window – and then you know like the both of us looked up – "jy's vrek as ek vir jou kry", he reckons to me. And then he just moved away. And um, a friend of mine, he's like, every time when he gets so then he will like ask her if she didn't see me, don't she know where I'm working. So she told him no but she like think I'm working out in (*name of place*) man, but I mean like whoever he gets, whatever friends of mine, he will like ask them if they haven't seen me or things like that. (Roslyn)

imagery of extreme violence that could possibly result in death. Below Sindiwe described the violence in a similar manner.

He used to beat me badly, but this time he was killing me. You can't hit a person with a brick and then, you know, he throw the brick and I collapsed because I feel dizzy. And then he started to kick me, I couldn't even get up. You know, I tried to pretend like I'm dead. What! He want to make sure if I'm dead, he was kicking me like this, to make sure if I'm dead. And then I started to scream again because I couldn't take it. That's why I say he was killing me. (Sindiwe)

At the time of the interviews, both Sindiwe and Roslyn had left their abusive partners. It is likely that they acknowledged the extremity of the violence because they were no longer living with the abusers. Their accounts may be compared with others who seemed to minimise or downplay the severity of their husbands' physical abuse. In the following extract Barbara describes an incident she named as the worst incident of physical violence.

- Barbara: [...] the other night, I was sitting in the toilet. I said, "ag man, you're going on about everything, keep quiet, I just came from work". I was just (saying) I am tired I came from work. And then- look there the bathroom door is still broken ...
- Floretta: Did he break down the door?
- Barbara: Er, he kicked it down. And I was still sitting on the toilet and he choked me. "I will stab you", and all this.
- Floretta: So, what did you do?
- Barbara: Nothing.
- Floretta: Could you stop him?
- Barbara: No, he just went on and on and on.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara: I think the other night, I was sitting in the toilet – I said ag man, jy gat so aan vir alles, hou jou mond, ek kom uit die werk uit. I was just telling – ek is moeg ek kom uit die werk uit. And then- kyk daar die badkamer deur is nou nog stukkend ...

Floretta: Did he break down the door?

Barbara: Er, hy't dit af geskop, toe sit ek nog op die toilet hy choke vir my, so. Ek sal vir jou vrek steek en al die.

Floretta: So, what did you do?

Barbara: Niks.

Floretta: Could you stop him?

Barbara: No, he just went on and on and on.

Naming and fully describing the severity of a partner's violence may have been more difficult for women who were still living with their partners. Women struggled with contradictory feelings toward their partners as well as the challenges and difficulties in attempting to leave abusive situations.

Below, Merle describes how pervasive the threat of physical violence is in her relationship.

I've got this scary, scared feeling inside of me, especially when there's company, that he's going to embarrass me, or he's gonna beat me. And even though it seems to me it's not gonna happen, but this scared feeling won't go away. (Merle)

The feelings Merle described were informed by the unpredictability and constant threat of physical violence, and were based upon her previous experiences of violence. Dobash and Dobash (1998) suggest that once violence has been used, men are able to control women through fear and the threat of future violence. Merle's fears of the exposure or visibility of the violence in the presence of others speaks to the isolation and maintenance of the invisibility of woman abuse (discussed above).

### **Sexual abuse**

"Sexual abuse is considered to be any unwanted physical invasion of an individual's body that is sexual in nature" (Vetten, 1999, p. 5). Sexual abuse could be viewed as occurring on a continuum (Kelly, 1990) and may include acts such as unwanted touching, kissing, and forced sexual acts. More than one half of the sample (n=53.33%) described incidents of sexual coercion or manipulation by their husbands. Some women described how their partners evoked feelings of guilt or became verbally abusive when they refused sex. Basile (1999) discussed how women acquiesce to unwanted sex with their partners. She described different types of acquiescence namely, when unwanted sex turns into wanted; when women believe it's their duty; when women submit because it is easier not to argue; and when women submit out of fear because they either know that their partners will become violent or they do not know what they are capable of doing. Abusers' reactions to women not wanting to engage in sexual intercourse included emotional

manipulation, pressure, or control. Participants in this study who acquiesced to their partners' demands did so for the same reasons discussed by Basile. The most common reasons were out of fear that their partners' might become angry or physically violent (in Barbara, Sindiwe, Diane, Letitia, Roslyn, and Sally's cases). As Sandra illustrates:

[...] he gets very angry when I refuse him sex. And then one night he punched me in the head, here (*shows to the side of her head*) – just gave me with his fist [...] (Roslyn)

Both Kathryn and Sandra's foremost reasons for acquiescence were because of their partners' emotionally manipulative behaviours. Their husbands ignored them, became angry, or were unpleasant or unkind. In the following example, Diane shows how she emotionally disengaged from the event and acquiesced to her husband's demands with the purpose of avoiding further confrontation.

Maybe if I was more for sex, maybe this wouldn't have happened. I don't know. I wasn't for it that much. If I'm tired tonight, I'm tired. A man doesn't understand that. And fine, you want it, there! And then, he also shakes the hell out of me afterwards. (Diane)

At the initial phase, Diane attempted to assert her rights to refuse sex. However, she also seemed to be blaming herself. Her self-blaming stance may be linked to hegemonic discourses about the differences between male and female sex drives (Miles, 1995; Shefer & Ruiters, 1998) and about a woman's marital sexual duties (Yllö, 1999). At age 52, Diane has been divorced twice. Her self-blaming stance (that the marriage might not have ended had she been more sexually inclined) may also be a reaction to societal pressures that a woman at her age should be married. Elsewhere in her narrative Diane stated that she thought her husband would have changed had she given him another chance.

Furthermore, Diane did not acknowledge that her husband's abusive behaviour might also have impacted on her willingness or desire to engage in sexual intercourse with him.

Below Kathryn verbalises the impact the abuse has on a woman's desire to engage in sexual intercourse with her partner.

... sex I can have once a year, I'll be happy, even if I don't it wouldn't bother me. Where he again is a person, he's a sexually active person. Now the moment I re- not reject but say no, then it's also an issue. Because a man doesn't think, what they do to a woman, can actually make them cold where sex is concerned. There's times when everything is fine, then I will play my role. [...]. If you don't wanna give in to them then it's another issue. And then they say you having an affair and then there's somebody else. [...]. Sometimes I do it, just to get him off my back and to avoid a situation. But I mean, I'm taking my own dignity now and I'm pushing it down. (Kathryn)

Kathryn's account may be analysed on a number of levels. Firstly, one could examine how masculinity and femininity is constructed within her talk. She juxtaposed her lack of sexual drive with her husband's active sexuality. Her representations conform to dominant constructions of 'passive female' and 'active male' sexuality (Miles, 1995). Kathryn's indication that she will "play her role" at certain times, provides evidence of traditional constructions of feminine (wifely) roles. Kathryn's partner's reactions to her refusal are also related to cultural constructions of femininity (as discussed in the previous section). At times, he reacted to her refusal by accusing her and questioning her fidelity. Further, one might also question her statement that she does not find pleasure in her sexual relationship. This could be because sex with her partner is unpleasant, or because of the effects of the abuse (as she alluded to).

Other participants described incidents of marital rape where they were forced to have sexual intercourse (sometimes after an incident of physical abuse). Below, Sindiwe provides an example of blatantly coercive behaviour by her partner.

... he's been abusing me so many times, so many ways. I don't feel like I'm a wife to him. Even him, he doesn't feel like he's got a wife. He knows that when he wants to sleep with me. Then he knows I'm his wife. [...] I can't say no, I can't say no to my husband. He can go out for the whole week but when he comes back, I have to accept that he must sleep with me. (Sindiwe)

In Sindiwe's case, the extreme form of her husband's physical abuse led to her not being able to refuse sex with him. She described how he forced her to have sex, especially after incidents of physical violence. In her account, she also implied that her refusal often led to incidents of further physical violence. In Sindiwe's description, the term 'wife' shifted in meaning. Her use of the term was with reference to her feelings ("I don't feel like a wife to him") and his abusive behaviour. The abuse, to her, did not conform to the way a husband is supposed to treat his wife. However, her description of her husband's sexual abuse ("Then he knows I'm his wife ...") relates to the discourse on the marital sexual duties of wives (Yllö, 1999). Within marriage, women are perceived as the property of their husbands and are therefore not supposed to refuse their sexual demands. What it means to be a 'wife', in Sindiwe's case is for a husband to treat her well and for her to comply by being sexually available. She both situates herself within and resists the 'marital sexual duty' discourse to some degree.

In the following extract, Roslyn describes an example of her husband's sexually coercive behaviour.

He will come and he will force himself on me. And there's nothing I can do about it, I must just lie like that. Now I can't also just lie like this because then it's also an issue. "Why are you just laying like that?" I don't know, if I think about it now then I-, I feel totally sick because to me it's like – at that time it's almost like, you know, he's like raping me. I mean you don't wanna be with him and here he wants to be with you. (Roslyn)

At the time of the interview, Roslyn had been divorced from her partner for one year. During this time she described how she coped with what has happened to her – by speaking and being open about her experiences. Perhaps these issues may have contributed to her naming the violent incident as rape, although her account seems to reflect the tentative and ambiguous nature of the naming process. This is revealed in her use of the terms "like" and "almost like". Kelly (1990) suggests that women only remember or name certain aspects of the abuse when or, as they feel capable of dealing or coping with this knowledge. She describes forgetting as an adaptive strategy that allows women to negotiate their own abilities to cope with their emotions. Furthermore, the

naming process and consequent construction of herself as 'victim' and her partner as 'rapist' incorporates shame and humiliation (Jackson, 2001). In addition, the naming of sexual violence within relationships is complicated by institutionalised heterosexuality and coercive sexuality (Shefer et al., 2000).

As revealed above, women's negotiations of sexual behaviour were limited and they were often forced to submit to their partners' desires. However, in the following example, Sally's 'passive submission' was a strategy used to resist the sexual abuse from her husband.

The other night he forced himself onto me and he said to me: "I've got rights on you." And I said: "You haven't got rights because you gave up your rights." And he said to me: "I've still got rights and I'm gonna take my rights." And I said: "Well, you can take your rights but it doesn't mean that I'm gonna participate in your rights." And you know, Floretta, he just did his thing there with me. And I was laying there like, like a doll or whatever, you know, with no emotions. And he felt so bad, he didn't even finish what he wanted to do. He felt so bad, then he got up and he went to the bathroom and he came back and he said to me: "Can you see how you humiliate me."(Sally)

In the above extract, Sally showed how her behaviour resulted in the cessation of what might have become a sexually violent incident. At that particular moment Sally's strategy, aimed at stopping the sexual act, was successful. Before this account Sally described other incidents of coercive sex with her husband, where she could not employ effective strategies to stop the act. The point to be made here is that the shifting dynamics of power and control allow women to employ various strategies at different times in their relationships. According to Hoff (1990), the strategies women employ are based upon the particularities of their situations. In Sally's case, her relative financial independence and increased self-confidence enabled her to gain a sense of power and control in her relationship.

Furthermore, Sally's indication that her husband experienced her response as humiliation is linked to hegemonic constructions of masculinity. A rejection of her partner's sexual demands could be interpreted as an attack to his masculinity (also in Kathryn's account

above). In terms of social constructions of male sexuality, men are expected to prove their sexuality by satisfying their sexual partners (Shefer & Ruiters, 1998). Furthermore, Sally's response ensured that her husband could not exercise his manly "rights".

### **Economic abuse**

The question of why women stay in abusive relationships has often been the focus of investigation (Sikhitha, 1997). Many reasons have been offered as to why women experience difficulties leaving these relationships. The reason most often cited is that women often stay because they are financially dependent on their spouses (Strube, 1988; Vogelmann & Eagle, 1991). These inequalities are a reflection of the social arena, where women are constructed as subordinate and practices are instituted in order to maintain women's economic dependence upon men. In South Africa there are vast income disparities between women and men, particularly black women (Budlender, 1998). For example, 66% of African women who are self-employed earn less than R500 per month, compared to 16% of men in the same category (Budlender cited in NICRO, 1998). Economic dependence or control is further compounded by race and class, which, in addition functions to further disempower women. The definition of economic abuse adopted in this study includes, "any coercive act or limitation placed on an individual that has adverse economic implications on the woman and/or her dependants" (Vetten, 1999, p. 4).

### **Economic deprivation and control**

Poverty affects woman abuse, with poor women being more likely to experience violence from their partners (Tiefenthaler & Farmer, 2000). Economic deprivation increases an abuser's control over a woman, thereby constraining her options for leaving an abusive situation. Women in this study experienced multiple forms of economic deprivation, including specific tactics aimed at exerting economic power.

Unemployed women (n=27%) in this sample were completely reliant on their partners for financial support. They described how their partners' economic control forced them to overlook their personal needs and sometimes even basic survival needs. Merle described

how she was sometimes forced to go without food because of her husband's constant complaints and abuse. Similarly, Rachel was reluctant to buy herself any personal items since her husband often made her feel guilty or complained about the amount spent, however small. Men also abused their economic power by giving their partners a limited amount of money for household expenditures. They expected women to purchase groceries and household necessities but they also expected them to have a surplus of funds. Economic abuse also occurred in a subtle manner. For instance, when Faith asked her husband to contribute towards paying the telephone bill, he became verbally abusive.

If you talk about money, you're dead. Don't ask, don't ever ask for money. It told him the other evening, he must help me with the phone. Cause he also uses the phone, the phone was R380. [...] Then he started swearing. I thought: "Ag, I'll have to sacrifice and pay it". Because the swearing is just gonna start and they (*her sons*) not gonna like it.<sup>11</sup> (Theresa)

In this instance her husband's economic abuse was accompanied by a verbal attack aimed at escaping responsibility and further manipulation.

In addition to depriving women of financial resources, some abusers forced or subtly coerced their partners to leave their places of employment. Merle describes her situation as follows:

I began to feel embarrassed with my situation and about the beatings because I worked in a huge office and I'm the only one coming to work with scratches and blue eyes and things like that. And so I felt I had to deal with clients all day, every day, so I felt, no, I'm not going to put myself through this. I'll rather stay home and see if I can get something else. But at that time the abuse actually started. (Merle)

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<sup>11</sup> If you talk about money, jy's nou dood. Don't ask, don't ever ask for money. It told him the other evening, he must help me with the phone. Cause he also uses the phone, the phone was 380. [...] Then he started swearing. I thought ag, I'll have to sacrifice and pay it. Because the swearing is just gonna start and they (*her sons*) not gonna like it. (Theresa)

Merle's loss of work resulted in her economic dependence on her husband. In this manner he was further able to control her – by curtailing her independence. Merle also described how, at times when she worked late, her husband accused her of having affairs with her work colleagues. In her recognition that the abuse started after she was no longer employed and totally reliant on her husband for financial support – Merle was acknowledging the dynamics of power and control in her relationship. Merle also described how the abuse escalated when they moved into their own home (after living with her mother). In this instance, her loss of work and isolation from her family served to reinforce and maintain her husband's controlling and abusive behaviour.

Accounts of how men used material possessions to exert control were common to all participants. They described how their partners claimed exclusive ownership to, or threatened to take away possessions like the home or car (often jointly owned). Below, Merle highlights some of the dynamics involved in a relationship where a woman is financially dependent on her partner.

What makes me so frustrated is not being able to do what I want. Not being able to live like I want. And it makes me even more frustrated to, to know that um, he is in control. He is, because I'm dependent on his food, I'm dependent on everything I need. And if he decides I won't let you have it, and then he won't let me have it. It makes me so mad to think that I don't have to go through this, it's only because I can't find a job. If I must find a job tomorrow then I don't need to put myself through this. (Merle)

In this example, when Merle described her husband as being in control, she implied economic control. In a different section she discussed how she would not allow him control her in other ways – she adopted a determined stance that she would maintain her dignity and pride and that he could not erode her self-esteem. This dynamic illustrates the shifts in power in abusive relationships. Because her husband had economic power, he drew on those resources to maintain control in the relationship however, Merle derived a measure power from her increased self-esteem and determined attitude. Furthermore, her statement: “I don't need to put myself through this” indicates that she is enduring the abuse for a particular reason, as she reveals in the following extract:

Floretta: So what do you think has helped you to cope in this relationship?  
Merle: To be very honest er, I think the fact that I'm so dependent financially and with everything else on him – that has caused me to make myself cope.

Gail, who was also economically dependent on her husband, adopted a similar attitude. She also indicated that she would leave as soon as she could secure employment. Issues of financial insecurity are also evident in the case of women who work outside the home.

Almost all participants (even those employed outside the home) acknowledged, that they were to some degree reliant on their partners for financial support, not only for themselves (as in Letitia, Gail, Theresa, and Merle's cases) but also for the children and the maintenance of the household. As discussed earlier in this section, women's work is greatly under-valued and women earn less than men. Often, women's salaries were inadequate to maintain the household, themselves, and their children without contributions from their partners. Once again, their partners used the degree of economic dependence as opportunity to exert control over them. The following examples illustrate this point.

He worked before and Friday evenings when he gets paid then he doesn't give money for the house. Then there's not even bread for the children in the house.<sup>12</sup>  
(Mary)

He always says to me, like if I ask him for money, if I say to him: "Listen, you mustn't forget to give me the bond's money." "Oh, is your money not enough? Can't you work with your money? I thought that you the queen of this." Like he says to me: "Why do you ask money from me, you earn such a lot?" (Sally)

In the above extract is evident how Sally's husband used her relative financial independence against her, by attempting to provide justifications for why he did not financially contribute to the household. In this manner he also tried to humiliate her by implying that she was not able to manage her finances adequately.

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<sup>12</sup> Hy't gewerk voorheen, en as hy Vrydags aande gepay het dan hou hy die huis verby. Dan is daar nie eers brood vir die kinders in die huis nie. (Mary)

### Overburden of responsibility

Kirkwood (1993, p. 54) describes the “overburden of responsibility” as a type of emotional abuse where women are forced, through their husbands’ irresponsible behaviour, to take control of the marital responsibilities. This theme was enacted in various ways in this sample, with the underlying theme of economic abuse or control. In many cases (53.33%) women were forced by their husbands’ irresponsible behaviour to assume control of the household finances and accept responsibility for the family. Oftentimes their husbands neglected or refused to pay household bills. These women were thus forced to assume the roles of financial managers.

In Mitchell’s Plain, housing is a scarce resource, with people often waiting for years to secure accommodation. In this sample women such as Faith, Gail, Theresa, Roslyn, and Kathryn took responsibility for securing accommodation for their families. In many cases women asked family members, friends, or strangers, if they could live with them temporarily or build informal structures on their properties. In Roslyn’s case, her husband’s behaviour resulted in their having to move from place to place. Tenants were not prepared to tolerate his abusive behaviour. Furthermore, he often stole their household possessions in order to support his drug habit. Consequently, Roslyn struggled to find accommodation, with even her family being reluctant to assist them.

Staying there and then we had to pay board. And I mean then the times when I had to pay and then he always had a mouthful to say about it. And eventually the lady told me, listen here I’ll keep you and your children here but not your husband – so I said but you know that I can’t stay with the children because he’s not gonna, he’s not gonna allow it man. And I mean it got so bad that on the end we were like walking around looking for place to stay. I mean we had to sit in the park at night and think who we gonna ask, where we gonna sleep now. (Roslyn)

In Faith’s case, she felt that she had to secure alternative accommodation for her family in order to get her husband out of the environment of drug taking and drinking. She described how, after visiting her premature baby in hospital everyday for three months, she went to the housing office in an attempt to secure alternative accommodation.

Clearly, these women had to endure numerous hardships because of the harsh economic climate, as well as their husbands' abuse. All these factors converged to burden women with the sole responsibility of maintaining the household and family in addition to dealing with their partners' violence.

### Alcohol and drugs

Due to high levels of poverty and unemployment, drug abuse is a significant problem in Mitchell's Plain. According to the Medical Research Council (*Cape Times*, 5 April 2001), Mitchell's Plain is one of the areas most in need of addiction services. Three women (Mary, Faith and Roslyn) disclosed the difficulties of living with a drug addict. Although women mentioned other negative effects of their partners' substance abuse, economic issues were at the forefront of their narratives. All three narrated how their husbands became extremely aggressive when they could not obtain money to purchase drugs. Roslyn also described how her husband stole and sold many of her household possessions in order to buy drugs. At times he forced her to sell her own clothing given to her by family members. The following illustrates:

... my sister would give me clothes. Now when I get home then I have to go and sell those things that she gave me. I must go and sell it so that he can smoke. One day he hit me on the back with a broom, I was totally purple, the way he hit me. Just because I sold the sweater and I only got R10 for it. And he wanted R25 for that sweater and I must go back to that people and tell them I want the other R15 or they must leave it. (Roslyn)

The fact is, he doesn't only drink, he also smokes the drugs now, the buttons, they smoke. And if he doesn't have money, then he wants to disrupt the whole house ... I must give him money for buttons. I won't do it, even if I've got money.<sup>13</sup>  
(Mary)

In other instances, women described their husbands' abuse of alcohol as the reason for the abuse (Theresa, Rachel, Kathryn, and Letitia). Although being under the influence of

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<sup>13</sup> Maar nou die feit bly staan is, hy drink nie nou net nie, hy rook nou die drugs, die buttons, wat hulle rook. En as hy nie geld het nie, dan wil hy die hele huis omkeer ... ek moet nou geld het om vir hom te gee vir buttons, wat ek nie sal doen nie – al het ek ook geld. (Mary)

alcohol is often used as an excuse for the abuse, these women described how their husbands changed when they were either sober, or drunk. Below, Theresa and Kathryn speak about the effects of alcohol on their husbands' behaviour.

There's a good side to him and a bad side. I think he should not drink, I always tell him that. Cause drinking brings totally different things [...] then your mind is not controllable. [...] If he should stop drinking then he will definitely be a different person. (Kathryn)

You know, he'll say ja he gives us food money, he gives us this – and before he wasn't one who used to take drink at the shebeen but now lately when it come to end of the month, when I work out whatever budget there is then he tell me he owe this one at work, he owe that one at work, he must give this one because they clubbed together, they signed at the shebeen (*bought wine on credit*). I mean knowing that we just manage on his wage, you know. And if I tell him all that then he'll tell me straight, he worked for it, it's his sweat, it's his money. (Letitia)

Although the use of alcohol or drugs and the relationship with men's violence is thought to be overstated or used as justification for violence (Bennett, Tolman, Rogalski, & Srinivasaraghavan, 1994), the above showed how women's experiences of violence are further compounded and how they face additional hardships associated with their partners' substance or alcohol abuse. Women experienced further economic and emotional suffering caused by the partners' habits.

#### Coping with economic abuse

Some women in this study found alternative ways of dealing with the other types of abuse (for example, applying for a protection order for physical abuse). The economic abuse became more distressing since it remained a constant source of power on the abusers' part, with very little recourse left to women. This point is illustrated very clearly in Gail's narrative. She discussed how she employed strategies to deal with the physical and verbal abuse from her husband. It seems the financial control exerted by the abuser was more painful because it was more difficult to deal with or control. Women seemed to be grappling with the fact that they have gained a measure of power and self-worth in their relationships but they were still reliant on their husbands for financial support. This

tension seemed to be a source of extreme distress for some of the participants in my study. For example:

And even when it comes to clothes, I had cupboards full of clothes when I married him. But today, I won't say I dress shabby but I wouldn't dress the way I dress today if I had my own money, if he gave me the money to work with. So I don't know, that's what's so heart-breaking (*crying*). I can never buy what I want to buy, or I can never buy things for my children that I want to buy them. He will always say: "No, you can't buy that." (Gail)

As shown above, economic dependence on their spouses constrain some women's options with regard to leaving their abusive partners. In the cases of women who do work, it is shown that their earnings are not always enough to support themselves and their children. Furthermore issues such as fear, religious and cultural values, love for their partners, and lack of adequate social and legal resources further constrain women's options for leaving the abusive situations. These issues will be explored later in this chapter.

### THE IMPACT OF ABUSE

Women experienced a range of negative consequences as described in the research literature. The effects of the abuse included stress related symptoms such as hair loss, memory loss, nervous system problems, and disturbances in sleeping and eating patterns. Women such as Barbara, Merle, Roslyn, and Sally also experienced depression. Roslyn made two suicide attempts as a result of the abuse. Below Sally describes her response to her partner's emotional and physical abuse.

- Sally: You know, my problem is sometimes, sometimes I can't really express myself, I can't – all the things will bottle up inside of me and I can't let it come out and er, then I think that's why ... I dunno.
- Floretta: So you never really dealt with what you were feeling at that time?
- Sally: Mmm.
- Floretta: Were you angry at him in any way?
- Sally: I was very angry at him. You know if it wasn't for my children I think ... I would have killed myself (*crying*).
- Floretta: Have you thought about it.

Sally: I walked one night from my home here, right down to the robots, there where it meets up with that – and I thought this is just it, so I just walked. And I didn't even care what was gonna happen to me.

The above exchange shows some of the challenges of conducting research on sensitive topics. In my questioning Sally about her feelings in response to her husband's violence, I did not anticipate her disclosure of an attempted suicide. Sally's response shows the depth of the emotional consequences of a partner's violence and abuse. Barbara describes the emotional impact of the abuse and the effect on her relations with others.

Barbara: It makes me terrible, cause it makes me be moody with the children, even anyone at work also, even the guys who say something – shout and and when you see people a lot of people and maybe shout at them or just keep quiet.

Floretta: Do you sometimes get depressed?

Barbara: Mmm ... like they were saying the other day – don't even see the beauty no more, nothing. Cause I like to see, things like that man, I don't even see nothing like that, no more.

The emotional impact of the verbal abuse and degradation were also emphasised. For example, Roslyn described how, over time, she believed the abuser's derogatory remarks and verbal abuse.

... I thought to myself, I belong in this relationship. Sometimes I felt like I was a nobody. (Roslyn)

The abuse impacted on her self-esteem resulting in her returning to the abuser many times before she left permanently. Both Roslyn and Sindiwe left their abusive partners on numerous occasions, before leaving permanently. On each occasion, leaving involved securing alternative accommodation at shelters or with family or friends. Roslyn indicated that each time she left, her husband would seek her out and either coerce or manipulate her to return. Sindwe also returned because her husband promised that he had changed. In both cases, at the time of the interviews, their partners were unaware of their whereabouts. Each time both Roslyn and Sindiwe left their partners they were able to gain a measure of power or control in their relationships. Leaving meant that they could

'test the waters' and show how they were capable of coping on their own. In this manner they also gained an increased sense of self-esteem and confidence. These processes illustrate how leaving an abusive partner involves a process of negotiation and the gaining of power and control in the relationship (Hydén, 1999; Kirkwood, 1993).

## **WOMEN'S STRATEGIES AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR**

### **Personal resources**

All participants described how they took certain actions to counter the abuse from their partners. They avoided an escalation of verbally abusive attacks by not talking back or leaving the situation. Sandra and Letitia illustrate some of the strategies they employed in response to their partners' verbal or emotional abuse.

At that moment I would just leave it because I've experienced that it doesn't help to get angry at that time. And afterwards I'll tell him I didn't like that. (Sandra)

And I just lay there and I pray and I ask God just to keep me still. (Letitia)

As all participants discovered, the incident of verbal abuse did not continue for very long when ignored. The strategies women employed to deal with and resist verbal abuse were based on the specifics of their situations. For example, Letitia's husband was in a relatively powerful position as she was completely dependent on him for financial support. In addition, Letitia was isolated from a supportive network of family or friends. The abuser's power and the extremity of his physical violence contributed to Letitia's 'passive' reactions to the verbal abuse. Alternatively, Kathryn's relative financial independence and the power disparities (income and education) in her relationship enabled her to counter the verbal abuse by arguing back. However, in certain instances she also had to gauge whether it was appropriate or safe for her to argue back. The following illustrates:

... it depends on the situation and how much alcohol he's had, what mood he's in. I judge everything. Like many times my friends will say: "Do this and do that". I say: "It's easy for you to say but you've got to look at the situation first ..." (Kathryn)

Similarly, Sally tested the boundaries of this approach by recognizing that at certain times, it might be more appropriate and safe to remain silent.

... I will say things to hurt him, to hurt him. I would answer him back too. But then I know he will come and he will start hitting me around and then I'll just keep quiet after that. And he'll rant and rave, and he'll go on. And I'll just be quiet and I'll just do what I must do. (Sally)

Women's decisions to ignore the verbal abuse were therefore informed by their prior experiences that the abuse sometimes escalated when they spoke back and by the specifics of their situations, which included the level of power they had gained in the relationships or the levels of their partners' control and abuse.

Common reactions to physical abuse were screaming, calling or threatening to call the police, running away, contemplating or threatening to harm their partners, or leaving temporarily. Fighting back was also described as a way to deal with the violence. For example:

I was also violent, I have to admit. I threw him with everything I could get, just to defend myself also. (Sandra)

The fighting back could either be physical or verbal. In all cases, the physical act was in self-defence and women indicated that they could not match the abuser's physical strength. As discussed in Chapter two, sociological studies on family violence interpreted women's self-defence as mutual violence and led to assumptions of symmetry in domestic violence (Dobash et al., 1992; Saunders, 1990). A critical feminist understanding of violence recognises that the use of violence by women is often in self-defence, in response to their partners' violence. In addition to the personal resources

described above, participants also utilised a number of social and legal resources in order to deal with the physical abuse from their partners.

### **Social and legal resources**

Women in this sample sought assistance from a number of sources including the criminal justice system, child protection services, social service agencies, and mental health systems. Although help-seeking attempts sometimes succeeded in reducing the abuse, there were frequent accounts of how women were failed by the system.

Sixty percent of the sample applied for protection orders as a legal recourse to dealing with the abuse. Under the threat of further violence from her husband, Mary left home temporarily until she could obtain the protection order. She returned after receiving the protection order, knowing that her husband would be reluctant to harm her and face the possibility of being arrested.

And so I went for the interdict. And I didn't go home because then I went straight to my brother in (*name of place*). So I stayed there for three weeks. And when the interdict came I went home because I know he won't do anything now. He can't do anything now.<sup>14</sup> (Mary)

In Gail's situation, obtaining a protection order resulted in the cessation of physical violence by her husband. The protection order gave her, and others like Sandra, Diane, and Roslyn, a certain degree of strength and power in their relationships and they could use the threat of imprisonment against their husbands. However, their situations may be compared with others like Rachel and Barbara who felt that obtaining a protection order would not help them and might have increased the violence from their partners. Furthermore, women perceived the protection order to be enforceable only for physical abuse. For instance, Sandra felt that she did not want to call the police when her husband verbally abused her, since she believed that nothing would be achieved by doing so.

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<sup>14</sup> En toe gaan ek toe vir die interdik, en toe gaan ek mos nou nie huistoe nie. Want toe gaan ek straight na my broer toe in (*name of place*). Toe gaan bly ek daar vir drie weke. En toe die interdik nou kom toe gaan ek huistoe want ek weet mos nou hy gat my mos nou niks maak nie. Hy kan mos nou niks maak nie. (Mary)

Women felt that it was acceptable to call the police when they were in physical danger but felt that enforcing the protection order with regard to verbal abuse was questionable. The reasons for women's hesitation to enforce or apply for protection orders were multiple. As a result of economic dependence on a partner, women were sometimes reluctant to send their partners to jail. Furthermore, an application for a protection order required payment. Often, economic control exerted by abusers resulted in women having to provide an account of all money spent. Within this context, it was difficult for women to use money obtained from their partners to apply for protection orders.

Serena however provides an alternative account regarding her refusal to enforce the protection order.

I will not use that interdict because I know what the result will be. I will go to court six, ten times. He'll come and say he doesn't have a lawyer; he can't come next week because he has a job. Or he doesn't turn up at all. I'm staying out of work. I must now support my children too. [...] Now I'm sitting there, he didn't turn up. Now they don't tell you ten 'o clock this morning he's not gonna turn up – no, they walk up and down past you. They're just smart. Now you feel like a piece of shit sitting there. Now she walks up and down past you with the files. Now eleven 'o clock, now you think: "It's funny they didn't call my name yet." Now you start to think to yourself: "Am I doing the right thing? Is it the right day, am I in the right place?" Now you walk into different rooms. "No, I don't know where your file is." You have to appear in court but they don't know where your file is. Now you think: "Ooh, what am I gonna tell my boss, they can't find my file, I can't stay out of work again. What am I going to do?" All of that is added onto your problem! You're already scared to put this man in jail. "What is he gonna do when he gets sentenced? What is his family gonna do to you?" You're already scared of all of that, now they come. And at the end of the day, two 'o clock, now they tell you – you're not appearing today. Don't you you think that is further bugging your burden?<sup>15</sup> (Serena)

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<sup>15</sup> ... nooit wil ek daai interdik optel 'ie. Ek sal it nooit doen nie. Because ek weet wat gaan my end result wees. Ek gaan ses keer op 'ie court, ek gaan tien keer op 'ie court. Hy gaan kom dan sê hy ek het nog nie 'n lawyer nie, hy't nog 'ie 'n representative 'ie, hy kannie ander week kom 'ie want hy't 'n job gekry, hy't nou net die job gestart. Of hy turn net glad 'ie op 'ie. Of almal die dinge. Ek bly elke tyd uit die werk uit. Ek moet my kinders ook nou support. [...] Nou kom ek, nou sit ek daar – nee hy't 'ie op geturn nie. En nou hulle sê nie vir jou ten 'o clock van oggend - hy gaan nie op turn nie of um – nee hulle loop op en af verby jou. Hulle's net kwaai. [...] Now you feel like a piece of shit sitting there. En nou, nou loop sy op en af met die lêer. Nou hier by eleven 'o clock, nou dink jy is snaaks hulle het "ie my naam uit geroep 'ie. Nou begin jy jouself te dink – is this the right thing I'm doing. Is ek die regte dag hier, is ek by die regte plek. Nou loop jy hof in en uit, kamer vir kamer. [...] Nou kom sy – nee ek weet 'ie waar's jou file 'ie. You have to appear in court, maar hulle weet 'ie waar's jou file 'ie. Nou dink jy – ooh wat gat ek vir my

Serena's account exposed the challenges women face in attempting to obtain legal assistance from a system not sympathetic to their struggles. She highlighted the difficulties involved in making the decision to apply for a protection order – including the doubts and constraints discussed above. Serena also showed how women experience institutional oppression, further constraining their options.

Divorcing an abusive partner has also been suggested as a legal recourse to dealing with abuse. Four women in the sample were, or had been divorced from their abusive partners. Serena and Sindiwe continued to live with the abusive partners after obtaining their divorces. In their situations, housing and a lack of alternative accommodation were important factors shaping their choices and options. In Sindiwe's situation, the only viable option after obtaining her divorce was to continue living in the same home. Selling the home might have meant that Sindiwe and her children would not have had alternative accommodation. In this situation, her husband exerted further control over her by suggesting that she was not entitled to any resources (particularly financial) because they were no longer married. In this respect, Sindiwe's options were limited and they remarried after one year. Serena's husband moved into the backyard after the divorce. In order to move back into the home, he manipulated her with promises of change as well evoking feelings of sympathy. Both Diane and Roslyn were divorced and estranged from their abusive partners.

### **The police response to woman abuse**

Social institutions systematically disadvantage women, particularly poor women who may have limited access and support. This lack of support is sometimes evident in the ineffectiveness of police when assisting women with problems of violence in their relationships. Below Sandra describes the police response to her call of assistance.

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baas sê, en nou hulle kan nie my lêer kry nie, ek sal mos 'ie weer kan uit bly nie. Hoe gat ek nou maak? Almal daai, is klaar bo op jou problem. Jy's nou klaar vrek bang om die man in die tronk te sit, of die man nou straf kry. Hoe gaan jy maak as hy nou klaar straf gekry het. Wat gaan sy familie doen aan jou? Jy's klaar bang vir almal daai dinge, nou kom hulle. And at the end of the day – two 'o clock nou sê hulle vir jou, jy kom 'ie vandag voor 'ie. Don't you you think that is further buggering your burden?

... the police came here one night and he was throwing everything, breaking everything around. And I called them and then they – now he's a technician – and he just said to them, "oh yes you remember I fixed your machine last time", and this and that. I thought what's going on here. And he was telling them, "this woman is mad man just ignore her, ignore her she's mad". And they told us, they let him sit down and they told him um, "ja but the two of you must try to work this out now" And, they could see the house was in disarray and everything was everywhere, and um, "you've got kids and please don't go on like this". But they were talking to him as if he's now-, I'm the wrong one. "And do you know that he can get a interdict against you also", and all this shit. (Sandra)

Sandra's anger in the retelling of this experience illustrates that she acknowledged her rights to obtain proper assistance from the police. However, the police response did not reflect the same. Furthermore, her husband's description (and police officers' collusion) is connected to the way psychological discourses have traditionally positioned women as pathological (Westlund, 1999). The policemen left without taking any form of action against Sandra's husband. Similarly, Merle described how the police failed to respond to her calls for assistance.

He wouldn't let me come in the house. I was outside, I was knocking, and he said to me: "You won't come in here". And so he said: "Go and fetch the police because you're not coming in here". And so I went to the chatterbox here, this telephone on the corner. So I phoned them. It wasn't actually the first time that I did phone them – on the two previous occasions they never came. They didn't come. So on Friday I lied to the operator, I said to her somebody was laying here stabbed, and that's the only reason, I believe that's the only reason that they came. Because why, as I say, on previous occasions they never did pitch up.<sup>16</sup> (Merle)

It seems that although police are no longer permitted (by law) to dismiss incidents of woman abuse as a 'domestic affair' – the responses to such episodes still imply that they consider them as such. The South African Commissioner of Police recently commented on the Domestic Violence Act stating that domestic violence incidents are difficult to

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<sup>16</sup> He wouldn't let me come in the house. I was outside, I was knocking, and he said to me: "Jy kom 'ie hier in 'ie". En toe sê hy vir my jy gaan haal die boere, want jy kom 'ie hier in 'ie. And so I went to the chatterbox here, this telephone on the corner. So I phoned them. It wasn't actually the first time that I did phone them – on the two previous occasions they never came. They didn't come. So on Friday I lied to the operator, I said to her somebody was laying here stabbed, and that's the only reason, I believe that's the only reason that they came. Because why, as I say, on previous occasions they never did pitch up. (Merle)

enforce and that police officers often switch off their radios in response to such calls (*Cape Argus*, 15 August 2001). He also said that the Domestic Violence Act is not practical and that many members of the police were themselves perpetrators of woman abuse. Vetten (in Nix, 1998) found that one out of five incidents of intimate femicide was perpetrated by police officers.

Gail's situation emphasised the complexities involved when perpetrators of abuse are members of the police.

... they came and they arrested him and they kept him in, and he was kept overnight and he always came back. I mean the policemen, you tell, I know – a policeman will never treat a policeman the same way like he treats a civilian. And he got the, he got VIP treatment with them at the police station. (Gail)

When Gail attempted to enforce the protection order and called the police – she discovered that her husband received preferential treatment by virtue of his profession. Her husband was taken to the police station and spent time with his colleagues in the charge office instead of being imprisoned. She also described how he convinced the other policemen that the 'argument' was her fault. Nix (1998) suggests that police attitudes are an important contributor to how police respond to incidents of woman abuse. Thus, attitudes about woman abuse being a private matter or being justified affects how police would respond to and assist women with these incident. Furthermore, as illustrated in Gail's case, and supported by Nix, police are often reluctant to enforce the law with regard to violence perpetrated by their colleagues. According to Richie & Kanuha (1997), violence against women should not be viewed from an individualistic perspective, but should be scrutinised by taking into consideration that society and social institutions reinforce and sanction unequal power relations based upon gender. The police function as a social institution, which, through their lack of support for abused women, sanction and legitimates violence against women resulting in secondary victimisation.

## **Psychological services**

Services for abusers are sorely lacking in South Africa. Although the focus on assisting women is commendable, it may also serve to stigmatise women as those in need of psychological assistance, reflecting a preoccupation with the psychological states of abused women (Westlund, 1999). Thus, I concur with Vetten (2000b), who asserts that an exclusive focus on women as victims does not challenge the status quo and reinforces traditional stereotypes. Below Serena's account emphasises the inadequacy of psychological services as the sole means of assisting women.

But counselling is not gonna solve my problem. I want to get out, but I don't know how to get out. I don't have parents that I can go to, I don't have family. [...] ... it's just the talking. They just talk. "No, you handle it this way, you see, if he shouts, then you don't give answer". But none of those women told me to divorce him.<sup>17</sup> (Serena)

In my experience of counselling abused women, I have often come across the same anxieties and frustrations expressed by Serena ("... it's just the talking"). It seemed that many women did not perceive any value in ongoing counselling and only presented for assistance at times of crisis, which may have been precipitated by a violent attack. Women presented with specific problems that required practical solutions. While it is acknowledged that the aims of empowerment counselling (espoused by NICRO) are to make women aware of their options and to assist them in making decisions, sometimes this may not be adequate. An integration of services for women (counselling to deal with the effects of violence as well as referrals, practical advice, and assistance) is required.

## **The family**

The family played a role in either supporting women or minimising or colluding in the abuse. Sandra's family provided a much-needed support system when she required someone to confide in, or assist her with temporary accommodation. However, they also

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<sup>17</sup> But counselling is not gonna solve my problem. Ek wil uit, maar ek weet nie hoe om te uit nie. Ek het nie ouers wat ek na toe kan gaan nie, ek het nie family [...] ... it's just the talking. They just talk. "No, you handle it this way, you see, if he shouts and dinges, then you don't give answer". Maar geëen van daai vrou het vir my gesê skei. (Serena)

reinforced the fact that she should 'stick it out' for the sake of the children or that they should not get divorced over something minor. For example:

And um, I spoke to my sister and I said maybe we should get a divorce – what does she think. And she said, “no man, stick it out because it’s – um don’t give up so easily”. Because he, like I told you he can be very nice, we get along, we get along very well apart from this. (Sandra)

[...] every time – as I say we lived by my mommy – and every time I go in for a divorce, my mommy wanted me to stay in this marriage. I suppose to her, it wasn’t like anything was wrong because she was doing the same thing to me, for how many years since childhood. (Merle)

In Theresa’s case, her husband’s family emphasised the maintenance of the family at all costs.

Still thinking of the children, I mean because his mother always said that to me. That’s their tradition, they’re married long. The mother and the father doesn’t want these things to happen in their children’s lives. We have to sort out our problems.<sup>18</sup> (Theresa)

Since the family is viewed as the basic unit of society, there are often sanctions against divorce and social institutions emphasise maintaining the family unit at all costs. For example, in a village in rural China, divorced women suffer economically and face further discrimination through negative social attitudes (Lui, 1999). Thus, women often stay and endure abusive relationships. In these situations women sought help from their families who would intervene and try to reconcile the couple. Women in this sample encountered similar experiences. Letitia’s family provided a supportive role however, she emphasised that they could only assist her with temporary shelter. Although in some cases, the family could provide limited support for women, they often expressed concerns about burdening their families with their problems. Families played the dual role of either encouraging women to leave their partners, or persuading them to stay. In

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<sup>18</sup> Still thinking of the children, I mean because his mother always said that to me. Daai’s hulle tradisie, hulle’s al lang getroud, die ma en die pa en hulle wil ‘ie hê sulke dinge moet gebeur in hulle kinders se lewe nie. We have to sort out our problems. (Theresa)

Roslyn's case (because of her husband's extreme violence) her mother threatened to have her children removed if she did not leave her husband.

The husband's family could also play a very direct role in colluding in the abuse. Letitia, Serena, Faith, and Gail described how their husbands' families either passively witnessed the abuse, or blatantly encouraged it. In the present context of high levels of poverty, elderly parents are largely dependent on their children's financial contributions or support. In this respect, the wife is often viewed a source of competition over scarce financial resources. For instance, Gail alluded to a tension between herself and her mother-in-law and how her husband gave his mother money at the expense of providing for his immediate family. Furthermore, the husband's family may also serve as a barrier to women securing outside assistance for the abuse. For example, Sandra described how she was afraid to call the police because she was afraid that her husband's family would harm her.

### **Religion**

Gail, Serena, Theresa, Letitia, and Diane described their religious beliefs and practices as a source of strength in their lives. However, they also expressed how religious beliefs influenced their decisions about divorce and marriage. Gail's quote typifies the position:

You know the Catholic beliefs are totally different from the other religions – the Catholic priest will try to keep your marriage together no matter what. They say you must take your cross and bear it. (Gail)

In Roslyn's case, religious practices reinforced and sanctioned the violence she experienced. Below she describes her experiences in attempting to obtain a divorce from her husband.

And you know like with the Moslems they like really, if you go to them they always talking about reconciling and things like that and I mean when I went to the judicial council I told the imam, "listen here I want my" – they call a divorce a fassag – so he told me no but I must like reconcile with my husband. I left there and I thought, I thought to myself – "it seems to me this people aren't prepared to help me". I went back to them a second time and I told the same guy, this imam, I

told him, “listen here he threatened me with a knife last night – and um before he kills me I want out of this marriage”. And he told me, “no but you must try to reconcile”. I was so desperate that day, I told him: “You reconcile with him, you live with him and you see what he does – but I, I’ve had it, I want my divorce today!” And then I immediately got my divorce that day. (Roslyn)

The constant refrain that Roslyn should reconcile with her husband reflects religious constructions of the sanctity of the family and a husband’s authority in the household. If the religious leader (imam) believed that Roslyn’s husband was justified in using violence against her, he would reinforce the role of the ‘good wife’ by persuading her to tolerate her husband’s violence and to reconcile. Diane’s experiences were similar, in that her first help-seeking attempts were located within the religious sphere and she was persuaded to reconcile with her abusive husband.

Religious ideals also serve to reinforce male authority and female subordination. Religious constructions of femininity and the ‘good woman’ have been discussed in a previous section . Participants like Serena and Diane also invoked biblical beliefs about men being the heads of the household. For example:

Because the woman isn’t the head of the household – the man is the head of the household. The word of the Lord tells us to honour your father and your mother. But then the word of the Lord also tells us that the man is the head of the household. We must serve the man and the man serves the Lord. Only then will your house be blessed.<sup>19</sup> (Serena)

Female submission (“We must serve the man...”) and male authority is inscribed in religious constructions of ‘women/wives’ and ‘men/husbands’. Religious principles were also a site of contradiction for some participants. For example, Serena spoke about how she expected her husband to assist her with housework and show appreciation for her

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<sup>19</sup> Because die vrou is 'ie die head van die huis 'ie – die man is die head van die huis. Die word van die Here sê vir ons eer u vader en u moeder. But dan sê die word van die Here ook dat die man is die hoof van die huis. Ons moet die man serve en die man serve die Here, en dan alleenlik kan jou huis reg wees. (Serena)

work outside the home. This may be understood as a contrast to the religious values she invokes above.

Studies have shown how religious institutional practices reinforce and sanction violence against women, by adhering to strict gender stereotypical roles and discouraging divorce (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000 and Govinden, 1997). It is important to recognize the duality of religion in providing valuable social support and encouragement but also in minimizing and denying abuse in the home.

In this chapter I showed how women's naming and making sense of their experiences of violence were linked to the particular context within which their experiences occurred. People in Mitchell's Plain endure many economic hardships and high levels of poverty are common. Many women lived with similar problems and they chose to highlight the importance of economic abuse and control in their lives. Although women faced a number of social structural constraints, they also exercised agency and made attempts to end the violence in their lives. Women employed personal resources and sought outside assistance by utilising social and legal resources, seeking assistance from family or friends, and obtaining support from religious institutions.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUBJECTIVITY & GENDER CONSTRUCTION

In this chapter I explore the construction of masculinity and femininity and its relation to men's violence against their partners. By attending to women's talk, I show how they either take up or resist feminine constructions. In their narratives, women evoked ambiguous and shifting constructions of themselves and their partners. Women's constructions of meaning in their relationships were fused with constructions of hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity.

#### MASCULINITY, LOVE AND VIOLENCE

##### Discourses of love

Recent research has exposed a complex, entwined relationship between gender construction, love, and violence in heterosexual relationships (Jackson, 2001; Shefer et al., 2000; Towns & Adams, 2000). Towns and Adams (2000) in their analyses of discourses of romantic love in women's experiences of violence from their partners, showed how cultural constructions of the 'perfect' partner hold women in abusive relationships. At the beginning of their relationships women in their sample described their partners in positive terms, as the 'perfect man'. In this sample, Sally's account is similar.

- Sally: But because I loved him, I really loved him, I made up with him again. And I thought – no, it will all change but it hasn't changed.
- Floretta: Why do you think you stayed married to him so long?
- Sally: Because I loved him, I loved him. And he- he was my real first love, he was really my first love. He was the one who made me a woman, who made me a mother. And I was clinging onto that.

In Sally's description of her husband being her "first love" she draws on discourses of the perfect love (Towns & Adams, 2000) and romantic fairy tale (Jackson, 2001), emphasising that the first love would be the Prince Charming who sweeps the Princess off her feet. In this regard, her repetition of "I loved him, I really loved him" was

significant. Her description of her husband as someone who “made me a woman” is resonant with hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity. Societal and cultural standards script the roles of compulsory heterosexuality with women being depicted as incomplete, unless partnered by a male. Although some women spoke about loving their partners in the beginning, positive qualities were not emphasised and the transformation into the ‘beast’ was swift.

### **Dual identities**

Jackson (cited in Towns & Adams, 2000) showed how romantic narratives construct men with dual identities – those of the prince and the beast. The hero behaves in characteristically masculine ways by hurting and humiliating the heroine but his softer side is also revealed (with her help of course) when he declares his love for her. Passivity and the submission of women are inscribed in the romantic narrative (Jackson, 2001). Evidence of the invocation of dual identities was present in many women’s narratives. For example:

- Sandra: No, at this point it’s fine, not fine except for the emotional abuse. Um, like I said we have our good times when we go out or we, even when we (are) at home. It’s just when he gets angry like that, he’s a whole other person, almost like a monster.
- Floretta: How do you feel about him?
- Sandra: I do love him.

In Sandra’s depiction, her husband is transformed by anger. Her use of the simile (“almost like a monster”) might have greater significance. Compared to saying: “He is a monster”, the former sounds more tolerable. In this manner she used a specific form of language to convey the ‘acceptability’ of her positioning (living with someone who could be described as a monster). Below Diane and Theresa also depict their husbands with dual identities.

[...] But I tried to hold on to my marriage – inside every person is somebody good but um, that person must make the change. (Diane)

And um, then everything was, everything is okay, you know he's a very good man, that's now one thing I can tell you. He likes to spoil me, and stuff like that. But the- the only problem that I have with him now, the only damn problem is his drinking. Because I tell you, he's gonna drive me beserk, he is, he musn't drink. He gets totally carried away and he's very rude. He is tremendous(ly) rude, I can tell you that he's very rude. [...]

He's a very good man and everything and he's good in his hands, his his work, the work that he's doing, he's a very good mechanic. That is now one thing I can say about him but he mustn't drink. Cause if he starts with his drinking, then he's not a good person anymore. Then the worst and the ugly stuff come out of him. (Theresa)

The splitting off of the good from the bad is made evident in Theresa and Diane's accounts. Diane described how every person has a good person "inside". In a similar vein, Theresa described the abuse as, "the ugly stuff (that) come(s) out of him". In this respect, the bad or good is located dormant inside the individual and erupts as a result of disequilibrium. In some cases the eruption may be caused by anger or, as in Theresa's husband's case, through the consumption of alcohol. Violence and abuse is therefore viewed as a form of disruption from the normal state. For example:

You saw him now he's normally very sweet tempered. But when he gets angry like that, and the eyes is bulging and [...] (Sandra)

And er, I came home and I said to him, "look I need to speak to you." And I waited till that atmosphere subsided and he like took it now after two weeks everything should be back to rosy and back to normal. (Kathryn)

By describing their husbands as "normally" good, the violence is portrayed as a departure from the norm. These dual depictions allow women to acknowledge the non-violent and sometimes loving characteristics of their partners thereby making it more acceptable to live with them. In addition, by describing the violence in this manner, women resist holistically constructing their husbands as abusers and themselves as victims. Women's depictions provide some support for the theories of the cycle of violence (Walker, 1979, 1984, 2000) and traumatic bonding (Dutton & Painter, 1993), in that women form a bond with the affectionate side of the abuser. From this perspective it is necessary to theorise the different dimensions of the abusive relationships (love and abuse) and to show how discourses of love script particular roles for women in abusive relationships.

The 'normal' state described above, shifted in meaning for other participants. For example:

Floretta, if something bad must happen to him now, and he feels I'm the only person whose gonna be able to help him – then I will have bliss, you know until that help has you know, has helped him. But once that is over it will be back to normal again. (Merle)

I stayed there for about two weeks and then he found out where I was and he came to fetch me. Then I went back to him again. Things just went okay for the first three weeks. After that it was like back to normal. And then one Friday, I mean he beat me up so badly, I mean, he locked the doors and everything so nobody could like, come in. (Roslyn)

To Merle and Roslyn, 'normal' implies a continuation of the abuse. In their accounts, they do not invoke dual masculine identities but rather depict their partners as constantly manipulative and abusive.

Alcohol was often described as the cause of the disruption from the norm (of non-violence) or the abuser's loss of control. For example:

[...] if he can overcome his drinking problem then he can be a better person. But he's letting that alcohol control him. I think it has sometimes gone too far already. (Letitia)

He's a person, very soft-hearted, he's got very good values. He's a person that cannot let out what he feels, so he waits till the alcohol talks. And once a deed is done then he like sort of, "oh shit", then it's too late. (Kathryn)

Letitia's description that her husband lets "the alcohol control him" and Kathryn's depiction of the alcohol that "talks", implies a loss of control on the abusers' part. These characterisations also serve to create a split between the 'sober/good husband' and the 'drunk/beast'. According to Towns and Adams (2000) women rationalise their partners' violent behaviour by creating a split between the good and bad persona. The 'loss of control' metaphors describe violence as unpredictable and uncontrolled (Eisikovits, 1999). Ptacek (1990) described how explanations of violence as a loss of control are

often used as excuses or justifications for violent behaviour and showed how men choose to use violence against their partners. Describing violence as a loss of control also has specific functions for women who, by creating a split between the good and violent man, can better deal with living with this person (Eisikovits, 1999). Rather than pathologising women, this strategy should be viewed as a functional form of coping in these relationships.

### **Masculinity and powerlessness**

McCloskey (1996) found that income disparity between spouses increased the risk for violence. In cases of employed women who earned more than or equal to their partners, they were at increased risk of being abused. Male violence is thus enacted in response to a perceived loss of control and an attack on masculine identity. Petrik, Petrik Olson, and Subotnik (1994) also described violence as men's reacting to feelings of powerlessness, having a low tolerance for being controlled, and feeling a consequent need to exert control. In this sample, these issues are exemplified by the examples of women who worked outside the home.

For some participants who were employed outside the home (Barbara, Sally, Kathryn, Faith, Rachel, and Roslyn), their identifications as working women shaped their self-constructions. Because of the periodic nature of their husbands' work (for Sally, Rachel, and Kathryn) and their financial burdens, they had to ensure that they maintained their jobs. This resulted in these women investing a lot of time and energy into their work. Kathryn's account illustrates how she accepted this responsibility and identified herself as the breadwinner in the family.

Okay, like he knows now with this new position I got, I've got more responsibility. And I said to him: "Look, it's not for me I'm doing it. I'm doing it for those two kids. Because you can be working now three, four, five months down the line, then suddenly there's no work," because he works for a sub-contractor. Who is gonna feed those kids? So I'm fortunately, I'm the permanent breadwinner. (Kathryn)

Women's identifications as responsible, independent, and able were a source of pride and increased self-worth. In this manner, women (such as Sally, Rachel, and Kathryn) were able to exert some control over their lives and feel a sense of confidence and self-respect. However, the above constructions were also a site of tension for some. In their accounts, Sally, Barbara, Rachel, and Kathryn stressed that their husbands' abuse was aimed at breaking down or minimising their power. The partners used various tactics aimed at degradation, power, and control. For example:

I think it's because he feels a little insecure because at one stage he was earning quite a bit more than what I earned. And when I got a promotion at work I earned three times more than what he was earning. And it just got worse from there. And one night we had a stock-take at work, and our directors came from Johannesburg to do the stock-take with us. And after the stock-take we went to have something to eat – then I phoned home and told my mother, I'm going to a restaurant and I'll be home later. He wasn't at home. So when I got home, he was at home and he was now waiting for me, very upset. And he started this thing again, that I was sleeping with these men. And you know what really hurt me is that he actually put his hands between my legs to feel if I actually slept with somebody. And that really hurt me. (Sally)

Sally's husband's actions were clearly a form of degradation and humiliation and an attempt to exert control over her. Sally's husband's reactions are similar to those of Barbara and Kathryn's (questioning their wives' fidelity), providing further justification for how men use the Madonna/whore metaphor to degrade women and attack their supposed lack of conformity to feminine ideals of sexual purity. Sally's belief that her husband felt inferior or threatened by the income disparity supports the description of male violence as a response to powerlessness.

Women's shifting constructions of themselves and the reality of the abusive situations also created a site of tension and contradiction. For instance, Sally described how her identification as a strong successful person shifted when she left the workplace to go home. In the home, the abuser used his male privilege and power to attempt to keep her submissive. Further justification for the analysis of male violence as a form of emasculation is provided in the following accounts:

I don't know if he feels inferior towards me, or whatever. But I think that is one of the reasons where he feels, if I hit you down now, then I will get you on a level that I want you. (Mavis)

Like the other night he phoned me, he said to me: "The reason why I don't come home and I don't give you money and I've changed like this is because I wanted to break you. I wanted to make you soft because you're too independent."  
(Sally)

I said to him, "look you gonna start wearing the pants – if you telling me I'm wearing the pants, doing all the decisions in the house running, then you do it."  
(Kathryn)

The above examples demonstrate that although some men refuse to accept responsibility for their families, they feel their positions of power and male privilege to be threatened when their wives assume (or are forced to assume) this responsibility. The abuse is therefore aimed at minimising and negating women's capabilities. Research suggests that as men perceive challenges to their gendered identities, they develop a crisis (Shefer & Ruiters, 1998) and their feelings of powerlessness or insecurity are translated into emasculation (Simpson, 1992). In this view, women become the targets of the male's attempt to reassert his masculine identity. As Dobash and Dobash (1979) discussed, women become the 'appropriate' targets because of socially constructed gender roles and power disparities between men and women.

### **FEMININE SUBJECTIVITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS**

This section explicitly examines how women construct themselves in their narratives. Women drew on varied discourses and took up various subject positions at different moments in their narratives. In their stories, women invoked the past, discussed the present and expressed concerns and hopes about their futures. Women's narratives therefore encompassed change. Their self-constructions and subjectivities were multiple, shifting, and contradictory.

According to Jackson (2001), discourses of romantic love provide specific solutions to a partner's violent and abusive behaviour. In line with constructions of 'emphasised femininity' (Connell cited in Jackson, 2001), a woman's task is to provide love, care, and

tenderness to soften the 'male hardness'. A solution to the partner's behaviour is thus located in the behaviour of the woman. In the following situations women either adopt or resist feminine constructions of the 'good woman/wife'.

Floretta:        So why do you think you stayed with him for five years?  
Rachel:         To be honest with you, um, I really loved him. I loved him. And I really thought, okay I will be able to change him. But I know [...] he's not gonna change.

In Rachel's account, the third sentence might read (... I really thought **my love** would be able to change him). In this manner she takes up the position of being a 'good wife' by enduring the abuse because she loved him and, by implication, assuming that if she loved him enough, he would change. Similarly:

He say I don't give him enough love. I try my utmost best to give him all the love that I can give him. But he's actually killing that love by doing all this, mentally abusing me, telling me certain things. (Letitia)

Above, Letitia's husband drew on constructions of 'emphasised femininity' in order to manipulate her. By apparently not loving her husband enough, she does not take up the position ascribed to her as a 'good wife', to soften her husband's abusiveness. Letitia's husband makes an external attribution and blames her for the abuse by drawing on cultural constructions of femininity.

Femininity as nurturing and caring were also emphasised in some women's accounts. In Sally, Theresa, and Roslyn's cases, one of the reasons for returning to or accepting the abusive partner back was because their partners evoked feelings of guilt and sympathy. In these situations their partners' lifestyles and physical appearances had deteriorated after separation. For example:

I used to feel sorry for him. If I'm away from him what is gonna happen to him. (Roslyn)

In some women's narratives, feelings of love were interwoven with pity for their husband's, once again emphasising nurturing feminine constructions. In other cases, women assumed 'motherly' roles. Merle explains:

But I think the main reason (*husband's name*) got married to me is because he needed me. He needed me to clean him up, he needed me to take care of him, he needed me to take of the mess he was in. He needed me to take care of his children and to fight his battles. (Merle)

At different moments, women either accepted or resisted the nurturing position of assuming responsibility for their partners' well being.

Women's questioning of gender roles and their identities were a way of negotiating their subjectivities based upon the realities of the abusive situations as well as material and structural conditions of their lives. Participants often adopted a questioning stance and seemed to puzzle over why men were abusive. In the following quote, Sally provides an example of her challenge toward stereotypical gender roles:

He's a man, he always tells me, he's a man and I'm a woman and there's a big difference between us. A woman's got no willpower, she can be used, you can just do with her whatever you want to. That's one of the things we always used to quarrel about. That he thinks the man and the woman must be, yes boss, no boss. And I said to him, "I can't do that. I'm a person in my own right, you're a person in your own right, you can't make me be like your slave, or submissive to you." I know that I must be submissive to him because he's my husband but not to that extent that he wants me to be. (Sally)

In Sally's account, the terms 'woman' and 'man' are imbued with socially constructed meanings of authority and subordination. Although Sally questioned her husband's gender stereotypical attitude and attempted to resist gendered constructions of the 'submissive woman', she acknowledged male privilege and the stereotyped 'submissive wife'. Her statement: "I know that I must be submissive to him because he's my husband ..." reflects her adoption of the socially and culturally scripted role of the 'wife'. Walkerdine (cited in Jackson, 2001) commented that the adoption of femininity is

unstable and partial. In this respect, women do not fully take up socially constructed feminine positions and struggle to resist and situate themselves within this positioning. Kathryn's narrative most actively challenges hegemonic gendered discourses.

So I said to him: "The earnings shouldn't actually bother you because even if you cannot achieve to give to your kids, I will do it but it will be on behalf of the both of us." I know maybe it's not easy for a man to accept that. (Kathryn)

Kathryn spoke about disparities between her husband and herself in terms of both income and education. She did not apologise for her success and felt that her husband should appreciate her efforts. Although other participants also mentioned the abuse as a result of feelings of inferiority or insecurity (emasculatation) on the part of the abuser, in no other account was it made as explicit.

In the extract below, Mary questions her husband's behaviour in the light of her performance of tasks in terms of the gendered division of labour (taking responsibility for the upkeep of the household and the well-being of the children).

Why must I keep walking out of the house? That is what I'm asking myself. Why must I keep walking out of the house? [...] I don't think it's right – he is clean, his house is cleaned, the children are okay, there's no problems with the children. What more does he want? I don't scold at him, I don't swear at him. I don't give him a reason to go on like this.<sup>20</sup> (Mary)

The division of labour in the home is gendered and this reflects the reproduction of unequal gender relationships in society (West & Zimmerman, 1991). A paradox ensues, men are not involved in housework and the home is seen to be the domain of the woman. On the other hand, the home is also the place where the man asserts his social power.

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<sup>20</sup> Hoekom moet ek elke keur uit die huis uit stap? Dis wat ek vir my vra ... hoekom moet ek elke keur uit die huis uit stap? [...] Ek dink nie dit is reg nie – hy is skoon gemaak, sy huis is skoon sy kinders is reg, daar's niks probleme met die kinders nie. Wat meerder wil hy hê? Ek skel 'ie vir hom 'ie, ek vloek 'ie vir hom 'ie. Ek gee hom nie 'n rede om so aan te gaan nie. (Mary)

This contradiction was emphasised when women described how, in times of conflict, their husbands forced them to leave the home (taken to be the husband's domain).

After naming their experiences as abuse, women were empowered to compare and make connections between their experiences and those of other women who were being abused (Profitt, 2000). Oftentimes, women who felt that they were coping well in their own situations gave advice to other women. For example:

Now that this new bill has been implemented, I'm gonna use it, I'm not gonna sit back and just look, let it just go on and on. No, I'm gonna use it. I told several girls at work, when they come in on a Monday with blue eyes, you know it is in a factory – then I say: “You don't have to take this. Go out there and go and do something, it's only R50.” (Faith)

I help them. I support them. I must actually join the women's support group. I must join them man, it's true. I help them wherever I can. I make them strong now. I've learnt a hell of a lot. (Diane)

By recognising the abusers control tactics, naming the abuse, problematising gender, and expressing a concern about other women who endure similar acts of violation, we see women shifting toward a gendered consciousness (Profitt, 2000).

### **Shifting subjectivities**

Many women's narratives cohered around a recurring theme, their determination to overcome the abuse. They described how they were determined not to allow their husbands' abuse to destroy them. For example, Barbara insisted that her husband would not drive her to become dependent on medication to cope with the abuse. She accounted how, through her previous employment at a mental institution, she encountered women with nervous problems as a result of abuse. She insisted that her husband's abuse would not cause her to have a nervous breakdown. In this respect she adopted a determined stance and decided that she would find alternative, adaptive ways of coping with the abuse. Merle adopts a similar stance:

I'm a very strong person inside and due to that um, it has always been my way of thinking that you can do anything else to me but I won't allow you to break my spirit. You can hit me, you can kick me around but you not gonna take away from me what I value – and that's my dignity. (Merle)

Although the abuse has affected her in many negative ways, Merle's determined stance helped her to cope with the abusive situation. In this manner, she tried to maintain her self-respect despite her partner's attempts to degrade her. Letitia may be described as being in a very disempowered position, due to the abuse and her financial dependence on her partner. However, she was still able to acknowledge her strengths and coping capacities.

I just thank God for the strength he has given me. I didn't get to that point where I land up with a nervous breakdown or land up in a psychiatric hospital. I stood by it, believing that my strength will just be strong enough to go through it all. And I don't let it get me down, I don't neglect myself to show the world what I'm going through. (Letitia)

Shifts in identity facilitated changes in women's use of strategies to deal with the violence. For instance, at the beginning of the marriage Sally's husband maintained control over her by isolating her from a supportive network of family or friends. She described how, at this time, with limited resources to cope with the abuse, she contemplated suicide. Along with her changing consciousness, Sally described how she later sought out friendships and family support thereby minimising her partner's control over her. The negotiation and renegotiation of strategies and alternatives illustrates how women adapt their methods of coping to their immediate circumstances and constraints (Lempert, 1996). It is also enacted as a process where women gain more power and control over their own lives (Kirkwood, 1993).

All the participants in the study described how their husbands' abusive behaviours were enacted as a form of control and domination. The abusers attempted to erode women's self-esteem or minimise their confidence in their abilities to make decisions. For example:

He wants to be in control of everything. He wants to do everything his way. If I put this thing (*vase*) like this, tonight he will come and he will put it the same way, like that. I can never put a vase the way I want it. The vase must be put the way he wants it. (Gail)

Gail's emphasis on the words "I" and "he" reflects a site of tension that runs through her narrative. Although a description of her husband's behaviour is repeated throughout, her reactions and feelings form a major part of the narrative. Rather than describe what he did to her, Gail used the active voice to describe herself, her reactions, and emotions. For example:

I'm not letting him control me in that way anymore, like he used to in the past. And I think I'm getting it right, by not letting him get to me in that way. And and, and, by overcoming this abuse I found I had to give more of myself to others and not just concentrate on my little problem. I give to others, I give of myself to others, and I find I get more pleasure out of life that way. (Gail)

In the above extract Gail projects the past into the present. She describes herself as passive in the past but contrasts this to the 'active I' in the present. The interview context also played an important role in shaping Gail's narrative. Gail responded to the advertised poem (see Appendix B). In her narrative, she described the importance of the poem when she said: "But I can tell you I, I will get through it and it's not gonna end for me like in your poem." Gail's determination to cope with the abuse was framed within the context of proving her determination to overcome the abuse.

Some women described how their capacities for dealing with the abuse had changed. They were no longer willing to tolerate behaviour that may have been acceptable at the beginning of their relationships. For instance, Barbara described how, at the beginning of the marriage, she prepared her husband's clothing for him to wear. He later expected the same behaviour from her and she refused to do so, indicating that she had spoilt him in the beginning. This illustrates how Barbara became aware that the duties ascribed to her as a 'good wife', were not essential to her role. It is likely that her awareness and challenge to gender roles was related to her political consciousness and activism, and her shifting sense of self.

After numerous promises of change and vacillations between periods abuse and calm, some participants seemed to be grappling with their partners' behaviour, questioning aspects of themselves and their relationships. Below Rachel seems to be coming to the realisation that it is unlikely that her partner will change his abusive behaviour.

I really don't know, it's no use me hanging on and I'm trying to make a change and he's not changing. (Rachel)

Sally reflects similar issues:

And one Saturday I was driving to work, and I looked at him and I thought to myself: "Wow, I can't believe that somebody could have changed so much. I really looked up to this man, but in my eyes he's a pathetic, egoistic, rubbish." That is what I thought to myself. (Sally)

In the above extract, Sally seems only to be talking about her husband and how he has changed. It is not unlikely that she may also be describing how her attitude toward him has changed or her shifting consciousness. With an increased sense of self-worth, she felt that she should no longer accept his abusive behaviour. She also realised that it is not likely that he will change and she therefore has to adapt her attitude and change her situation.

According to Kirkwood (1993), an awareness of changes in women's sense of self was the impetus for gaining a modicum of power and control in their relationships. In the following examples both Gail and Merle recognise changes in themselves as a result of the abuse.

You know I was a soft girl but the abuse made me like a street woman in my own home. And that is something that I hated about myself – and I thought I am going to change in that way. And I'm getting it right. I'm not behaving like a street woman, scolding with him all the time and swearing at him. (Gail)

[...] this situation has done many things to me. It has changed me in a lot of ways because as I say, it's because I loved him so much and all he threw back at me

was hurt and it caused me to change towards – not only him but even towards myself. (Merle)

Gail also showed how the degree of power and independence she was able to gain in her relationship armed her with the tools to better cope with her husband's abuse. She described how his verbally abusive attacks used to make her cry and compares this to her current response.

[...] in the past I used to sit and cry over those things he called me, all the kinds of names. But today I can tell you, he can call me anything under the sun, and I won't cry about it because I know it's not true. And I know he wants to break me in that way and he will never get it right. He will, he will never get it right. (Gail)

### Changing love

In contrast to discourses of the 'perfect love' invoked at the beginning of this chapter, many women either described feelings of hatred or a lack of affection for their partners.

- Floretta: How do you feel about him and about your marriage, at this moment?  
Sally: I loved him a lot Floretta, I loved him a lot but I can't make up with him anymore. We can't patch things up, I can't do it anymore.  
Floretta: So what would you say you feel for him?  
Sally: Nothing, I feel just sorry for him. I feel sorry for him because he's gonna lose out big time – he's gonna lose out on his children, he's gonna lose out on his whole family.

Similarly, Merle describes her feelings toward her husband.

You know Floretta, what hurts me the most is, I loved my husband very much (*crying*). I loved him very much. And that love is gone, it is no longer there. There's nothing in my heart for him.<sup>21</sup> (Merle)

In both accounts, love is depicted as something that women gave, while received nothing in return. Sally and Merle resisted discourses of the perfect love, in recognition that their

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<sup>21</sup> You know Floretta, wat maak vir my die seerste is, ek was baie lief vir my man (*crying*). Ek was gevaarlik lief vir hom. En daai liefde is weg, dit is nie meer daar nie. Daar is niks in my hart vir hom nie. (Merle)

husband's were not likely to change their abusive behaviours. Further, they also resisted constructions of the nurturing feminine roles. These positions (loving, caring, and nurturing) were adopted at the beginning of their relationships but changed as a consequence of the abuse.

Sindiwe left her husband after an incident of extreme physical violence that almost resulted in her death. This incident was at the forefront of her narrative and she was determined that she would not return to him. As Sindwe explains:

Floretta: How do you feel about him?

Sindiwe: About him? You know if I can see the people, they killing him there, I'm sure I can help them. As true as the living God, I said to my priest in front of him – I said I dunno how I feel like, I don't feel like he's my lover or he's (the) father of my children, he's just like, I dunno how I can explain (to) you. How I feel about him? About him! Ooh. I don't think even he feels something for me. I don't have feelings about that man, I will hate him till he's dead.

As a result of the last episode of violence, Sindiwe expressed hatred toward her husband. In her narrative she did not discuss love or any other positive feelings toward her husband.

The above positions concur with the literature (Kirkwood, 1993; Mills, 1985; Proffitt, 2000) that suggests that women change as they deal with and respond to violence from their partners. It has been shown that these changes can be positive and allow women to gain power and control in their relationships.

In this chapter, I showed how women challenge gender roles in a variety of ways. These challenges are reflected in their resistances to constructions of femininity. These challenges, shifting identities, and strategies aimed at dealing with the violence in their lives, rejects traditional representations of women as passive recipients of abuse. Acknowledging these shifts in power does not imply that all women are able to deal with violence in a similar way, nor does it ignore the negative impact of violence in the lives of women. By acknowledging women's agency, we show how women depart from the

norm and create new possibilities for identifications, opening up discourses of resistance for women (Profitt, 2000).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

#### POWER AND GENDER

In this study, power and control were at the centre of women's narratives of violence and women both implicitly or explicitly acknowledged that the abuse was an enactment of male power and control. Male power was enacted in a number of ways including the exertion of physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic control. Men's actions were aimed at reducing women's power or maintaining their subordinate roles as wives and women. Abuse against their intimate partners was attributed to men's perceived loss of power, or as the assertion of male power and authority. These findings suggest that, as women gain more resources (both personal and material), gender roles are challenged and men perceive their authoritative positions to be threatened. Furthermore, these issues are complicated in situations where men are also socially and economically powerless, often reflected in problems such as alcohol and substance abuse.

Moore (cited in Vetten, 2000a) proposed a theory of male violence in response to 'thwarted' gender identities. In terms of this theory, the thwarting of gender identity occurs when an individual fails to properly take up a gendered position, resulting in a crisis. Thwarting occurs both at the individual and societal levels. At the individual level, men use violence to compensate for a perceived crisis resulting from shifting gender relations and dynamics. At the societal level, challenges to dominant masculinities may be perceived as a crisis. In this instance, other factors such as age and socio-economic status intersect with race and gender to form complex patterns of domination and oppression. In this study, women's narratives of violence provide some justification for further research on this issue. Research might explore the relevance of theories of emasculation or 'thwarted' gender identities to men's explanations violence. Justification is also provided for a post-structuralist approach to power in abusive relationships. The consideration of power as constantly in flux will strengthen further research on this issue.

Women's reactions to abuse concur with the literature showing that women employ a variety of strategies to end the violence in their lives (Baker, 1997; Hamby & Gray-Little, 1997; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Lempert, 1996). The strategies women employed were based upon the power they were able to gain in their relationships and were linked to the particularities of their situations (Hoff, 1990). Women employed personal strategies and sought assistance from family, religious sources, social service agencies, and legal systems. These findings depart from theories such as learned helplessness (Walker, 1979, 1984, 2000) that emphasise deficiency in women's responses to their partners' abuse.

The strategies women employed and the sources of power they gained in their relationships depicted women as active agents who made specific choices and decisions to end the violence in their lives. Although studies have focussed on women's strategies to end violence (Hamby & Gray-Little, 1997; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Lempert, 1996), few have considered women's power and agency in their relationships. Kirkwood (1993), explored the role of power and control in relationships where women had already left their abusive partners. Similarly, Hoff (1990) explored the experiences of women, she described as 'survivors', after they had left their abusive partners. This study has shown differences in the accounts of women who had already left their partners and those who were still in the abusive relationships. For example, women who left their partners seemed more likely to describe the severity of the physical abuse. This finding provides support for the analysis of the experiences of women who stay in comparison to those who have left. This study departed from the literature discussed above (Hoff, 1990; Kirkwood, 1993) and from one of the few studies directly examining women's agency (Baker, 1997) by utilising a sample of women who, at the time of the interviews, were still living with their abusive partners. Thus, this study did not examine why women stayed, rather, *how* they stayed.

### **THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Cultural and social institutions either constrained or increased women's options for obtaining assistance for the abuse. Bograd (1999) used the concept of 'intersectionality'

to illustrate how systems of power and oppression intersect and influence the meaning and nature of woman abuse. Similarly, Hanmer (1996) asserted that race, culture, class, religion, and other forms of oppression are the boundaries through which women filter their experiences of violence. An analysis of the social and cultural context is thus important when considering women's experiences of abuse.

The strategies women in this study employed were filtered through boundaries such as class, religion, culture, and other conditions based in the socio-cultural environment. The study showed how poor women's options are limited since they often lack social and institutional support to end the abuse and their experiences of abuse are exacerbated by poverty and deprivation. Issues such as the scarcity of housing, economic dependence, unemployment, and their partners' substance or alcohol abuse further compounded the negative effects of the violence. The police also played a role in constraining women's options and did not provide adequate assistance to women in this sample. These findings concur with the literature suggesting that women's options for leaving abusive partners are constrained by a lack of support and assistance in the social arena (Callaghan et al., 1997; Richie & Kanuha, 1997; Shornstein, 1997). Both the family and religion functioned as social institutions that either impeded women's options or assisted in providing women with support against the abuse.

Women's definitions and meanings of violence were also contingent on the socio-cultural context. Women in this sample experienced multiple forms of abuse simultaneously, showing how women's experiences of violence cannot be easily contained within pre-defined categories. Furthermore, the particularities of their situations also influenced the meanings of the abuse. For example, a large proportion of the women highlighted the centrality of economic abuse. It is likely that women's concerns reflected broader aspects of the socio-economic environment such as the levels of poverty and unemployment in Mitchell's Plain. Moreover, the nuances of women's experiences were also illustrated by showing how the effects of a partner's marital infidelity and a partner's alcohol or substance abuse constituted forms of abuse. The options available to women were also negotiated within structural and material constraints. Some women, question the

effectiveness of applying for a protection order to end their partners' abuse. Their situations were complicated by economic dependence on their spouses and a subsequent reluctance to send their husband's to prison. This study showed how the examination of woman abuse in varying contexts illustrates the variations in meanings and experiences based in the socio-cultural environment.

Women in this study exercised agency within the context of social structural constraints. I showed that, within this context, women had limited options and choices but negotiated these boundaries in their attempts to free themselves from violence and abuse. The exercise of agency is therefore, not simply an individual endeavour but occurs within a particular socio-cultural context that shapes the meaning of experience. This study expanded on the literature by the focus on agency (within a particular context) while attending to the language women used to narrate their experiences of violence. In this manner, the often taken for granted feminine and masculine identities were open for scrutiny.

### **IDENTITIES IN FLUX**

An important finding in this study was that change occurred as a result of the abuse. The literature suggests that the acknowledgment that change has occurred often provided the impetus for action to end the abuse (Kirkwood, 1993; Mills, 1985; Profitt, 2000). Change was evident in the strategies women employed to deal with their partners' abuse. Some women described 'passive' strategies at the beginning of their relationships and more active strategies later. At times in their narratives, women also constructed themselves as passive, and at other times they presented as active and able to deal with the abuse. Women also challenged and questioned gender roles in a variety of ways. However, this process did not occur in a linear fashion and some women acknowledged conformity to and a belief in stereotypical gender roles. The belief in gender stereotypical roles was revealed as a site of contradiction – where some women both accepted and resisted these constructions. These ambiguities and contradictions reflect a post-structuralist view of identity. The subject positions women took up were culturally contingent and reflected fluidity, multiplicity, and shifts in meaning.

Shifts in meaning were also evident in women's constructions of their partners. Women invoked dual depictions of their partners and recognised their partners' good qualities as well as their abusive characteristics. The manner in which women constructed masculine dual identities also had implications for the subject positions they took up. If a partner was constructed as abusive, then the woman would be limited to the role of victim. Instead, women's subjective positions were often partial, contradictory, and selective. A broader anomaly reflected in the data was that women named their partners' actions as abuse but did not holistically depict him as abusive. Nonetheless, some women spoke only about the abuse and did not invoke dual identities of their partners. These contradictory depictions reflect identities that are unstable, ambiguous, and fluid.

In women's discussions of love and dual identities, this study finds some support for the theories of the cycle of violence (Walker, 1984) and traumatic bonding (Painter & Dutton, 1985). A common feature of these theories is the recognition of the intermittency of abuse. Women acknowledged that they sometimes experienced love and kindness from their abusive spouses. The varying dimensions of the abusive relationship (and the abuser) were thus acknowledged. This study examined the interconnections between love and violence (Jackson, 2001; Shefer et al., 2000; and Towns & Adams, 2000) by attending to hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity. The woman abuse literature does not accord sufficient attention to the role of love in abusive relationships. The study showed how discourses of love are often invoked in women's narrations of their experiences and provides justification for further exploration of these issues.

Women also changed in how they viewed themselves and their partners. These changes in women's subjectivity, and sense of selves resulted in some adopting an activist consciousness about woman abuse (Profitt, 2000). For example, some women aimed to assist and empower others by providing them with advice. Women named their own experiences as abuse and made connections with other women's experiences and violence against women at large. Women shifted toward a gendered consciousness

through naming the abuse, recognising the abuser's control, questioning gender roles, and expressing a concern about women in similar situations (Profitt, 2000).

The participants reproduced and resisted hegemonic gendered constructions to varying degrees. Women's challenges, shifting identities, and strategies aimed at dealing with the violence in their lives, rejects traditional representations of women as passive recipients of abuse. By recognising agency and resistance we acknowledge the multiplicity of experiences of abused women and move away from the homogenisation of all women's experiences. Theorising also shifts away from stereotypical beliefs about abused women and opens up new possibilities for discourses about survivors of abuse. These shifting, multiple and contradictory identities reflected in their talk, drawing on cultural and contextual resources, reflect a post-structuralist view of language and subjectivity (Towns & Adams, 2000). As Bhavnani and Phoenix (1994) noted:

“Identity is not one thing for any individual, rather each individual is both located in and opts for a number of differing and at times conflictual identities, depending on the social, political, economic and ideological aspects of their situation” (p. 9).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Practice implications**

In order to redress the stereotypical depictions of abused women, research such as this should inform services for women. Gondolf (1998) posits a clinical approach that would acknowledge and recognise women's strengths in their relationships. An important assumption of survivor theory is that women who are abused have strengths and work to change or improve their situations and to protect themselves. Abused women utilise a diversity of strategies in response to the severity and nature of violence in their lives. A focus on the strengths of abused women allows clinicians to affirm women's potential and it avoids exposing women to secondary victimisation by not accounting for the full range of their experiences (Gondolf, 1998).

Abused women require adequate access to resources that enable them to escape the violent situation. As illustrated in this research, women often seek help from a number of sources, which are sometimes inadequate in assisting them to free themselves from abuse. Women therefore frequently return to the abusive situations. Social institutions should attempt to comprehensively deal with the needs of abused women. For example, it has been shown that a lack of alternative accommodation is often an important barrier against leaving an abusive situation. Counselling services for women should adequately address this issue by providing practical assistance to women in abusive relationships. Sheltering is a contentious issue in South Africa. Shelters are often inaccessible to many South African women and some women have questioned why they should be required to leave their homes (see Park, 2000). However, the sheltering needs of abused women should be prioritised and large-scale government initiatives should address the scarcity of shelters in South Africa. Economic dependence is also shown to inhibit women's options for leaving abusive situations. Programmes and services for women should be geared toward providing economic empowerment and increasing women's options in the formal employment sector. In addition, it has also been shown that ending the relationship does not always end the violence (Fleury, 2000) and services for abused women should address the needs of women who have left abusive partners but are still living with the threat of violence.

Addressing the social and institutional response to woman abuse is a colossal task. However, increases in community education initiatives may provide an initial attempt to deal with the problem. Agencies dealing with violence against women should focus on initiatives geared toward creating awareness and providing support and empathy for abused women. Furthermore, large-scale, ongoing training should be conducted with the police, court officials, medical practitioners, and others who are likely to encounter abused women in their professions.

#### **The limitations of this study and possibilities for further scholarship**

In this study, I was concerned with staying in touch with women's meanings and concerns at the time of the interviews. It may have been helpful to provide a more

structured framework for the discussion of different phases of their relationships. Women's meanings and constructions of the abusive relationships were explored at a particular social and historical moment. Further research might employ longitudinal techniques to examine how women's meanings shift over time. Multiple interviews with the same participants will therefore provide in-depth and comprehensive data in this regard.

Exploring the socio-cultural context in greater depth may strengthen further research in this area. Interviews with community workers, social service employees, and others who work in the area of violence against women might provide richer data and a more encompassing view of the socio-cultural context of woman abuse.

There is a paucity of empirical research with abusers in South Africa. In this area, research should focus on constructions of masculinity and its relation to violence against women. Attention should also be accorded to the oppressive system of apartheid and the roles of masculinity, powerlessness, and violence. Research in this area would inform programmes for perpetrators of woman abuse, which are sorely lacking in South Africa.

Indigenous research endeavours on the issue of woman abuse is also lacking. In order to provide adequate services for abused women, research initiatives on this topic should be encouraged. Priority research areas should explore the incidence of woman abuse, the links between woman abuse and other problems such as poverty, unemployment, and substance abuse, and programmes for abusers (Park, 2000). Research initiatives should aim to focus on the specifics of the South African situation and should not look abroad to provide theories on woman abuse.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

This study aimed to examine the meanings women construct in abusive relationships, within a specific context. These issues were explored by attending to women's stories and re-presentations of their experiences of abuse and violation. In women's stories they gave meaning to the violence in their lives by drawing on resources based in the social

and cultural environment. Women in this study named their experiences as abuse, discussed the impact of the abuse, and spoke about their strategies and resistance aimed at ending the abuse. Women's stories showed how gendered subjectivities were constructed. By attending to women's talk about the violence, feminine and masculine constructions, as well as the role of love were highlighted. Women either resisted or reproduced gendered constructions and their subjective experiences were negotiated within a particular social and cultural context.

In conclusion, this research has challenged representations of women as passive victims of abuse, providing a picture in contrast to some of the traditional depictions of women as masochistic, passive, and mentally unstable. The present study's investigation of the shifts in power and the ways in which women resisted male power called into question the assumed static categories of the 'dominant male' and the 'submissive female'. The present approach departs from the binary approach (male dominance versus female submission), which overlooks women's agency and power. Research such as this, indicates a move toward the recognition of women's strengths and agency in taking control of their own lives. Concurring with Gavey (1996):

"... if our feminist analyses only reinstate a discourse of heterosexuality as inevitably about male dominance and female submission, then we are arguably complicit in reproducing the particular traditional cultural constructions of passive female sexuality and aggressive male sexuality which so neatly script the roles for male sexual violence against women" (p. 62).

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## **APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**  
**STUDY ADVERTISEMENT**

***ARE YOU BEING ABUSED?***

Would you like to participate in research that focuses on women who experience abuse from their partners? I am interested in the problems women face and how they deal with violence from their partners. I will ask you to take part in an interview that will be **COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL**.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences with me, please call

Floretta at 376 5057 or 083 583 9836.

# Say it with flowers but don't make it a wreath

**FROM FLORETA BOONZAIR,  
BEACON VALLEY, MITCHELLS PLAIN:**

I got flowers today.  
It wasn't my birthday or any other special day.  
We had our first argument last night.  
And he said a lot of cruel things that really hurt me.  
I know he is sorry and didn't mean the things he said,  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today.  
It wasn't our anniversary or any other special day.  
Last night he threw me into a wall and started to choke me.  
It seemed like a nightmare.  
I couldn't believe it was real.  
I woke up this morning sore and bruised all over.  
I know he must be sorry  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today,  
And it wasn't Mother's Day or any other special day.  
Last night, he beat me up again.  
And it was much worse than all the other times.  
If I leave him, what will I do?  
How will I take care of my kids?  
What about money?  
I'm afraid of him and scared to leave.  
But I know he must be sorry.  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today.  
Today was a very special day.  
It was the day of my funeral.  
Last night he finally killed me.  
He beat me to death.  
If only I had gathered enough courage and strength to leave him,  
I would not have gotten flowers today.

● Are you experiencing abuse? I am conducting research among women in Mitchell's Plain who are abused by their partners. I am interested in how you deal with your problems. I am a psychology master's student at the University of Cape Town and am gathering information for my thesis. If you are interested in sharing your experiences with me, call me at 376 5057 or 083 583 9836. All information will be treated confidentially.

# Looking at the rainbow through shattered glass

**FROM S DEANE, BAYVIEW ROAD, WYNBERG:**

And then what?  
So  
A big bang in a leafy suburb  
Lots of fast flashing cars  
Ear-splitting sirens which  
show no mercy  
Life disturbed and life lost  
And then what?

An innocent man with no legs or arms  
A pretty teenager who once worked  
in bars  
A middle aged woman who gave  
to the poor  
Where to go where fear is no more?

To all the nameless ones  
Who pass like shadows in the dark  
To all those without a voice of their  
own  
Who can only see the rainbow  
through shattered glass  
And then what?

Make the point as loud as you can  
Show the babe in the pram and  
the bergie on the street  
Just how bad it is  
To be without a voice and only have  
One that hurts and maims  
And then what?  
When everyone is deaf

My guardian angel closes his  
eyes  
He said I despised him  
His pale blue eyes close  
Come back, he says  
But I have a mind of my own  
So, instead  
I turn my back and walk away  
I no longer feel the need to stay  
I move down a different path  
toward a darker light,  
I've clearly lost sight,  
I can't move!  
I can't see,  
What's happening to me?  
I'm trapped no way out  
My hearts filled with doubt  
I sway this way and that  
Where do I go,  
which way  
I don't know?  
Heaven or hell, I can't discern  
My guardian angel, his  
concern  
Help me! I say  
He stares at me, turns and  
walks away  
and as he walks I hear him say  
"I'm sorry, my child, it's too  
late,  
You've decided on your own  
fate."

**FROM RESHONDA ENUS,  
MITCHELLS PLAIN:**

● The Fates is a poem which  
will be published in an  
anthology of poetry entitled,  
Sincerely Yours in spring, 2001.

# Losing the light and an angel

**FROM RESHONDA ENUS,  
MITCHELLS PLAIN:**

My guardian angel closes his  
eyes  
He said I despised him  
His pale blue eyes close  
Come back, he says  
But I have a mind of my own  
So, instead  
I turn my back and walk away  
I no longer feel the need to stay  
I move down a different path  
toward a darker light,  
I've clearly lost sight,  
I can't move!  
I can't see,  
What's happening to me?  
I'm trapped no way out  
My hearts filled with doubt  
I sway this way and that  
Where do I go,  
which way  
I don't know?  
Heaven or hell, I can't discern  
My guardian angel, his  
concern  
Help me! I say  
He stares at me, turns and  
walks away  
and as he walks I hear him say  
"I'm sorry, my child, it's too  
late,  
You've decided on your own  
fate."

Need money now? Call ...

# LOAN -BY- PHONE

# Probing the dark world of domestic violence

**FUAD ESACK**

**F**LORETTA Boonzaaier of Beacon Valley, a Master's student at the University of Cape Town, sent us a poem entitled "I Got Flowers Today" (Plainsman, November 9).

Despite its somewhat misleading title, the poem casts a dark and sinister spell on anniversaries, birthdays and other joyful occasions normally associated with receiving flowers. It gives a detailed account of the miserable life of an abused woman, whose husband would give her flowers whenever he beat her.

Written by an anonymous poet and sent to Floretta via e-mail, the poem ends when a final bouquet of flowers is presented to the abused women at her own funeral.

Although normally not interested in the jokes and other junkmail that would pop up on her computer screen from time to time, this particular poem immediately attracted Floretta's attention.

"I thought it was quite interesting and very relevant to what I am doing," said Floretta, who is also a volunteer counsellor at Nicro in Eastridge, where she deals with many women who, like the one in the poem, are trapped in an abusive relationship.

She is presently completing her Master's Degree in psychology and have been counselling at Nicro since 1999, after a short training period at the organisation's Cape Town office. She is also doing research into the

experiences of abused women and how they deal with their situation and is inviting those women willing to share their experiences to contact her.

She described the response from abused women to her appeal as very encouraging. "I was very pleased by the many telephone calls I received after the poem was published," she said and invited more women to contact her.

After matriculating from Beacon Hill in 1991, Floretta enrolled at Peninsula Technikon to study international auditing, but soon realised that finance was not her calling. Instead, she opted to go to university and, in 1998, obtained her BA degree, majoring in psychology, from the University of the Western Cape.

She became interested in violence against women after enrolling for a gender course at UCT.

"In 1999, I started my honours degree at UCT. The course included a practical component that required me to connect with a community organisation.

"We were given a brief introduction of various community organisations and I chose Nicro, because it was close to home and also because of the work that they do. In town they have an abused women support centre that deals exclusively with abused woman and in Mitchells Plain they have a community victim support project that includes counselling abused women.

"My research focuses on women's experiences in abusive relationships, specifically relating to the obstacles they face when attempting to leave.

"I try not to look at women as victims, but try to focus on their strengths and how they cope with their situation. A lot of literature on abused women tends to blame women for abuse and for staying in the relationship," said Floretta.

She said that through her research, she has discovered that economic dependency is one of the major obstacles preventing women from leaving an abusive relationship, as many of them are unemployed.

"I've done about six interviews since the poem was published and judging from that, it seems that it is mostly economic factors preventing women from leaving. It is very difficult to leave if you don't work, or have nowhere to go. One cannot isolate physical abuse, because it is often connected to verbal, emotional, sexual and economic abuse.

"A woman is often isolated in her situation in that the abuser cuts her off from friends and family, so that it becomes a shame or an embarrassment for the woman to discuss the abuse with someone close to her.

"Sometimes it is better to talk to a complete stranger, and I hope to provide an unthreatening environment for women to unload and to discuss their problems," she said.

Floretta has secured a fellowship to study at an American university, and is looking forward to leaving for the US early next year. She will spend six months at Emory Univer-



■ UCT Masters student Floretta Boonzaaier and volunteer counsellor at Nicro, invites abused women to contact her.

city in Atlanta, Georgia, where she will be studying under a psychologist who runs a domestic violence and service project.

Meanwhile, her counselling sessions will continue until the end of the year. She is available on Wednesdays between 1pm and 4pm. Those interested in sharing their experiences with Floretta can contact her on 397 6060 or 083 583 9836.

## APPENDIX D

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

#### MARY

Mary was 43 years old and had been married for 18 years. She was employed outside the home. Her husband abused her physically, emotionally, verbally, and financially. Mary has obtained a protection order to deal with the abuse. However, her husband's drug and alcohol abuse was a source of distress for her, as he became extremely abusive when he could not support his habit. Mary indicated that she had no feelings for her husband and throughout her narrative she indicated that she was no longer willing to tolerate her husband's abuse. At the end of the interview she asked for advice and we explored possible options.

#### DIANE

Diane was 52 years old, single, and had been married twice before. Both marriages ended in divorce. The first marriage of 10 years ended because of her husband's infidelity, which she described as emotional abuse. Her second husband was verbally and physically abusive. The relationship ended after six years. Diane described herself as very religious and these principles encouraged her to attempt every available option before ending her marriages. Even though it was four years since the divorce from her second husband, Diane still created the impression that she thought the marriage might have been successful had he stopped abusing alcohol. Her strong religious beliefs and her beliefs that her abusive husband would change contributed to her staying in the relationship. Later, she derived strength from dealing with the abuse and she realised that her husband would not change his abusive behaviour.

#### GAIL

Gail was 43 years old and had been married for 14 years. She had a 13-year-old son and a nine-year-old daughter. Gail worked as a nurse and was unemployed at the time of the interview, only fulfilling temporary contract positions when they arose. Her husband, who was a police officer, had been physically, emotionally, verbally, financially, and

sexually abusing her from the start of their marriage. Gail identified as strongly religious (Catholic) and her religious principles were a source of strength for her. Gail used a number of strategies to counter her husband's abuse. She applied for a protection order, which was helpful in stopping the physical violence. She also indicated that she ignored the verbal abuse and did not let it affect her. However, the financial abuse and economic dependence were at the forefront of her narrative and seemed to be the most distressing to her. In Gail's narrative she discussed her 'passive' reactions to her the abuse in the past. Returning to the present, she showed how she was determined to overcome the abuse and she expressed a positive outlook for her future, contingent upon securing employment.

#### SERENA

Serena was 38 years old and had been married for nine years. At the time of the interview, she was divorced for eight years. However, her ex-husband was still living with her, after being away for some time after the divorce. He was living in an informal structure in her backyard, and recently moved back into the home. Her husband manipulated her with promises of change by using her strong religious beliefs. Serena indicated that the only reason he was still there was that she did not know how to get rid of him. In her narrative, Serena chose to explore the failures of services for abused women. She explored the systemic barriers she encountered when she attempted to leave her husband.

#### FAITH

Faith had been married for 26 years. Her husband abused mandrax and marijuana resulting in constant conflict in their relationship. Throughout her marriage, her husband had been unfaithful to her and he abused her physically, verbally, and financially. He did not contribute to the financial upkeep of their household. Whenever Faith requested his contributions, he became either verbally or physically abusive towards her. As a result, Faith had to maintain the household with the assistance of her two sons. Faith indicated that she wanted to do something about her situation as she realised that her husband was not likely to change. She stated that she was no longer willing to tolerate his abusive behaviour.

## THERESA

Theresa had been married for 10 years. Her husband deserted her and their children after seven years of marriage. He was away for almost one year and she found alternative accommodation without his support. After she had erected a wooden structure in her mother's backyard, her husband returned with promises that he had changed and become religious. Theresa indicated that she accepted him back because she felt sorry for him and because of family pressures. At the time of the interview, Theresa stated that her husband abused alcohol and often became verbally aggressive toward her. Theresa said that she tried everything to make her marriage work and she expressed uncertainty about the future.

## MERLE

At the time of the interview, Merle was 33 years old and had been married to her second husband for seven years. Her first husband was also abusive and that marriage ended in divorce after one year. Merle was unemployed and completely reliant on her husband for financial support. In her case, leaving was complicated by the fact that she ended her first marriage due to her husband's abuse and she did not want people to know that she experienced similar abuse in her second marriage. Merle experienced physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse. She insisted that as soon as she found employment, she would make concrete decisions about leaving her abusive husband, as she no longer loved him.

## BARBARA

Barbara had been married for 14 years and was 34 years old. She had three sons aged nine, 15 and 17. Barbara stated that she had always worked outside the home and, at the time of the interview, was employed in an administrative position for a financial company. She indicated that her involvement in political activism (through her work) for women's rights was a source of strength but also contradiction for her. Reflecting back, Barbara indicated that her husband had always been abusive, verbally, physically, financially and sexually. In Barbara's narrative, she did not speak about how she had met

her husband, or any of things that may have initially attracted her to him. Throughout her narrative she struggled with the contradiction between her principles, beliefs, and the abuse. Her barriers to leaving included finding alternative accommodation and financial stability and she also expressed uncertainty about her future.

#### ROSLYN

Roslyn was 34 years old and had two sons aged four and eight. She had been married for seven years and at the time of the interview, been divorced for one year. Her ex-husband was unaware of her whereabouts. Roslyn left her husband on numerous occasions and usually stayed at shelters or with family members. At those times her husband always found her and forced or intimidated her to return. Roslyn spoke about the problems she endured during the marriage. These included her partner's dependence on drugs, his unemployment, and severe physical abuse. She also spoke about constant problems with finding accommodation. They moved from place to place and either lived with family or in temporary structures on others' properties. To support his drug habit, her partner sold many household items, and forced her to sell their clothing. Roslyn mentioned that he even tried to force her into prostitution. Although Roslyn had been away from him for one year, she still feared that her ex-husband might try to find and harm her.

#### SALLY

At age 34, Sally had been married for 14 years. She had three sons, one of who died in a car accident. Sally was employed outside the home and stated that she earned more than her husband. This was a source of conflict in their relationship and in her narrative, she described his controlling and domineering behaviours. Like Gail, Sally described how her husband used financial resources to exert power and control over her. He used her relative independence as a way of justifying his lack of financial support to the upkeep of the household and the children. His financially irresponsible behaviour was also described as a source of distress for Sally. Sally told how the verbal and emotional degradation and abuse were constant during her relationship. Considering that Sally was largely responsible for the maintenance of the household, two months prior to the

interview, she asked her husband to leave. He later returned and, at the time of the interview, they were living in the same home.

#### RACHEL

At age 40, Rachel had been married to her second husband for five years. Physical violence occurred at the beginning of the marriage. Rachel indicated that because her husband stopped abusing alcohol, the physical violence had ceased for two years. However, the verbal and emotional abuse escalated. She described her husband as a very domineering person who attempted to control every aspect of her life. He also accused her of having extra-marital affairs and verbally degraded and insulted her. Rachel's husband was also financially irresponsible and expected her to cover his indiscretions. Rachel expressed the desire to leave her partner but her decisions were complicated by many factors. These included not having anywhere to go, fears about his reactions to a divorce, feelings about having a second 'failed' marriage, and concerns about her children. Based upon this, her narrative reflected uncertainty about her future.

#### KATHRYN

Kathryn was 33 years old and had been married for six years. Her daughter and son were seven years old and six months old respectively. She completed her high school education and was employed in an administrative position for a major corporation. Similar to Sally, Kathryn described disparities in education, employment, and income between her husband and herself. Kathryn however, did not minimise these disparities. She positioned herself as strong, able, and determined and struggled with the fact that her husband could not accept that. Kathryn clearly challenged traditional gender roles when she indicated that she wanted her husband's support and appreciation for her efforts. Early in their relationship, her husband was physically abusive. She described him as possessive, jealous and verbally abusive.

#### SINDIWE

At the time of the interview with Sindiwe, she had been away from her husband for approximately one month. Sindiwe started her narrative by disclosing the most recent

incident of extreme physical violence during which she was certain that her husband was trying to kill her. Sindiwe was 38 years old and had been married for 15 years. Her husband had been abusive for the past 10 years. Like Roslyn, she also left on many occasions. She stated that her husband always found her and convinced her to return. Sindiwe seemed determined that that was the last time and that she would not return. Her husband was also unaware of her whereabouts and she said that she lived in constant fear that he would find her and cause her further harm. Sindiwe's narrative was engulfed in fear. Due to the extreme violence she experienced in the last episode, it was at the forefront of her narrative. She seemed extremely angry and upset and indicated that she would never be able to forgive her husband.

#### LETITIA

Letitia was 44 years old and had been married for 20 years. They had three children, two of whom were in high school. Letitia did not complete her high school education and was currently unemployed and financially dependent on her husband. I sensed a nervous tension in her voice – possibly because she never really confided in anyone about the abuse. She later told me that, as a result of the abuse, she was often nervous and scared. Letitia started her narrative by describing how she had met her partner, detailing the beginning of their marriage and the start of the abuse. She described incidents of physical abuse and the constant verbal and psychological abuse she had endured. Letitia moved to Cape Town from another city and she was isolated from a supportive network of friends or family. This isolation served to reinforce the abuser's control over her. The dominant themes in Letitia's narrative were fear, dependence, helplessness, and confusion. Letitia's options for leaving were limited by her financial situation, her children, and the isolation from her family. Even though her situation seemed hopeless, Letitia employed some of strategies based upon her personal experiences and immediate context.

#### SANDRA

Sandra was 30 years old and had been married for 10 years. She had two children – a six-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy. She was employed on a part-time basis. The

abuse started at the beginning of the marriage and was often in response to her refusal to have sex. Her husband started being physically violent and she also admitted to being violent toward him, although this was in self-defense. She later obtained a protection order and the physical abuse ended. Her husband however, continued to abuse her verbally and emotionally. Sandra noted that her husband's traditional views about a wife's sexual responsibility were a source of tension and conflict in their marriage. Sandra felt that couple counselling was needed to solve their problem and stated that she wanted to try to make her marriage work. Although many participants reflected uncertainty about the future of their marriages, Sandra was the only one who expressed a desire to make her marriage work.

## APPENDIX E

### LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear ...

I am a Masters student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. I also work as a counsellor for abused women at NICRO Mitchell's Plain. I am currently conducting research on women's experiences in abusive relationships. I am interested in the problems women face and how they deal with violence from their partners. This study will help professionals in the field to better understand the issues faced by abused women.

You will be requested to partake in an interview lasting approximately 1 – 2 hours. In the interview I will ask about your experiences of violence from your partner, how you are affected by and how you deal with the violence, as well as your feelings toward your partner or the relationship. Given the sensitive nature of the topic it is likely that you may experience difficulty in discussing some of these issues.

With your permission, I will tape record the interviews to ensure that the information is recorded accurately. You may refuse to have the interview recorded and may request to switch off the tape at any time or remove any data from the tape. Your identity and personal information will be kept entirely confidential and will not be included in any written reports. The results of the study will be written in the form of a Masters thesis and may be published in a scientific journal.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw your participation at any time. Your decision to participate will in no way affect any future help that you may require from NICRO.

Should you have any further questions regarding the research, please leave a message for me at NICRO at (telephone number).

Yours sincerely,

**FLORETTA BOONZAIER**

Please indicate your consent by signing a copy of this letter and keeping a copy for yourself.

I have read this letter and understand what is requested. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX F**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Demographic Information

Name:

Age (woman):

Age (husband):

Religion (woman):

Religion (husband):

No of children:

Employment (woman):

Employment (husband):

Education (woman):

Education (husband):

Relationship length (marriage):

Relationship length (pre-marriage):

Have you ever left the relationship?

If yes, how many times?

Topic Guide

- Can you tell me about your life with your husband?
- Tell me more about the abuse
  - When did the abuse start?
  - How often does it happen?
  - When was the most recent incident?
  - What does he do?
  - What was the worst incident?
  - How does he react after an abusive incident?
- How do you deal with the abuse when it happens?
  - What do you feel?
  - What do you do?
  - How has the abuse affected you?
- What has helped you to cope or been a source of strength in your relationship?
- Can you tell me more about your feelings toward your husband and the relationship?