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Women Mothers Victims of Violence: Narrations on the Effects upon Children if Exposed

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Abstract

The paper discusses women's narrations on the effects violence against them has upon their children, if exposed, and challenges the women's consciousness of these effects. Findings concern the first phase results of the VICTIMS project (2009-2011) on violence against women and its effects on their children, which was designed and conducted in four European countries with co-funding obtained by the DAPHNE III programme. The paper particularly discusses the findings that have emerged from a series of seventeen in-depth interviews that were conducted with mothers from Cyprus,

who have been victims of intimate partner violence. Data have been analyzed mainly qualitatively. Results indicate that, a) there are different levels of mothers' consciousness of the negative effects of children's exposure to violence, b) there are different types of children's exposure to violence, indicated by mothers, and c) mothers report the way their children are traumatized by being exposed to violence against the mother mostly in terms of behaviour, self-image and school-performance.

Introduction

It would be rather reasonable to take for granted that women who suffer intimate partner violence do realize from the beginning of the violence occurrence that it is not only themselves, but also their children who are traumatized by being exposed to violence against them. Still, this is easier said than done, since the way a woman victim reacts and copes with any form of violence is a far more complex construct than it looks and can be affected by a lot of factors; personal, emotional, psychological or even societal factors. In addition, women, victims of violence, are involved in a traumatic experience that challenges and perhaps disproves their previous views and roles, such as their mothering role. Thus, women victims may not recognize that violence against them affects also their children when exposed. Still, children are traumatized since, when exposed, they fear for their lives or for the life of someone they love¹ -- in this case their mother. The whole rhetoric is getting even more complicated if we take into consideration that there are many types of children's exposure to violence² while the effects on children depend on the severity of exposure.³

Therefore, we had to appreciate that making sense of domestic violence is different for victims and non victims,⁴ that is, researchers. Through the VICTIMS project, we aimed to examine women's narrations on the effects of violence against them upon their children, if exposed. To attain this aim, and get an insight to their experiences and

understandings, we used women as our main informants. In this paper, we argue that violence against women victimizes – or traumatizes – not only the women themselves but also their children, who are psychologically maltreated, even if the children are not themselves the target of violence.⁵ Still, the children's exposure to violence against their mother is a traumatic experience which can profoundly alter the way children make sense of the world. So, this study aims to challenge the woman's consciousness on the effects of violence upon children, when exposed, by uncovering these effects through a series of seventeen in-depth interviews with mothers, victims of violence, from Cyprus.

Literature Review

There is a large body of research regarding the women's responses to violence and also the relationship between violence against women and children's exposure. Still, little has been said about the women's consciousness of the effects of violence upon children, when exposed, in relation to both the type and severity of exposure.

What is accepted is that women who experience intimate partner violence in the family setting are under duress, either due to their circumstances, their relationships, or even their social and biological conditions.⁶ This comes to justify the fact that women, victims of violence, who are usually the main support for their children in providing nurturance and protection, may not be able to do so when they suffer violence,⁷ at least not from the beginning of the violence occurrence. Accordingly, women victims often make cognitive errors or start to form irrational beliefs about what they knew or could control prior to or during the traumatic event. The behaviour of a woman, victim of violence, cannot be one-dimensional, since women's behavioral characteristics at the time of the traumatic experience, are controversial.⁸ For example, women may use emotion-focused strategies, which are usually ineffective, since it seems that by doing so women deny the problem, or avoid the stress.⁹ Apart from the denial discourse,

women can respond to violence in a number of other ways, determined mainly by the discourses of blaming self, powerlessness, tolerance, and dependency¹⁰. Such responses may prevent them from realizing the negative effects of violence upon their children.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that some women do make great efforts to protect their children from the horrors of domestic violence.¹¹ With regard to the mothers' consciousness on the effects upon children, if exposed, research reveals that mothers may be able to report on the extent to which their children are "aware" of the violence but may not be able to specify the nature of that awareness. Additionally, mothers may underestimate the extent of their children's exposure to violence because they might be deceived by the children themselves, who may be hiding in another part of the home or pretending they are asleep.¹² Furthermore, mothers tend to both under-report and over-report what their children may have seen, heard, or how much they have been affected in terms of violence.¹³ Some mothers even believe that overhearing the violent incident is potentially even more traumatic than seeing it.¹⁴

However, exposure is a far more complex construct than simply the dichotomy between whether the child observed or overheard the violence or not.¹⁵ According to Holden, there are ten discrete categories of children's exposure to violence, of which some may co-occur, and concern: a) prenatal exposure, b) intervention, c) verbal or physical assault on the child, d) participating, e) eye witnessing, f) overhearing, g) observing the initial effects (e.g., distressed mothers, injuries), h) experiencing the aftermath (e.g., separation from father, living in a shelter), i) being told or overhearing, and, j) ostensibly being unaware.¹⁶ At any event, children exposed to violence are first and foremost considered to be victims instead of subjects in their own lives¹⁷ whereas they are also described as 'invisible victims'¹⁸ or 'unintended victims',¹⁹ even if the violence occurs in their absence. Research reveals a wide range of effects on the child exposed to violence, namely psychosocial outcomes, that is, behavioral, emotional and

psychological problems.²⁰ However, the signs and effects of a child's exposure to violence are as varied as children's personalities, and can be moderated by various factors, such as parental support, type of violence and severity of exposure.²¹ For example, seeing a tolerant mother being beaten may affect a child differently than watching the mother actively defending herself.²²

Still, the question remains: Do mothers, victims of violence, realize that their children are traumatized too, and, how conscious are they of the fact that their children's exposure to violence against them brings on negative effects?

Methodology

The present study is part of the European project VICTIMS titled, "*An indirect harmful effect of violence: Victimizing the child and Re-victimizing the woman-mother through her child's exposure to violence against herself.*" The project VICTIMS was designed and conducted in four countries (Cyprus, Italy, Romania, Slovakia) with co-funding obtained from the European Commission - DAPHNE III programme and coordinated by the University of Cyprus from 2009 to 2011. In particular, this study concentrates on discussing part of the findings that have emerged from a series of seventeen in-depth interviews conducted with mothers from Cyprus, who were currently or had been victims of various forms of violence by their partners. The study aims to discuss women's narrations on the effects of violence against them upon their children, if exposed, and challenge the women's consciousness of these effects. So, the study intended to give answers to the following questions: a) What types of children's exposure to violence do mothers indicate? b) How conscious mothers are about the negative effects of children's exposure to violence in relation to both the type and severity of exposure? c) Which particular effects do mothers identify?

Women who participated in the interviews were selected through the purposive sampling method from different districts all over Cyprus, in both rural and urban areas, with the help of two regional organizations specializing on domestic violence, the Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Office of the Cyprus Police, and the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence. Age, education, family situation and financial status varied for the women. With regard to the interviewee sample, there were both Cypriot (n=13) and foreign women participants (n=4) that is, women from Cuba, Russia, Greece and Romania, who have all lived in Cyprus for many years. Five of the women (4 Cypriots and 1 Russian) were still married with the abuser at the time of being interviewed, ten out of them were divorced, and twelve out of them were in a phase of separation from the abuser and waiting for divorce.

The seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted during an 8-week period from June to July 2010. The interviews were carried out in a neutral place so as to avoid the problem of data reliability. During the interviews, women participants were informed regarding the project's aims, their voluntary participation and the scientific, anonymous and confidential use of data. The written and informed consent of each participant was also obtained. A semi-structured interview guide was used that allowed the researchers to follow certain themes and open up new lines of inquiry. Open-ended questions were formulated on the basis of data obtained by 28 written police testimonies given by women, victims of violence, which were analyzed before the interviews, and of a review of the existing literature on the topic.

The constant comparative analysis method²³ was used for data analysis, through the systematic examination of similarities between the women's views in order to identify emergent thematic units (categories) within and across the transcripts. In addition, content and discourse analysis techniques were used in order to elicit situated meanings and discourses. Emphasis was given both to the form and content of discourses

emerging in the women's narrations; the functions and effects of each discourse were also sought.²⁴

Findings

The analysis of the interview data was an ongoing process, open to the researchers' interpretations, with the main directions given by the research questions. In their narrations, women mothers have reported types of their children's exposure to violence as well as some negative effects they could discover in their children's overall behaviour, both short-term and long-term ones.

The majority of the women stated that, at the beginning, they were not conscious enough that violence traumatized their children as well as themselves. Their first concern was to think how to cope with the problem and what strategies to adopt in order to ensure their survival, especially in cases where there was intense physical violence (e.g., "*...He would beat me all day, he insulted me with offensive words, he was never happy with anything I did... I couldn't react; I acted like a robot...*" [I.11], "*...Most of the times, I was trying to have people at home so as to be protected since this would stop him from yelling and making trouble. Other times though when I was home alone, I suffered tremendous violence...*" [I.8]). Many of the women stated that they needed time, even years, to realize that the violence against them was also affecting their children, both emotionally and psychologically (e.g., "*...I made my daughter suffer a lot with my tolerant behavior... But, when you are hurt and you are suffering, you cannot realize that you are hurting the others around you... that your children are suffering too...*" [I.7]).

Women mothers also talked about the extent to which they believed their children were "aware" of the violence. Through women's narrations, three levels of consciousness were detected: a) *Level 1* = mothers estimated that their children were aware of less than

what was actually happening at home, without being able to show possible effects, b) *Level 2* = mothers said that their children were aware of much that was going on, mentioning that their children were present to the violent incidents and describing their reactions, and, c) *Level 3* = mothers reported that their children were aware of violence, both describing their children's presence and reactions to violence, and reporting the effects of violence.

Regarding the types of children's exposure, the most common reported by women, also identified with some of the categories in the Holden's taxonomy²⁵, and were: a) the child would intervene to help the mother (e.g., "... *One day when I was beaten by him, my son stood up and came to protect me...*" [I.11], b) the child would be eyewitness to the abusive incident, (e.g., "...*children were present when he was knocking the car to unlock it; they were crying...*" [I.8]), c) the child would overhear the violence (e.g., "...*When we fight, my sons are in their room, sitting frightened; but they listen to us and keep telling us to stop fighting...*" [I.4]), d) experiencing the initial effects after the abuse (e.g., "...*He beat me so badly that I had to go to the hospital; my son came with me*" [I.14]), and, e) the child would be ostensibly unaware (e.g., "...*my daughter was at school the time we were fighting; she wouldn't believe me and she kept saying that it was my fault that her father left home...*" [I.12]).

During the interviews, women had been purposefully asked to reflect upon the effects of violence upon their children in relation to both the type and severity of exposure. Still, not all women could easily relate the type and severity of their children's exposure to the observed effects. The short-term effects reported by mothers concerned mostly: a) the children's feelings of terror, fear and helplessness (e.g., "...*My sons were sitting frightened in their room...*" [I.4]), and b) the children's feelings of rejection by the father figure, that is, the perpetrator (e.g., "...*My daughter started crying, she was looking for her dad, she kept making him calls but he wouldn't answer her*" [I.12]).

Through the women's narrations, it was revealed that when the child was ostensibly unaware of the violence incident, he/she would feel rejected by the father. On the contrary, the feelings of fear and helplessness were more intense in cases where the child was eyewitness to the violence. In every type of exposure, though, mothers reported that children felt afraid and insecure.

Some of the longer term effects on children identified by women mothers were: a) their children's adoption of antisocial and violent behaviour both at school and at home (e.g., *"...my son is very aggressive at school, he always has trouble with the school headmaster..."* [I.16]), observed mostly in cases where the child is directly exposed to the physical and verbal abuse of the mother, b) their children's adoption of tolerant behaviour towards violence (e.g., *"...I suddenly went to school and I saw my son to be beaten by some of his classmates without reacting; I was shocked..."* [I.17]), observed mostly in cases where the child sees his/her mother being mostly passive towards the physical and verbal abuse, c) their children's low school performance (e.g., *"...my son doesn't care about his homework; he has many difficulties and all he cares about is football..."* [I.10]), observed almost in all types of exposure, d) their children's low self-esteem (e.g., *"...she is always complaining about herself, she doesn't love herself..."* [I.1], *"...you could see the sadness in her eyes..."* [I.8]), observed in all types of exposure, especially in cases where the child experiences the father figure's contempt for the mother, e) their children's feelings of depression and isolation (e.g., *"...my daughter was isolated, she wanted to take pills so as to kill herself..."* [I.15]), observed almost in all types of exposure, and f) the child's alteration of feelings towards the mother (e.g., *"...my daughter is closer to her father [than to me], she always blames me for being separated from her father, she doesn't want me..."* [I.16], *"...my son wants to know where I go and he always tries to be with me feeling that he needs to protect me..."* [I.13], *"...my daughter tries to do all her homework at school so as to*

spend all her free time with me at home..." [I.12]), observed in all types of exposure, especially in cases where the child sees his/her mother being tolerant towards any form of violence.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine women's narrations on the effects violence against them has upon their children, if exposed, and challenge the woman's consciousness of these effects in relation to both the type and severity of exposure.

The findings show that women participants reported that they would make attempts to minimize the psychological effects of violence firstly on themselves and secondly on their children, when they were conscious about the emotional and psychological pain a child is going through when exposed to violence. As the women argued, however, at the start of the occurrence of violence, it was harder for them to realize that their children were also traumatized when exposed to violence than it was to perceive themselves as helpless victims. Thus, three levels of consciousness were detected in the women's narrations. These range from initial estimation of less than what their children were aware of, to detailed descriptions of effects upon their children. Some women reported that, at the beginning, they underestimated the extent of their children's exposure to violence, because their children were not physically present. At some point in the narration, however, it seems that mothers were getting conscious of the negative effects of violence upon their children (who might be exposed in different ways, from intervening to overhearing violence). In every type of exposure, the children's feelings of fear and helplessness were apparent, although they were more intense in cases where the children were eyewitness to violence, as reported by mothers.

All women, after being purposefully asked, did report on the effects of violence upon their children when exposed, even mentioning examples. Mothers, who mostly suffered

physical and verbal abuse, could observe the aggressive behaviour adopted by their children both at home and at school. Mothers referred also to their children's adoption of tolerant behaviour towards violence, observed mostly in cases where mothers sustained violence without dynamically reacting. These results are very important, and could suggest that the type of aggressive or tolerant behaviour exhibited by children exposed to violence against their mothers may foreshadow these children as future abusers or victims, who will use or tolerate violence respectively in turn. Mothers would also describe the problems their children faced at school in terms of behaviour, self-esteem and school performance, reflecting upon the reasons for these problems, that is, their children's exposure to violence in the domestic sphere.

Conclusions

Findings showed that the women could indicate types of their children's exposure to violence as well as some negative effects they could observe in their children's overall behaviour, both short-term and long-term ones. Still, not all women could easily relate the type and severity of children's exposure to violence against them with the observed effects.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that there are limitations to this study that must be taken into account. Firstly, the data obtained by the interviews were self-reported and partly retrospective, since some women had already left the abusive relationship at the time of being interviewed. Some time had passed since the suffering of violence; therefore, a number of other life experiences could have affected the women's current views and consciousness of the negative effects of violence upon their children. Secondly, women participants did not suffer the same forms of violence and to the same extent; thus, women's experiences and the extent of their children's exposure varied, something that may prevent the generalization of results.

The findings do, however, elaborate on, and allow us to discuss, the types and effects of children's exposure to violence identified by mothers. Finally, they provide clear indications as to how conscious women are of the effects of violence upon their children, when exposed.

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³ Bonnie E. Carlson, "Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: Research Findings and Implications for Intervention," *Trauma, Violence and Abuse: A Review Journal* 1 (2000): 321-342.

⁴ Nancy Berns and David Schweingruber, "When you're Involved, it's Just Different. Making Sense of Domestic Violence," *Violence against Women* 13 (2007): 240-261.

⁵ Joy D. Osofsky, "The Impact of Violence on Children," *Domestic Violence and Children* 9 (1999): 33-49.

⁶ Lorraine Greaves et al., *A Motherhood Issue: Discourses on Mothering under Duress* (Ontario: Status of Women Canada, 2002), 2.

⁷ Joy D. Osofsky, "Prevalence of Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment: Implications for Prevention and Intervention," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 6 (2003): 161-170.

⁸ Nancy Berns, *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media and Social Problems* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 19.

⁹ Rubeena Zakar et al., “Voices of Strength and Struggle: Women’s Coping Strategies against Spousal Violence in Pakistan,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 27 (2012): 3268-3298.

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¹¹ Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 154.

¹² Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 154.

¹³ Anne E. Appel and George W. Holden, “The Co-occurrence of Spouse and Physical Child Abuse: A Review and Appraisal,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 12 (1998): 578-599.

¹⁴ Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 153.

¹⁵ Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 152.

¹⁶ Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 152.

¹⁷ Carolina Øverlien, “Children Exposed to Domestic Violence. Conclusions from the Literature and Challenges Ahead,” *Journal of Social Work* 10 (2010): 80-97.

¹⁸ Osofsky, *Prevalence of Children’s Exposure to Domestic Violence*, 162.

¹⁹ Øverlien, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 86.

²⁰ Katherine M. Kitzmann et al., “Child Witnesses to Domestic violence: A Meta-analytic Review,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 71 (2003): 339-352.

²¹ Stephanie B. Clarke et al., “Intimate Partner Psychological Aggression and Child Behavior Problems,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 20 (2007): 97-101

²² Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 156.

²³ Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded Theory, Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage).

²⁴ James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis. Theory and Method* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

²⁵ Holden, *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, 152.