

**University of Alberta**

**“I’m a Good Mother”: Abused Women’s Resistance in the Face of  
Dominant Mothering Discourses**

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the thirty abused women participants I interviewed who willingly and courageously shared their stories of struggle, suffering, and sorrow. These women's personal stories have helped to render more visible the individual voices and lived realities of women who mother in the social context of domestic abuse.

## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years there has been a burgeoning literature in the area of domestic abuse and motherhood/mothering. However, there is surprisingly little overlap between these two literatures. Both do not specifically consider abused women's subjective mothering experiences, and do not critically examine abused women's mothering in light of dominant ideologies of mothering and individual social contexts. Consequently, there is little knowledge about abused mothers' individual voices and lived realities.

My research attempted to fill these gaps in the literature by examining abused women's subjective mothering identities, the role, influence, and effects that dominant ideologies of mothering have on abused women's subjective mothering identities, and the ways in which intersections among the social context of abuse, gender, social class, and race shape abused women's subjective mothering identities. My research used a qualitative research approach, which consisted of face-to-face in-depth interviews with 30 abused mothers residing in abused women's shelters in Calgary, Alberta.

My research findings build upon Andrea O'Reilly (2006) and Patricia Hill Collins' (2007) critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering. The findings indicate that abused women are also among the groups of marginalized women who engage in "empowered/feminist" mothering as they constructed their mothering identities in ways that resisted the discourses of intensive mothering. I propose that these findings suggest moving beyond O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" and instead towards what I refer to

as “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood” as abused women constructed their mothering identities in ways that not only resisted, but also redefined and replaced the discourses of intensive mothering. The findings also demonstrate that marginalized abused women resisted the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. I propose that these findings indicate that marginalized abused mothers engaged in “motherwork for identity” not merely for their children’s identity as Collins discusses, but also for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity”. My research contributes to research and theorizations of mothering in the social context of domestic abuse by illustrating that subjugated and marginalized women who mother find ways to exercise agency, resistance, and power.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

“You have to be strong to be a mother, it’s a difficult job but it’s also a rewarding job. But when you’re abused it takes away from who you are, and it brings you down. You’re totally beat down and to put those pieces back together on top of being a mother and doing what’s right for your kids, and who’s to say what’s right, every situation is different. You’re coming from a negative situation and trying to better yourself, and you’re lost, and it’s almost like you just want somebody to hold you and lift you up and let you fly away. Still, abused mothers are looked down upon. But it’s easy to sit on the outside and look in and give advice. But actions do speak so much louder than words, and forever in a day they will. There needs to be more out there for abused mothers, finding out what’s really going on, going to the core of the problem, not just trying to scrape the peeling off the apple because there’s still so much more. I’d rather sooth my own soul by knowing something that’s real. It doesn’t take having kids to understand. It just takes being a person and knowing that the other person is a person too. I am a person, please don’t make me feel like a lower class citizen because I’m not.”

This quotation is from one of the thirty abused mothers that I interviewed as part of my research on mothering within the social context of domestic abuse. This 31-year-old white woman who has two children, experienced and suffered years of violence at the hands of not one, but two abusive male partners. Her experience illustrates and reveals the complexity of not only being an abused woman, but being an abused woman who is a mother, and the very little that is known and understood about abused women’s mothering within the social context of abuse. In light of several decades of extensive research on domestic abuse, how much do we really know about abused women? How much do we really know about abused women who are mothers? More importantly, how much do we really know about abused women’s personal meanings and experiences of mothering within the social context of domestic abuse? Unfortunately the answer is- not very much at all.

In the last several decades, there has been considerable academic, policy, and public attention paid to the social problem of violence against women. Violence against women is recognized today as a serious violation of human rights and is a major issue on the international human rights agenda. According to Article 1 of The United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women, violence against women is 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 deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (United Nations, 1993).<sup>1</sup> Domestic abuse is one aspect of violence against women. Domestic abuse refers to a variety of different behaviours, including emotional, psychological, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner (Jasinski, 2001: 5).<sup>2</sup>

Until the late 1960's and early 1970's, domestic abuse was all but ignored by criminologists. The impetus for much of the growth in interest in domestic abuse was the pioneering work of several feminist scholars and activists who focused attention on what they correctly viewed as a neglected area of study

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<sup>1</sup> This widely-accepted definition refers to the gender-based roots of violence, recognizing that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position. It broadens the definition of violence by including both the physical and psychological harm done towards women, and it includes acts in both private and public life.

<sup>2</sup> The language used to refer to violence against women varies from the use of gender-neutral terms such as 'domestic violence', 'partner abuse', 'domestic abuse', and 'spousal abuse', to gender-specific terms such as 'woman abuse' and 'wife abuse' (Radford, 2001). My research focuses on the experiences of women who are abused by male partners within an intimate relationship. As such, I use both the terms 'woman abuse' and 'domestic abuse' to highlight the gendered nature of the abuse, as well as the intimate context in which this abuse occurs. By limiting my research this way, the intent is not to convey that women who are abused in non-heterosexual relationships or in non-intimate relationships is nonexistent or unimportant. Rather, the body of literature that my research draws from and builds upon focuses on the experiences of women in intimate heterosexual relationships.

(Johnson, 1996: xi).<sup>3</sup> This has resulted in the development of a large body of feminist criminological literature on domestic abuse. This literature largely examines domestic abuse as a gendered social problem and in relation to the patriarchal social structure. Recently this literature has moved towards explorations of differences among women's experiences of abuse, women's subjectivities as socially constructed, shifting and conflicting, and discourses as shaping and constructing women's subjectivities. However, this literature does not specifically consider an important aspect of the varied, heterogeneous, multiple facets of abused women's lives- their mothering. As Radford and Hester (2006) indicate, "despite almost thirty years of research into and activism against violence against women, little has been written about mothering in the context of abuse, whether from the viewpoint of women's experiences, of children's experiences, or on the basis of review of social policy and academic discourses (p. 135).

The topic of motherhood and mothering has also emerged in recent years as an important and central topic of academic attention and inquiry (O'Reilly, 2007, p. 1). Beginning in the late 1970's and early 1980's a small number of

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<sup>3</sup> Each year thousands of women in Canada are victims of domestic abuse. Statistics Canada's 1993 Violence Against Women Survey indicates that 29 percent of all women who have ever been married, or who have lived with a man in a common-law relationship, have experienced at least one episode of violence by a husband or live-in partner. This figure represents over 2.6 million Canadian women. Approximately 201,000 women suffered violence during the one-year period preceding the survey, representing 3 percent of currently married or cohabitating women (Statistics Canada, 1993). More recently, according to Statistics Canada's 2004 General Social Survey, an estimated 653,000 women (7 percent) were victims of domestic abuse by a current or previous partner in the previous five years. In terms of the most serious types of violence reported, 23 percent of women reported being beaten, choked, or threatened with a gun or knife by an intimate male partner. In addition, 21 percent of women reported that they were the targets of more than ten violent incidents at the hands of their intimate male partner, 44 percent reported that they were injured as a result of the violence, 34 percent reported that they feared for their life, and 29 percent reported that they took time off from their everyday activities because of the violence (Statistics Canada, 2004).

feminist scholars began to see the necessity of feminist consciousness in order to create a rewarding and disciplined expression of conscience through mothering, and therefore develop a theory of mothering. This has resulted in the development of a large body of feminist sociological literature on motherhood and mothering. This literature largely examines motherhood in relation to commonalities and collectivity in women's experiences, and women's experiences as mediated by their diverse and varied personal contexts. Recently this literature has moved towards explorations of differences among the meanings and experiences of mothers, mothers' subjectivities as diverse and multiple, and connections between ideology, experience, and agency in the lives of mothers. This literature focuses on the ideology of mothering, how it creates compelling but unrealistic standards for women, how it is so pervasive and taken for granted that women themselves are often harshly self-critical, and how it operates as a regulatory mechanism. This literature also highlights that some mothers are more regulated by the ideology of mothering than other mothers, such as working mothers, poor mothers, single mothers, and lesbian mothers, among others.

The ideologies of mothering function as culturally constructed practice, ones that are continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As cultural constructions, their meanings vary with time and place (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 37). These ideologies of motherhood materialize in dominant mothering discourses, which are specific structures of statements, terms, and categories that define how women must mother at given times and places. These dominant mothering discourses are manifested, perpetuated and enforced in

numerous and various ways- from doctors' advice, teachers' recommendations, family and friends' counsel and parenting books, to mainstream media sources such as radio, television, and the internet. As such, in this thesis I use the term 'ideology' to refer to "'systems of ideas'" that are "sociocognitively defined as shared representations of social groups, and more specifically as the 'axiomatic' principles of such representations" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 115). I use the term 'discourse' to refer to "language and other forms of social semiotics not merely convey social experience, but play some major part in constituting social subjects (the subjectivities and their associated identities), their relations, and the field in which they exist" (Purvis and Hunt, 1993, p. 474). In other words, ideology consists of ideas and beliefs systems, and discourse consists of how these ideas and belief systems become expressed, acquired, and enacted through language.

'Intensive mothering', which emerged in the 1980's, is the current and dominant discourse of mothering. According to O'Reilly (2006), intensive mothering defines and promotes mothering in the following ways: 1) children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers; 2) mothering must be provided 24/7; 3) mothers must always put their children's needs before their own; 4) mothers must turn to experts for instruction; 5) mothers are fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; 6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children. Intensive mothering requires more than mere physical proximity between mothers and their children. Mothers are "expected to spend 'quality time' with their children" where "they are told to play with their children, read to them, and take



classes with them” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 40). Women who conform to the intensive mothering discourse are considered “good mothers”, while women who do not conform to the intensive mothering discourse are considered “bad mothers”. This social construction of the seemingly normal, seemingly inevitable discursive classification of women as “good mothers” or “bad mothers” sets up norms for women to meet which have little to do with the real lives of women. Although the feminist sociological literature on motherhood and mothering has begun to examine women’s mothering experiences in light of the ideologies of mothering, much of this literature does not specifically consider domestic abuse as one of the diverse social contexts in which women perform and experience mothering, and does not examine how abused women in specific experience mothering in light of these ideologies of mothering.

Despite the burgeoning literature in both the area of domestic abuse and motherhood/mothering, there is surprisingly little overlap between these literatures. The failure of both of these literatures to address and examine mothering within the social context of domestic abuse continues to persist despite long-standing research findings which indicate that: women with children are up to three times more likely to experience domestic abuse than are childless women; women’s responses to violence, women’s help seeking choices, and women’s experiences with domestic violence interventions are shaped by a diversity of factors, particularly their status/role as mothers; and a large number of residents in women’s shelters are mothers accompanied by their children (Edelson, Mbilinyi, & Shetty, 2003; Holden and Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998; Levendosky and

Graham-Bermann, 1998; Mirlees-Black, 1999). In particular, Statistics Canada's latest Transition House Survey indicates that between April 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008, there were over 101,000 women and children admitted to 569 abused women's shelters across Canada, and that 38,000 (38 percent) of these admissions were children accompanying their mothers (Statistics Canada, 2009).<sup>4</sup> In Alberta alone, there were 14, 582 admissions of women and their children to shelters across Alberta.

In the last decade a small body of feminist criminological literature on mothering within the social context of domestic abuse has emerged given the increasing attention and concern among women's and children's advocates, researchers, and clinicians about the prevalence of abuse experienced by women with children (Campbell and Parker, 1999; Campbell et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2001; McFarlane et al., 2002). This literature examines the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices, the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships, and to a lesser extent the impact of protective interventions on mothering. This literature is useful as it begins to examine mothering within the social context of domestic abuse. However, there are some gaps in this literature. First, this literature does not specifically consider abused women's subjective mothering experiences, and second this literature does not critically examine abused women's mothering in light of dominant ideologies of mothering and

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada's 2009 Transition Home Survey conducted between April 1, 2007 to March 31, 2008 consisted of a survey of 569 residential facilities providing services to abused women and their children in Canada, and collected information on the characteristics of residential services for abused women and their children during the twelve months of operation, as well as information on selected characteristics of the women and children residents on a specified 'snapshot' day (Statistics Canada, 2009).

individual social contexts. Consequently, there is little knowledge about abused mothers' individual voices and lived realities, as well as the effects of dominant ideologies of mothering and individual social contexts on abused mothers' everyday lives and experiences.

I argue that it is important that we begin to study abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering, as well as the ways in which dominant discourses of mothering and membership in different social groups frame abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering. Such research is crucial given that abused women are one group of women who in recent years have become especially stigmatized and unjustly vilified by dominant mothering ideologies for having lived in circumstances of abuse, and therefore having failed to protect their children from witnessing and/or experiencing abuse. As such, to understand abused women's mothering experiences, such must be located in reference to current normative discourses of "good" and "bad" mothering as this influences how abused women experience mothering and subjectively perceive themselves as mothers. Only when we give abused mothers a voice, pay close attention to their everyday lives and realities, and understand the challenges and complexities that they face are we informed enough to contribute to discussions about their unique mothering experiences. My research attempts to fill these gaps in the literature.

My research examines abused women's subjective mothering identities. The specific questions that guide my research include: 1) How do abused women construct themselves as mothers? 2) What discourses do abused mothers draw

from, resist, and negotiate in constructing themselves as mothers? 3) How do intersections of the abusive social context, gender, social class, and race and ethnicity, shape abused women's constructions of themselves as mothers?

My research uses a qualitative research approach, which consists of face-to-face in-depth interviews with 30 abused mothers residing in abused women's shelters in Calgary, Alberta during the months of January to April 2009. My research analysis consists of transcribing and coding the interviews based on patterns that emerge, and building arguments by creating an ongoing exchange between the data and existing critical feminist theory on motherhood and mothering in an effort to reconstruct this existing theory (Burawoy, 1991, p.10-11).

My research draws on critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering in order to construct a theoretical framework from which to examine abused women's subjective mothering identities. In specific, my research, overall, draws on Adrienne Rich's (1986) work which distinguishes between the term motherhood, which refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, and the term mothering, which refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women (O'Reilly, 2006). Rich argues that while motherhood as an institution is a male-defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 11). Rich also argues that in patriarchal culture, women who mother in the institution of motherhood are regarded as "good"

mothers, while women who mother outside or against the institution of motherhood are viewed as “bad” mothers.

My research draws on Rich’s work in order to examine abused women’s personal meanings and experiences of mothering. As such, my research examines abused women’s cultural knowledge about motherhood, and their personal experiences of mothering. Moreover, my research examines abused women’s personal constructions of themselves as mothers in light of the existence and influence of the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood. The findings reveal that abused women’s personal constructions of themselves as mothers are influenced by the patriarchal ideology of mothering, but that many abused women’s mothering experiences are empowering. As such, my research builds on Rich’s work by demonstrating that abused women’s own experience of mothering are a source of power.

Also, my research specifically draws on Andrea O’Reilly’s work (2006) which theorizes mothering and how its potentiality may be realized. O’Reilly argues that patriarchal motherhood must be differentiated from the possibility or potentiality of mothering in order for motherhood to be recognized and experienced as not naturally, necessarily or inevitably oppressive, and more importantly for mothering, when freed from motherhood, to be recognized and experienced as a site of empowerment and a location of social change (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 11). O’Reilly’s (2006) theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” distinguishes between two types of mothering that women engage in- “patriarchal mothering” and “empowered/feminist mothering” (pp. 16, 21-23,

37-38). Patriarchal mothering signifies an acceptance of patriarchal motherhood, while empowered/feminist mothering signifies a resistance to patriarchal motherhood and is characterized by agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity (O'Reilly, 2006, pp. 21-23). According to O'Reilly, marginalized mothers are more likely to engage in empowered/feminist mothering because they have less "resources and status in motherhood", and therefore are more able to "perceive and oppose their oppression" (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 22).

O'Reilly's work raises important theoretical insights that can be applied to the investigation of abused mothers' subjective experiences. However, O'Reilly's work has some gaps. First, O'Reilly's work mostly discusses whether women engage in patriarchal mothering or empowered/feminist mothering in their personal mothering practices, and not in other areas of their lives such as in their personal constructions of their mothering identities.<sup>5</sup> Second, O'Reilly's work does not focus on how dominant discourses of patriarchal motherhood inform, if not define women's personal perceptions of themselves as mothers. Finally, O'Reilly's work does not discuss how abused women are also among the groups of mothers who are marginalized and who are therefore more likely to engage in empowered/feminist mothering. As such, my research attempts to address these gaps. My research therefore draws on O'Reilly's work in order to examine the

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<sup>5</sup> O'Reilly (2006) discuss how feminist mothering must first and primarily be concerned with the empowerment of mothers. As such, O'Reilly (2006) does give attention to mothers themselves and the conditions under which they mother. In this regard, O'Reilly discusses how mothers may seek to liberate themselves from traditional motherhood by living and modeling a feminist life in patriarchal motherhood where they have agency and authority to impart feminist childrearing to their children. However, O'Reilly (2006) does not discuss how mothers may seek to liberate themselves from traditional motherhood in other areas of their lives such as through their personal constructions of their mothering identities.

mothering experiences of abused women, who also constitute a group of marginalized mothers. In this regard, my research examines the dominant discourses of mothering that abused women draw from, resist, and negotiate in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. In specific, my research examines whether abused women engage in patriarchal mothering by accepting the dominant discourses of mothering, or engage in empowered/feminist mothering by negotiating and resisting the dominant discourses of mothering.

The findings reveal that abused women are not only able to articulate the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but are also able to identify and challenge its constricting and oppressive nature. That is, the abused women resist the intensive mothering discourse not just in their mothering practices as O'Reilly discusses, but in the ways that they subjectively construct their mothering identities. This is evident by the fact that the large majority of the abused women engage in "empowered/feminist mothering" by resisting the "bad mother" discourse in three ways: 1) they negotiate the "bad mother" and "good mother" discourses; 2) they draw on and then redefine the "good mother" discourse so that it has more inclusive boundaries; and 3) they reject both the "bad mother" and "good mother" discourses and replace them with experientially-based alternative mothering discourses that they create. As such, my research builds on O'Reilly's work by demonstrating that abused women are also among the groups of marginalized women who engage in empowered/feminist mothering by constructing their mothering identities in ways that outright resist, redefine and replace dominant discourses of mothering. Therefore, abused women resist the

intensive mothering discourse not just in their mothering practices as O'Reilly discusses, but in the ways that they subjectively construct their mothering identities. I suggest moving beyond O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood", which focuses on mothering practices that oppose the dominant discourses of mothering which are male defined and male centered, by moving towards what I refer to as "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood", which focuses on directly redefining and replacing the dominant discourses of mothering so that they are female-defined and female-founded.

In addition, my research specifically draws on Patricia Hill Collins' (2007) work which places race, class, and gender at the center of theorizations of motherhood. Collins (2007) theory of "Intersectionality and Motherhood" upholds that intersections of race, class, and gender frame and shape mothers' experiences across specific social contexts" (pp. 321-325). Collins argues for the need to focus on and examine "motherwork", which is centred on non-white and non-middle-class women's mothering experiences. According to Collins, non-white and non-middle-class women engage in motherwork for identity, whereby they attempt to foster a meaningful and independent identity in their children by either submitting to or challenging dominant race, class, and gender ideologies (Collins, 2007, p. 314, p.321-325).

Collins work also raises important theoretical insights that can be applied to the investigation of abused mothers' subjective experiences. However, Collins work has some gaps. First, Collins work focuses on how non-white and non-middle-class mothers engage in motherwork for the identity of their children, and



not for their own identity as mothers. Second, Collins work does not discuss whether non-white and non-middle-class mothers submit to or challenge other dominant ideologies, such as mothering ideologies. Finally, Collins work does not examine how intersections of race, class, and gender influence women's mothering experiences within the specific social context of domestic abuse. As such, my research attempts to address these gaps. My research therefore draws on Collins' work in order to examine how intersections of gender, class, and race influence whether abused women draw from, resist, and negotiate the dominant discourses of mothering in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. In specific, my research examines whether marginalized abused women submit to dominant mothering ideologies by accepting the dominant discourses of mothering, or reject dominant mothering ideologies by resisting the dominant discourses of mothering.

The findings reveal that marginalized mothers engage in "motherwork for identity" not merely for their children's identity as Collins discusses, but also for their own identities as mothers. This is evident by the fact that abused women who are single women, poor, and non-white are more likely to resist the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. These marginalized abused women resist by negotiating, redefining, and replacing the intensive mothering discourse. As such, my research builds on Collin's work by demonstrating that non-white and non-middle-class abused women engage in "motherwork for identity" not only for their children's identity as Collins discusses, but also for their own identities as mothers. They do so by not only

resisting dominant discourses of race, class, and gender, but also dominant discourses of mothering. I suggest building on Collins theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” by focusing on and examining what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity”, which is the ways in which non-white and non-middle class women engage in motherwork for their own identity as mothers.

Overall, my research demonstrates that the standards of the current dominant discourse of intensive mothering are presented as universal, essential, and timeless, when in fact they are based on a white middle-class model of mothering, which is then used to define and regulate all mothers and create the “good mother” and “bad mother” dichotomy. The voices of the abused women in my study demonstrate that the “good mother” and “bad mother” discourses are not fixed or stable. Rather, the meaning of “good” motherhood is situational and context bound. For an abused mother, “good” mothering may for example mean enduring abuse from her abusive male partner or relinquishing custody of her children in order to ensure the safety of her children. In this sense, mothering is culturally determined, and the meaning of mothering can only be understood in the context of women’s specific lived and material conditions of mothering.

In sum, there is very little knowledge to date about abused women’s personal experiences and meanings of mothering within the social context of domestic abuse. My research begins to develop such knowledge by examining abused women’s subjective mothering identities, as well as the role that dominant mothering ideologies and intersections of gender, class, and race play in shaping abused women’s subjective mothering identities. All in all, my research

contributes to feminist criminological theory and research on domestic abuse and motherhood/mothering by demonstrating that even among the most marginalized and subjugated of women who mother, and even in the most constrictive and oppressive of contexts in which women mother, women find ways to exercise agency, resistance, and power.

## **Chapter Two: Literature on Domestic Abuse, Mothering and Motherhood, and Mothering in the Social Context of Domestic Abuse**

This chapter provides the broad scholarly context for my research study on abused women's subjective mothering experiences. First, this chapter provides a general overview of the literature on domestic abuse and the literature on motherhood and mothering. I point to how both of these literatures fall short of addressing and examining mothering within the social context of domestic abuse. Second, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the current literature on mothering in the social context of domestic abuse. This existing literature is useful as it begins to paint a more complex picture of mothering in the context of domestic abuse. However, this literature has a number of gaps. I argue that the empirical approach that frames most of the research does not allow for abused women's subjective mothering experiences to be revealed. Consequently, I highlight the need for qualitative research that allows for the analysis of women's own narratives. I also argue that the research does not problematize dominant discourses of good and bad mothering, and in fact evaluates abused women according to these normative standards, most often finding deficiencies. As such, I emphasize that in order to capture the complexities of mothering in the context of domestic abuse, research must critically interrogate these normative standards and allow for abused women's agency within their individual social contexts.

### **1) Feminist Criminological Literature on Domestic Abuse**

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the topic of domestic abuse emerged as an important and central topic of public and academic attention and inquiry.

When the topic of domestic abuse emerged at this time it was not because the condition was new. Rather, it took claims-making activities to define this condition as a social problem and to convince the general public that the behaviours we now call 'domestic abuse' were morally intolerable, and that women we now call 'battered women' deserved and required public sympathy and safety. Public awareness of the social problem of domestic abuse grew as a result of feminist activists and scholars' efforts in the amorphous 'battered women's movement', a movement, in turn, often credited to the general women's movement. Feminists argued that domestic abuse provided a powerful illustration of the systematic oppression of women in the context of male domination (Dobash and Dobash, 1979).

Feminists' efforts to politicize the problem of domestic abuse and to aid female victims had two foci. The first emphasis was to challenge the dominant view of the family as a place of safety and stability by drawing attention to the potential for violence and danger. Feminists argued that the distinction between the private and the public spheres perpetuated the oppression of women by protecting the heinous acts of men in the home from social or legislative or sanctions. The second emphasis was the creation of women's shelters as transitional institutions- the bridge between home and the larger society. Feminists argued that women would remain trapped in violent homes unless they and their children could go to a safe place for a short period of time during an emergency or a crisis. As such, feminists mobilized resources to create an alternative to violence (Schechter, 1982). Abused women's shelters were among

the first services targeted to address the needs of abused women. The first shelters for abused women in Canada were established in 1973 and included Transition House in Vancouver B.C, followed by Ishtar in Langley, B.C., Oasis House (now Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter) in Calgary Alberta, Saskatoon's Interval House in Saskatoon Saskatchewan, and Interval House in Toronto, Ontario (Gilman, 1988: 10-11; Hebert and Foley, 1997; MacLeod, 1989; Walker, 1990). From the time the first abused women's shelters opened, feminist activists, scholars, shelter workers, and abused women have been vocal in their demands for research on domestic abuse. This has led to the development of a large body of feminist criminological literature on domestic abuse.

The feminist criminological literature on domestic abuse largely examines domestic abuse according to two main conceptualizations- as a gendered social problem, and as resulting from a patriarchal social structure. The literature that examines domestic abuse as a gendered social problem focuses on how males are the primary perpetrators of violence and women are the primary victims of this violence (Kurz, 1989; Berk, Berk, Loseke and Rauma, 1983; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Pleck, Pleck, Grossman, and Bart 1977-1978; Russell, 1982; Walker, 1979). As such, this literature places the issue of gendered power at the centre of analysis, and is concerned with men's violence against women.

The literature that examines domestic abuse in relation to patriarchal social structures focuses on how male abuse results from historic and current power differentials that keep men dominant and women subordinate, primarily through the use of control, including psychological, emotional, physical, and

sexual abuse (Bograde, 1988, p. 14). As such, this literature attributes male dominance, and the abuse used to sustain it, to male socialization. This literature also focuses on how the acceptance, reproduction, and institutionalization of male abuse in everyday life perpetuates women's subordination. In this regard, the patriarchal ideology of the family, for example, institutionalizes the subordination and control of women by men through the structure of male-female roles. Male partners who abuse female partners do so in order to maintain their dominant position and the subordinate position of females in relationships (Bowker, 1983; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Dobash and Dobash, 1988; and Lenton, 1995).

Recently, the feminist criminological literature on domestic abuse has begun to move beyond examinations of domestic abuse as solely a gendered social problem and a result of patriarchal social structure, towards explorations of differences among women's experiences of abuse, women's subjectivities as socially constructed, shifting and conflicting, and discourses as shaping and constructing women's subjectivities (Browne, 1987; Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Hyden, 1994). This shift in the literature is due to recognition that the etymology of domestic abuse reflected a white, middle class feminist focus on challenging patriarchy within the household, as well as disregarded social dimensions other than gender inequality as key explanatory factors of domestic abuse. However, it is important to note that this literature does not specifically consider an important aspect of the varied, heterogeneous, multiple facets of abused women's lives-their mothering.

## **2) Feminist Literature on Motherhood and Mothering**

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, the topic of motherhood and mothering emerged as an important and central topic of public and academic attention and inquiry. Feminists were the first to identify motherhood and mothering as an area worthy of scrutiny. Early feminist work focused attention on the subjugation of women. These feminists rejected motherhood, as they equated the responsibility of motherhood with oppression (Featherstone, 1999; Firestone, 1970; Price Knowles & Cole, 1990). As such, these feminists believed that "women's self-determination depended on women's ability to control their reproduction" (Chase and Rogers, 2001, p. 6). Early feminist work created a distinction between 'woman' and 'mother' that has benefited women.

Later feminist work focused attention on differences between men and women. These feminists embraced motherhood, as they equated women's procreative potential with moral superiority over men (Featherstone & Trinder, 1997, p. 153). However, this "feminist embrace of motherhood was riddled with tensions" (Chase and Rogers, 2001, p. 14). Some feminists "elevated all women's potential for motherhood to an essential, unifying principle" (Chase and Rogers, 2001, p. 14). Other feminists rejected this totalizing approach to motherhood and sought to draw attention to the value of motherhood without idealizing it (Chase and Rogers, 2001, p. 15). Later feminist work made mothering visible and furthered the centrality of motherhood to feminist theory. Both this early and later feminist scholarship opened up conceptualizations of women's lives in



relation to motherhood and mothering. This has led to the development of a large body of feminist literature on motherhood and mothering.

The feminist literature on motherhood and mothering largely examines motherhood along two broad tracks. The one track in the motherhood literature has a universalistic focus, and consists of efforts to develop a model of mothering that offers breadth and universality, and delineates commonalities in women's mothering experiences (Ribben's, 1994; Ruddick, 1980; 1994). This work emphasizes how, while mothers differ culturally and individually, they share, by definition and condition, a set of activities (Ruddick, 1994). That is, they engage in maternal practice: the nurturing, protecting, and training of their children (Ladd-Taylor, 1994; Leonard, 1996).

The other track in the motherhood literature has a particularized focus, and consists of efforts to develop a model of mothering that draws attention to diversity and variations, and outlines differences in women's mothering experiences. This work emphasizes mothering as mediated by experiences of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age and ability (Baca Zinn, 1990, 1994; Collins, 1991, 1994; Cossman, 1997; Glenn et al., 1994; Luxton, 1997; Stack and Burton, 1993). In this sense, this work draws attention to the sociohistorical, cultural, and economic contexts that shape, in various ways, the activities and understandings of mothers. As such, not all mothers nurture, protect, or socialize their children in similar ways or circumstances

Recently the literature on motherhood and mothering has continued to rethink motherhood by moving towards explorations of differences among the

meanings and experiences of mothers, mothers' subjectivities as diverse and multiple, and connections between ideology, experience and agency in the lives of mothers (Croghan and Miell, 1998; Garey, 1995; Gordon, 1990; Hays, 1996; Little, 1999; Mauthner, 1999; McMahon, 1995; Ranson, 1999; Seagram and Daniluk, 2002). This work begins to point to the complexity of factors that influence women's experiences of motherhood. However, this work does not specifically consider domestic abuse as one of the diverse social contexts in which women perform and experience mothering.

Despite the burgeoning literature in both the area of domestic abuse and motherhood/mothering, there is surprisingly little overlap between these works. Researchers who focus on domestic abuse have not taken advantage of the recent contributions of those who theorize and study motherhood and mothering. Likewise, although domestic abuse is widespread and infuses every aspect of abused women's lives, particularly their identities, practices, and experiences as mothers, it has not been addressed in most of the literature on mothering.

### **3) Feminist Criminological Literature on Mothering in the Social Context of Domestic Abuse**

In the early 1990's, increasing attention and concern arose among women's and children's advocates, researchers, and clinicians about the prevalence of abuse experienced by women with children. This led to the development of two large and separate bodies of literature on the effects of domestic abuse on women and children (Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Follingstad, Brennan, Hause, Polek, & Rutledge, 1991). The literature on the effects of domestic abuse on women found that abused women

were at risk of experiencing depression (Koss, 1990), low self-esteem (Cascardi & O' Leary, 1992), health problems (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986), and psychological distress (Kemp, Green, Hovanitz, & Rawlings, 1995). The literature on the effects of domestic abuse on children found that some children experienced emotional, social, behavioral and developmental problems, and implied that this may be due to abused women's impaired mothering (Christopoulos, Cohn, Shaw, Joyce, Sullivan-Hanson, Kraft, & Emery, 1987; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985).<sup>6</sup> In light of the findings of this literature, women's and children's advocates, researchers, and clinicians have increasingly become concerned about the effects of domestic abuse on women's mothering (Sullivan, 2000, p. 52). This has resulted in the development of a small body of feminist criminological literature on mothering in the social context of domestic abuse.

The feminist criminological literature on mothering in the social context of domestic abuse primarily examines three areas: 1) The impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices; 2) The impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships; and to a lesser extent 3) The impact of protective interventions on mothering (Abrahams, 1994; Buchbinder, 2004; Hazen et al., 2006; Holden and Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998; Jarvis et al., 2005; Krane and Davies, 2002; Krane and Davies, 2007; Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky and Graham-

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<sup>6</sup> Sullivan et al. (2000) state that "the supposition that battering impairs a woman's capabilities has also extended beyond the academic realm of research to include service domains. A clear example of this phenomenon is demonstrated by numerous domestic violence shelter programs mandating parenting groups for all residents who have children. Clearly the message this directive conveys to women is that the experience of abuse universally impairs one's ability to parent. The battered woman, then, is viewed as at least partially responsible for any adjustment problems her children are experiencing (Sullivan et al., 2000, pp. 52-53).

Bermann, 1998; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 2000; Levendosky et al., 2000; Levendosky et al., 2003; McCloskey et al., 1995; Moore and Peppler, 1998; Morrel et al., 2003; Mullender et al., 2002; Sullivan et al., 2000; Zeanah et al., 1999). Although this literature draws primarily on feminist approaches, some of this literature also draws on psychological approaches.

Overall, this literature provides mixed findings. Much of the early research focuses on abused women's mothering deficits and highlights abused women's negative and ineffective mothering abilities. This research portrays abused women as "unfit" mothers simply by virtue of their identity as battered women" (Sullivan, 2000, p. 55). Consequently, this research often stigmatizes abused women by emphasizing their deficiencies in mothering. However, the more recent research calls into question the assumption that abuse universally impairs women's mothering, and therefore focuses on abused women's mothering strengths and highlights abused women's positive and effective mothering abilities. Consequently, this research draws attention to abused women's successful strategies of mothering in circumstances of abuse.

This literature is useful as it begins to examine mothering within the social context of domestic abuse, and therefore makes many important contributions. However, there are some gaps in this literature. First, this literature does not specifically consider abused women's subjective mothering experiences. Second, this literature does not examine the role of dominant ideologies of mothering and individual social contexts. Consequently, there is currently a lack of understanding about abused mothers' individual voices and lived realities, as well

as the effects of dominant ideologies of mothering and individual social contexts on abused mothers' everyday lives and experiences. I argue that it is important that we begin to study abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering, as well as the ways in which dominant discourses of mothering and membership in different social groups frame abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering.

***i) Literature on the Impact of Domestic Abuse on Mothering Practices***

A large part of the feminist criminological literature on mothering in the social context of domestic abuse focuses on the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices. This research examines abused women's experiences of parenting stress, parenting behaviours, disciplinary methods utilized with children, abilities to parent their children, and parent-child interactions (Buchbinder, 2004; Hazen et al., 2006; Holden and Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998; Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 1998; Levendosky et al., 2000; Moore and Pepler, 1998; Morrel et al., 2003; Sullivan et al., 2000).

Some of the research suggests that experiencing domestic abuse has a less than positive influence on mothering practices. These research studies indicate that abused women experience higher levels of parenting stress; exhibit aggressive parenting behaviours; and engage in harsh disciplinary practices which involve the use of psychological, verbal, and physical punishments (Hazen et al., 2006; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 1998; Moore and Pepler, 1998; Morrel et al., 2003).

Moore and Pepler's (1998) study examined the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices by comparing mothers and their children between the ages of 6 to 12 years in four different groups: 1) abused women's shelters, 2) homeless shelters, 3) single-parent families, and 4) two-parent families in the community. The sample consisted of 113 mothers and children residing in abused women's shelters (abused women's shelter group), 82 mothers and children residing in housing hostels (homeless group), 82 mothers and children in single-parent families in the community (single-parent group), and 100 mothers and children in two-parent families in the community (two-parent group) (Moore and Pepler, 1998, p.161). Moore and Pepler (1998) interviewed mothers by administering 4 testing instruments, and interviewed children by administering 3 testing instruments. Moore and Pepler (1998) examined the role that mothers' behaviors play in their children's adjustment. Moore and Pepler (1998) find that mothers in the abused women's shelter group are no more punitive and verbally aggressive with their children compared to mothers in the other groups, but are more physically aggressive with their children compared to mothers in the two-parent group (p.166). Moore and Pepler also find that mothers in the abused women's shelter group who are verbally aggressive with their children are more likely to report higher levels of behaviour problems in their children (p.178). As such, Moore and Pepler (1998) indicate that these findings suggest that in children exposed to domestic violence, mothers' verbal aggression may augment or exacerbate pre-existing emotional susceptibility brought about by witnessing interparental violence (p.179). Abused women may become "too exhausted,

distressed, and distracted to provide their children with the necessary attention, discipline, and affection” (p.179). This study is useful as it begins to examine mothering in the social context of domestic abuse. However, this study does not exclusively examine abused mothers’ experiences, but rather examines abused mothers’ experiences alongside homeless mothers, married mothers, and single mothers’ experiences. Furthermore, this study does not give primacy to abused mothers’ individual voices as their mothering experiences are based on both their personal reports and their children’s reports. It is important to focus exclusively on abused mothers’ experiences and individual voices in order to understand their unique circumstances and the constraints under which they carry out their mothering.

Morrel et al.’s (2003) study provides a greater focus on abused mothers’ experiences. Although Morrel et al. (2003) do not exclusively examine abused mothers, they do examine abused mothers in comparison to only one other group of mothers- non-abused mothers. Morrel et al (2003) conducted a multisite and longitudinal study of the long-term impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. First, they orally administered two questionnaires to 206 women and their children over a two year period who were recruited from pediatric primary care clinics serving low income, urban families. Second, they mailed questionnaires to the children’s teachers. Morrel et al. (2003) examined the mechanism linking maternal history of victimization and disciplinary practices, and children’s behavior problems, social competence, and intelligence. Morrel et al. (2003) find that in comparison to non-abused women,

1) abused women are more likely to report externalizing and internalizing behaviors in their children; 2) abused women's children are not more likely to have behavior problems, to be socially incompetent, and to have lower levels of cognitive development; and 3) abused women are more likely to engage in harsh disciplinary practices, such as using verbal aggression to discipline their children, which in turn lead to behaviour problems in their children (p.29). As such, Morrel et al. (2003) indicate that these findings are evidence of diminished parenting among abused mothers in comparison to non-abused mothers. This study is useful as it begins to direct greater attention to abused mothers' unique experiences. However, in this study abused mothers' individual voices are still adjacent to the voices of other individuals and are not considered in their own right. That is, the abused women's mothering experiences are based not only on their personal reports, but also on their children's reports, and their children's teachers' reports. It is important to focus exclusively on abused mothers' individual voices in order to understand their mothering experiences from their viewpoint.

Levendosky and Graham-Bermann's (1998) study provides a greater focus on abused mothers' individual voices. Although Levendosky and Graham-Bermann's (1998) study also compares abused and non-abused mothers, their study differs in that it examines women's mothering experiences based solely on their personal reports. Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (1998) recruited 60 sheltered abused women and 61 nonsheltered women and their children aged 7 to 12 from urban communities in south-eastern Michigan, USA (Levendosky and



Graham-Bermann, 1998, p. 387). They then (1998) administered a series of questionnaires to mothers on children's adjustment, parenting stress, child domain stress, and domestic violence. Based on this data, Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (1998) examined the effects of domestic violence on women's experiences of parenting stress, as well as the effects of this stress on children's adjustment (pp. 387-389, 394). Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (1998) find that in comparison to non-abused women, abused women experience higher levels of parenting stress (p.392). Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (1998) also find that children whose mothers experience higher levels of parenting stress exhibit more internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems (p.393). As such, Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (1998) indicate that these findings suggest that "the children of women who feel stressed by their parenting responsibilities in the face of domestic violence" suffer more "emotional and behavioural impact." (p.393). In this regard, "increased parenting stress" may cause "mothers to react to their children's behaviors in less effective ways, which leads to more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems" (Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 1998, p.393). This study is useful as it begins to direct greater attention to abused mothers' unique experiences from their viewpoint. Nonetheless, this study mostly examines abused women's perceptions of how their mothering impacts their children. In this regard, abused women are solely considered in relation to their children. It is important to focus on abused mothers' personal accounts of how they view, understand, and carry out their mothering in their own

lives, in order to develop a more clear and holistic understanding of the complex experiences of mothering in the context of domestic abuse.

Hazen et al.'s (2006) study is the only study that focuses exclusively on abused mothers, as well as on abused mothers' individual voices. However, Hazen et al.'s (2006) study is based on secondary data analysis. Hazen et al. (2006) drew a nationally representative sample of families from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a national and longitudinal study of children who were the subjects of child abuse and neglect investigations in the USA. The sample consisted of 2020 abused women who had children between the ages of 4 and 14 years, and who were interviewed about demographic characteristics, community characteristics, mental health, parenting behaviors, experiences with intimate partner violence, and child behavior problems (p. 99). Hazen et al. (2006) examined the influence of abused women's experiences of intimate partner violence, incidents of depression, and parenting practices on their children's behaviour. Hazen et al. (2006) find that abused women engage in harsh parenting practices which involve the use corporal punishment and psychological aggression (p. 106). Hazen et al. (2006) also find that 1) severe intimate partner violence experienced by abused women is associated with child behavior problems; and that 2) abused women's harsh parenting practices moderate this relation between severe intimate partner violence and child behavior problems (p. 99). As such, Hazen et al. (2006) indicate that these findings suggest that abused mothers may have difficulty dealing with children who display behavioural and emotional difficulties and may react by using coercive parenting strategies (p.

106). This study is useful as it focuses on abused mothers' unique experiences from their own viewpoint. Nonetheless, this study, which is based on secondary data analysis and which still considers abused women solely in relation to their children, provides a more general and partial understanding of the complex experiences of mothering in the context of domestic abuse.

Much of the existing research constitutes abused women's mothering practices as deficient, which is problematic. However, some research studies suggest that there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that experiencing domestic abuse has a less than positive influence on mothering practices. In fact, this research suggests that experiencing domestic abuse often has no influence, and even in some cases has a positive influence on mothering practices as mothers tend engage in efforts to compensate for the abuse and to protect their children from the abuse (Edleson, 1999, p. 866). These research studies indicate that abused women show greater positive discipline and warm and nurturing behaviours toward their children; demonstrate an increased sensitivity to their children's feelings, empathy for and protectiveness of their children, and more awareness of how their behaviour may impact their children; are available to their children, closely supervise their children, and use noncorporal punishment with their children; and build a positive and safe emotional reality for their children (Buchbinder, 2004; Holden and Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998; Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky et al., 2000; Sullivan et al., 2000).

Holden and Ritchie (1991) and Holden et al. (1998) exemplify this shift to capturing the complexities of mothering in the context of domestic abuse. Both of

these studies call into question the emphasis on abused women's mothering deficiencies. These two studies point to the fact that although experiencing domestic abuse may affect abused women's well being, it may not affect their mothering. The inclusion of interviews in these two research studies allowed for the complexities of mothering within the context of domestic abuse to emerge.

Holden and Ritchie (1991) examined the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices by comparing abused and non-abused women. They recruited 37 abused women and their children between the ages of 2 and 8 years from an abused women's shelter, and another 37 non-abused women and their children between the ages of 2 and 8 years from an advertisement in a shopping guide distributed in sections of the city where most of the abused women had lived. Holden and Ritchie (1991) matched the abused women to the non-abused women based on their race, their education, and their children's sex and age (Holden and Ritchie, 1991, p.313-314). Holden and Ritchie then used four methodologies: three standard methodologies- one interview, three questionnaires, and a mother-child observation, and one non-standard method- a microcomputer program to collect self-report data (Holden and Ritchie, 1991, p.314). Holden and Ritchie (1991) examined relations between marital discord, parental behavior, and child behavior. Holden and Ritchie (1991) find that in comparison to non-abused women, abused women 1) report that their children have more internalizing behavior problems, more difficult temperaments, and more aggressive behaviours; and 2) report that they have high levels of child-rearing stress, and inconsistency in their child-rearing behaviors (p. 311). According to Holden and Ritchie (1991),

maternal stress is associated with child behavior problems. Despite these findings, Holden and Ritchie (1991) find that there are no differences in the quality of child rearing between abused and non-abused mothers. That is, there are no differences between abused and non-abused mothers in either their use of negative parenting practices such as verbal and physical aggression or positive parenting practices such as reasoning and physical affection. Holden and Ritchie (1991) indicate that these findings suggest that experiencing domestic abuse does not negatively impact women's mothering practices.

In a later study with additional contributors, Holden et al. (1998) provide a more in-depth examination of the impact of domestic abuse on women's mothering practices. In this study, which is based on the same sample and methods used in their earlier study, Holden et al. (1998) examined parenting behavior, behavioral intentions, and child-rearing beliefs (p. 297). Holden et al. (1998) find that even though abused women report higher levels of mothering stress and depression, abused women are no more aggressive, no more punitive, no less affectionate, no less proactive, and no less capable of providing structure to their children than are non-abused women (p.325). In fact, Holden et al. (1998) find that abused women's higher levels of mothering stress and depression significantly decrease six months after the end of the violent relationship (p. 325). As such, Holden et al. (1998) indicate that these findings suggest that there is no evidence of diminished parenting among abused mothers in comparison to non-abused mothers (p. 304). These two research studies make many important contributions. They begin to direct greater attention to abused mothers' unique

experiences as they shift the focus from only examining abused mothers' deficiencies to also examining abused mothers' strengths. However, there are a number of gaps in these two studies, similar to the previous studies discussed above- they compare abused and non-abused mothers, they base abused women's mothering experiences not only on their personal reports but on the reports and/or observations of others, and they consider abused women mostly in relation to their children. It is important to focus exclusively on abused women's mothering experiences, individual voices, and personal lives in order to recognize and document abused mothers' positive strategies while mothering in the context of domestic abuse.

Letourneau et al.'s (2007) study provides a greater focus on abused mothers' individual voices in relation to their mothering experiences, particularly their coping strategies as mothers. Although Letourneau et al.'s (2007) study also compares abused and non-abused mothers, their study differs in that it examines women's mothering experiences based solely on their personal reports. However, like Hazen et al. (2006), Letourneau et al.'s (2007) study is based on secondary data analysis. Letourneau et al. (2007) drew their sample from five cycles of the Statistic Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth by Statistics Canada (cycle 1: 1994-199; cycle 2: 1996-1997; cycle 3: 1998-1999; cycle 4: 2000-2001; and cycle 5: 2002-2003). In total, 3,245 mothers were included in the sample for analysis, 208 whose children were exposed to domestic abuse, and 3,037 whose children were not exposed to domestic abuse. Letourneau et al. (2007) examined the relationship between exposure to family violence and

parenting behaviors. Letourneau et al. (2007) find that in comparison to non-abused women, abused women show greater positive discipline and warm and nurturing behaviours toward their children. As such, Letourneau et al. (2007) indicate that these findings suggest that “mothers of children exposed to domestic violence may indeed compensate for exposure to violence in their parenting interactions with their children” (p. 649). This study is useful as it focuses on abused mothers’ own viewpoints about their coping strategies. Nonetheless this study, which is based on secondary data analysis, compares abused and non-abused mothers, considers abused women’s coping strategies solely in relation to their children, and provides a somewhat limited understanding of how abused women view, understand, and carry out their mothering in their own lives. Consequently, abused women’s viewpoints about other aspects of their mothering are overlooked.

Sullivan et al.’s (2000) study focuses solely on the mothering experiences of abused women, particularly in relation to numerous aspects of their mothering, including their emotional availability to their children, discipline strategies, and parenting stress. Although, Sullivan et al.’s (2000) study is based on reports from both abused mothers and children, the reports from children measure their personal self-concept and self-adequacy and not their mother’s parenting. Sullivan et al. (2000) recruited 80 abused women and their children who were between the ages of 7 and 11 years from domestic violence shelter programs, a community-based family service organization, and a Social Services department located in a mid-sized urban city (pp.51, 56). Sullivan et al. (2000) examined 1)

the degree to which abused women are emotionally available to their children and the strategies they use to discipline their children; 2) how abused women's experience of domestic violence relates to their parenting stress and discipline strategies; and 3) how abused women's parenting, in turn, relates to their children's adjustment (p. 56). Sullivan et al. (2000) find that mothers are available to their children, closely supervise their children, enjoy being parents, and are more likely to use noncorporal punishment with their children than corporal punishment. Sullivan et al. (2000) indicate that these findings suggest that mothers' experience of abuse does not directly impact their level of parenting stress or their use of discipline with their children (p. 51). This study is useful as it focuses on abused mothers' viewpoints about various aspects of their mothering. However, this study still considers these aspects of abused women's mothering solely in relation to their children. Consequently, this study also provides a somewhat limited understanding of how abused women view, understand, and carry out their mothering in their own lives. Abused women's viewpoints about their own personal meanings of mothering are not given importance.

The research studies discussed above did not focus on abused women's individual voices in part because of the research methods that were utilized. That is, these studies often examined abused women's mothering by employing quantitative research methods, such as using standardized questionnaires, which do not allow for the production of individual narratives. Therefore, the complexities of mothering in the context of domestic abuse were silenced.



Clearly there is a need for the utilization of qualitative research methods, which allow for the emergence of abused women's own narratives.

Only two studies examine the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices by using a qualitative methodology. Both of these studies focus solely on abused women's mothering experiences and individual voices. These studies specifically examine abused women's personal meanings of mothering in the context of domestic abuse. The first study conducted by Levendosky et al. (2000) consisted of semi-structured interviews with 61 abused women residing in abused women's shelters, and 34 abused women residing in the community in south-eastern urban and rural Michigan (p.251). Levendosky et al. (2000) examined the effects of domestic violence on how women parent their children, on women's abilities to parent their children, and on what type of parent they are (p. 252). Levendosky et al. (2000) find that most abused women believe that their parenting is affected by their partners' violence. In this regard, abused women reported not only negative effects of the violence on their parenting, but also some positive effects (Levendosky et al., 2000, p.247). More specifically, Levendosky et al. (2000) find that abused women claim that experiencing abuse exacts a toll on their emotional energy, affects the time they are able to devote to their children, and at times results in anger towards their children. However, they also find that abused women claim that experiencing abuse leads to increased sensitivity to their children's feelings, results in empathy for and protectiveness of their children, and makes them more aware of how their behaviour may impact their children. As such, Levendosky et al. (2000) indicate that these findings

suggest that abused women are not helpless victims that are focused solely on their abusive partner's needs, but rather are active agents who mobilize their resources to respond to the violence on behalf of their children (p.247).

The second study conducted by Buchbinder (2004) consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 abused women who sought help from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Unit in a large municipal area in northern Israel. Buchbinder interviewed women three times each for a total of 60 interviews. Through these interviews Buchbinder (2004) examined abused women's perceptions of how their past experiences of child abuse and their current experiences of domestic abuse impact their motherhood (Buchbinder, 2004, p. 309). Buchbinder (2004) finds that 1) abused women make the conscious decision to use the memories of their negative feelings in their family of origin as a driving force to be different as mothers themselves (p.311); and 2) abused women face their past by avoiding violent behaviour with their own children. In this sense, abused women are committed to not repeating the cycle of violence in their own lives (p.315). As such, Buchbinder (2004) indicates that abused women describe a basic mission in their life that structures the core meaning of their motherhood- to repair the negative experiences of emotional and physical distress (Buchbinder, 2004). Such repair is seen as compensating for the past and as building a positive and safe emotional reality for their children's future. This motivation is further magnified in the face of ongoing violence in their current relationships (Buchbinder, 2004, p.320).

Both of these studies are useful as they focus on abused mothers' viewpoints about various aspects and meanings of their mothering and motherhood. However, these studies examine abused women's views of how they carry out their mothering, and not their views of themselves as mothers. Consequently, these studies do not move beyond examinations that provide a general and partial understanding of the complex experiences of mothering in the context of domestic abuse.

***ii) Literature on the Impact of Domestic Abuse on Mother-Child Relationships***

The feminist criminological literature on mothering in the context of abuse focuses to a lesser extent on the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships. This research examines the psychological, emotional and social characteristics of mother-child relationships, mother-child attachment, responsiveness between mothers and their children, communication between mothers and their children, and the quality of mother-child relationships (Abrahams, 1994; Jarvis et al., 2005; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 2000; Levendosky et al., 2003; McCloskey et al., 1995; Mullender et al., 2002; Zeanah et al., 1999).

Some of the research suggests that experiencing domestic abuse is detrimental for mother-child relationships. These research studies indicate that abused women express less maternal warmth towards their children, have disorganized attachments with their children, are emotionally distant from their children, and experience communication difficulties with their children

(Abrahams, 1994; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 2000; McCloskey et al., 1995; Mullender et al., 2002; Zeanah et al., 1999).

Zeanah et al.'s (1999) longitudinal study is the only study that examines the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships by comparing abused and non-abused mothers. Zeanah et al. (1999) recruited 72 mothers and their 15-month-old infants from a prenatal clinic and pediatric clinic of a tertiary referral center serving primarily indigent families in New England (p. 79). Zeanah et al. (1999) then observed interactions between mothers and their children in two laboratory procedures, and interviewed mothers in their homes about their partner violence experiences within a week of the laboratory procedures (pp. 80-81). Zeanah et al. (1999) examined mothers' experiences of partner violence in relation to infant-mother attachment and infant mastery motivation (p.77). Zeanah et al. (1999) find that in comparison to non-abused mothers, abused mothers who experience more serious partner violence are more likely to have infants with disorganized attachments to them (p. 71). Zeanah et al. (1999) indicate that these research findings suggest that abused mothers may maltreat their children, elicit fear in their children, and project their unresolved trauma and mourning on their children (p.83). This study is useful as it begins to examine more specific and concrete aspects of abused women's mothering experiences-their mother-child relationships. However, there are a number of gaps in this study. First this study does not examine women's mothering experiences in light of dominant ideologies of mothering. Second, this study, which compares abused and non-abused mothers, does not take into consideration how they are held to

different socially constructed standards of mothering. It is important to examine the power and influence of dominant ideologies of mothering in order to understand how it impacts abused women's mothering experiences.

Unlike Zeanah et al. (1999), Mullender et al. (2002) examine the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships by solely examining abused mothers and by using a qualitative method. As such, Mullender et al.'s (2002) study provides a greater focus on abused mothers' unique experiences and individual voices. Mullender et al. (2002) interviewed 24 abused women and their 54 children, as well as 14 professionals who were recruited from inter-agency domestic violence forums, Women's Aid groups, women's support groups, and family centres and statutory organisations providing services for abused women and their children in London, England. Mullender et al. (2002) examined the influence of domestic violence on the relationships between abused mothers and their children. Mullender et al. (2002) find that abused women report that the violence affects their parenting, and that the violent incidents and the anxiety of being constantly 'on guard' means that they are exhausted and have limited energy to devote to their children (p. 159). Mullender et al. (2002) also find that women's mothering is orientated "not around what they feel and believe is good for children but around efforts to limit further harm to themselves or their children" (p. 164). As such, the needs and perceptions of women and children are often incompatible and this leads to difficulties in communication between women and their children (p. 167). Mullender et al. (2002) indicate that these findings suggest that domestic violence creates an environment deeply non-

conducive to the mother-child relationship (p. 157). This study is useful as it directs greater attention to the specific challenges that abused women uniquely face in their mother-child relationships. However, this study continues to overlook how dominant ideologies of mothering impact abused women's mothering experiences.

Two studies somewhat begin to direct attention to abused women's mothering experiences in light of dominant standards of mothering by explicitly evaluating abused women's mothering according to specific standards of mothering. Both of these studies examine the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships by solely examining abused mothers. The first study conducted by Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2000) consisted of observations of 95 abused women and their school-age children residing in two south-eastern Michigan communities, some of whom were living in local domestic violence shelters (p. 80). Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2000) examined maternal parenting behaviors and children's behaviors in order to determine the effects of domestic violence on family relationships and functioning (p.82). Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2000) find that abused women's experience of psychological and physical abuse leads to less maternal warmth (p. 90). According to Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2000), these findings suggest that the experience of chronic abuse may deplete abused women of the ability to give emotional support to others, including their children (p. 90).

The second study conducted by McCloskey et al. (1995) differs in that it consists of interviews, rather than observations with abused women. McCloskey

et al. (1995) interviewed 365 abused mothers and their children between the ages of 6 and 12. They recruited abused mothers and their children from two sites: abused women's shelters and the community. McClosky et al. (1995) examined abuse in the home, support and closeness within the nuclear family, and mothers' and children's mental health (p.1239). More specifically, McClosky et al. (1995) examined positive aspects of mother-child relationships, including warmth, kindness, and expressed affection (p.1258). McClosky et al. (1995) find that abused women express less maternal warmth (p. 1258). However, McClosky et al. (1995) find that even when abused women do express more maternal warmth, it fails to buffer children from harmful psychological consequences of family violence (p.1258). According to McClosky et al. (1995), these findings suggest that "when sources of stress reside within the family, and especially when it is so profoundly dysfunctional as to lead to serious displays of abuse, the more affirming feature of abused women's mother-child relationships are "unlikely to help" (p.1258).

Both of these studies are useful as they begin to direct greater attention to the dominant standards of mothering by explicitly evaluating the ways that abused women conform to a specific list of mothering standards. However, these studies do not question these mothering standards. That is, these studies do not question the dominant standard of mothering that 'all mothers should express maternal warmth', but rather evaluate and judge abused women's mothering according to this standard by investigating whether or not abused women express this maternal warmth. Consequently, these studies may reveal the dominant standards of

mothering that abused women are judged against, but they do not critically examine how these standards are social constructions which are imposed on abused women, nor do they examine the impact that these standards have on abused women's personal views of themselves as mothers, their children, and their relationships with their children. It is important to examine how dominant standards and discourses of mothering shape abused women's personal views of their mothering.

Abrahams' (1994) study provides a greater focus on abused women's personal views of themselves as mothers, their children, and their relationships with their children in relation to standards of mothering. Abrahams (1994) conducted a national study where he solely interviewed abused mothers attending family centres in England. Abrahams examined abused women's views about their mothering capabilities and their mother-child relationships. Abrahams (1994) finds that abused mothers report feelings of losing their self confidence as mothers, being emotionally drained and with little to give their children, taking out their frustrations on their children, and experiencing an emotional distance between themselves and their children (pp. 29-30). Abrahams (1994) also finds that these feelings reported by abused mothers are compounded by their children's sometimes difficult behaviours. Abrahams (1994) indicates that these findings suggest that the numbing aspects of the trauma of domestic violence can lead to mothers being emotionally distant towards their children. This study is useful as it directs attention to abused women's personal views of themselves as mothers, their children, and their relationships with their children in relation to standards of



mothering. However, this study does not examine how the standards of mothering are social constructions which are set out by the dominant ideology of mothering, and which are imposed differently on women. As such, this study does not provide an understanding of the complex ways that the dominant ideology of mothering shapes abused women's mothering personal experiences and views of themselves as mothers.

Other research suggests that there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that domestic abuse proves to be detrimental for mother-child relationships. In fact, this research suggests that mother-child relationships often successfully endure through abuse, particularly when mothers receive external social support. These research studies indicate that abused women are responsive to their children, as well as have high-quality and supportive relationships with their children even in the midst of coping with abuse (Jarvis et al., 2005; Levendosky et al., 2003).

Levendosky et al. (2003) examined the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships by examining both observational and self-report data from abused women (p. 275). Levendosky et al. (2003) recruited 103 abused mothers and their pre-school age children from several agencies and programs including: local Headstart preschools, the Family Independence Agency from the Department of Social Services, a local domestic violence shelter, and the general community (p. 278). Levendosky et al. (2003) examined the role of the mother-child relationship on children's functioning in families experiencing domestic violence (p. 275). Levendosky et al. (2003) find that although abused mothers

who are depressed and traumatized by the abuse have lower parenting effectiveness and more insecure attachment to their children, abused mothers who are not depressed and not traumatized by the abuse appear to be compensating for the abuse by becoming more effective and responsive to their children (p. 275). As such, Levendosky et al. (2003) indicate that these findings suggest that “domestic violence may have a positive effect on parenting effectiveness and mother-child attachment. This supports the idea that many women in domestic violence situations are often coping very well with the violence and that they are not suffering from ‘learned helplessness’” (p. 285). This study is useful as it begins to call into question the previous studies which focused on and portrayed abused mothers as “bad mothers” for failing to conform to dominant standards of mothering. This study points to the fact that although in some instances domestic abuse has a negative impact on abused women’s relationships with their children, in most cases it has a positive impact because abused women attempt to compensate for the abuse by forging stronger relationships with their children. However, like the previous studies discussed above, this study does not examine abused women’s mothering experiences in light of dominant ideologies of mothering, and also does not take into consideration how abused women are held to different socially constructed standards of mothering. In this sense, there is a lack of understanding about what abused women personally perceive are the standards of mothering, and whether or not they exercise agency in the face of these standards of mothering.

Jarvis et al.'s (2005) study provides greater attention to the positive strategies that abused women adopt while mothering in the social context of domestic abuse. Jarvis et al. (2005) examined whether or not abused women are active subjects who attempt to compensate for the abuse they experience. Jarvis et al. (2005) studied the mother-child relationships of 30 abused mothers and their children between the ages of 6-12 years residing in domestic violence emergency shelters. Jarvis et al. (2005) conducted individual interviews and psychometric assessments with abused women and their children approximately 3 weeks after they entered the domestic violence emergency shelter (Jarvis et al., 2005, p. 389). Jarvis et al. (2005) examined the psychological distress of abused mothers and their children, contextualized by the quality of their relationship post-violence while residing in domestic violence emergency shelters (p. 389). Jarvis et al. (2005) find that overall, abused mothers and children report high-quality relationships with each other (p. 400). According to Jarvis et al. (2005), these research findings suggest that "supportive maternal relationship serves to buffer against adverse psychological consequences" (p. 391). This study is useful as it points to how abused women are active subjects who attempt to compensate for the abuse by forging stronger relationships with their children even in times of extreme crisis, such as while residing in domestic violence emergency shelters post-violence. Although this study points to how abused women exercise agency in the face of domestic abuse, it does not examine whether or not abused women also exercise this same agency when it comes to the standards of mothering that are imposed on them. As such, this study also continues to overlook how

dominant ideologies of mothering impact abused women's mothering experiences, and how abused women may also be active subjects who question dominant ideologies of mothering.

***iii) Literature on the Impact of Domestic Abuse Protective Interventions on Abused Women's Mothering***

A very limited part of the feminist criminological literature on mothering in the social context of domestic abuse focuses on the impact of domestic abuse protective interventions on abused women's parenting. This research, which gives explicit attention to abused mothers' subjectivity, examines the ability of domestic abuse protective interventions to address abused women's mothering (Krane and Davies, 2002; Krane and Davies, 2007). These research studies, which solely consist of Krane and Davies' qualitative work, suggest that domestic abuse protective interventions, particularly abused women's shelters, do not effectively recognize and address abused women's mothering. These research studies indicate that abused women's shelters are lacking in their efforts to help abused mothers (Krane and Davies, 2002; Krane and Davies, 2007).

Krane and Davies (2002) conducted a case study that involved a combination of participant observation and interviews with 5 shelter staff and 12 former shelter residents over a four year period in an abused women's shelter in a large Canadian city (p. 173). Krane and Davies (2002) examined "feminist practice in abused women's shelters, with particular attention to the extent to which, and how, issues of mothering are addressed" (p. 167). Krane and Davies (2002) find that abused women who are mothers have different interests and needs, but that these differences are not taken into consideration in abused

women's shelters (p. 181). Krane and Davies (2002) also find that intervention in abused women's shelters is based on a woman who is able to pursue her individual needs, heal herself, develop autonomy, establish her right to independence, and ultimately choose to live violence-free and separate from her abusive male partner (Krane and Davies, 2002, p. 186). However, Krane and Davies (2002) note that this intervention model denies various, at times competing, and complex facets of women's lives, particularly in relation to mothering, and therefore fails to also meet the interests and needs of women with children (Krane and Davies, 2002, p. 186). Krane and Davies (2002) indicate that these findings suggest that in abused women's shelters, the social category 'woman' continues to be treated as if fixed, homogeneous, and one-dimensional (p. 186). As such, other facets of abused women's social location- mothering status, race, religion, and so forth- are neither featured nor understood (Krane and Davies, 2002, p. 186). An intervention model that treats 'woman' as an uncontested, taken-for-granted, singular category is one that unwittingly compels a woman to put aside a particular aspect of her identity- mother (Krane and Davies, 2002, p. 186). According to Krane and Davies (2002), failing to shape interventions to respond to women as mothers is to risk failing to end the violence in their lives (Krane and Davies, 2002, p. 187).

Building on the findings of this first study, Krane and Davies (2007) conducted another study in order to examine how shelter staff workers understand mothering. This study provides a greater focus on abused women's mothering experiences in the context of abused women's shelters. Krane and Davies (2007)

conducted participant observations of staff and residents, as well as interviews with 11 shelter staff in an abused women's shelter located in a metropolitan city in Eastern Canada. Krane and Davies (2007) examined the challenges that abused mothers face in abused women's shelters. Krane and Davies (2007) find that abused women residing in shelters are expected to participate in preparing meals and cleaning, but that this creates an added burden on abused women who are mothers, as they must also deal with disruptions in daily routines and the management of children (p. 31). Krane and Davies (2007) also find that shifting the typical challenges of mothering, which include the emotional energy and constant physical effort it takes to manage children, into the unfamiliar and communal environment of a battered women's shelter gives rise to heightened frustration and feelings of ambivalence between mothers and their children (p. 32). Krane and Davies (2007) further find that juxtaposed against these unrelenting demands on mothers is the invisibility of mothering in abused women's shelters (p. 33). When mothering is rendered visible it is subject to idealized constructions and scrutinized through a lens that is highly sensitive to abuse of power and control (Krane and Davies, 2007, pp. 32-34). The message given to abused mothers is that "good mothers should always be available, and their children's needs should always come first, no matter what has happened to them" (Krane and Davies, 2007, p. 33). That is, there is an expectation that mothers "must never allow their own needs to interfere with their maternal duties" (Krane and Davies, 2007, p. 33). At the same time a contradictory message is conveyed to abused mothers, which is that to confront the violence in their lives

abused mothers need to think about themselves, choose themselves, or put themselves first (Krane and Davies, 2007, p. 33). That is, there is an expectation that mothers will “promote” their own “autonomy”, “pursue” their “individual needs”, and “engage in effective decision making to live violence-free” (Krane and Davies, 2007, p. 33). However, this focus on the woman may unwittingly disregard other facets of her complex identity, including her mothering (Krane and Davies, 2007, p. 33). Krane and Davies (2007) indicate that these findings suggest that abused women’s shelters may be lacking in their efforts to help abused women as they fail to adequately recognize and address their unique and complex experiences and needs as mothers (p. 36).

Both of these studies are useful as they begin to examine abused women’s subjective mothering experiences. However, these studies obscure the variability of abused women’s individual mothering experiences. That is, these studies focus solely on how domestic abuse protective interventions, and not membership in different social groups, frame abused women’s mothering. Consequently, these studies do not provide an understanding of the complex ways in which gender, race, and class shape abused women’s mothering experiences. Despite these gaps, studies such as the ones discussed in this section begin to lay the foundation for my own research. These studies, which are based on qualitative methods, give explicit attention to abused mothers’ subjectivity. As such, these studies have influenced the approach I have taken in my research.

#### 4) Conclusion, Limitations and Looking Ahead

The small body of feminist criminological literature on mothering in the context of abuse has made many useful contributions. In sum, on the one hand the research on the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices suggests that domestic abuse has a negative influence on some aspects of abused women's mothering practices. On the other hand, this research suggests that domestic abuse often has a positive influence on abused women's overall mothering practices as mothers tend to engage in efforts to compensate for the abuse and protect their children from the abuse (Buchbinder, 2004; Hazen et al., 2006; Holden and Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998; Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 1998; Levendosky et al., 2000; Moore and Peppler, 1998; Morrel et al., 2003; Sullivan et al., 2000).

Moreover, the research on the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships suggests that although domestic abuse may be detrimental for some mother-child relationships, the majority of mother-child relationships successfully endure through abuse, particularly when mothers receive external social support (Abrahams, 1994; Jarvis et al., 2005; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 2000; Levendosky et al., 2003; McCloskey et al., 1995; Mullender et al., 2002; Zeanah et al., 1999).

Finally, the research on the impact of domestic abuse protective interventions on abused women's mothering suggests that the protective interventions of abused women's shelters fail to effectively recognize and address abused women's mothering (Krane and Davies, 2002; Krane and Davies, 2007).



The feminist criminological literature on mothering in the context of abuse has directed greater attention to the issue of mothering in an abusive social context. However, this literature has a number of gaps. First, this research, which is mostly empirical, does not specifically consider abused women's subjective mothering experiences. Most of this research is not based on claims made by abused mothers themselves, but rather is deduced largely from claims made by others about abused mothers, such as by shelter staff, child protection staff, the children of mothers, legislative reviews, and researchers' observations of abused mothers and their children. Consequently, explicit interest and attention paid to abused mothers' individual voices and lived realities is mostly absent from this research. For example, the research on the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices focuses on how abused women practice mothering (their abilities, behaviours and interactions as mothers) and not on how abused women personally perceive their mothering (Buchbinder, 2004; Hazen et al., 2006; Holden and Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998; Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 1998; Levendosky et al., 2000; Moore and Pepler, 1998; Morrel et al., 2003; Sullivan et al., 2000). As such, little is known about abused women's various, diverse, and multiple discursive constructions of themselves as mothers. This limitation raises a number of questions: How do abused women personally perceive their mothering? How are abused women's personal perceptions of their mothering experiences similar or different?

My research moves beyond this current research which does not provide nor contribute to a conceptual space where the challenges, struggles, and difficulties

of mothering in the context of abuse can be discussed freely, by putting abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering at the forefront and making their subjectivity visible. My research, which is based on a qualitative method, focuses on abused women's subjective mothering experiences in order to investigate how abused women construct themselves as mothers.

Second, this research does not consider the role, influence, and effects that dominant ideologies of mothering have on abused women, and the ways in which abused women accept, reject, or negotiate these dominant ideologies of mothering. Rather, most of this research simply holds abused women to the socially constructed standards of dominant ideologies of mothering, and questions the deviance of abused mothers instead of the institution of motherhood. Consequently, this research overlooks how dominant ideologies of mothering hold abused women to socially constructed standards of "good" or "bad" mothering, and how evaluating and judging abused women's mothering according to these socially constructed standards of "good" or "bad" mothering is taking them for granted and reifying them. In this regard, explicit concern and attention paid to the role that dominant ideologies of mothering play in abused mothers' everyday lives and experiences is missing from this research. For example, the research on the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships focuses on the quality and characteristics of abused mothers' relationships with their children (their responsiveness, attachment, and communication as mothers), and not on the role that dominant ideologies of mothering play in shaping abused mothers' personal perceptions of themselves as mothers, their children, and their

relationships with their children (Abrahams, 1994; Jarvis et al., 2005; Levendosky and Graham-Bermann, 2000; Levendosky et al., 2003; McCloskey et al., 1995; Mullender et al., 2002; Zeanah et al., 1999). Therefore, little is known about abused women as active subjects who ensure their and their children's safety, protection, and well being regardless of the context of abuse in which they find themselves. This limitation also raises a number of important questions: What role does the ideology of mothering play in the lives of abused women who are mothers? How are abused women's lives shaped by the ideology of mothering discourses?

My research moves beyond this current research which does not highlight the influence that historically specific systems of meaning have on abused women, by directing attention to the ways in which abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering is framed. My research focuses on the role, influence, and effects that dominant ideologies of mothering have on abused women's lives in order to investigate what discourses abused mothers draw from, resist, and negotiate in constructing themselves as mothers.

Third, this research does not consider the role, influence, and effects that abused women's individual social contexts have on their mothering, and the ways in which various aspects their individual social contexts intersect to influence their mothering experiences. Most of this research focuses solely on how domestic abuse itself and domestic abuse intervention protective interventions, and not membership in different social groups, frame abused women's mothering. Consequently, missing from this research is how abused women's mothering is

constructed, performed, and experienced through often subordinated positions within gender, race, and class relations. For example, the research on how domestic abuse protective interventions impact abused women's mothering focuses on how shelters shape abused women's mothering, but not on how abused women's individual social context (their gender, race, and class) shape their personal perceptions of their mothering experiences (Krane and Davies, 2002; Krane and Davies, 2007). Therefore, little is known about the specific and divergent contexts in which abused women carry out and experience their mothering. This limitation raises the following questions: How are abused women's mothering experiences shaped by their individual social contexts? How do various elements of abused women's individual social context intersect to influence their mothering experiences?

My research moves beyond this current research which does not emphasize the importance of the various and diverse aspects of abused women's lives, by exploring variations in abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering. My research focuses on the role, influence, and effects that individual social context has on abused women's lives in order to investigate how intersections of gender, race, and class shape abused women's constructions of themselves as mothers.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology that I used to carry out my research on abused women's subjective mothering identities. This chapter provides a general description of the purpose of my research, the theoretical framework guiding my research, and the procedures of the research design, data collection and data analysis.

### **1) Purpose of Research**

#### ***i) Research Objectives***

The overall objective of my research is to examine abused women's subjective mothering identities, the role, influence, and effects that dominant ideologies of mothering have on abused women's subjective mothering identities, and the ways in which intersections among the social context of abuse, gender, social class, and race shape abused women's subjective mothering identities.

#### ***ii) Research Questions***

The specific questions that guide my research include:

- 1) How do abused women construct themselves as mothers?
- 2) What discourses do abused mothers draw from, resist, and negotiate in constructing themselves as mothers?
- 3) How do intersections of the abusive social context, gender, social class, and race and ethnicity, shape abused women's constructions of themselves as mothers?

## **2) Theoretical Framework Guiding Research**

In order to examine abused women's subjective mothering identities, I constructed a theoretical framework which draws on critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering. In specific, my theoretical framework draws on the work of Adrienne Rich (1986), Andrea O'Reilly (2006), and Patricia Hill Collins (2007).

Rich, O'Reilly, and Collins all develop, put forth, and utilize a feminist standpoint epistemology on mothering. Feminist standpoint epistemology is a philosophy of knowledge building that sees and understands the world through the eyes and experiences of members of oppressed groups (namely women), uncovers the hidden knowledge that women have cultivated from living life on the margins, and applies the vision and knowledge of women to social activism and social change. Feminist standpoint epistemology is both a theory of knowledge building and a method of doing research- an approach to knowledge construction and a call to political action. On the one hand, feminist standpoint epistemology requires placing women at the center of the research process. Women's concrete experiences provide the starting point from which to build knowledge. Feminist standpoint scholars emphasize the need to begin with women's lives as they themselves experience them, in order to achieve an accurate and authentic understanding of what life is like for women. Building knowledge from women's actual or concrete life experiences is acutely important, feminist standpoint scholars argue, if we hope to repair the historical trend of women's misrepresentation and exclusion from the dominant knowledge canons. Only by

making women's concrete life experiences the primary source of our investigations can we succeed in constructing knowledge that accurately reflects and represents women. On the other hand, feminist standpoint epistemology challenges us to critically examine society through women's eyes. Women's experiences and the knowledge garnered from these experiences can be used as a means to draw attention to the inequalities and injustices in society as a whole.

Criticism of early feminist standpoint epistemology has come from postmodern feminist scholars who argue that there is no concrete women's experience from which to construct knowledge. That is, the lives of women across space and time are so diverse it is impossible to generalize about their experiences, and therefore such feminist standpoint epistemology is not useful. However, Rich, O'Reilly, and Collins move beyond this early feminist standpoint epistemology by recognizing and arguing that there is no one single or universal "women's experience" (Hekman, 2004, p. 227). Rather, there is a multiplicity of epistemically informative situated standpoints (Hekman, 2004). As such, they assert that a feminist standpoint epistemology which acknowledges and takes into account a diverse array of women's experiences is indeed useful. Rich, O'Reilly, and Collins also recognize and argue that there are important things to learn from taking seriously the perspectives of all marginalized groups. They assert that individuals are both oppressed in some situations and in relation to some people, while at the same time are privileged in others. As such, they situate women

within multiple systems of domination in a way that is more accurate and more able to confront oppressive power structures.<sup>7</sup>

Although Rich, Collins and O'Reilly address issues of power and how the experiences of women reveal these issues of power, there are some differences in their feminist standpoint epistemologies on mothering. These differences have implications for the conceptual framework that I constructed to examine abused women's subjective mothering identities

***i) Adrienne Rich - "Motherhood as Institution and Mothering as Experience"***

Adrienne Rich's (1986) work in *Of Woman Born* distinguishes "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction- and to children; and the *institution*- which aims at ensuring that that potential- and all women- shall remain under male control" (p. 13). According to Rich, the term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women (O'Reilly, 2006). Rich argues that the reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of feminist mothering. In other words, while motherhood, as an

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Comack, while highlighting the epistemological tensions between standpoint and post-modern feminism, explicitly refuses "to choose sides" between them. Rather, she sees feminism's current ambivalence between scientific (modernist) and more fluid, specific (postmodern) approaches as a positive development, reflecting what Sandra Harding describes as, "the different, sometimes conflicting, legitimate political and theoretical needs of women today" (Harding, 1990, p. 86). Describing the tensions between standpoint and post modern stances as partly a result of confusion over the meaning of "standpoint", she distinguishes "women's standpoint"- meaning knowledge "for women" or women's experiences of their lives, from "feminist standpoint"- meaning knowledge which is produced about women's experiences.



institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 11). Rich (1986) explains that the patriarchal institution of motherhood "has a history, it has an ideology", and "for most of what we know as the 'mainstream' of recorded history...motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (pp.13, 33). As such, Rich (1986) indicates that "to destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood", but rather "it is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination and conscious intelligence, as any difficult, but freely chosen work" (p. 280).

Rich also argues that in patriarchal culture, women who mother in the institution of motherhood are regarded as "good" mothers, while women who mother outside or against the institution of motherhood are viewed as "bad" mothers. As such, Rich states that mothers, in order to resist patriarchal motherhood and achieve empowered mothering must be "bad mothers" or "mother outlaws" (Rich, 1986). In this regard, Rich defines empowered mothers as "good mothers" and patriarchal mothers as "bad mothers".

My research, overall, draws on Rich's work in order to examine abused women's personal meanings and experiences of mothering. As such, my research examines abused women's cultural knowledge about motherhood, and their personal experiences of mothering. Moreover, my research examines abused women's personal constructions of themselves as mothers in light of the existence and influence of the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood. As such,

my research builds upon Rich's work by examining the ways in which abused women's own experience of mothering can be a source of power.

**ii) Andrea O'Reilly - *"Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood"***

Andrea O'Reilly's (2006) theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood", which is a transgressive/transformative theory and practice of maternity, builds upon Rich's (1986) work which distinguishes between 'motherhood' and 'mothering', by theorizing mothering and how its potentiality may be realized.<sup>8</sup> O'Reilly argues that patriarchal motherhood must be differentiated from the possibility or potentiality of mothering in order for motherhood to be recognized and experienced as not naturally, necessarily or inevitably oppressive, and more importantly for mothering, when freed from motherhood, to be recognized and experienced as a site of empowerment and a location of social change (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 11).

O'Reilly argues that patriarchal motherhood is manifested in ideology, and therefore functions as a master discourse that defines how women must mother. The ideologies of patriarchal motherhood function as culturally constructed practices, ones that are continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. The current ideology of patriarchal motherhood is intensive mothering, and sets out demands of "good motherhood" which reflects and reinforces an inherently child-centred perspective. In specific, the ideology of

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<sup>8</sup> According to O'Reilly, although Rich's work does not describe or theorize mothering, it does distinguish mothering from motherhood and identify the potential empowerment of mothering, which has enabled feminists to envision empowered mothering for women, and made possible later feminist work on mothering, particularly those that analyzed mothering as a site of power and resistance for women. For many scholars, this is the true legacy of Rich's work (O'Reilly, 2006, p.35).

intensive mothering dictates that: 1) children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; 2) this mothering must be provided 24/7; 3) the mother must always put children's needs before her own; 4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; 5) the mother is fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; and finally, 6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children (O'Reilly, 2006, p.43). Each demand is predicated on the eradication, or at very least, sublimation of a mother's own selfhood and in particular her agency, autonomy, authenticity, and authority.

The ideology of intensive mothering is the mode of motherhood by which all mothers are regulated, evaluated, and judged. Women who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering are considered "good mothers", while women who do not conform to the ideology of intensive mothering are considered "bad mothers". The social construction of the seemingly normal, seemingly inevitable discursive classification of women as "good mothers" or "bad mothers" sets up norms for women to meet which have little to do with the real lives of women. However, O'Reilly indicates that mothers do challenge the demands of intensive mothering and the mandate of powerless responsibility (O'Reilly, 2006, 46). In this regard, O'Reilly distinguishes between two types of mothering that women engage in- "patriarchal mothering and empowered/feminist mothering" (O'Reilly, 2006, pp. 16, 37-38). Patriarchal mothering signifies an acceptance of patriarchal motherhood, while empowered/feminist mothering signifies a resistance to patriarchal motherhood and is characterized by agency, authority, autonomy and

authenticity (O'Reilly, 2006, pp. 21-23). More specifically, empowered/feminist mothering consists of mothering practices that resist patriarchal motherhood, and therefore marks the movement from motherhood to mothering and makes possible a mothering against patriarchal motherhood (O'Reilly, 2008, 4). According to O'Reilly, the agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity of empowered/feminist mothering are as available to marginalized women as they are to women of privilege, and in fact are more evident in the mothering practices of mothers who are young, lesbian, poor, or women of colour. This is because privileged women with more resources and status in motherhood are often less able or likely to perceive and oppose their oppression (O'Reilly, 2006).

O'Reilly's work raises important theoretical insights that can be applied to the investigation of abused mothers' subjective experiences. As such, my research specifically draws on O'Reilly's theory in order to examine the mothering experiences of abused women, who also constitute a group of marginalized mothers. My research examines the dominant discourses of mothering that abused women draw from, resist and negotiate in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. In specific, my research examines whether abused women engage in patriarchal mothering by accepting the dominant discourses of mothering, or engage in empowered/feminist mothering by negotiating and resisting the dominant discourses of mothering.

### ***iii) Patricia Hill-Collins - "Intersectionality and Motherhood"***

Patricia Hill Collins' (2007) theory of "Intersectionality and Motherhood" builds upon feminist theory on motherhood by placing race, class, and gender at

the center of her theorization of motherhood. Collins argues that “motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender” (Collins, 2007, p. 311). As such, Collins indicates that intersectionality “provides an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race, class, and gender frame and shape mothers’ experiences across specific social contexts” (Collins, 1994, p. 208). As such, intersectionality “provides an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of, for example, race and class, or race and gender, or gender and class, position mothers within unjust power relations and does so in a way that introduces added complexity to formerly race-, class-, and gender-only approaches” to motherhood (Collins, 1994, p.205). Collins emphasizes the importance of developing a contextual and specific analysis of mothers with a view to theorizing hierarchies of intersectionality, such that various oppressions are not deemed to be equivalent. Shifting attention to the varying placements of mothers in systems of privilege or non-privilege, whether race, class, or gender, generates divergent understandings of the varied experiences of mothering (Collins, 1994).

Collins also argues for the need to focus on and examine “motherwork”, a term she “uses to soften the existing dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood which is centered on white and middle-class women’s mothering experiences, and which therefore posts rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as individual autonomy and identity growing from the collective self-determination of one’s group” (Collins, 2007, p. 313). Such rigid distinctions reveal themes of

mothering which include connections among mothering, aggression, and death; the effects of maternal isolation on mother-child relationships within nuclear family households; maternal sexuality; relationships among family members; all-powerful mothers as conduits for gender oppression; and the possibilities of an idealized motherhood freed from patriarchy (Collins, 2007, P. 313-314).

However, focusing on and examining motherwork which is centred on non-white and non-middle-class women's mothering experiences (such as African-American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian-American women's mothering experiences), merges and interconnects private-public, family-work, individual-collective, and identity as individual autonomy-collective self-determination. As a result, different themes of mothering emerge. Themes of "survival, power, and identity" come to light and reveal how women of colour and of lower social classes encounter and shape motherwork (Collins, 2007, p.314).

In discussing the theme of 'motherwork and identity', Collins indicates that a dialectical relationship exists between on the one hand, systems of racial and class oppression designed to strip subordinated groups of personal identity and a sense of collective peoplehood, and on the other hand, the cultures of resistance extant in various racial and class groups that resist the oppression by maintaining an independent identity (Collins, 2007). For women of color and of lower social class, 'motherwork for identity' occurs at this critical juncture (Collins, 2007, p.322). Collins discusses two dimensions of the mothering tradition of women of colour and of lower social classes: 1) Fostering a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of

colour; 2) Equipping children with skills to confront the contradiction of the larger effort to assimilate racial children, and to challenge systems of racial oppression (Collins, 2007, p.321-322). In this regard, Collins indicates that mothers make varying choices in negotiating the complicated relationship of preparing to fit into, yet resist, systems of race and class domination. Some mothers submit to racist, class, and sexist ideologies by remaining powerless in the face of oppressive external forces, by becoming unwitting conduits of the oppressive dominant ideology, or by choosing to fit in for reasons of survival. However, other mothers espouse sophisticated skills that facilitate the appearance of being submissive while at the same time being able to challenge inequality (Collins, 2007, p.324-325). For women of colour and of lower social class, the struggle to maintain an independent identity takes many forms and is mediated by membership in different racial and social class groups.

Collins work also raises important theoretical insights that can be applied to the investigation of abused mothers' subjective experiences. As such, my research also specifically draws on Collins' theory in order to examine how intersections of gender, class, and race influence whether abused women draw from, resist, and negotiate the dominant discourses of mothering in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. In specific, my research examines whether marginalized abused women submit to dominant mothering ideologies by accepting the dominant discourses of mothering, or reject dominant mothering ideologies by resisting the dominant discourses of mothering.

### **3) Research Design**

#### ***i) Qualitative Research***

Due to the lack of existing research on mothering within the social context of domestic abuse, I chose to conduct my research using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is an ideal choice as it provides the necessary design and format to achieve a depth of understanding not possible with quantitative research. Also, qualitative research methods lend themselves to research endeavors that aim to grasp individuals' perceptions, experiences, and the ways that they interpret and "act toward the "realities" that constitute their everyday worlds (Sandstrom et al, 2010, p. 13; Weiss, 1994). Using a qualitative research approach enabled me to give a voice to abused women's mothering experiences, and understand abused women's mothering experiences as complex, varied, contradictory, and fragmented (Cosgrove, 2003).

#### ***ii) Face-to-Face In-Depth Interviews***

The specific qualitative research approach that I chose to conduct for my research consists of face-to-face in-depth interviews. The interviewing style that I employed is similar to the style outlined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), referred to as "free association, narrative" interviews. This type of interviewing technique recognizes that participants' narratives are co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee. As such, the focus is on eliciting narratives that are meaningful to the participant. As the researcher, I asked questions that were focused on story telling (for example, "Please tell me about your mothering experiences while you were in an abusive relationship"), and I listened to the



narrative. I also asked probe questions that drew on the language of the participant and that were presented in the order that the narrative followed in order to preserve the flow and meaning making of the participant.

The face-to-face in-depth interviews were unstructured, open-ended, and in conversational style. The interviews were informally guided by an interview schedule that consisted of open-ended questions. The interview schedule covered five broad areas: 1) sociodemographic information; 2) abuse experiences; 3) mothering experiences; 4) mothering in the context of domestic abuse; and 5) mothering experiences in the context of domestic abuse and dominant mothering discourses (see Appendix A for the “Interview Schedule”). I invited the abused mothers to tell their stories, and used prompts where necessary. I asked the participants to talk about themselves and their immediate families, their experiences being in abusive relationships, their experiences as mothers, their mothering experiences in the context of abuse, their perceptions of their mothering identities and their perceptions of dominant mothering discourses. The open-ended questions in each of these areas gave both myself and the participant the freedom to take the conversation in unplanned directions to explore more deeply the themes under investigation.

#### **4) Data Collection**

##### ***i) Ethics***

Conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews with abused women (research on human subjects) necessitated ethical approval. As such, I applied for and was granted ethical approval for my research study from the Research Ethics Board

(REB) in October 2008. In keeping with REB requirements, all interviews were conducted with informed and voluntary consent. Before the interview, I gave participants an information page explaining the purpose and nature of my study (see Appendix B for the “Description of Research Project”). I explained my study to participants and answered any questions they had regarding my study. I then gave participants a consent form (see Appendix C for the “Consent Form”). I explained the consent process and the voluntary nature of my study to participants prior to asking for their written consent to the interview. Again, in keeping with REB requirements, all participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality. I explained to participants that their identities would remain anonymous and that the information they shared with me during the interview would remain confidential. As such, all interview excerpts included in this dissertation rely on the use of participant pseudonyms. Finally, I provided participants with a list of counseling services that they could contact should they become distressed after the interview (see Appendix D for the “List of Counseling Services”).

## ***ii) Recruitment***

I recruited participants for my study from abused women’s shelters in Calgary, Alberta and surrounding areas. Abused women’s shelters provided an accessible population of abused women from which to recruit participants. I recruited participants from nine different abused women’s shelters located in various parts of the city and outlying areas. This enabled me to obtain a representative group of abused mothers from a variety of age, education, racial/ethnic, and income positions.

I began the recruitment process by first, contacting the Chair of the abused women's shelters in Calgary, Alberta and requesting assistance with recruiting participants in the shelters. Contacting the Chair was facilitated through the close associations that I have established with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters in Alberta while working, since 2004, as a Research Assistant on "The Healing Journey: A Longitudinal Study of Women Affected by Intimate Partner Violence", a SSHRC-CURA funded tri-provincial research study. The Chair asked that I email her a letter of request introducing myself, detailing my study, and explaining the specific ways that I would like the shelters to assist me with recruiting participants. In the letter of request I asked that the shelter directors assist me with recruiting participants by 1) putting up posters which advertised my study in the shelter, and 2) having the Outreach Workers hand out postcards which advertised my study to former residents who no longer resided in the shelter but still received outreach support. I provided scanned copies of the posters and postcards that I would send to them. The posters and postcards asked women who had experienced abuse and who were mothers to call to participate in a study that seeks to learn about their mothering stories. I provided both a local number and an email address for women to contact me. The Chair then emailed my letter of request and copies of my posters and postcards to each of the shelter directors (see Appendix E for the "Letter of Request to the Shelter Directors", Appendix F for the "Poster", and Appendix G for the "Postcard"). Two weeks later, I mailed this same letter along with the actual posters and postcards to each of the shelter directors.

Seven of the nine shelter directors responded to my letter of request by contacting me through either email or phone. Some of the shelter directors requested that I provide them with additional information about my study by emailing them, calling them, or meeting with them in person. All seven of the shelter directors that contacted me agreed to assist me with recruiting participants in their shelter. I also personally contacted, via phone, the two shelter directors who had not at that point contacted me to respond to my letter of request. Both of these shelter directors also agreed to assist me with recruiting participants in their shelter.

After all nine shelter directors agreed to assist me with recruiting participants in the shelters, I then contacted them via phone to ask if I could interview the participants in a private room within the shelter, so as to ensure the privacy and safety of both the participants and myself as the researcher. All nine shelters agreed. The shelter staff granted me access to a private room in the shelter on the days that I met and interviewed participants. As such, twenty-nine of the thirty interviews took place within the shelter where the participant was currently residing or had resided. Only one participant requested that the interview take place outside of the shelter. This participant was no longer residing in the shelter, and therefore requested that we conduct the interview in a private room at her place of employment during her lunch break, as this was more convenient for her. Given that this location was an equally private and safe place in which to conduct the interview, I agreed to this request.

### *iii) Interviews*

Within just days of the shelters posting my posters and distributing my postcards, I began and continued to receive a flood of phone calls and emails from participants who were interested in participating in my study. When a prospective participant called I began by introducing myself, describing my study, giving a rough outline of what the interview would entail, and asking the woman if she had any specific questions for me. After confirming that the woman had experienced abuse and was a mother, I scheduled an interview. Overall, 44 women contacted me to participate in my study (36 women contacted me by phone and 8 women contacted me by email). Of these 44 women, 5 women scheduled a date and time to meet with me for the interview, but when I went to the shelter on the scheduled day and time, they had decided to leave the shelter for undisclosed reasons; 4 women called and said that they needed to cancel their scheduled interviews and would call back to reschedule but never did; 3 women cancelled the day before their interview as they stated that after much thought they felt that talking about their abuse experiences would be too traumatizing; and 2 women called after I had completed all of my interviews. As such, in total I interviewed 30 women. However, when I began transcribing my interviews I realized that one of the interviews did not record, which I believe may have been due to a technological problem with the digital voice recorder. Therefore, my discussion is based on a total of 29 interviews.

Interviews took place between the months of January and April 2009. The interviews ranged in length from one and a half hours to three and a half hours.

Most interviews were approximately two and a half hours. All interviews were recorded, with the women's permission, using a digital voice recorder. At the end of each interview I gave the participant a thank you card with a \$50 honorarium. After I completed the recruitment and interview process, I sent a thank you letter to each of the shelters for assisting me with recruiting participants.

#### ***iv) Experience as Researcher***

The interview process was painful for the women participants. All of the women talked about how their abuse experiences brought back hurtful memories, memories which were more recent for some than for others. Consequently, it was often difficult for the women to discuss their abuse experiences. Many of the women became very emotional during the interviews when they recounted the atrocities done to them and to their children, and how they had to mother within this abusive context. This often resulted in many of the women crying and being unable to speak. During these times I comforted the women by patting them on the back, on the knee, or by giving them a hug. At times we took a break, went to get a drink, or just chatted about more general things like the weather, what their plans were for later that day, their hobbies, etc. Then we would resume the interview.

The interview process was not only painful for the women participants, but also for myself as a researcher. During the interviews I was often shocked, devastated, deeply saddened, and even angered by the terrible experiences of abuse that the women had gone through. However, I knew I had to remain composed and in control if I were to be effective in listening to and understanding

their stories. This was something I had over time learned, practiced, and become proficient at doing in my role as a counselor at an abused women's shelter several years prior. As such, my experience as a counselor helped me in my role as a researcher when I was faced with the difficulty of hearing the cruelties that had been done to these women and their children, and how it impacted their mothering. It was only when the interviews were done and I was alone in the private space of my vehicle driving home that I would breakdown and all of my emotions of grief and sorrow were released. I recall this happening time and time again. I felt an immense sense of concern and compassion for these women. After all I had just spent two, sometimes three hours face-to-face getting to know these women, talking with them, and hearing their most intimate personal life stories. We had connected in some inexplicable way. I'm not sure why- perhaps it was because I was a woman just like them, or because I too shared the role of mother with them, or because these women had opened themselves up and shared their most deep and intimate personal experiences and emotions with me, ones which were profoundly hurtful for them. Thinking about these women gave me the strength and perseverance to carry on with my research, day after day.

While carrying out the interview process I also found it difficult to juggle my role as both a researcher and a mother. After spending the whole day interviewing women, I had to go and pick up my two children from my mother-in-law's/sister's home and from preschool. As such I had to quickly compose myself and put on a happy and cheerful face for my children, despite the fact that while driving home I had been overcome with emotion after hearing the women's

experiences. Also, I did not have the time to sit down and take notes about the many thoughts and comments that I had during the interviews immediately after I had conducted the interviews nor later that evening, as I had to tend to my children. As such, after the first few interviews I realized I needed to find a way to document my thoughts and comments shortly after the interviews so as to not forget them. I came up with a strategy that worked. While I drove home I would use the same voice recorder that I used to record the interviews to also record my thoughts and comments about each of the interviews. This helped me to keep a record of my experiences as a researcher.

Hearing the women's stories of abuse was also at times disturbing and distressing, and had effects on me as a researcher that lasted long after the interview process. During the whole four months that I conducted my interviews and for about one month after I had completed conducting my interviews, I often had nightmares at night. I would dream about the experiences of abuse that the women had gone through with exact and vivid details, but in my dream I was the one being abused, and not the woman who had recounted the story to me. During and even and long after the interviews I felt the weight of the injustices and cruelties that were done to these women and their children by their abusive partners. Speaking weekly with one of my supervisors about the research process and the challenges that I faced in this regard greatly helped as it enabled me to, in a sense, have a chance to debrief from the interview process.

Throughout the whole research process- when I would recount the women's stories in my mind after the interviews, when I was transcribing word



for word the interviews with the women, and when I was writing and quoting the women in the results sections of my dissertation- I distinctly remembered the look in the women's eyes when they originally related their experiences to me. As such, I experienced these women's pain and hurt time and time again as I conducted this research. To this day I still frequently think about these women. I do not think I will ever stop thinking about them. Sometimes I see someone that looks like them, and then their story comes to my mind all over again. I had not fully anticipated the emotional ramifications of this research. However, this often drove my research as I felt an immense need and sense of responsibility to give a voice to these abused women and to shed greater light on the experiences of mothering in the context of domestic abuse. It is my hope that my research accomplishes this.

## **5) Data Analysis**

### ***i) Transcription***

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. I personally transcribed 19 of the interviews, and hired a qualified transcriptionist to transcribe the remaining 10 interviews. After all the interviews were transcribed, I then cleaned the interviews by listening to the interview while reading the transcript for accuracy.

### ***ii) Coding and Analysis***

Once the interviews were transcribed and cleaned, I coded the transcripts using Nvivo 8. I began this research with a theoretical framework in mind, with an understanding that there is an interaction between dominant discourses and

agency, that all subordinates, including abused mothers, take part in the dominant discourses that subjugate them, and that all individuals have the ability to reproduce, disrupt, and transform those dominant discourses. I constructed this theoretical framework by drawing on Rich (1986), O'Reilly (2006), and Collins' (2007) critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering. I chose to construct this theoretical framework to guide my research, as I believe that these critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering are powerful and valuable, and that there are intellectual gains to participating in and contributing to existing theories. As such, my focus was not specifically on constructing new theory (as discussed by Glaser and Strauss in grounded theory), but rather on reconstructing existing theory (as discussed by Burawoy 1991).

I coded the interviews based on patterns that emerged, but instead of producing and building a new theory by analyzing those patterns, I built my arguments by creating an ongoing exchange between the data and the existing critical feminist theory on motherhood and mothering in an effort to reconstruct existing theory (Burawoy, 1991, p.10-11). More specifically, in pursuing this theory reconstruction, I conducted a running exchange between my data and the analysis that followed it, and a running exchange between my analysis and the existing critical feminist theory on motherhood and mothering, in which the latter was reconstructed on the basis of emergent anomalies (Burawoy, 1991, p.10-11).

My analysis, therefore, was a continual process, mediating between my data and the existing critical feminist theory on motherhood and mothering. Understanding of the women's point of view was grounded through the use of

quotations. These quotations will serve to create a bridge between the real life experiences of the respondents and the general theme category, which is based more on abstractions. That is, these quotations will highlight the various levels of meanings attached to a theme category, but not the entire range of situations from which they were created.

## **6) Conclusion**

In sum, my qualitative research study is an examination of abused women's subjective mothering identities, as well as the role that dominant mothering ideologies and intersections of race, class, and gender play in shaping abused women's subjective mothering identities. In order to examine abused women's subjective mothering identities, I constructed a theoretical framework which draws on critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering, specifically the work of Rich (1986), O'Reilly (2006), and Collins (2007). In this sense, my research extends these important works. Overall, I conducted 30 face-to-face in-depth interviews with abused mothers in Calgary, Alberta, who I recruited from local and surrounding abused women's shelters. Of these 30 interviews, 1 of the interviews did not record. As such my discussion is based on 29 interviews with abused mothers. Finally, I analyzed the data by creating an ongoing exchange between the data and the existing critical feminist theory on motherhood and mothering in an effort to reconstruct existing theory.

## **Chapter Four: Abused Women's Narratives – Mothering in the Social Context of Domestic Abuse**

This chapter presents women's stories of mothering in the social context of domestic abuse. First, this chapter presents a collective synopsis of the women's abuse experiences and sociodemographic characteristics in order to introduce the women in my study. Second, this chapter presents the individual narrative profiles of a select number of abused women in order to give a voice to the women in my study. Given the scope of this thesis I was not able to present all twenty-nine of the women's stories. I deliberated a lot over how many and which of the twenty-nine women's stories I would present. I felt that each and every one of the women had a unique and significant story to tell, as well as notable and valuable insights to share. In the end I decided to present seven women's stories. These seven women that I selected are most representative of the women as a collective.

I also deliberated a lot over the various ways in which I would present these women's stories so that the authenticity and integrity of their voices and experiences would be preserved and accurately portrayed. As such, in presenting the women's stories I decided to mostly rely on the use of direct quotations from the women themselves. These direct quotations present abused women's own articulations, indicating their pauses, their repetitions, their hesitant or broken speech, and their various utterances.

In sum, this chapter endeavors to make visible and stay true to abused women's voices and lives, which are often rendered silent and invisible. In this sense, this chapter aims to bring us closer to genuinely and empathetically

understanding abused women's victimization experiences. In addition, this chapter, which provides a general discussion of the women in my study and their abuse experiences, serves as a stepping-stone to the next two chapters which specifically discuss their mothering experiences.

### **1) Introducing the Abused Women Participants**

The abused women participants in my study occupied various social locations. Below I discuss the women's abuse experiences and sociodemographic characteristics in order to present these women and their circumstances.

#### ***i) The Abused Women's Experiences of Domestic Abuse***

All of the women in my study experienced abuse from their current intimate male partner. Interestingly, more than half of the women (15 out of 29 women), experienced abuse not only from one partner, but from multiple partners over the course of their life.<sup>9</sup>

The women's experiences of abuse ranged from emotional, psychological, financial, verbal, physical, and sexual forms of abuse. The most common forms of abuse that the women reported experiencing in their current relationships were physical, verbal, and psychological abuse. Of the 29 women, 22 women reported experiencing physical abuse, 22 women reported experiencing verbal abuse, and 15 women reported experiencing psychological abuse. The least common forms of abuse that the women experienced were emotional, financial and sexual abuse. Of the 29 women, 14 of the women reported experiencing emotional abuse, 10 of

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<sup>9</sup> This synopsis focuses on the women participants' experiences in their current abusive relationship.

the women reported experiencing financial abuse, and 3 of the women reported experiencing sexual abuse.

All of the women but one mentioned experiencing multiple forms of abuse at the same time. Of the 29 women, 24 women reported concurrently experiencing three or more forms of abuse, whereas only 5 of the women reported concurrently experiencing less than three forms of abuse.

At the time of the interviews, the majority of the women (22 out of 29 women) were residing in abused women's shelters in Calgary, Alberta. Of the 22 women residing in shelters, 12 women were residing in emergency shelters and 10 women were residing in second stage shelters. Only a small minority of the women had exited the shelter and were residing in their own home (7 out of 29 women).

## ***ii) The Abused Women's Sociodemographic Characteristics***

### ***Age***

The women as a group were relatively young. The average age was 37 years. The women's ages ranged between 24 and 66 years. Of the 29 women, 20 women were between the ages of 24 and 37 years of age, and only 9 women were between the ages of 37 and 66 years of age.

### ***Race***

In terms of race, the women were a relatively representative group. Of the 29 women, 15 women were Aboriginal, 9 women were Caucasian, 1 woman was Arab, 1 woman was Filipino, 1 woman was Black, and 1 woman was South Asian. Of these 29 women, 6 women were landed immigrants. These women

immigrated to Canada from Lebanon, the Philippines, Somalia, India, Hungary, and England.

### ***Education***

The women's educational backgrounds varied. Most of the women had a High School education and above. Of the 29 women, 3 women had Bachelor Degrees from University (1 of these women had two Bachelor Degrees), 2 women had College Diplomas, 2 women had some College, 3 women had a Technical Certificates, 10 women had a High School Diploma, 6 women had some High School, and 2 women had only completed Elementary School. One woman had not completed Elementary School.

### ***Employment***

Most of the women stated that they had worked either full-time or part-time at one time in their lives. However, at the time of the interviews a large majority of the women (27 out of 29 women) were currently unemployed and receiving social assistance. Of these 27 women who were unemployed, many stated that they were looking for employment, and 2 recently found and were about to begin new employment. Also, some of these unemployed women were considering returning to school, and 1 of these women had been attending school full time.

Only a small minority of the women (2 out of 29 women) were employed at the time of the interviews. Of these 2 employed women, one was working full-time and the other was working part-time.

### ***Marital Status***

In terms of their current relationships, the majority of the women (22 out of 29 women) were living with their abusive male partner in either a common-law or a marriage relationship. Of these 29 women, 12 women were in common-law relationships, 10 women were in marriage relationships, and 7 women were in dating relationships.

The average length of the women's relationships was 6.59 years. The length of the women's relationships with their abusive male partners varied from 8 weeks to 37 years. Among the women who were in common-law relationships, the average length of the relationship was 5.65 years. Among the women who were in marriage relationships, the average length of the relationship was 11.25 years. Finally, among the women who were in dating relationships, the average length of the relationship was 1.02 years.

### ***Number of Children***

All of the women in this study had children. The average number of children that the women had was 2.79 children. The number of children that the women had ranged from 1 to 7 children. Most of the women (23 out of 29 women) had two or more children. The women's children ranged between the ages of 3 months and 40 years.

Out of the 29 women, 8 women had lost a child- 4 of these women miscarried (one woman miscarried 9 times, another woman miscarried 2 times, and the other 2 women only miscarried once), and 3 of these women lost a child after birth due to complications (mercury intoxication, congenital heart failure,



prematurity). One woman both miscarried (three times) and lost a child after birth due to complications (SIDS).

### ***iii) The Abused Women's Social Location and Their Mothering Experience***

Despite the abused women's various social locations, their race and social class was representative of the shelter population. In terms of the abused women's race, half of the women were Aboriginal, which is representative of the population residing in abused women's shelters in Alberta. Alberta has the third largest Aboriginal population in Canada. Alberta leads the Canadian provinces in domestic assault, and is second in domestic-homicide. In fact, Aboriginal women are three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be victims of domestic abuse, and more Aboriginal women experience serious forms of abuse than non-Aboriginal women (Lamberthus, 2007, p.). Many factors have been identified as the root causes of abuse among Aboriginals. These include the impact of colonization and residential schools and the resulting effects this had on Aboriginals such as loss of identity and way of life, disintegration of family structures, the use of substance as a coping mechanism, low levels of education, and poverty (The Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008, pp.3, 9-11). Consequently, there is a high proportion of Aboriginal women residing in domestic abuse shelters in Alberta.

In terms of the abused women's social class, the majority of the women were currently unemployed and receiving social assistance, which is also representative of the population residing in abused women's shelters. As such, the abused women participants shared a condition of economic insecurity and

material deprivation. In Alberta, like in most other provinces in Canada, the majority of the abused women residing in domestic abuse shelters live below the poverty line, and therefore are among the most marginalized and in urgent need of assistance as they have little or no income (Krane and Davies, 2006, p. 417). Lamberthus, 2007). Many of the factors involved in abused women's poverty which have been identified include issues of control, manipulation, and monitoring by abusive male partners, as well as issues of lack of positive self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence experienced by abused women, resulting in abused women not pursuing and having a strong educational background to equip themselves for skilled employment. For many abused women, their poverty creates a double disadvantage: the abuse leaves them fearful and ashamed while a lack of money leaves them with few resources for ending the abuse (Jaffe et al., 2002, pp. 12-13).

The abused women's structural conditions discussed above shaped their mothering experiences. The dominant ideologies of mothering are more likely to blame certain women on the basis of their social locations, and this includes in particular abused, non-white, poor, and single women. In this sense, abused, non-white, poor, and single women are seen as pathological or deviant, and hence are viewed as deviating from "good" mothering. As such, despite differences among the abused women participants, a "similar process of social construction vilifies" many of them based on their social location (Chase and Rogers, 2001, p. 31). Consequently, the abused women's mothering experiences provide contextualized accounts which need to be understood within the broader context of intersections

among their social locations and the resulting positions of oppression which they occupy. This intersectionality of race, class, and gender (which will be further discussed in Chapter Seven) has real-life consequences for many abused women's mothering, and therefore is important to consider and understand when examining the mothering experiences of abused women from diverse racial, class, and gender backgrounds.

## **2) The Voices of the Abused Women Participants – The Experiential Experts**

Despite their various social locations, the women's experiences of abuse influenced and shaped their experiences not only as women, but also as mothers. Below I present the individual narrative profiles of seven abused women in order to make visible their voices and experiences.

### ***i) Aliya<sup>10</sup>***

Aliya is a Caucasian woman of Polish descent, in her early twenties, and born in Alberta. At the time of the interview Aliya was residing in an abused women's emergency shelter in South East Calgary, Alberta. Aliya is the mother of a two-year-old boy from her relationship with her current abusive partner. Aliya's son was residing with her at the shelter.

Aliya grew up in a European Catholic family. Her parents divorced when she was two years old. Both Aliya's father and mother were physically abusive towards her. Aliya also lived for some time with her grandparents, who were also physically abusive towards her. According to Aliya, her parents and grandparents

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout this thesis I have used pseudonyms, and not the actual names of the abused women that I interviewed, in order to ensure the anonymity of the women.

were physically abusive because it is a “cultural” and “generational thing”. Aliya completed grade 11, but then left High School in order to work full time.

Aliya met her partner, who is Italian, when she was working as a waitress at a restaurant, and shortly after they began dating. Aliya’s partner has two sons from a previous marriage who he is in contact with. Shortly after meeting her partner, Aliya was forced to quit her job because her partner did not want her to work. She is currently unemployed. After dating her partner for a year, Aliya found out that she was pregnant. Aliya never lived with her partner, but rather was forced to live in one of her partner’s condominiums with his best friend, who later became the godfather of their child. Aliya’s partner would come and visit her and their son at the condominium each day. Aliya’s partner thought that it was best that they live separately as he was not ready to introduce Aliya and their son to his two older sons who frequently visited him in his home. Aliya was in a dating relationship with her partner for three and a half years, but left him eight months prior to our interview. She tried leaving her partner one other time, but ended up returning because he was constantly “stalking” her and she was tired of “running and hiding”. When Aliya decided to leave her partner the second time, she wanted to ensure that she would not be constantly running and hiding from him. As such, she contacted Child Welfare in Calgary, Alberta and they helped safely escort her and her son from her home to an abused women’s shelter in North East Calgary. Aliya then moved to a second stage abused women’s shelter in the North East of Calgary, and then finally moved to the abused women’s emergency shelter where she was currently residing at the time of the interview.

Throughout their relationship, Aliya's partner was emotionally, psychologically, financially, verbally, and physically abusive. The abuse began shortly after Aliya found out that she was pregnant:

Things were great, and then as soon as I found out I was pregnant I started to notice little things happening, and then it got worse... It started off as verbal abuse, then a little bit of physical abuse, and then when I was six months pregnant, um, it really became emotional, verbal, financial, and physical abuse... There were times where I felt he was stressing me out just so I would miscarry. When I was pregnant, he hit me a bunch of times in my chest, and I said 'I'm pregnant what are you doing?' He said, 'It doesn't matter it's not mine', and he knew I hadn't slept with anybody else. And then he threatened to kill me and put me six feet underground. I said 'How can you say that when I'm pregnant?' and he just didn't care. This one night he told me that he was gonna take me out for dinner, so I was really excited cause I'd been cooped up in the apartment for weeks on end, and um, he came and he goes 'Well I'm going out and you're staying here.' So I got really upset and I decided to walk to the 7/11 and grab a Slurpee. When I came back he was gone and I had a feeling as to where he was. So I walked all the way down to this pub that I knew he was at (clears throat). When I walked in the door his friends were all sitting at one side of the bar all together, and he was standing at the bar with a woman. He's twenty years older than me and he was sitting with a woman who was like ten years older than him, and her arms were all over him and I walked up and I was just six months pregnant, and I'm like crushed and I'm like 'What are you doing?' And he's like 'Just calm down, just calm down.' I'm pregnant, I'm emotional, and this woman she's like 'Oh hi, who are you?' She tried to shake my hand, I slapped her hand away, and I slapped him across the face and then he grabbed me and he's like, 'Don't embarrass me'. And I was like 'Don't embarrass you?' and, I slapped him and he threw me on the bar in front of everybody and started to strangle me, and it took 3 men to pull him off me... Another time his friend came and told me that he was cheating on me... He then twisted it around and said I was cheating on him. I said 'But I just caught you!' (laugh). Like everything he would do, he would put it on me.

The emotional, psychological, financial, verbal, and especially physical abuse became more continuous, frequent, and severe after Aliya gave birth to their son:

After I had the baby it escalated to a thousand times worse and it was constant. I wasn't allowed to leave the house most of the time unless he

knew where I was. Uh, when he didn't know where I was he was constantly calling. I mean I would be at a friend's house and she would tell me 'You know, he's outside watching', and I wouldn't know and I'd be like 'No, no he's not', and she'd be like 'Yeah he is, I saw him'. I mean, anytime I'd get money I'd have to give him half of it. Just you know trying to tell me what I can and can't wear. I remember after I had the baby, the baby was about six months old and I wanted to go out with a girlfriend of mine, and I wasn't wearing anything that would be considered, you know, slutty or promiscuous. I had a skirt on but it came down to here (points to knees), my shirt came to here (points to collar bone). There was no cleavage or anything, and he told me I looked like a prostitute. But usually it was like shaking me, grabbing me by my wrists a lot, and he strangled me a lot... And it was to the point where I was passing out and I thought I was gonna die. I did! I literally thought my last word's were gonna be 'Please, I didn't do anything wrong!' There were times we'd be in the middle of, pardon me, but in the middle of making love and he'd start strangling me and telling me if I ever cheated on him he'd kill me. One time he hit me so bad in my kidneys that my kidneys are now permanently deformed.

The main reason Aliya decided to finally leave her partner was for the sake of her son. Since he was an infant, Aliya's son witnessed the abuse despite Aliya's pleas and efforts to convince her partner not to abuse her in front of their child. As Aliya's son became older and more aware, she realized that she had to leave:

He threatened on his oldest son's life he was gonna kill me. The older my son was getting the more my son was understanding. When his dad would hit me, my son would go hit his dad and say 'Stop, stop, stop!', and that was when my son was only a year and a half. That used to be really hard for me to talk about. Now it's, okay but it used to be really hard to talk about and I used to just burst out crying...I used to say to him [partner] 'You're teaching him it's okay to hit and that's not okay.' I didn't want my son to also grow up thinking that it's okay to hit women...One day my son was so mad at his dad after watching [the abuse] that he just kept hitting his dad in the face over and over and over again. I said I can't do this to my kid anymore...That's all there is to it, I gotta get outta here!

Experiencing abuse has been very difficult, painful, and frustrating for Aliya both as a woman and a mother. Aliya often felt emotionally, mentally, and

physically worn down from the abuse, and would struggle to hide her pain from her son. The only times Aliya felt a sense of joy, peace, and comfort were the times she was alone with her son. Being a mother gave Aliya the courage to go on:

All the time it was like, I know I'm not doing anything wrong. But of course deep down inside you always feel like you are because you're always walking on eggshells...When I was still there I was having a really hard time waking up. I just wanted to sleep all the time...When I was awake, I just wanted to sit there and cry, and I couldn't do that in front of my son because I had him to take care of him...My brain was not in the right spot. I couldn't focus. I was like a zombie, a walking zombie, and my son knew that I was there, but really I wasn't there. My head was gone...One of the things that used to help me was taking my son, setting up the bed with the TV and we'd just cuddle all day and watch cartoons or something like that. But at the same time that's all I could do, because I couldn't play with him and I wasn't allowed to go outside. That was the only time I felt good. His dad was usually not home at those times, so that was our special time together. It was our bonding time, and it was the time where, okay your dad's gone so I can breathe right now, so because I can breathe I'm just gonna take this time to just hold you and keep you... My son's my life, he's like my soul you know. When I'm really upset I can look at him and calm myself down. It just feels warm.

Since she left her partner, Aliya has been in counseling and has been attempting to obtain full custody of her son with no visitation rights from her partner.

## ***ii) Coreen***

Coreen is an Aboriginal woman in her late thirties who was born in Alberta. At the time of the interview Coreen was residing in an abused women's emergency shelter in South West Calgary, Alberta. Coreen is the mother of five children- a twenty-one-year-old girl from a relationship with her first partner who was not abusive, a nineteen-year-old and a seventeen-year-old boy from her relationship with her second partner who was abusive, and finally a sixteen-year-

old girl and an eleven-year-old boy from her relationship with her third partner who was not abusive. Coreen also had a son with her first partner, but he died three months after he was born. At the time of the interview, Coreen was with her fourth partner who was abusive. Coreen does not have any children with this current abusive partner. None of Coreen's children were residing with her at the shelter at the time of the interview. Her twenty-one-year old daughter and nineteen-year-old son were living on their own, her sixteen-year-old daughter and eleven-year-old son were living with her second partner, and her eleven-year-old son was living with her mother. Coreen also has three grandchildren.

Coreen experienced many tribulations in her life. Coreen grew up in a foster home and was physically and sexually abused by her foster father. Coreen's foster father was a priest in a residential school, and therefore no one believed her when she sought help. As such, Coreen ran away from her foster home when she was fourteen years old. Despite living on her own, Coreen managed to complete high school.

Prior to meeting her current partner, Coreen was in three other common-law relationships, two of which were abusive. Coreen met her first partner when she was fourteen years old. She was in a common-law relationship with this partner for seven years. This partner was not abusive. Shortly after they met, Coreen became pregnant and moved with this partner to a home on a reservation in Alberta. Coreen and her partner were very poor, and in order to survive they ate fish from a nearby creek. When she was pregnant, Coreen was often very sick but did not know why. When her first child was born he was also very sick. As



such, the hospital ran tests and found out that Coreen's baby boy had mercury poisoning. Three months later he died. Coreen continued to be sick and ended up in the hospital. The hospital also ran tests on Coreen and found out that she too had mercury poisoning. After an investigation, the hospital discovered that the fish from the creek on the reserve that Coreen ate throughout her pregnancy was contaminated with mercury. Coreen and her partner suspected something was wrong with the fish because when they would cut it open they could "see a yellowish colour and a rainbow on the meat" of the fish. However, they "didn't think anything" of it, and "just ate" the fish because they were "so hungry and there was nothing else to eat".

Four years later Coreen and her partner had another child, which is her eldest daughter. When her daughter was three and a half years old, Coreen's partner committed suicide by "shooting himself in the head with a gun" in front of her and her daughter. Before shooting himself, Coreen's partner threatened to take her and their daughter with him as he said "If I go, you're coming with me. I'm not leaving you behind". Coreen's daughter was "screaming" and Coreen herself was screaming and "begging" her partner not to kill her and their daughter. The next thing she knew, her partner "turned the gun and shot himself, and everything went all over". After Coreen called the police, they arrived and then made Coreen and her daughter sit there in the house next to the deceased body for six hours while they questioned Coreen because they thought that she was the one who had killed her partner. Coreen's daughter kept saying "My daddy, my daddy, my daddy did it", in her mother's defense. Coreen's daughter "still remembers"

and still “suffers” from this traumatizing incident today. Coreen also still has nightmares today about this incident because she still remembers the smell that lingered after her partner shot himself. Coreen and her daughter never received counseling after witnessing this incident and instead just tried to “block it out” of their minds.

A few years later Coreen met her second partner. She was in a common-law relationship with this partner for two and a half years and had two children with him. This partner was psychologically and physically abusive. The abuse occurred throughout the whole relationship, except for when Coreen was pregnant. After being with her partner for some time, Coreen became an alcoholic because she “couldn’t stand feeling the beatings anymore”, and when she was “drunk” she “didn’t feel them”. As a result, Coreen lost her children to child welfare for a short time. Coreen finally decided to leave her partner because he was unfaithful. She personally found him with another woman. When Coreen left her partner she got custody of her children again, and then moved to Vancouver, B.C. to stay at an abused women’s shelter.

Coreen’s third partner was not abusive. She was in a common-law relationship with this partner for three years and had her two youngest children with him. Coreen is still in contact with this partner and they have a good relationship.

Many years later, Coreen met her current partner, who is Aboriginal. Coreen was in a common-law relationship with her current partner for four years, but left him three weeks prior to our interview. Coreen tried leaving two other

times, but ended up returning because she “didn’t have anywhere else to go”. The first time she left her partner for two months, and the second time she left him for one week before returning. When Coreen met her partner she was working full time at a convenience store. However, shortly after meeting her partner, Correen was forced to quit her job because she was moved to a night shift with a male coworker, and her partner did not want her working with another man. Correen is currently unemployed.

Throughout their relationship, Coreen’s partner was emotionally, psychologically, verbally, and physically abusive. The abuse began a year into their relationship:

A year after I started staying with him it started...He’s been in jail like three times because of me, cuz I’ve charged him for assault...The first time I had bite marks on me, I had uh, two black eyes, and he hit me over the head with a bar. He uttered death threats in front of the cops, (clears throat), then he got put in jail for five and a half months on remand. We weren’t allowed to have contact with each other. So I moved back home, and then the police were looking for me. But I kept avoiding them cuz I didn’t want to go to court, and then the crown prosecutor went to see him in jail and said ‘We need to find her, we need her testimony, we have the pictures of what you’ve done to her.’ The judge was just like ‘Whoa!’ (clears throat). Then the judge told him ‘I have to let you out cuz you’ve already done time served and we can’t find her to testify. But if I ever see you in my courtroom again with pictures like this...and with assault charges this bad you won’t be doing just federal time, you’ll be doing pen time.’ The second time he got charged for assault and he got put in jail for two weeks. Um, those charges actually ended up getting dropped. He was choking me, punching me, and burning me...I had a black eye, and I had cigarette burns on my legs...It took six police to break into my house to get him away from me. He wouldn’t open the door, so they had to break the door down. We got evicted actually because of that incident, cuz there were too many cop cars there, and the landlord happen to be there when it was happening and he said ‘You have a twenty four hour eviction, I can’t handle this’ (clears throat). So yeah, so he went to jail. I went to another shelter, and then I wasn’t gonna go back but his family really harassed me into going back. The third time he attacked me right outside a coffee shop, like on the c-train path and across from the cops he attacked me. Six

cops came running out and they had to pull him off me cuz he had me by my hair and the people on the c-train station were just like ‘Ahh’, but nobody helped me. Like nobody jumped in to help me, just the cops did. Everybody just kind of stood around and walked away...He was really mean. He would say like I’m useless, you know, like (clears throat) I’m fat, you know, nobody’s gonna want me cuz of my kids, if I ever leave he’s gonna wreck my looks so bad that nobody will want me, stuff like that. He’d wreck my stuff like my hairdryer, my curling iron, and my makeup. If I was gonna leave him he’d wreck my underwear and my bras. I don’t know why, but he would always do that! Like he’d cut them up, and burn them or throw them in the garbage. And like if I had a nice jacket and I looked nice, he wouldn’t like it. I had a fringe jacket, buckskin my mom gave me for my birthday. It was really nice, and he yanked most of the fringes off cuz he didn’t want me to wear it. So, stuff like that he did. My mom bought me a hairdryer and a curling cuz I never used to fix up, cuz I wasn’t allowed. He wouldn’t allow me to. He was very jealous of me. And so she told me like, ‘I’m not used to seeing you look so drab. Like you always fixed yourself up and you always looked good.’ So she bought me a curling iron and a hairdryer set from Conair. And he wrecked them. He cut the cords when I left him the first time, and I was like ‘Uh!’ I didn’t want to tell my mom that, (clears throat), so I thought I’ll just try and find the exact same set (laughs) in case she asks me what happened to them.

Coreen decided to finally leave her partner because she could no longer endure the abuse:

I left him because, um, I just couldn’t take it. Especially like hating myself and not liking who I am because of what he was telling me. I was just sick of it! I’m too old to go through this!

Experiencing abuse has diminished Coreen’s self-confidence not only as a woman, but also as a mother. However, watching her children grow into adults and seeing the good that she has taught them, the love that they have for her as their mother, and their determination to end the cycle of violence in their own personal lives has been a tremendous source of hope, comfort, and encouragement for Coreen:

It [abuse] has really affected me...My self-esteem really went down and even my kids noticed. They’d be like ‘Mom, you’re not even fixing up,

like the only time you fix up is when he's not around.' And like people, you know my friends, they'd say 'You're so different when you're with him, like you don't even talk, you don't even say hi, and you're just really quiet. But then when you're not with him you're like 'Oh hi, what's up?''...So, lots of times I felt like committing suicide because that's the only way I could get out of it, just leave him forever. And um, (clears throat), I really just didn't like the way it made me feel...It made me really depressed a lot, like I didn't want to go out of my house cuz of the things he would tell me...It takes my focus away from what I need to do cuz I'm trying to survive and I'm trying to get through, and then everything else goes on hold... like when I'm not there all the time for my kids when I need to be. I'm having my own issues, and yet they're having issues just as bad and I can't deal with them. When they really need me I'm not there...But watching my children become adults, especially watching my boys, makes me really proud...My son told me, 'You know mom,' he said 'I really get mad at Kara,' that's his wife, 'I really get mad at her and sometimes I get really frustrated and I want to hit her. But you know what stops me? I see your face. I don't see her face, I see my mom, and I just can't.' I said to him 'Really?', and he said 'Yeah.' And even like my youngest son, my seventeen-year-old son, he said 'That's exactly the same for me. I just think, you know, if my mom's getting hit I can't hit.'...So, when I see my kids and the way they are with others, I think I did something right!

Since she left her partner, Coreen has been looking into returning to school and regaining custody of her children.

### *iii) April*

April is a Caucasian woman in her late twenties. She was born in Ontario, but moved to Alberta with her family when she was three years old. At the time of the interview April was residing in an abused women's second stage shelter in South West Calgary, Alberta. April is the mother of two children- a seven-year-old daughter from her relationship with a previous partner who was not abusive, and a two-year-old daughter from her relationship with her current partner who is abusive. Both of April's children were residing with her in the shelter at the time of the interview.

Like Coreen, April has faced many trials in her life. Growing up, April's father was emotionally and sexually abusive towards her mother, and was physically abusive towards her and her sister. After several years of marriage, April's parents finally divorced when she was just eleven years old because her mother found out that her father was unfaithful. In fact, April was the one who personally discovered her father with another woman, which was very difficult for her. April did not speak with her father for many years. However, just four years ago April and her sister confronted their father about his abusive and unfaithful behaviour and he apologized. Today April has a relatively good relationship with her father. April also has a step brother (from her father's previous marriage) who she has never met. April's trials continued to mount when she was a teenager and both she and another girl were "raped" at a party by a young male teenager that they did not know:

I was young...and we went to a party, and (pause) I was raped...I pressed charges, and the charges got dropped cuz I was drinking at his house and partying...So because I was drinking and partying with him, that gave him permission to assault me and the other girl that was there...They had pictures of the tie marks, and the bruises, and the choke marks. But because I was drunk...and because the other girl wouldn't testify to prove that he had done it to the both of us, there was no case...She was too chicken to follow through with it...So, he got off.

April "went downhill from there". She attempted to commit suicide, and when she was not successful she turned to alcohol and drugs to ease the incessant pain and suffering she felt day after day.

April completed high school and worked at a fast food restaurant until she had her first child seven years ago with a previous partner that she dated for over a year. She has not worked since. After her first child April continued to use

alcohol and drugs until her family intervened, took her daughter, and then brought her to an alcohol and drug treatment program. April has now been sober for three and a half years.

April met her current partner who is abusive through a mutual friend, and after dating for a few months they moved in together. April's partner also has a child with a previous partner- a twelve-year-old son who he is not in contact with. After dating her partner for a year, April found out that she was pregnant. The most difficult trial April experienced in her life was losing her mother on the very same day she gave birth to her second child. At the time, April's mother was in the hospital and was very ill, but then died of a stroke only thirty minutes before April gave birth to her baby:

I had the baby at four thirty in the morning and my mom died at four o'clock in the morning, and they [hospital] didn't tell me until about five thirty in the morning that she had passed. I kept saying to the hospital I was in 'Phone the other hospital and tell them to tell my mom I had the baby,' and they kept saying 'No, no, no, no, your mom's sleeping, your mom's sleeping,' and they all knew that she had suffered a stroke. I just feel like I didn't bond with the baby like I should have because of the emotional stress that I was going through...Ever since she passed it's not been the same... I find myself crying a lot and I really wish my mom was here.

April was in a common-law relationship with her partner for three years, but left him approximately one month prior to our interview. A year into their relationship April wanted to leave her partner but did not because she felt she had "nobody" and "nowhere to go", and so "had to stay". April wishes she would have known about abused women's shelters back then as she would have left her partner right away.

Throughout their relationship April's partner was emotionally, psychologically, financially, verbally, and physically abusive. Like Aliya, the abuse began shortly after April found out that she was pregnant:

We were together six months when I found out I was pregnant. Then it started right away and lasted up until I left...When I got pregnant he didn't want the baby. He wanted me to terminate the pregnancy, and I told him I would terminate him before I terminated the pregnancy. So, then he was like 'Oh okay, well I'll be the father of the year', and blah, blah, blah. And then he would never touch me when I was pregnant. You know, most men hold the belly, and they love it, and they kiss it. He wouldn't. He didn't touch me once when I was pregnant...He made gestures about my weight...he called me a bitch, and a slut...he financially abused me, he moved me to a small town where I could not get back and forth to Calgary to my family. Uh, he would not allow me to get a job, I was not allowed to go out with my friends, I wasn't allowed to be friends with men, I wasn't even allowed to walk down the street with the kids unless he knew where I was going at all times, which I didn't know was abuse until two weeks ago (laughs)...I had to ask him for money, I had to explain and show receipts, you know. I couldn't even go to the store and buy diapers without having him check the bank statements and bring the receipts home. Even my feminine products, I'd have to ask him and then he'd go to the store and buy them instead of me going to the store and buying them (coughs)...I was independent, I had my whole life, and then one slip up and I was dependent on him and I had nothing.

The emotional, psychological, financial, and verbal abuse continued after April gave birth to their daughter. Once their daughter was born, April's partner became even more emotionally abusive, and also began to be physically abusive:

He cheated on me all the time, and then he would keep doing it. I'd want to be intimate and he'd rather be with magazines instead of me, and watch dirty movies instead of being with me. So I guess that was my emotional abuse...He cheated on me with a prostitute, he cheated on me with another girl when the baby was only three months old...He threw me once against the wall. That was because I caught him cheating on me. I slapped him, and then he threw me and I went flying against the walls. Then she came out [the woman he was cheating with], and I left with the kids.

April decided to finally leave her partner not only because of the myriad of abuse she was personally experiencing, but more importantly because of the



sexual abuse she suspected her children were experiencing from him. Given that April herself had been “raped” as a teenager, she knew firsthand what it is like to be sexually assaulted:

Well the reason I left is very different from the abuse that I went through. I left him because I found out that he had sexually molested his youngest sister when they were kids. And it wasn't, you know he was five and she was three, or he was eight and she was three. It was, he was sixteen and she was six! And to me, he knew what he was doing was wrong, he knew that it was bad!...His sister told me Christmas day...cuz she was drunk, and so she spilled her guts. When I confronted him he admitted to it, and he wouldn't give me details and he wouldn't go to counseling. So I packed my daughters up and left for their safety cuz I wouldn't have forgiven myself if something happened to them and I knew... I'd blame myself more if they came to me and told me daddy's touching me, and I could have prevented that... There were, not signs that he had done it, but signs of him being uncomfortable, like he would not run the bath for my older daughter [his step daughter]. You know, my younger daughter [his biological daughter] would be in her diapers, so my older daughter would want to be in her underwear and he'd get really uncomfortable. And so those I think might have been my signs, but I just didn't catch on. I figured he was her [oldest daughter's] stepdad, it wasn't his baby, so yeah. Now that I think about it, they were my signs and I just didn't catch them in time... We're going to see CASA, which is Canadian Children Against Sexual Abuse, and they'll role play with my older daughter without directly saying did this happen to you... I was sexually assaulted as a teenager, and I know how it felt at sixteen to go through that. So to watch them go through it, I won't! I won't! And I watch a lot of shows about sexual abuse, and, I won't put them through that. I want them to have a good life.

April's partner continued to abuse her emotionally, psychologically, and verbally even after she left him:

He's threatened to kill himself. Like I have the messages saved on my phone: 'If I can't have the kids, I'd rather be dead, and I'm gonna take them to court with me.' He and his family were still abusing me on Facebook. I had to delete them, and block them, and make it so that people can't go into my profile unless I'm friends with them. Like it's just terrible!

Experiencing abuse has changed April. She often feels confused and hurt. But what has been most difficult for April is dealing with her personal pain as a victim of abuse while still carrying out her everyday duties and role as a mother. Although April has many bad days, she also has many good days where she experiences happy and precious moments with her children. It is these good days with her children that carry her through the deepest and darkest of moments that she experiences while trying to heal from the abuse:

Well I'm not the person I was. I was very independent, and now I'm weak. I don't know where I'm going from here. I might go back to school, but just everything hit me all at once. I find myself crying a lot...It's really hard to not show your feelings and try to be the mother that you are supposed to be. So trying to do bed time and bath time, and laughing and joking, when all you want to do is go to your room and cry your eyes out cuz your stuck, you have nowhere to go, and it's just a horrible situation...They go to bed at seven so I break down when they go to sleep...Some days are really really good, and some days I get really edged...It's, it's, it's a struggle! Everyday is a struggle! For the last seven years it's been a struggle...I love taking them to the park...or colouring...or reading with them. My favourite part is reading, cuz they get so excited and then they fall asleep in my arms. That's my favourite part- the joys... I think it [being abused] made me more (pause), protective of them [children] and more suckering to them, cuz I see how much pain that they're in and I see how sad they are a lot of the times, and I just want to make them not hurt. So when they're crying, I try to (pause), you know, give them something else to take their minds off of it. So it's made me more in tune with their feelings.

Since April left her partner she has been fighting in court to have his supervised visits with the children revoked.

#### ***iv) Kylie***

Kylie is an Aboriginal woman in her late twenties who was born in Alberta. At the time of the interview, Kylie was residing in an abused women's second stage shelter in South West Calgary, Alberta. Kylie is the mother of three

children- an eleven-year-old and a nine-year-old son from her relationship with her first partner who was abusive, and a four-year-old daughter from her relationship with her second partner who was not abusive. Kylie does not have any children with her current partner, who is also abusive. All three of Kylie's children were residing with her at the shelter.

Kylie grew up in a very abusive home. Kylie's father was physically abusive towards her mother, and even attempted to "kill" her by stabbing her with a knife. As such, Kylie's mother left her father when Kylie and her younger brother were very young. Kylie grew up feeling much anger, resentment, and disrespect towards her father. She did not have contact with her father until she was sixteen, and since then she has only had contact with him on one other occasion.

Kylie did not complete high school when she was an adolescent. However, when she was a young adult, Kylie returned to school to do upgrading in order to obtain her high school diploma. Kylie then went to college and obtained a Business Diploma. After graduating, Kylie worked full time for over a year and a half for a local company. Kylie started off as a receptionist, was then promoted to office manager, and was about to be promoted to accounting manager. However, Kylie had to quite her job because she no longer had childcare for her children. Kylie removed her children from the daycare she was sending them to because her son came home with "marks on the back of his neck" from one of the daycare workers. Kylie called child welfare and social services to report the incident. Kylie is currently unemployed.

Prior to meeting her current abusive partner, Kylie was in two other common-law relationships, of which only the first was abusive. Kylie met her first partner, who is Aboriginal, when she was fifteen years old and shortly thereafter moved in with him. Kylie's partner was seven years older than she was, and therefore her mother greatly disapproved of their relationship. Kylie's partner also had five children from four different previous relationships. Kylie was in a common-law relationship with this partner for six years, and had her two eldest sons with him. This partner was psychologically and physically abusive. The abuse began shortly after Kylie moved in with her partner and endured the whole time they were together, including when Kylie was pregnant. When Kylie was pregnant with their second child, her partner was so physically abusive that she "almost lost the baby". Kylie had to "go through ultrasounds every week just to see if the baby was going to make it" and the baby finally "did make it". Kylie stated that she "almost called the baby Lucky". After three years Kylie decided to leave her partner because she could no longer withstand the abuse. She moved into an apartment with her two children. However, Kylie's partner, who was in a "fit of rage" because she left him, broke into her apartment in "the middle of the night" and physically assaulted her in front of the two young children, who were thirteen months and thirty six months old at the time. Kylie became unconscious and so her partner called 911. When the ambulance and police arrived, Kylie's partner tried telling them that Kylie fell down the stairs. However, Kylie asserted that the police were quite sure that was not the case and so they arrested him immediately. Kylie was then taken to the hospital and her children were taken to

her mothers. Kylie's partner "smashed up" her "face so badly" with his bare "fists, that she needed to have "facial reconstructive surgery", where "titanium plates" were inserted above one of her "eyes", on her "cheekbone", and on her "jaw". When Kylie and her mother returned to her apartment to gather all of her belongings, they found the socks that her partner had put on his hands prior to beating her, which were covered in blood. They also found a knife in the basement next to the window her partner had smashed to break into her apartment. Kylie believed that her partner had planned to kill her. At that moment, Kylie vowed never to return to her partner. Kylie's partner was sentenced to six years in prison for the assault.

Kylie's second partner, who is Aboriginal, was not abusive. She was in a common-law relationship with this partner for a few years, and had her younger daughter with him. Kylie is still in contact with this partner and they have a very good relationship.

Kylie met her current partner, who is Aboriginal, through friends. Kylie and her partner moved in together after dating for a few months. Kylie was in a dating relationship with this partner for only three months, but left her partner approximately five months prior to our interview. Throughout their relationship, Kylie's partner was psychologically, verbally, and physically abusive. The abuse began right after they moved in together:

He was really jealous throughout our relationship. Just little things. But I wouldn't put up with them. We were constantly, fighting cuz I wouldn't put up with his shit...He totally called me down when we were together, like everything I did was wrong, everything I did was bad...We only lived together for like a month and that's when he hit me, and that's when I left...It was really bad, like he raised his fist to my son and that's when I

jumped up and I was like, 'I don't think so.' I told my kids to go outside and I was on my way behind them going down the stairs and he kicked me down the stairs. Then he came down and punched me in the face and I got a black eye. It was really bad.

Kylie decided to finally leave her partner the first time he physically abused her because she refused to be in another abusive relationship:

He only hit me once, but that was enough for me. And that's when I left. I left with my kids that day. I left everything! I left absolutely everything we had...cuz there's just no way I'd go through that again...And then I moved to Winnipeg...to get away from him.

A few months after Kylie left her partner, she unexpectedly encountered him and he was physically abusive towards her. At that point Kylie knew that she was not safe and needed to seek refuge in an abused women's shelter:

After moving to Winnipeg, I came back [to Alberta] three months later for a funeral. That's when I saw him again. I had already changed my phone number so there was no way he could contact me, but I just happened to see him at the store and he grabbed me by the hand pretty hard. I didn't notice until like the next day that my hand was all bruised up. And the girl he was with spit in my hair and my face. The he started trying to stalk me and stuff, so that's when I came here to the shelter.

Experiencing abuse has caused Kylie to feel guilty, humiliated, and ashamed about herself as a woman. Kylie blames herself for failing to provide a "normal life" for both herself and her children. However, remaining steadfast, hopeful, and dedicated as a mother for her children's sake has helped Kylie to overcome her negative feelings of self-worth. Experiencing abuse has made Kylie feel "stronger" about herself as a woman and as a mother, and has given her the confidence and knowledge to teach her children to also be strong individuals. Experiencing abuse has also given Kylie the determination to teach her sons not to be like their father, and to have respect for women:

I just felt really bad for my kids, why I was staying there, and why it was the way it was. I just wish that they had a normal life and not such a messed up dad...And then I got messed up myself for staying there...It was really, really hard not to break down and cry in front of them [children]...and just trying to act and look like you're normal and that everything's okay. Like going to drop them off at their dayhome and trying to act like everything's okay, when I just felt like shit...It was really hard! My mom was there a lot and I was always at my mom's with them...I used to feel really bad about myself after it happened. Like I felt really bad about myself and I became anorexic. I went from a size eleven to a size three and ended up in the hospital for an eating disorder, but I just felt so badly about myself. And then it took a while to just kind of build myself back up. I don't know, I feel like a stronger person now. I feel like I could pretty much handle anything now, and I could be there for them [children], and be stronger, and teach them how to be strong...It [being abused] has made me more paranoid and more strict I would say with the boys because I don't want them to be like their dad. So, I'm kind of hard on my boys because I want them to be strong men and I want them to have respect for women. So I like make them do a lot of things for their little sister so that they'll have respect for her and for me, and stuff like that. I've made the choice right now not to get into a relationship for a long time, until I'm healthy enough. I know the signs of abuse and all that stuff and I'll never go through it again so that my kids don't see me go through it, and so that they don't grow up thinking that it's okay...When people tell me that my kids are really well behaved and really good it makes me like really proud, and I think oh I must be doing something right for them to be like so good and well behaved.

Since Kylie left her partner, she has been looking for a new daycare for her children, and for new employment for herself.

**v) *Louisa***

Louisa is a Caucasian woman in her early sixties who was born in Alberta. At the time of the interview, Louisa was residing in an abused women's emergency shelter in South West Calgary, Alberta. Louisa is the mother of two children- a thirty-one-year-old son and a twenty-eight-year-old daughter both from her relationship with her current abusive partner. Louisa also has one grandchild.

Louisa grew up in what she describes as a “Mennonite home which was not traditional, but liberal”. Louisa lived with her parents and her two sisters and one brother. Louisa moved away from home when she was eighteen to attend university. Louisa has a Bachelor of Education Degree from University.

Louisa met her current partner, who is Caucasian, when she was twenty years old. After dating for two years, Louisa and her husband were married. Louisa was married to her husband for thirty-five years, but left him nine months prior to our interview. Louisa’s husband has a Masters Degree in Engineering from University, and although he is currently retired he now does consulting work. Louisa has a Bachelor of Education Degree from University, but has never worked as a teacher. The year Louisa graduated from university was the same year she married her partner. Only after they were married did Louisa discover that her husband did not want her to work, particularly once they had children. When Louisa was first married her husband did allow her to “have small part time jobs for minimum wage” here and there, but would not allow her to work full time. Louisa believes that her husband “felt insecure” if she was “making any significant amount of money”. Louisa also had to give her husband the money that she did earn, so there was “not much incentive” for her to “work a lot”. Once Louisa’s children were born she remained at home with them and did not work. When her children were in school she “volunteered at their schools”, which was a “really good outlet” for her to “be with people” and to “socialize”. Later in life when Louisa decided that she might need to work if she left her husband, she realized that even though she had a Bachelor of Education she could not teach



because she learned that most school boards “do not want anyone who has been out of the classroom for more than eight years”. As such, Louisa realized that because she did not “use” her “education”, it was “gone”. This has been a “terrible grief” for Louisa which she still deals with today, as it was always her “dream” to be a teacher. Since Louisa left her husband she has been working part time at a local boutique.

Throughout their relationship, Louisa’s husband was emotionally, psychologically, financially, verbally, physically, and sexually abusive. Louisa’s husband began to be psychologically abusive when they were dating:

As I think back on it now, it [abuse] started before we were married. It was manipulation and game playing then. I tried to break off the engagement twice because I had all these red flags that were coming up, and then that led to actually more abuse and I was afraid. So I thought, okay if I marry him then it’ll change you know, because he told me that it would. And so I married him thinking that. And of course um, I really thought that I had to carry through with the decision that I’d made, and I did not think that I would have support from my family for backing out of it [engagement]. Little did I know that my mother said that she would have supported me from day one, cuz she knew there was something very wrong, cuz she said I changed when I met my husband and I was no longer the same in anyway. I became very guarded, very secretive, and that’s been a very large grief to me too because I’ve had to get to know my family again.

Once they were married, Louisa’s husband continued to be psychologically abusive, and also became emotionally, financially, verbally, physically, and sexually abusive:

He would ask my input, and I’d do a lot of research about, you know, how to do things, but I didn’t feel confident in my knowledge of that because he would override all of my decisions. Anything! Any input that I would have he would override it or belittle it, or something like that to make me feel insecure about what I had done...Some of the physical stuff was the pushing, slapping, choking, um, those kinds of things. And also the confinement and rape, that was a lot of what happened earlier in the

marriage...I have memories of like lying on the bed with his arm over my throat and like his full weight of his arm on my throat, which was pretty debilitating. There's not much you can do! When he would rape me he would twist my arm to the point where I thought it would break...But if I submitted to him sexually, then it would mean look at you, you actually do want this and you're saying that you don't, but look at you, you actually do!...There were times when I knew that I had to submit to him sexually in the end or I would be very, very physically hurt and he had the power to hurt me because I have very fragile bones...I have had broken ribs and, you know things like that, because when he became aggressive my bones would break easily and that is very, very painful and I did not want that to happen if I could help it. So I would give in when I realized that I needed to.

The only times when Louisa's husband was not abusive was when she was pregnant with her children:

I was treated like a princess during my pregnancy...And that was really a break for me...It was! I have always been his possession, and his children were also his possessions. So I think that's why he would take care of me during that time [pregnancy]. So it was a break for me. I actually was able to get healthier, and once the baby came I really was determined to take care of myself, my baby, and my marriage. So it just became like a goal for me to make this work, because even though there were times when I thought I can't do this, I have to take the baby and go, I really knew in my heart it wasn't an option for me at that time...I would often say to my husband, and it was actually something that was deep in my psyche I think from the brainwashing, I would often say 'If it wasn't for you I would be living on the street.' I think that's what kept me from actually leaving, because I did not believe I would make it if I ever left him, and especially with two children...I remember that was also said to me very, very often. He would tell me I would be on the street if I ever left him.

Although Louisa's husband was abusive during all thirty-five years of their marriage, the specific forms of abuse that he employed varied and alternated at different times:

The abuse happened in a way that there wasn't always an explanation for it- that I had triggered it or that I had done something to bring it about. So I really believed it was my fault for many, many years. I didn't know exactly what it was that I had done, but it must have been something you know, and that's why I thought, oh I've got to change myself, I've got to

do something different, it's my personality, it's my something. Therefore, all the changes. But it [abuse] never stopped. It just changed. It changed to verbal, then it changed to physical, then it changed to mind games, what they actually call, and what I've been counseled is called crazy making. I didn't know there was such a thing! I thought I was losing my mind. I thought I had misunderstood something that he'd said or done, or interpreted something wrong. I didn't realize it was a game that we were playing, and it was a game to him, to see how much I would take... Another reason why I stayed in it [relationship] so long, is because when one type of abuse stopped and changed to something else I thought, okay now we're getting better, we're actually working this out. But it had only changed to something else... I didn't realize it was the same thing but in another colour... And so you can deceive yourself into thinking that it's actually improving... Towards the end of the thirty-five years that we lived together he was actually verbalizing that he was testing me to see how much I would take. What an eye opener for me! I was just totally devastated because here I'd been trying with everything that I had available to me, and here it is a game. And I thought how can anybody be that cruel! And I think I was pretty much at the end of my rope emotionally, mentally, physically, like everything just on thin threads.

Louisa decided to finally leave her husband when the abuse became constant and incessant, and when her husband verbalized that she was no longer safe. It was then that Louisa realized that she needed to leave immediately if she were to remain alive:

I must say he [husband] is very good at doing his job, and he's been a very good provider over the years. We never wanted for anything materially, so he was good that way. But all of us, including myself and my two children, suffered a great deal emotionally. It doesn't matter how much material stuff you have, or how wealthy you are, if you don't have emotional safety then nothing else matters. And it took me a long while to realize that money cannot make up for what I was losing... I had been in counseling for a number of years already talking with different counselors, and my counselors were telling me that I needed to leave, and I needed to leave quickly. They were also telling me that it was incredibly dangerous because my husband did not remember what he would do after he had done it. Like even to this day my husband will say to me that he has never done those things, and it would never occur him to him to do things like that. But it's really odd because sometimes he'll refer back to an incident and it will be some years later, and then I'll think, okay I guess maybe you did remember that after all. So somewhere in the back reaches of his mind it's still there. And so my counselors did um, say to me that those types of

abusers are the most dangerous kind because they don't have the presence or conscience of mind that in the moment will stop them from doing something very bad. So when you don't have that sort of hold on your conscience from way back, then there's no limit...But what finally really opened my eyes, even though there had been a lot of physical, emotional and verbal abuse, was that it had come to a point where, you know the cycle of abuse and there's a bit of a lull in it, well in my life there was no longer a lull in it...After thirty five years the spiral had become so tight that there was no break from it, and there was no time when I felt I could actually still breath and get some energy back to face whatever was coming next. It came to a point where my husband actually told me that I wasn't safe. He said he felt he was no longer responsible for anything that he did towards me, and I could take it or leave it. And I thought, okay, now this is time. I can't fool around with this anymore.

As such, Louisa began to quickly plan out how she would flee, because she knew that once she left she could never go back:

I planned it. Because I could see this coming I knew that I needed to do something, and I was getting counseling that was saying you need to plan for this and I was actually getting help financially so that I could hire a lawyer. So I hired a lawyer without my husband knowing about it, and I got advice from her, and I got documents before I actually left cuz I knew that once I was gone I could never, ever go back. I could not go back and get stuff, I would just have to be gone. So I was doing that for a while. But then there was an opportunity that I had known about- my husband was going to be away for about ten or eleven days, and it was during that time that I had a window. A God given opportunity actually, because I was really praying about it, like how am I going to manage this and I knew that I had to go, God was telling me that I had to go because of all the stuff that was so obvious now. And it was an opportunity, it was my window to leave, and I did. I made sure that I had everything that I needed, and I just took the basic things that were dear to me, and important papers and things like that, and I went and stayed with a friend. I wasn't able to stay with her long because when my husband got back he found out where I was staying and so he was stalking me. So I moved frequently during that time just so that I could stay beyond his reach, but actually what I found out later on is that he knew exactly where I was all the time. When I got here [to the shelter] it wasn't long and I saw his car and realized that he knew where I was here too...It was such a shock to so many people when I left, cuz the people in the church, the people in the community, people wherever just thought we were the ideal family, and that's how we portrayed it. Like my parents knew that there was something wrong, and my sisters knew that there was something very wrong, but they didn't know what it was. When I left then they were like, okay now we know. I

have been highly supported from some, but not from others. Some have said 'Well look at how wonderful you had it! Look at your wonderful life and you just threw it away!' you know, because nobody knew. See, you reap what you sow, and really I had portrayed such a wonderful image of pretense that everything was just fine because I wanted people to think that. And now I couldn't live in that anymore, so I guess it's really not their fault that they didn't know, and they won't know because I'm not going to go explaining it to everybody.

Even though Louisa left her husband nine months ago, he continues to psychologically and verbally abuse her:

I was afraid that I would have to leave here [shelter] because my husband knew that I was here, but they [shelter staff] have been very gracious...I also felt very afraid because there were threatening messages on my phone, but then another message would come and he'd say 'Oh I'm not, I only want to make sure that you're okay, and you know I only care for you, I love you, I, I would never hurt you.' And so it was always these very, very mixed messages. And even still like I get that, like he would never want to hurt me, yet he wants me to be penniless. So it never ever is consistent or makes any sense...He's still asking if I will come back and that's amazing to me.

Experiencing abuse for so many years has damaged Louisa to her very core as a woman and a mother. The recurrent and relentless abuse that Louisa experienced over the years at the hands of her husband caused her to feel so much grief, anguish, and distress that she no longer felt like a "human being". Louisa found it difficult to deal with the pain and agony she felt on the inside from the abuse, and still portray that she was well, composed, and collected on the outside for the sake of her children. Despite the controlling and oppressive environment in which Louisa lived, the times she most looked forward to and which brought her the most happiness were the times she was alone with her children. This was when Louisa felt she could truly be herself as a woman and as a mother.

Knowing that her children remember these happy times they had together has been a source of strength and comfort for Louisa:

When I was being abused it was like I wasn't even a human being anymore...I would just sort of go inside myself and try to be unaware of what actually was going on, and that's what I would do when I was being physically and sexually abused. I would just tune out and pretend that it actually wasn't happening in a lot of cases...But the difficult thing was just trying to be okay, and just trying to be sane. If I had just come out of the bedroom from being raped for example, I had to come out and be okay. If I had just had my arm twisted to the point where I thought it would break and there were bruises, I had to wear something long sleeved and come out and be okay (starts crying)...So the difficult thing was not saying anything, and being okay- putting on a front...I just recall how much energy I had to put into just being okay, and just being okay so that it would look okay for my kids. Whether I was okay inside or not I had to look okay on the outside, and that took an enormous amount of energy...What I would do was, I would say 'It's okay! I can handle this, it's okay! I'm doing fine, I'm fine, look at how fine I am! I am absolutely fine!' And that's how I'd get through it...Totally, totally fragmented I'm sure because I wasn't connected at all with what was going on in my heart and in my insides. But my head was saying 'I'm fine! This is okay! Look at how fine we are!'...When I look back on how unwell I was during the times when I should have been a healthy, vibrant mother with lots of energy to go and do this and that with the kids, that's been disappointing that I didn't have that. We would go on a vacation, or some time when we were spending intense family time together it was so difficult, and it wasn't like this free and easy and we all feel really good about being together kind of thing, it wasn't like that. A lot of family vacations fell apart because we just couldn't hold it together for any length of time you know...But I was there for my children more when my husband wasn't around, and we did have some very, very good times and good memories of that. Sometimes when I talk to my kids now they talk about those times, and it really touches my heart to know that it was meaningful to them even though it was a really difficult time...I don't even know how I got the strength to leave. I don't know. I was just running on pure adrenaline, and when I think back on it now I have no idea how I did it...Now I don't feel safe in this world. I've come to some situations that are really big eye openers for me now that I'm out in the world a little bit. At this age I should know what feels good to me and what doesn't feel good. I should know more social graces than I actually do know. I should know more boundaries than I know. So in some ways I feel like I really have to work on my boundaries. I have to work on what is really safe for me to accept and what isn't, and how I portray what's okay for me and what isn't. There's just a lot of fear of doing things on my own, making

my own decisions. It's just incredible! I've had to make so many decisions on my own, like my own banking, my own care insurance, my own payment of the rent, my own medical coverage, you know all these things I'm still working on... So many decisions that, that I need to do all by myself and I'm finding I'm very, very frightened of that. But we moved I guess probably ten or eleven times during the course of our marriage and they were large long distance moves. I look back on it now, and I basically did all of that on my own because he was at work doing the earning and the providing. I looked after all our real estate people, the packing up of the house, the moving people and everything. All the setup of the family wherever we were, like getting all of their needs looked after- doctors, dentists, schools, tutoring, sports. Everything like that was my doing. So I know I can do it. But do I feel confident in it? No, not at all. So that's where I guess my confidence and my self-esteem is very eroded, and I am determined to build it back up. I know that I can, but it's just that solid, solid foundation that most people would have, I think that I don't have.

Since Louisa left her partner, she has been working on a settlement with her husband for their assets through a mediation process with lawyers.

*iv) Carly*

Carly is a Caucasian woman in her early thirties who was born in Alberta. At the time of the interview, Carly was residing in an abused women's second stage shelter in North West Calgary, Alberta. Carly is the mother of two children- a seventeen-year-old son as a result of sexual assault, and a twelve-year-old son from her relationship with her current abusive partner.

Growing up, Carly lived with her parents, her older brother, and her two younger twin brothers. However, Carly left home when she was only twelve years old because she felt overwhelmed with the responsibility of helping her mother take care of her younger twin brothers. Carly's mother "depended" on her "a lot", something Carly thinks her mother may not have "realized" at the time. After Carly left home she stayed with many of her friends' families.

At the young age of fourteen, Carly was “raped” by her older cousin. Shortly thereafter, Carly found out that she was pregnant. Despite the pain and agony of knowing that the child within her was a result of sexual assault, Carly carried through with her pregnancy. Although it wasn’t her “choice to be raped”, having an “abortion” was “not a choice” in her “books”. Carly believes she made the decision to keep the baby because she was brought up in a Christian family. Carly did not initially tell anyone in her family about how she was sexually assaulted by her cousin and then later became pregnant because she was ashamed, but then she eventually confided in her parents. Carly raised her son on her own, which was hard for her as she missed out on being a teenager- she “never went to prom” and she never had the opportunity to “finish school”. Carly spent many years hiding the truth from her son. However, a year ago when Carly’s son was eleven, he began asking who his father was. Carly felt that “when it comes time to lie, it’s time to tell the truth”, and she told her son who his father was. Over the years members of Carly’s extended family were gradually informed about the sexually assault and pregnancy. As a result, Carly’s immediate and extended family “disowned” this cousin and he is no longer invited or allowed to attend family functions. Carly’s parents are still married today and she has a good relationship with both of them, although she does not see them very often because they live in British Columbia.

As a result of leaving home and becoming pregnant at an early age, Carly was unable to complete Elementary School. The last grade level that Carly completed was grade seven. Since then Carly has upgraded to grade eleven at a



local College. Carly was working full time at a local retail store until she left her partner and began residing at the shelter. Once in the shelter, Carly had to quit her job because she had no childcare for her children, and the shelter requires that residents ensure that their children are attended at all times regardless of their ages.

Carly met her current partner, who is abusive, when she was just nineteen years old. Her partner was working in construction for the summer in Alberta. After dating her partner for just three months, Carly found out that she was pregnant. Carly was in a dating relationship with her partner on and off for almost twelve years, but left her partner approximately three months prior to our interview.

Throughout their relationship, Carly's partner was psychologically, financially, and verbally abusive. The abuse began after their son was born, and increased as their son got older:

Not even a year after our son was born...he became pushy, really pushy...And, you know I found myself doing things that I didn't want to do...The whole situation was just terrible all the way around, you know. Like once it was Christmas and my paycheck isn't very much, I mean, I'm making ten dollars an hour you know. But he [partner] was like, 'Ah, I'll take care of this, this, and this.' And I was putting away Christmas presents and what not. And here my son, you know, he takes a lunch everyday to school, but there's no bread, and there's no milk. And he [partner] knows that my cheque is in my purse and I can't cash it because I have these funky hours from eleven pm to seven am. I go, 'You know, I didn't go to the bank,' and here my son is crying and picking money out of his piggy bank so I can get him bread and milk cuz he witnessed what was going on. Well, like how is that, you know? He's [partner] got money, but he's like 'No, no, no, no.'...It's a control thing. Everybody should do as he says, you know. He's a very angry person. He believes that counseling doesn't help anybody (starts crying), you are the way you are and that's just it. And you know, he thinks that if he doesn't demand respect and intimidate people, then you know they just walk all over him.

Well it doesn't work like that, you know. And that's probably the hardest thing right now, is like he was working on things, but as far as counseling or seeking help he thinks that's all a bunch of bullshit. What scares me is that my son is still soft, and loving, and caring, but he's not allowed to feel what he wants to feel, he's not allowed to have his own emotions cuz his dad controls him, you know. If he cries he gets in shit, you know, and that's not fair.

Carly decided to finally leave her partner the first time he physically abused their son. Carly could personally endure the psychological, financial, and verbal abuse that her partner put her through for years, but she could not endure the thought of her son also being put through abuse at the hands of her partner:

The final day that I left I phoned child welfare and found out where I could go and what I could do. Here I'm a small town girl in a big city, you know, I don't know what to do (sighs). I um left because it was about seven thirty in the morning and he [partner] was just angry and ignorant, and he's a major marijuana user, like six, seven, eight joints a day, you know. Anyways, um, he couldn't get a bag of weed the night before, and that morning he had gotten upset with my son, and I don't know why, I was still sleeping cuz like I'd just gotten home from work. And he's freaking out on my son, and he had pushed my son and basically from here, the couch, to there (points to a table about ten feet away), that's how far my son flew before he hit the ground. Just by pushing him, you know. And here's my son, he's got his book bag and he just got up and started running out the door crying. You know, how's that fair for any child to go to school? Not even the fact of going to school, that's no reason to treat a child like that, you know. There was no reason for it! 'Oh he was looking at me funny' he [partner] said. So I said 'What do you mean he was looking at you? You know, the kid doesn't know how to look at you because everybody's gotta walk on eggshells around you.' And that's when I'm there! What happens when I'm not there, you know... There's still a lot of things, like he overreacts to things, and he uses some of the verbal language, and you know. I find that's just not necessary, and it's just so unfair to intimidate or have anyone live in an intimidated world... This is not what any child or any person deserves, you know. And I told myself like, you know, this isn't the way to bring kids up... I'm guilty of putting my kids through too much, you know, my kids have seen too much and it's not fair (starts crying). You know, it's hard for a parent to deal with that. You start to feel like a failure and you reach out for that help, and you sure are sorry that you didn't reach out for that help sometimes.

During one of the times when Carly was not with her current partner, she met and began dating another partner. Carly was in a dating relationship with this second partner for just under a year. This partner was verbally and physically abusive. The abuse began shortly after they started dating. During one abusive incident, Carly's partner threw a case of empty beer bottles at the back of her head as she was walking down the stairs, and she became unconscious. Carly was then rushed to the hospital with a head injury. It was then that Carly decided to leave this partner and move back home to British Columbia with her children. Shortly after leaving this partner Carly found out that she was pregnant, but did not inform him. Three months after Carly found out that she was pregnant, she was in a serious car accident and began hemorrhaging. Carly was then rushed to the hospital and told by hospital staff that she was miscarrying the baby. However, six months later Carly went to the hospital because she was having cramps, only to find out that she was in labour and had not miscarried after all. Carly gave birth to a little girl, but her daughter was born with a congenital heart defect and died when she was two months old. Losing her daughter has been a very difficult and heartbreaking experience for Carly. She often still thinks of her daughter and wonders what it would be like to have her daughter living with her today.

Experiencing abuse has caused Carly to feel very disappointed in herself as a woman and as a mother. Carly has not only internalized blame for the abuse she experienced, but has also held herself responsible for the abuse her children witnessed. This has led Carly to feel dejected, remorseful, and inferior.

However, Carly's children have been her biggest source of strength. Carly's children have given her the courage to talk with them about abuse, and to teach them that abuse is wrong, unjust, and unacceptable:

I feel like a piece of shit, like a piece of shit (starts crying). You know, like what have I done? At first it's like you feel sorry for yourself, and you're ashamed, and you're embarrassed, and you're weak, very, very weak. It [abuse] scared me most definitely. It has made me continue to think I'm weak (starts crying), and a lot of things...I'm a strong person, I'm a very strong person! But you know, I find that one little thing will make me feel so weak, and I'll think back cuz something will trigger a certain time or a certain instance and I start to not believe in myself. I'll be discouraged, and I'll see it myself because I won't do certain things because I feel I'm not worthy or I don't deserve to be...I wonder what have I done, you know, is it something I've done?...Is it something I've missed?...Is it something I am doing wrong?...Is it somewhere that I have lacked being a mother? Because of the abuse I'm very hard on myself...But my kids are my biggest strength, you know. My biggest feeling of being ashamed or embarrassed is at what I was doing to them, or what exactly they had seen, or how they were interpreting how they were you know, cuz I would just die if my kids grew up to hit women...It would break my heart! And just to talk to them and to discuss with them that this is not right, this is not acceptable, and it's not even okay for me. It's bad and it's wrong for me to be in that situation and for them to witness or to see that kind of situation...And to make sure that they're aware of that, you know, it's not okay to treat anyone, male or female, men or women, like that...And you know, try to explain that it's maybe something within someone that needs to be dealt with you know...Not everybody's bad, and you know it comes from somewhere. Actions come from somewhere, and some people just have a crappy life. I got dealt one of them. In some ways I'm extremely fortunate, you know, I got two beautiful babies...I've had a lot of mishaps, I've had a lot of heartbreak in my life (starts crying).

Since Carly left her partner, she has been trying to find a home for her and her children so that they can begin rebuilding their lives.

#### ***vii) Badriya***

Badriya is an Arab woman in her mid thirties. Badriya was born in Iraq, but her family moved to Lebanon when she was still a baby. Badriya immigrated

to Canada when she was a child. At the time of the interview, Badriya was residing in an abused women's second stage shelter in North West Calgary, Alberta. Badriya is the mother of four girls- a ten-year-old, eight-year-old, six-year-old, and three-year-old from her relationship with her current abusive partner. All four of Badriya's daughters were residing with her at the shelter.

Growing up, Badriya's father was physically abusive towards her mother. As such, when Badriya was still young her mother decided to "run away" with Badriya and her three sisters. Badriya's mother left her three brothers with her father. Shortly after, Badriya's mother moved to Canada with Badriya. Badriya's brothers and sisters remained in Lebanon as they were all married at the time. Badriya lived with her mother in Toronto, Ontario. Although Badriya completed high school, she has never been employed.

Badriya met her partner when she was living in Toronto, Ontario. Badriya's partner is also Arab, and immigrated to Canada from Iraq when he was an adult. The same month Badriya and her husband were married, they moved to Calgary, Alberta. Badriya was married to her husband for eleven years, but left him six months prior to our interview.

Throughout their relationship Badriya's husband was verbally and physically abusive. Badriya's husband began to be abusive two months after they were married:

He start to abuse me the first two months we was married. Yeah, he was very abusive. But I can't say nothing cuz it's like culture thing, right...He always like put me down. He never ever say I love you. And one time I ask him 'Like why you don't say I love you?' He say 'Because I don't want you be proud of yourself.'...He always tell me I a piece of garbage...He always say to my kids I'm stupid, and I don't know

nothing...Many times he actually said if he leave me nobody would look at me or at my face. That's what I feel now...Like even now I feel I'm nothing still. And even I'm going to group [counseling] and we study self-esteem...He used to hit me too much, like three times a week at least, and my body was bruised everywhere...Even if I can't give him glass of water cuz I'm sick he used to hit me...Shouting, calling me names, and hitting it was part of my life.

The verbal and physical abuse escalated when Badriya was pregnant with their children. Badriya even had two miscarriages as a result of the physical abuse she experienced at the hands of her husband:

Since day one when I start to have kids...he always treat me bad...especially because he doesn't want have kids...Each time I find out I was pregnant I was scared if it's girl or boy because I know how much he wants boy. And I'm scared if I find out it's girl, what he would do. He always get mad when he find out I'm pregnant, especially when I do ultrasound...and find out that I have girl...he doesn't talk to me for one week...When I go to hospital he doesn't go with me cuz it's girl too... With all my pregnancies he used spit at me, hit me and choke me when I was pregnant. He did many times. Or like he'd throw water at me to wake up...I went through too much...I had two miscarriages actually because he hit me too many times...I was having very, very hard time...Like every day I used to have panic attacks after the kids go to sleep from like eight or nine o'clock until five o'clock in the morning, straight, never stop. Oh my gosh I went through lot! Like one time I called the ambulance and I end up in the hospital. The other time I have to wake up the kids around three o'clock in the morning and take them to the hospital with me with their pajama. The time I called the ambulance I see dark in front of my face, like somebody choke me, and my heart pumping, and I can't breathe (starts crying).

Despite the abuse that Badriya suffered for many years, she frequently denied that such abuse was happening when it was brought to the police's attention, as she feared that her partner would harm her if she reported him or left him:

My neighbour, they used to call the police when he used to hit to me. But I always say to the police 'No he didn't hit me,' even when they see bruises...The first time he hit me after we was married for two months the police show up and he run out the window...So I said 'He's not here.'

They said ‘Your neighbour just phoned and said he hit you.’ I said ‘No he didn’t,’ cuz we was like new married and I don’t want to like right away...So anyways they say ‘We can tell,’ cuz like I was crying and my eye was bruised. But I said ‘No.’ They said ‘We will get him.’ So they come after one week at two o’clock at night and he was in the house. They come and they get him and he has to stay in jail for one night...But I still said ‘No.’...And one time he hit me after I had the third baby and she was one week old. When I got home he hit me and all my body was bruised everywhere. So my neighbour called the police and they come. So like I was crying and I said ‘Yes he hit me.’ So they took picture everywhere of my body and they write statement and asked me to sign it. So when I sign it, right away I don’t know what come in my mind, I rip the paper and I say ‘I’m not going to charge him.’ But they said ‘Because we see everything on your body, the bruises, we’re going to charge him. And because you said that, and your neighbour said that he always do that, and you told us, and you write the statement but ripped it, we going to charge him.’ So I didn’t cuz I was like scared of him...Anyway they take him to jail again for one day and they give him no contact order, like, he can’t come to the area for three months...So anyway he used to phone me and say ‘Don’t charge me.’ When it was the court date I didn’t go because he said don’t go. And many times he said ‘If you go [to court] I will cut you in pieces, put you in the toilet and flush you up, and nobody knows where you are.’ He used to threaten me too much. So, I didn’t go [to court]. So the next day the police show up at my house...and they said to me ‘We coming to take you to jail...because you have subpoena from the police and you didn’t show up at the court.’...So they said ‘Who you have to take care of the kids?’ I don’t have any friends, nobody, because he wouldn’t let me have any friends, and I have no relative, nobody here. So they end up calling the child welfare. The child welfare, they come and they said ‘She has to go to jail because she didn’t go to subpoena to the courts.’ So anyway I went and they take the kids. But at four o’clock I get out and they give back to me the kids...I was crying, I said [to husband] ‘You see what happened to me! Why you didn’t tell me?’ He knows this will happen to me, like he’s smart he knows, but I didn’t know this would happen.

Badriya decided to finally leave her husband when Child Welfare became involved and gave her the ultimatum of either leaving her husband or having her children apprehended and taken into custody:

One day I was with my kids and we was going out and someone rang the door. It was two women and two police, and I said ‘Yes can I help you?’ and they said ‘We are from Child Welfare and we’re coming to get you out from the house.’ I said ‘Why?’ They said ‘Your neighbour, they

always phone the police because you always crying, your husband always hits you, and there is kids in the house. So if you don't come with us we're going to take the kids... This is the third time your neighbour phones. So we have to talk to judge before we come here, so it's not our decision and not your decision. It's court ordered. We have to get out from the house.' I start crying and I said 'No he never hit me'... because I was scared to leave the house, and I wasn't strong. I mean, still I'm not that strong, I know myself I'm not strong person. I am scared to do stuff, you know... So they said 'If you don't come we take the kids.' So he come [husband], he was in the bedroom, he come and he say 'No I never hit her,' and he start to shout. So they said 'Enough!'... And I left because of my kids... So they find a place at the shelter... and we went there for eight weeks. Then we end up here... At that time he used to phone me and I didn't answer my cell phone. I didn't answer because how much I accept from him, like hard life... I realized when I went up and I see the world, and he wasn't around for controlling and hitting and calling me names non stop, I was just waiting for somebody to take me away from him or something... When Child Welfare was gonna close the file I said 'No don't close it.' They said 'You're the first person who say don't close the file.' But I want them to stay with me because I feel little bit stronger than before, and he isn't around. I'm so happy I left. My life was saved from him. I know if I stayed with him maybe two or three weeks more I be dead because it comes to the end, and at that time it too much, like he was choking me almost to death.

Like Aliya, experiencing abuse has been emotionally, mentally, and physically taxing for Badriya. She no longer felt like the same person. Badriya often wondered and questioned why she was the victim of abuse, as she never imagined she would find herself in such a position. Badriya coped with the pain of abuse by focusing on and devoting herself to her children. This was the only thing that was "easy" in her life. The love and affection that Badriya's children showed her in return was the only source of happiness in her grief-stricken world:

I'm not like before, a normal person right... It affect me lots. I was stressed and on depression pills... I used to cry lots. I used to go outside on the balcony or downstairs to the basement and cry and say 'Why this happen to me?'... I feel like I'm fifty or sixty years old now. No honest! Like I feel I'm very, very tired... and I feel like I'm very down in my heart... So I used to just focus on my kids when they come from school. Everything in the house clean, the cooking ready, so I study with my



kids...I go for walk...I take them swimming...or we go watch family movie...Just focusing on my kids for me it's very, very easy...When I give them love or kiss they give me back, right. When I'm sad they give me hug right. So this is the life... I'm always happy with my kids.

Since Badriya left her partner, she has been volunteering at two different homeless shelters. Badriya has also been considering going back to school or finding employment.

### **3) Conclusion**

In the last several years there has been an increasing awareness and concern about the social problem of domestic abuse. However, for those who are presently in the grips of domestic abuse it remains a difficult and painful issue to reveal to others. The women I spoke with willingly and courageously shared their stories of struggle, suffering, and sorrow, which helps to render more visible the individual voices and lived realities of women who mother in the social context of domestic abuse. The women's individual narrative profiles reveal that despite their various social locations, their experiences of abuse influenced and shaped their experiences as women and as mothers. Although the women expressed that being a mother in an abusive situation was often challenging and difficult, they also expressed that being a mother was the primary source of hope, strength, and courage which carried them through the deepest and darkest moments of abuse.

## **Chapter Five: Abused Women's Knowledge and Understandings of the Dominant Discourses of Mothering**

“Mothering is caring, love, interest, respect, um, validating, like the mirroring thing. Perfection (laughs)...Society expects, like I mean I really don't give a crap, but they expect total self-sacrifice. Like there's no room for a person to be a mother. There may be room for a mother to be a person a little bit, but you know a person is, well he's a man and he doesn't have to worry about that! It's like the difference when you say to somebody 'Oh yes the vice president has four kids she can't make the meeting', they say 'Uh, okay, so she can't she get a babysitter?' But if you say 'The vice president has four kids he can't make the meeting', they say 'Why, he has another appointment?' You know it's just an assumption, like that because you're the mother it's your career and it's your interests that must be sacrificed...I've seen this in women's magazines and commercials. I mean have you seen the swiffering commercials where she is so excited to do the dusting (laughs)! Or where she makes everything better by baking her son cookies because it's raining out and he can't go camping! I'm like, oh gosh! Yeah, yeah, sure (laughs)!...And I think that society has a very inaccurate perception of who gets abused and what abuse is. So when you say abused mother, the picture that instantly comes to mind is like somebody very poor, had a whole bunch of children maybe by different fathers, is married to an alcoholic, and you know her life sucks and this is just another thing she has to deal with. But it's not true! It's just not true!...It's everybody can be anybody...And it's really hard to accept that...So, I don't think that society knows what an abused mother looks like, and I don't think that they focus very much on the mother. They focus more on the effects on the children, which is fair enough, but there's a woman there who needs help too...What I've noticed is it's very hard sometimes to articulate all the things that you're feeling, plus you've been told that you're stupid, or crazy, or whatever! So it's easy to sort of see them as incompetent, indecisive, not good, or something like that...I mean people always ask like 'Why does she stay?' and they don't ask 'Well why does he treat her bad?' No, they ask 'Why does she stay? I wouldn't stay there'. And I've said that too, you know....Well, it's not that easy, but it's easy enough to just sort of look at that end bit. But that's society too right, it's kind of the paternalistic male dominated.”

This quotation from Josephine, a 35-year-old Caucasian woman who is the mother of a one-year-old boy, illustrates well the main themes surrounding abused women's personal mothering experiences which I will be discussing in this chapter. Indeed, mothering is a complex experience. Mothers in the past and in the present have lived under the influence of an ideology of motherhood that promotes dominant ideals of motherhood against which mothers' lives are

regulated and judged. The ideologies of motherhood function as culturally constructed practices, ones that are continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As cultural constructions, their meanings vary with time and place (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 37). These ideologies of motherhood materialize in dominant mothering discourses, which are specific structures of statements, terms, and categories that define how women must mother at given times and places. These dominant mothering discourses are manifested, perpetuated and enforced in numerous and various ways- from doctors' advice, teachers' recommendations, family and friends' counsel and parenting books, to mainstream media sources such as radio, television, and the internet. In this sense, the dominant mothering discourses are considered as the legitimate standards to which mothers are compared and assessed.

The dominant discourses of mothering and the high demands they impose on mothers today to be ever-present and available regardless of the circumstances under which their mothering takes place, create a tension that makes it more difficult for mothers to negotiate their way through motherhood without feeling stressed, guilty, discouraged, and deficient (Baber & Allen, 1992; Eyer, 1996; Hays, 1996; and Stoppard, 2000). To date, the literature on mothering has largely examined how being a mother impacts women. Stress, guilt, depression, and feelings of inadequacy have all been identified as some of the negative consequences that mothers experience as a result of living under the influence of the dominant discourses of mothering and being unable to keep up to the expectations. However, not all women subscribe to the beliefs and expectations

of the dominant discourses of mothering to the degree that they are promoted and perpetuated in current society (Baber & Allen, 1992; McMahon, 1995; and Thurer, 1994). Researchers have found that some mothers do challenge the dominant discourses of mothering. However, the empirical literature that explores how mothers challenge the dominant discourses of mothering and the consequences it has on these mothers is very limited (Croghan & Miell, 1998; Gordon, 1990; and Little, 1999).

Both the literature on mothering and the literature on domestic abuse have largely failed to likewise examine how not only being a mother, but being a mother who has experienced abuse impacts women. As such, one is left to wonder: How does the dominant discourse of mothering impact abused mothers' lives? That is, what demands and standards of mothering do abused mothers articulate? Do abused mothers articulate the same demands and standards of mothering that are imposed by the dominant discourses of mothering? Do abused mothers experience the same stress, guilt, depression, and feelings of inadequacy from living under the influence of the dominant discourses of mothering? Do all abused mothers subscribe to the beliefs and expectations of the dominant discourses of mothering? Do some abused mothers challenge the dominant discourses of mothering? This chapter, which examines and discusses abused women's knowledge and understanding of the dominant discourses of mothering, begins to address some of these questions.

Josephine's narrative provides a good example of the role and influence that dominant discourses of mothering play in the lives of abused women.

Josephine clearly articulates the dominant discourse of intensive mothering and its related standards, which stipulate that mothers are solely responsible for the care of their children. In this regard, Josephine states that society expects “perfection” and “total self-sacrifice” from mothers. Josephine also clearly articulates the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, which casts abused mothers as “bad mothers” for failing to meet these standards of intensive mothering. As Josephine states, abused women are viewed and portrayed as “incompetent”, “indecisive”, and “not good” mothers.

What is interesting in this narrative is that Josephine does not merely subscribe to this dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but rather outright challenges it. Josephine questions and criticizes the messages within this discourse which promote an ideal that is impossible to achieve. In this regard, Josephine describes and pokes fun at the unrealistic portrayal of self-sacrificial and perfect mothers in commercials on television. Josephine even outright asserts that she does not “give a crap” what “society expects” of mothers, because she knows that the expectations are but false and idealistic “assumptions”. Josephine also challenges the view and portrayal of abused women as “bad mothers”. As Josephine states, “society has a very inaccurate perception of who gets abused, and what abuse is”, and consequently does not “know what an abused mother looks like”. In this sense, Josephine claims that abused mothers are not inherently “bad mothers”, but rather are falsely portrayed as such due to a “paternalistic male dominated” society. Indeed, Josephine’s narrative is one example that

demonstrates that abused mothers not only articulate, but also challenge the discourse of intensive mothering.

This chapter presents abused women's knowledge and understanding of the dominant discourses of mothering.<sup>11</sup> This chapter serves as a backdrop for the next chapter, which discusses abused women's subjective mothering identities. Understanding abused women's knowledge and perceptions about the dominant discourses of mothering provides insight into the ways in which these discourses in turn influence and shape their subjective mothering identities. First, this chapter presents abused women's perceptions of the social construction "mother". I discuss how abused women describe "mother" by reiterating four of the standards of intensive mothering. As such, I argue that abused women's understandings of "mother" are shaped and influenced by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. I also discuss how, although abused women reiterate the dominant discourse of intensive mothering in their definitions of "mother", not all of them subscribe to the beliefs and expectations that underlie this discourse. Rather, many of them challenge this discourse by actively questioning and criticizing the beliefs and expectations that are imposed on mothers. Therefore, I also argue that abused women are not only able to articulate the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but are also able to identify and challenge its constricting and oppressive nature.

Second, this chapter presents abused women's perceptions of the social construction "abused mother". I discuss how abused women describe "abused

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<sup>11</sup> I examine abused women's understanding of societal expectations, and not their own personal expectations, of mothers and abused mothers.

mother” by reiterating the dominant discourse of intensive mothering which casts abused mothers as “bad mothers” for failing to meet the standards of intensive mothering. In addition, abused women describe “abused mother” according to five other discourses, by reiterating and colliding the dominant discourses of victim-blaming and mother-blaming. As such, I argue that abused women’s understandings of “abused mother” are shaped and influenced by the dominant discourses of intensive mothering, victim-blaming, and mother-blaming. Like in their definitions of “mother”, many of the abused women challenge the view and portrayal of abused women according to these intensive mothering, victim-blaming, and mother-blaming discourses. Therefore, I also argue that abused women are not only able to articulate the dominant discourses that casts abused mothers as “bad mothers” or other deviant mothers, but are also able to identify and challenge its subjugating and unjust nature.

### **1) Abused Women’s Perceptions of the Social Construction of “Mother” – Reiterating the Dominant Discourse of Intensive Mothering and Variations in Believing and Challenging this Discourse**

The discourses of mothering that are imposed on women are relative to specific historical, cultural, and social contexts, and therefore are variable and multiple. In the 1940’s, ‘custodial mothering’ emerged as the dominant form and discourse of mothering (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 38). Custodial mothering defined and promoted mothering in the following ways: 1) mothering is natural to women; 2) mothers are to be the central caregiver of their biological children; and 3) children require full-time mothering. Although custodial mothering “required full-time mothering”, the “emphasis was on the physical proximity of mother and child-

i.e., the mother was to be “at home” with the children, with little said on the mother needing to be continually attuned to the psychological, emotional or cognitive needs of her children” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 40).

In the 1980’s, ‘intensive mothering’ emerged as the dominant mode and discourse of mothering, and is still today the prevailing standard of mothering against which mother’s lives are regulated and judged. According to O’Reilly (2006), intensive mothering defines and promotes mothering in the following ways: 1) children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers; 2) mothering must be provided 24/7; 3) mothers must always put their children’s needs before their own; 4) mothers must turn to experts for instruction; 5) mothers are fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; 6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children. Intensive mothering requires more than mere physical proximity between mothers and their children. Mothers are “expected to spend ‘quality time’ with their children” where “they are told to play with their children, read to them, and take classes with them” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 40). Women who conform to the intensive mothering discourse are considered “good mothers”, while women who do not conform to the intensive mothering discourse are considered “bad mothers”. This social construction of the seemingly normal, seemingly inevitable discursive classification of women as “good mothers” or “bad mothers” sets up norms for women to meet which have little to do with the real lives of women.



The dominant discourse of intensive mothering and the associated myth of the ideal mother are so pervasive and culturally entrenched that “like air, it is unnoticeable” and invisible (Thurer, 1994; xv). In this sense, women are often not aware that most of what they assume to be real is culturally created. As such, women attempt to conform to the standards of the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, which are highly idealistic and largely unattainable (Maushart, 1999 and Mauthner, 1999). However, not all women unwittingly accept and passively attempt to conform to the standards of the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. Rather, some women actively challenge and critique various tenets of this discourse (McMahon, 1995, Rossiter, 1988). In this sense, women may not hold dominant positions of power, but they are able to challenge to various degrees the different discourses that oppress them. As indicated by Belenky et al. (1986), some women’s ways of knowing are passive in that they just take in knowledge without actively involving themselves in questioning or choice. Other women’s ways of knowing are focused on their internal intuition where they rely on their ‘gut feeling’ to know and understand the world. Finally, other women’s ways of knowing are through an understanding that knowledge is constructed and there is no one truth or reality. These women come to know the world through questioning the status quo and the context in which claims to truth are made.

In this study, the abused women’s understandings of “mother” were shaped and influenced by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. During the interviews I asked the abused women what they thought of when I said the word “mother”, and what they thought were the “standards and expectations of

mothering”. Almost all of the abused women defined “mother” in relation to the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. That is, almost all of the abused women had an awareness of society’s expectations of mothers. In this regard, the abused women reiterated four of the six standards of intensive mothering discussed by O’Reilly (2006). These include: 1) children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers; 2) mothering must be provided 24/7; 3) mothers must always put their children’s needs before their own; and 4) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 43). However, the extent of abused women’s awareness of society’s expectations of mothers varied. While some abused women articulated all of these standards, other abused women only articulated one or two of them.

Although almost all of the abused women reiterated in one or more ways the dominant discourse of intensive mothering in their definitions of “mother”, not all of them subscribed to the beliefs and expectations that underlie this discourse. Rather, many of the women challenged this discourse by claiming that the expectations and standards that it imposes on mothers are unrealistic and unattainable. In this sense, some of the abused women were aware that the standards of intensive mothering are culturally created. As such, the abused women’s narratives reveal that abused women are not only able to articulate the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but are also able to identify and challenge its constricting and oppressive nature. These findings support arguments that women, despite their subordinate position, are able to challenge to

various degrees the different discourses that oppress them. Below I discuss the four standards of intensive mothering that the abused women most commonly discussed when defining “mother”, and the specific ways that they challenged these standards.

***i) Children Can Only be Properly Cared for by their Biological Mothers***

The abused women most commonly cited the standard that children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers. Many of the women expressed that mothers are expected to be solely responsible for the care of children. As such, the ultimate responsibility of caring for children lay with biological mothers, and not fathers. In this sense, mothers have little or no choice but to take responsibility for their children and perform the work involved in mothering. This view reflects the notion of the nuclear family model which is constituted by a heterosexual couple and their biological children, where the man earns and brings home the wage and the woman looks after the children and the home. Two abused women provide a clear example of this. Aileen claimed that mothering is primarily women’s responsibility, because men and women have different and separate roles and obligations in the family.

Aileen:        It [motherhood] is supposed to be happiness, brightness, flowers, sunshine, you know, happy home life...that’s what it’s supposed to be...For them [women] to look after their family, to keep the house clean, to cook, to be loving, and to take care of the husband too...The husband should...bring home the bread, the money, you know. And if the husband doesn’t do that or he disappears, well that’s very hard for the mother...Like in the forties and fifties, women did not go to work, and husbands always get the money home.

Like Aileen, Emma stated that mothers are primarily responsible for caring for children because if they do not, no one else will.

Emma: Mother is...women, caring, patience, and responsibility. Like I have to be responsible...cause nobody is gonna do it for me. I gotta do it myself...And I don't expect anybody to feel sorry for me.

Most of the abused women articulated that mothers are expected to be responsible for the care of their children as a direct outcome of their biology. This biological discourse of maternity equates the maternal role of exclusively caring for children with their bodily capacity to conceive, gestate, and give birth. This view was revealed through women's definitions of "mother" and "mothering" as 'maternal instinct', maternal 'nature', maternal 'love', and 'maternal bond'.

#### *Maternal Instinct*

Many of the abused women articulated that mothers are expected to be solely responsible for their children because mothering is a 'maternal instinct'. That is, mothering is considered to be an innate characteristic. In this sense, mothering is seen as something that women are born with, and are born to do. This view reinforces a biologically determined paradigm, where women are viewed solely as procreative. For example, one woman named Madelyn claimed that women's mother instinct begins at the time of conception. In this sense, Madelyn stated that women instinctively begin to care internally for the children in their wombs, by caring externally for their individual bodies during pregnancy. Madelyn also claimed that mothers are different than fathers because they are innately more loving, giving, dedicated, and responsible.

Madelyn: Mothering is like from the onset. Even when the child is still in your womb, that is already mothering. It's how you take care of yourself that you know that your child will be safe inside you, and that you guarantee that you'll give a healthy birth or delivery... Basically a mother is, you know, there exists a word mother instinct. Mothers are always different from fathers in that they have more love for their children. It's usually always a mother who will want to stay with the kids and have more love... They go to the extent, or far more than what they can do for their children than the spouse... A mother is usually the more responsible and the more stronger personality. They're more of your friend. They're more of the hands on. That is a mother.

Like Madelyn, Tammy stated that women's maternal instinct predisposes them to care for their children, just as their mothers cared for them when they were children. Tammy likens this to a cycle of "dependency" among women.

Tammy: There's the mother instinct that we're in others, whatever that maternal, but no matter what, you're somebody's dependency. Somebody's depending on you with their life! You [mother] should not be neglectful of that.

Aliya further declared that women's maternal instinct towards their own children extends to other children as well. As such, mothers have an inborn tendency to care not only for their own children, but for all children.

Aliya: Mothering is like um, taking care of. But at the same time, like you can mother anything! You can mother a turtle. So mothering is more like a maternal instincts period... I know that there's times where my other girlfriends, like if I'm watching their children for them when they ask me to babysit, and I feel a maternal instinct towards their children as well as my own, you know what I mean? Even in a place like this [shelter], everyone, I find, is looking out for everyone's children.

### *Maternal Nature*

Several of the abused women also articulated that mothers are expected to be solely responsible for their children because mothering is considered to be women's maternal 'nature', that is, their 'natural' role. This mothering role is

therefore seen as an extension of women's femininity. In this regard, abused women defined mothering as something that comes 'naturally' to women. This view reinforces the idea that the womb predisposes women to the role of exclusively caring for children. This view was revealed in a comment made by Abigail. She asserted that nurturing is a natural and central part of who women are.

Abigail: Mother is mother earth, and nurture and nature, those aspects of humanity I guess... And for us [mothers], I think nature is part of it because it's a big part of who we are, how we like to spend our time, and what makes us feel good.

Some abused women expressed that because nurturing comes naturally to women, it is their natural role. These abused women likened women's care of their children to mammals' care of their offspring. In this sense, mothers are viewed as instinctively caring for their children. Taahira stated that women, like the mothers of animals, naturally love and care for their children.

Taahira: Mother is love, mother is respect, mother is good... It's very normal and natural... You see it in baby animals, where you see mothers are so caring and they love their babies. They don't want that they should fall down, or they should be hungry. It's all about care, love, and affection. Mother is the second name of this.

Similarly, Carly claimed that women, like mother hen, naturally care for, guide, and direct their dependent children.

Carly: I think of a hen, yes, a mother hen (laughs)... When a child is born they are totally dependent on you, you know. If it's not you, then who? Mother's a strong word.

Likewise, Belinda said that women, like mother bears, are naturally responsible to not only care for, but also shelter and protect their children.

Belinda: Well I mean there's always been that mother bear thing, you know, you know don't mess with a mother bear's cubs.

Other abused women expressed that mothering is women's natural calling in life. These abused women likened women's role as nurturing caregivers to sacred personages' role as enlightening and comforting spiritual figures. In this sense, mothers' role as caregivers is viewed as their natural and singular vocation. Two abused women compared mothers to the Virgin Mary, a religious maternal figure who naturally and willingly responded to her call to be a mother. Belinda not only compared women to "mother bears", but also to the "Virgin Mary". Belinda stated that when she visualizes mother, she visualizes a woman who is similar to the Virgin Mary.

Belinda: The Virgin Mary. I kinda picture mothers kinda like that.

Like Belinda, Aliya also said that she envisions mothers to be like the Virgin Mary because both are naturally nurturing and caring maternal figures.

Aliya: I'm a Catholic, it's been drilled in my head, so the Virgin Mary comes into my head (laughs). Um, you know some of that takes a figure that is comforting, open, warm and, nurturing.

Interestingly, two abused women equated mothers to God, a religious figure who is omnipotent and the head of all of humanity. Louisa claimed that when she thinks of a mother, she thinks of God and how he is portrayed in the Bible.

Louisa: I think from reading the Bible, I think of a mother as God.

Like Louisa, Eden said that she equates mothers with God, because when children are born they view their mothers in an idyllic manner. Eden also related mothers to God because she believes that they are both naturally loving,

dependable, and comforting parental figures. In this sense, Eden asserted that mothering is a natural role and calling for mothers.

Eden: Mother should be natural to mothers...Mother is also God...I've been reading the bible a lot, and it says that God and mothers have a partnership because in the baby's eyes they're so innocent, it's almost like they see you as God cuz they're just so dependent on you, and they just love you so much. Like I've never really had a mother or father, they were a pretty shitty mom and dad, and the only one I ever talked to was God. And he's the only person, whatever he is, the only thing that got me through the rough times of my life cuz I could never go to my mom and dad because they were very abusive.

### *Maternal Love*

A number of the abused women voiced that mothers are expected to be solely responsible for their children because mothers possess a maternal 'love' for their children. That is, mothers foster and shape a profound and devoted loving relationship with their children. In this sense, maternal 'love' is considered to be unique to women. This view reinforces the idea that women are more warm, tender, and relational than men and thus should exclusively be assigned the responsibility to care for children. For example, both Kylie and Leena described mothering primarily on the basis of maternal 'love'.

Kylie: Mother is strong, trust, love... yeah, really loving.

Leena: Mothering is like loving. Yeah. Mothering is loving and being there.

In addition, two abused women described maternal 'love' in romanticized terms. These women defined the mother-child relationship as being characterized and exemplified by affection. Lacey stated that mothers are always available to provide affection to their children when they need it.



Lacey: Mother is just someone who's there when you need a hug or a kiss.

Makayla, however, stated that mothers not only provide affection to their children when needed, but also actively, willingly, and constantly bestow affection upon their children.

Makayla: Mothering is showing love, holding, cuddling with, and singing.

Moreover, some of the abused women described this maternal 'love' as innate, authentic, selfless and unconditional. In this sense, caring about and caring for children are seen as two inextricably connected aspects of mothering.

Zahra claimed that mothers are expected to inherently express and feel a genuine 'love' for their children.

Zahra: Mothers are supposed to be knowledgeable, they're supposed to be good at disciplining, and they're supposed to be lovable. Like they're supposed to love kids automatically.

Similarly, Josephine stated that mothers have an altruistic and endless love for their children.

Josephine: Mother is anyone whose heart breaks when your heart breaks you know? Anyone who's happy for you when something good happens...who wants only the best for you...Unconditional love, true love....That's a mother.

### *Maternal Bond*

A few of the abused women articulated that mothers are expected to be solely responsible for their children because mothers share a "maternal bond" with their children. That is, mothers are considered to not only be physically connected, but also emotionally connected to their children. This view reinforces the idea that giving birth exclusively predisposes women to physically and emotionally connecting with, and caring for children. For example, Madelyn

described mothering not as constricting or restraining, but as binding and unifying because of the bond that exists between mother and child.

Madelyn: Mothering is like you're bonded, you're connected, you're soul to soul. So mothering is...not chains...but a link....A chain can be broken...but not a link. You are [mother and child] one...like a link.

Like Madelyn, Carly claimed that mothering is characterized by bonding.

Carly stated that this connection between mother and child occurs at birth.

However, Carly also stated that there is a mandate of disconnection between mother and child as the child grows older, and that it is mothers who must initiate and direct this withdrawal, distancing, and separation. Carly upholds that this process of disconnection is normal and inevitable, but hopes that even though her children may no longer rely on her for nurturance, they will still rely on her for guidance.

Carly: Mothering is bonding, you know, nurturing. When you say mother it's that....From birth you [mothers] are bonding and nurturing, and they [children] are depending on you...Gradually, you cut the cord, so to say...But I hope to God that at thirty or forty my kids still call me for advice, you know what I mean.

### *Challenging the Standard that Children Can Only be Properly Cared for by their Biological Mothers*

Although many of the abused women cited the standard that children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers, not all of the women subscribed to the expectations that underlie this standard. Rather, many of the abused women challenged the expectation that mothers are solely responsible for caring for children.

Several abused women challenged the notion of ‘maternal nature’. In this regard, these abused women criticized the expectation that mothers are solely responsible for their children because it is their “natural role”. Many of these abused women emphasized that although women carry babies during pregnancy, give birth, and often breastfeed, both women and men are equally able to provide for a child’s emotional, psychological, and physical needs. For example, Arika drew attention to the expectation that women are the sole caregivers and therefore must stay at home, whereas men are freed from such responsibilities.

Arika:           Moms have to stay home, and the fathers just do what they want when they want with the children. Like they spend time with them when they want to spare an hour...I hear some people say their dad’s babysitting. Well how can their dad be babysitting their own child?

Maggie pointed to how the expectation that women are the caregivers and men are the providers reinforces a gendered division of labour in the home.

Maggie described how mothers are expected to stay home and take care of the children, while fathers are expected to go out and earn a wage to financially provide for the family. Maggie claimed that contrary to this societal expectation, she decided to go out and work while her common-law husband stayed at home with their children. Maggie also claimed that her husband stayed home with their children not because he agreed with his wife’s desire and decision to work, but because he did not want their children to be put in a daycare.

Maggie:           It seems like we’re [women] always looked at as the ones to stay home and take care of them [children]. Like it seems like we’re always the one that has to do everything...that mothers stay home, and fathers go out and work...But as I look at it, you know, it works both ways. Like when I was working...it switched...He [partner] turned around and was like ‘Well I’ll stay home’. He

didn't want my kids going to daycare, and so he ended up staying home, like taking care of them and taking on my role. But..I think that how people look at it is that we're [women] supposed to just stay home... that's what I experienced, that's what I was told to be and to do- stay home.

Kylie emphasized how the current conditions of mothering are the outcome of social processes that are constraining to women. Kylie described how while there are some people who expect mothers to stay home and raise their children, there are other people such as herself who feel mothers should pursue a career if they so wish. Kylie stated that despite the fact that her partner wanted her to stay at home with their three children, she still decided to work outside the home.

Kylie: Well a lot of people think a mother should be a stay at home mom, and then there's others that think like me, like I want to get out there, I want to have my career and that's why I'm trying to go back to school in September again. When I was with their dad he expected me to stay at home, he didn't like that I worked... Yeah I, I don't know whether it was more his jealous, jealousy, or whether he wanted to feel like the man and work. So I don't really know.

Leena highlighted the strength and power of the societal expectation that women should remain in the home to care for children. Leena asserted that the expectation of the "stay at home" mother is a stereotype perpetuated by the media, but that if mothers do not conform to this stereotype they are viewed in a negative and deviant light.

Leena: There's this belief that mothers should be at home with the kids, and cook and clean, and not wear the pants but let the man be the boss...It's just kind of like stereotypes...If you don't do that, then people are thinking you're like some evil person... I see this from society itself, like TV and the media.

Louisa drew attention to the recent changing and evolving nature of mothering standards. Louisa described how the responsibility of caring for children is being shared more between men and women, but how this final responsibility still largely lies with women and not men. Louisa claimed that this expectation is often perpetuated by other mothers, as well as by the media.

Louisa: I would say that maybe now when I look at the, the current generation of mothers and fathers, I think that it's changing because I see how much more of the fathers are having a role than what I knew or than the role my husband played in fathering. So when I look now I see the nurturing part as both coming from the mom and the dad, way much more than I experienced. And so the standards for mothering are changing I think, because the role is being so much more shared...In some way I want to say that because there's so much emphasis put on society caring for children too, I'm wondering if standards of mothering are changing...A lot mothers do stay home with their children and nurture their children, but a lot of them don't, they go and somebody else takes care of their children...So that all makes me kind of question like what are the standards for mothering right now? Are they changing? Are they being higher or are they being lower? Or, are they just changing? I don't know...society expects mothers to produce wonderful children...whatever that takes, their children are to be wonderful. When the children aren't wonderful it's a direct reflection back on the mother, in a lot of my observations...A lot of it is judgment from other mothers, like saying if the kids have not turned out well or they're self-centred or egotistical and then that's entitlement, the entitlement thing, and it is a direct result of how they've been raised in the home...And I'm thinking mmm, you know like I don't know for sure because I think the media has a lot to do with that as well. And we fight hard against the media. Any parent has to fight hard against the media...So it's a huge job for parents to raise kids and, I don't think it's a total reflection of the parents, but I'm talking about like society and and it's still the sort of judgment that's made...So I hope that it's changing because I'm hoping the fathers are going to be brought into the picture more too.

One abused woman also challenged the concept of the “maternal bond”.

Lacey criticized the expectation that mothers are solely responsible for their

children because of an enduring connection that only exists between mothers and children. Lacey claimed that mothering should not consist of mothers continually caring for their dependent children, but rather should consist of mothers teaching their children to care for themselves and be independent.

Lacey:           Mothering is knowing when to let go, like letting them experience things on their own...But I had to learn that...because with my family, my mother and my sisters, they all think that you should be there for your kids all the time, and I said 'No you have to let them grow up and, you can't just keep on'.

Clearly, several abused women challenged the message within the intensive mothering discourse which purports that children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers. These women questioned the idea that the sole responsibility of caring for children is the direct outcome of biological and not social processes. Therefore, these abused women recognized that such an expectation constrains women as it frees men from the responsibility of helping care for children.

#### ***ii) Mothering Must be Provided 24/7***

The abused women also commonly cited the standard that mothers must care for their children on a constant basis, that is, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Many of the women expressed that children are seen as necessitating extensive care, and therefore mothers are expected to give their children constant attention and attendance. As such, the requirement of constantly caring for children rests exclusively on the shoulders of mothers. In this sense, mothering is synonymous with continuous caring. This benevolent discourse of maternity equates the constant maternal work of caring for children with women's motherly

obligation to dependent children. This view was revealed through the women's descriptions of "mother" and "mothering" as always "taking care" of children, and always "being there" for children.

Two abused women clearly communicated the expectation that mothers care for their children on a 24/7 basis. Mandy claimed that mothering is an endless "job", and that mothers are always "on call" to respond to the needs of their children. She also claimed that mothering involves not only constantly doing everything for children, but also constantly caring about everything that pertains to children.

Mandy: Um, caring of the little ones, there for the child, you know, everything. Just the caring. Being a caring mother that cares about everything, that has to do with the child... It's a 24/7 job...It's never ending...just always be ready. You're on call 24/7.

Like Mandy, Makayla stated that mothering is never-ending. It involves not only always being with children, but also always taking care of children.

Makayla: Mothering is being with kids 24 hours. Like being a mother is washing them [children] up, cooking for them, making sure they don't cry for no good reason... Yeah I see it on TV, and your thinking, oh yeah hey it does work, good for them. I've been involved too with child welfare since I've been with my first husband...they took the kids away...and so I think that's where I got it from.

### *Taking Care of Children*

Many of the abused women articulated that mothers are expected to constantly care for children by "taking care" of their well-being. This includes continuously caring for children's physical and emotional needs. In this sense, maternal work is considered to be holistic work. This view reinforces the idea that mothers are exclusively responsible for always responding to children's

needs, desires, and wants. Two women described mothering in terms of the extent and range of care mothers must provide to children. Gabrielle stated that mothering is not just caring for children, but deeply caring for children.

Gabrielle: Mothering is to care for your child, and to care a lot for your child!

Similarly, Louisa claimed that mothering is caring for children in a way that is wide-ranging and all encompassing.

Louisa: A mother is caring for...Mothering is showing like in a really general way, the path for a child to take in life...It is all very all encompassing, every aspect of life. Just showing how to do life basically, in a good way...I'm not describing myself there with those words (laughs), it's just what I've seen and heard.

Some abused women described this intensive and widespread care by discussing the myriad of ways that mothers must care for children's physical and emotional well-being. Tammy claimed that mothers must constantly ensure their children's physical well-being by safely sheltering, feeding, and cleaning them. Equally mothers must constantly ensure their children's emotional well-being by supporting, securing, and pleasing them.

Tammy: Mothering, you know you're taking care of your child, you're being there for support, you're securing them in that safe place, you're making them happy, you're making sure they're fed and kept, and, and clean and happy, and organized.

Likewise, Mandy stated that mothers must constantly ensure not only their children's physical and emotional well-being, but also their children's spiritual well-being. Mandy asserted that part of taking care of children's well-being is protecting them from harm.

Mandy: Mother is caring...loving...sheltering It is caring emotionally, physically, spiritually for children...Doing the best that she [mother] can to not let harm come to the child.



Like Mandy, April also claimed that protecting children from harm is an important part of consistently ensuring their well-being.

April: A mother is a person that takes care of the baby by providing a stable, financial, loving, kind home for them... A mother should clean, cook, do the dishes, have a job, pick the kids up from school, take them to daycare, and do all the things... We're expected to do it all! Yes!... A Mother loves them [children], and does everything, and anything in the world to protect them no matter how much it hurts.

### *Being There for Children*

Several of the abused women articulated that mothers are expected to constantly care for children by always “being there” for them. That is, mothers must be ever present in order to adequately care for children. In this sense, mothers’ presence is considered to be the only means by which children can properly be cared for. Such individualistic mothering practices exclude the involvement of others outside the nuclear family. This view reinforces the idea that mothers are indispensable caregivers in children’s lives, and therefore must exclusively be physically and emotionally available to children at all times. For example, Darri declared that mothers must “take care” of their children, but ultimately must always “be there” for their children.

Darri: Mother is a woman that has children and that takes care of them and their upbringing... A mother should be a person that you can go to and rely on, be safe with. So being there for your children.

Likewise, Coreen asserted that mothers must “take care” of their children in a myriad of different ways, but also must “be there” for their children all the time.

Coreen: Mother is loving...warm...hugging...It's like, feeding, clothing, um, giving money to, helping out, talking, and being there all the time.

According to Maggie, “always being there” for your children consists of teaching and disciplining them in a caring and loving manner.

Maggie: Someone that will always be there... I think of it as I guess teaching them what's right or wrong, disciplining them, and also, you know caring for them and loving them...What you do influences your child.

Similarly, for Makayla a mother who is “there” for her children is someone who is attentive and involved in her children's lives.

Makayla: Someone who's um, there. Like someone who's, involved...Um, probably a listener. Um, um, what do you call that, attentive person, someone who gives them some attention, sits there and talks to them and stuff like that.

#### *Challenging the Standard that Mothering Must be Provided 24/7*

Almost all of the abused women who cited the standard that mothering must be provided 24/7, subscribed to the expectations that underlie this standard. As such, only two abused women challenged the expectation that mothers must give their children constant attention and attendance. One of the abused women questioned the notion of always “taking care” of children's needs, wants, and desires. In this regard, this abused woman criticized the expectation that mothers must constantly “take care” of children in an intensive and all-encompassing way. Kate emphasized that mothers are expected to always appear as though their children are well “taken care of”, despite the circumstances in which the mothers and the children find themselves. Kate stated that such an expectation is unrealistic and unachievable.

Kate: I think, you know, the expectation for every mother is to always take care and be there for kids, even though the reality is nobody can actually do that. We all think, 'Oh well look at that woman and her kids, she's obviously not a good mom because her kids are in dirty clothes'. You know, we won't consider, oh maybe they were at the park and they were playing in the mud. No, she's just a terrible mother! You see this...everywhere, you know, from the way people talk...or you see it on TV and all the 'Meet the Beaver' or 'Happy Days' shows where all the kids were always clean and perfect, and you know I think there's some of us, most of us, that do carry that expectation in our heads even though it's not real. Nobody really lives that way!

The other abused woman questioned the idea of always "being there" for children. In this regard, this abused woman criticized the expectation that mothers must constantly care for their children on their own, and without the involvement of others. Madelyn pointed to the problematic nature of this expectation, which places the burden of constantly caring for children solely on mothers. Madelyn emphasized how the assumption that children's behaviors are a direct outcome of women's mothering obscures the importance of the diverse social relations and environments in which children are located. Madelyn claimed that when things go wrong in a child's life, it is the mother who comes under scrutiny for what she failed to do in raising the child, and not the father or society who comes under scrutiny for what they failed to do to help support the mother in raising the child. In this sense it is only mothers who experience the pressure to constantly care for their children, and who are held responsible when something goes wrong with their children.

Madelyn: I'm not really so concerned about society. Like, because you know society they don't really have so much involvement. So like they don't care, so it's as if I don't really also care!...But they [society] expects mothers, because the mother is the light of the home, to do their part in raising their children and in discipline. Although they

[society] don't do more themselves too much. They just expect, but they don't do much. Not much help or programs...But when a crime happens, in the papers it will always say that this kids became like this because they grew up in an environment like that, or such and such, and then they will blame it on the mother. But that's not a hundred percent correct!

Clearly, the majority of the abused women took for granted the message within the intensive mothering discourse which purports that mothering must be provided 24/7. Only two abused women questioned this belief that mothers must constantly care for their children. This demonstrates the power of the intensive mothering discourse and its related standards, which serve the patriarchal institution of motherhood by assigning women the constant responsibility and work of caring for children.

***iii) Mothers Must Always Put their Children's Needs Before their Own***

The abused women cited, to a lesser extent, the standard that mothers must always put their children's needs before their own needs. Many of the women expressed that mothers are expected to care for their children before themselves. In this sense, mothering supersedes all aspects of a woman's self. This sacrificial discourse of maternity equates the maternal act of prioritizing the needs of children over one's own needs with women's maternal commitment to their children. This view was revealed through the women's descriptions of 'mother' and "mothering" as making sure children "have everything they need", and as being a "role model" for children. One abused woman clearly communicated the expectation that mothers should care for their children before themselves. Zahra claimed that above all else, mothers must "put their children first".

Zahra: As a mother you are supposed to...do good things for your children, take care of them, be there for them, and no matter what you put them first. They [children] come first in everything you do.

### *Children Have Everything they Need*

Some abused women articulated that mothers are expected to care for their children before themselves by ensuring that their children have “everything they need”. In this regard, mothering is wholly child-centered, and places mothers in service to children. That is, mothering implies self-denial and servitude. This view reinforces the idea that mothers are singularly responsible for catering to the needs of children, and therefore must selflessly adopt the needs of their children by seeing these needs as their own. For example, Belinda asserted that mothers must watch over children to ensure that they have “everything they need”.

Belinda: I think of a guardian. Someone loving, nurturing, protecting. Like, overall you make sure that little person has everything they need.

Likewise, Tammy claimed that mothers must do all within their capacity to ensure that their children have everything they need. It is not a choice, but a requirement and an obligation.

Tammy: You do whatever it takes to get that child’s needs met, and you make sure that it’s done. You make sure that you give them all the love and support, and mostly care for them. You do what you have to do! You’re a mom, do it (laughs)! Well it’s not that you need to, you will, you should (laughs)!

### *Mothers are Good Role Models for their Children*

Some of the abused women expressed that mothers are expected to care for their children before themselves by being “good role models” for their children. In this sense mothers have a duty to behave and act in a manner that is

positive for children. This view reinforces individualistic philosophies that place mothers as being unique forces and the most important influences in children's development. As such, mothers have no alternative but to take on the burden of being the primary role models in children's lives, even if it means putting aside their own experiences, feelings, and needs. The assumption is that women's mothering behaviours have the potential to greatly affect children. For example, Zahra claimed that mothers should not only "put their children first", but also be a "role models" in their children's lives.

Zahra: As a mom, you're supposed to be their [children's] role model. I have seen it through my mom...through other moms, you know just all that.

Also, Taahira said that mothers should be "good role models" for their children by only "doing good things," and by balancing their children's immediate needs with their long-term needs.

Taahira: A mother is a role model, a good role model...Someone who do good things only. Who tells you what is right and wrong so that tomorrow you should know the difference. Who tells you what is bad and what is good, and from whom you learn all the good things...good teachings, good values.

Similarly, April asserted that mothers should be "good role models" for their children by never showing that they are emotionally weak or that they engage in any bad behaviours.

April: A mother should be a good role model...There is the expectations that were supposed to be, you know, we're not supposed to break down, and we're not supposed to have emotions, and we're not supposed to drink beer, and we're not supposed to smoke cigarettes.

*Challenging the Standard that Mothers Must Always Put their Children's Needs Before their Own*

Many of the abused women cited, but also challenged the standard that mothers must always put their children's needs before their own needs. These abused women challenged the expectation that mothers must care for their children before themselves.

Several abused women questioned the idea that mothers must make sure their children have "everything they need". In this regard, these abused women criticized the expectation that mothers should exclusively focus on and fulfill all of their children's needs. For example, Kate pointed to how the assumption that women must prioritize the needs of their children over everything else implies that mothering should be women's only and most important activity. Kate declared that, in this sense, mothers are unfairly expected to anticipate and prevent any difficulties and problems that their children may have or may encounter. As such, Kate stated that mothering, according to such expectations, is a "negative" role and experience because mothers are expected to fulfill all of their children's needs.

Kate: Mothering to me is a really negative word... You know like somebody's mothering you, like 'Let's look after all the problems, and let's try and look in advance to see what's gonna happen to try and stop it from happening', you know. It's looking after everybody's needs, and trying to think what they're thinking so you can anticipate what they're gonna need tomorrow. That's mothering to me, and I find that very negative.

According to Aliya, the expectation that mothers must prioritize the needs of their children over their own needs obscures the fact that mothers themselves also have needs. As such, Aliya declared that society, as in social institutions, has

unrealistic expectations for mothers. Such child-centred expectations do not take into consideration or make room for the needs, feelings, and experiences of mothers. Consequently, mothers “easily get worn down” because they are expected to meet all of their children’s needs by ignoring and denying their own needs.

Aliya: I think that society, as in like the system and not necessarily as like mother to mother or friend to friend, sometimes has expectations that are unrealistic. I think that people need to realize that mothers are human beings, mothers get frustrated, mothers get hurt, and mothers get tired... You have to look at like if a mother has a child, there's only so much time she has besides cooking, cleaning, groceries, and everything else in her life that she has, to take care of her son or her daughter. Depending on how many children she has, I think sometimes they need to look more at time and scheduling, and that sometimes a woman, a human being, needs time for herself as well. You have to go do this, you have to do this, and this, and this, and as a woman you can easily get worn down. You’re taking care of your kids, and then at the same time you have all these things that you are expected to do. Where is the time to just sit down and have a break?

Carly also drew attention to the unrealistic expectation that mothers should meet and fulfill all of their children’s needs, and that if they don’t their ability to care for their children is called into question by authorities. Carly claimed that these expectations are perpetuated in mothering books, but that such messages are false and repressive.

Carly: I think society is trying to raise our children, you know, if you raise your voice to your child in the grocery store, the next thing you know you got child welfare on your doorstep... I never had my child taken away... but I’ve seen a lot of bad things happen... I learned those messages from the books ‘What To Expect When You’re Expecting’ or ‘What To Expect in The First Year’ (laughs). But it’s bullshit! It’s all bs!



One abused woman questioned the belief that mothers must be “role models” for their children. This abused woman criticized the expectation that mothers must always be positive examples because they are the most important influence in their children’s lives. According to Gabrielle, the expectation that mothers must be role models for their children is so powerful that mothers must publicly portray that everything is well in their private lives, even if it is not. Gabrielle claimed that mothers should not put aside their own needs in order to solely be good role models for their children, but rather should make these needs known to the community in which they live in order to receive support.

Gabrielle: Well they expect you to be this role model, you know like if things happen keep it in the house sort of thing...But I don’t think that that’s right because I think a community should be, like if you live in a community, all people should be aware of what happens to help.

Clearly, several abused women challenged the message within the intensive mothering discourse, which purports that mothers must always put their children’s needs before their own needs. These women questioned the idea that prioritizing the needs of children is a maternal commitment that women are required to make. Therefore, these abused women recognized that such an expectation is unrealistic, as well as emotionally and physically taxing for women.

***iv) Mothers Must Lavish Excessive Amounts of Time, Energy, and Money in the Rearing of their Children***

Only a few of the abused women cited the standard that mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children. These women articulated that mothers are expected to extensively devote themselves to their children. In this sense, mothering is all consuming.

This rigorous discourse of maternity equates infinite maternal care of children with women's maternal dedication to their children. This view was revealed through the women's descriptions of 'mother' and "mothering" as "doing everything" for children, and as "spending time" with children.

*Doing Everything for Children*

Two abused women expressed that mothers are expected to extensively devote themselves to their children by "doing everything" for them. In this sense, mothers must allocate excessive amounts of their energy to caring for their children. This view reinforces the idea that mothers' willingness to participate in all areas of their children's lives is an extension of their maternal love, care, and loyalty to their children. One abused woman named Julie provides a good example of this. She declared that mothers must "do everything" for their children, from taking care of their basic physical, emotional and developmental needs, to involving them in and bringing them to extracurricular activities, and to being active and involved in their school life.

Julie: Mothering is nurturing, loving, caregiving, disciplinarian, teaching, being there for your child, and cooking. How my mom was. She was a stay-at-home mom, I grew up on a farm, and she took us to all of our activities. She took care of all of it...you've got the housework, the cooking, the cleaning, the PTAs, that kind of thing... do everything!

Kate also affirmed that mothers' are expected to "do everything" for their children, and that women's maternal dedication is reflected in their children's behaviour and countenance.

Kate: There's this expectations that kids are always in clean clothes, their hair is always done, they're polite in public...and you're a good mom if your kid's not having a fit in the grocery store, you're

taking your kids to every sport possible, you know they're in piano, soccer, and ice skating, they have playdates, you allow other kids to come over....you do it all...you're doing everything!... Yeah, your kids don't talk back to you, but you don't scream at them, and everybody looks normal, and everybody's hair's in place all the time, or else you must be a bad mother... These are the standards, it doesn't mean their right or wrong.

### *Spending Time*

Three abused women articulated that the most important way that mothers are expected to extensively devote themselves to their children is by “spending time” with them. In this regard, mothers must assign excessive amounts of their time to caring for their children. This view reinforces the idea that mothers must not only be present for their children, but must also be engaged with their children. For example, Shyan asserted that mothers must be involved in their children's lives by “spending time” with them in a variety of different ways, including “doing physical things” with them.

Shyan:           Mothering is doing things and spending time with your kids...Get outside with them. Do physical things with them.

Taahira claimed mothers must work incessantly for their children. Taahira also claimed that mothers must not only spend time, but must spend “quality time” with their children, as it is the truest reflection of a mother's dedication.

Taahira:       A mother should work like a machine. She should be very caring, totally devoted...and fully dedicated. Mother has to tell everything, and mother should spend quality of time with children...that's the one!

Mandy also said that mothers must “spend quality time” with their children.

Mandy: A mother should just be a parent, you know being loving, playing games, and just spending that quality time.

*Challenging the Standard that Mothers Must Lavish Excessive Amounts of Time, Energy, and Money in the Rearing of their Children*

Almost all of the abused women who cited the standard that mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children, subscribed to the expectations that underlie this standard. Only two abused women challenged the expectation that mothers must extensively devote themselves to their children. Both of these abused women questioned the notion that mothers are responsible for “doing everything” for their children. Arika pointed to how the assumption that mothers must “do everything” for their children is unachievable. Arika declared that, in this sense, mothers are expected to be “super women”, and do things for their children which are beyond their actual abilities. As such, Arika affirmed that “too much” is expected of mothers.

Arika: I think society expects too much out of mothers. Like we’re expected to be super women and stuff like that, and it’s not like that. Like when the kids go to the hospital the moms have to stay there all the time. Moms are expected to do everything! I just think that society just expects way too much out of mothers. Way too much!

Coreen emphasized that the expectation that mothers “do everything” for their children is an expectation that is not imposed on fathers. In this sense, only mothers are expected to extensively devote themselves to their children, and are harshly judged if they do not meet this expectation. As such, Coreen stated that the expectations that are imposed on mothers are “really high”.

Coreen: The expectations for moms are also really high. I think really high! Higher than men to be dads. I think...they expect you to have everything like organized, your whole life totally together,

and you don't need help from your partner. They [fathers] don't get talked to, and they don't get talked about. But like when I, you know, if I chose to wait to do that I'd be a bitch, or I'd be you know a horrible mother... The father gets away with everything, but the mother, it's just like you're bad, you're not good, and you're doing this and you're doing that wrong.

Clearly, the majority of the abused women also took for granted the message within the intensive mothering discourse which purports that mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children. Only two abused women questioned this belief that mothers must excessively devote themselves to their children. This demonstrates the power of the intensive mothering discourse and its related standards, which serve the patriarchal institution of motherhood by requiring women to extensively devote themselves to the care of their children.

#### **v) *Summary***

Overall, the abused women's understandings about mothers and mothering were significantly influenced by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. The abused women defined "mother" according to the following four standards of intensive mothering: a mother is 1) the only person who can properly care for her biological children, 2) provides care to her children 24/7, 3) always puts her children's needs before her own needs, and 4) lavishes excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of her children. Although the abused women reiterated these standards of mothering, some also challenged them by actively questioning and criticizing the expectations that are imposed on mothers. As such, abused women were not only able to articulate the dominant discourse of

intensive mothering, but were also able to identify and challenge its constricting and oppressive nature.

## **2) Abused Women's Perceptions of the Social Construction of "Abused Mothers"**

Ideologies of motherhood not only define how women must mother, but also promote dominant ideals of motherhood against which mother's lives are regulated and judged. In recent years, several groups of mothers have been stigmatized and vilified by the dominant ideology of motherhood for failing to meet the standards of intensive mothering. The dominant ideology of intensive mothering upholds that children's wellbeing is primarily the responsibility of women. In situations of domestic abuse, abused women are accused of failing to ensure the wellbeing of their children because they have lived in an abusive context. As such, abused mothers are labeled as "bad mothers".

In this study, abused women's understandings of "abused mother", like their understandings of "mother", were shaped and influenced by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. However, their understandings of "abused mother" were also shaped and influenced by other dominant discourses including the victim-blaming and mother-blaming discourses. During the interviews I asked the abused women if they thought that "mothers who are abused are viewed differently than mothers who are not abused", and if they thought that there are "different standards and expectations of mothering for women who have been abused". Some of the abused women described "abused mothers" according to the intensive mothering discourse and its associated "good mother" and "bad mother" discourses. The women uniformly stated that "abused mothers" are

portrayed as “bad mothers” for failing to meet two standards of intensive mothering: 1) mothering must be provided 24/7; and 2) mothers must always put their children’s needs before their own.

Although some abused women described “abused mothers” by referring to the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, most of them described “abused mothers” by colliding the victim-blaming and mother-blaming discourses and then articulating five other deviancy discourses. These women stated that “abused mothers” are portrayed as: 1) “weak mothers”; 2) “abusive mothers”; 3) “looked down on mothers”; 4) “to blame mothers”; and 5) “in need of help mothers”. The women varied in relation to how many of the deviancy discourses they articulated. While some women mentioned only one of these deviancy discourses, other women mentioned several of them.

It is important to note that all of these abused women challenged these negative portrayals of abused mothers. As such, the women’s narratives reveal that they are not only able to articulate the dominant discourses that casts abused mothers as “bad mothers” and other deviant mothers, but are also able to identify and challenge its subjugating and unjust nature. Below I discuss these six discourses that the abused women commonly mentioned when discussing the portrayal of “abused mothers”, as well as the specific ways that they challenged these views.

#### **a) Reiterating and Challenging the Dominant Discourse of Intensive Mothering – “Bad Mother” Discourses**

Some of the abused women described the portrayal of “abused mothers” according to the intensive mothering ideology and its associated “bad mother”

discourses. These abused women claimed that abused mothers are largely portrayed as “bad mothers” for failing to meet the following two standards of intensive mothering: 1) mothering must be provided 24/7; and 2) mothers must always put their children’s needs before their own. However, these abused women challenged the view that abused women are “bad mothers” by stating that such depictions are false and misleading.

***i) Abused Mothers Fail to Mother their Children 24/7***

The abused women often claimed that abused mothers are portrayed as “bad mothers” because they are viewed as being unable to care for their children on a constant basis. These abused women stated that they are deemed as being unable to constantly care for their children because they are also coping with the problems, difficulties, and consequences of being abused. However, these abused women challenged these depictions of abused mothers. For example, Makayla asserted that abused mothers are viewed as putting their children in harm’s way by being involved in an abusive relationship. As a result, abused mothers are inaccurately portrayed as “bad mothers” who are unable to care for their children. Makayla called into question this unfair comparison and depiction of abused mothers as “bad mothers”, and non-abused mothers as “perfect” mothers.

Makayla: Other people look at women who are being abused as ‘What the hell is going through your head? You’ve got kids you know!’ They think lower...It’s like for the abused mother they probably think that oh well she’s not taking care of her kids, she’s not doing the safety of her kids, and a non-abused woman oh she’s perfect, look at her she’s so loving, and you know...Some people probably think a mouthy woman deserves to be hit, and maybe she’s not a good mother, and maybe she’s like this and that’s why she’s getting hit, you know.



Similarly, Eden declared that abused mothers are often stereotyped as having a “bad past”, or as using substances such as alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. Consequently, abused mothers are falsely portrayed as “bad mothers” who are unable to care for their children. Eden asserted that such a biased perception of abused mothers creates an unfair expectation that abused mothers must “prove” themselves.

Eden: I think abused mothers are very um, what is that word I’m looking for, they’re really, misunderstood! Like people think they know who abused mothers are, you know, they think they’re bad either way...So I think when you’re abused, a lot of the times they expect you to prove yourself cuz they probably think ‘Oh she’s had a bad past or she was probably bad before, she probably drank, did drugs, whatever...They expect them [abused mothers] to work extra hard, they expect them to prove to everyone that, you know, they’re not a bad person and they’re not doing drugs or alcohol. But yeah, that exactly, they expect them to prove to everyone that they can have a good life too...But being abused has taught me that there’s all different kinds of forms of ways of mothering and raising a child.

Like Eden, April stated that abused mothers are deemed as mothering under improper conditions because they often reside in abused women’s shelters, face financial hardships, or experience emotional difficulties. Therefore, abused mothers are incorrectly portrayed as “bad mothers” who are unable to care for their children. April criticized this misleading assumption that mothers can only properly care for their children by mothering under the same socially prescribed conditions.

April: I think abused mothers, because they’re in a shelter, or because they’re not financially secure, or because they’re not emotionally secure, and they should be, are viewed as bad mothers, unstrong mothers, and not very good mothers...I just feel like somebody wrote a book and said that this is how you are supposed to be as a mother, and if you don’t follow that then you are a bad mother.

***ii) Abused Mothers Fail to Put Their Children's Needs Before their Own Needs***

The abused women also often claimed that abused mothers are portrayed as “bad mothers” because they are viewed as putting their own needs before their children’s needs. These abused women claimed that they are deemed as prioritizing their own needs over their children’s needs because they are not emotionally, psychologically, and physically stable as a result of experiencing abuse. This reflects Krane and Davies (2007) recent research, where they argue that the message given to abused mothers in domestic violence shelters is that a “good mother should always be available, and her children’s needs should always come first, no matter what has happened to them” (Krane and Davies, 2007, p. 33). However, the abused women in this study challenged these depictions of abused mothers as “bad mothers”. For example, Madelyn claimed that abused mothers are considered to be “submissive”, “too kind”, and “overpowered”. In this sense, abused mothers are viewed as being unable to “stand up” and “protect” themselves and their children. Consequently, abused mothers are erroneously portrayed as “bad mothers” who put their own needs before their children’s needs. Madelyn declared that attributing women’s victimization to their personal characteristics conceals and denies the fact that abuse can happen to any woman, regardless of who or how she is.

Madelyn:      They say that she [abuse mother] is not a good mother. I think that’s the first thing that they’re going to say... So she is viewed in a negative way because she is submissive or the kind mother, and then she is like overpowered by the spouse. And probably she’s so kind that she won’t retaliate at all, will accept everything, and accept all the torture... Sooner or later she has to fight back right! Protect herself and protect the children! If she’s going to accept everything then what’s going to happen? She has to stand up for

herself...But it can happen, you can be abused even if you fight back, or even if you're the stronger one, or even if you're the timid or submissive one, you can also be abused.

Similarly, Kate declared that abused mothers are stigmatized as not having the "best problem solving skills" and not "putting their children first" because they are living in an abusive environment. As a result, abused mothers are falsely portrayed as "bad mothers" who think of themselves and their own needs before their children's needs. Kate criticized this biased presumption that abused women are incompetent and neglectful mothers who should be treated as though they have a malady.

Kate: There's this view that mothers that are abused don't have the best problem solving skills, and they're not putting their kids first you know, because if you put your kids first and you're in an abusive situation then you'd get your kids and you'd leave right! So the expectation is that that woman is going to be a loser. I think that society and the way that they treat domestic violence should change completely. They treat abused women like they have Stockholm syndrome or something...I think that when somebody comes out of an abusive relationship, that she's viewed as just one of those people right! So the expectations is that her kids are going to be unruly, they're gonna be dirty, they're gonna be rude, they're gonna be the bad kids in the class, they'll be the ones doing the drugs, and their mom's are so preoccupied with the abuse that they don't really notice their kids anyways. So I think society has almost come to accept that, you know, and they're just those people right, one of those women... So everybody has to look normal, and everybody's hair has to be in place all the time, or else you must be a bad mother...I've seen this in peoples' reactions to me because I'm not a poor me person, I don't lie about who I am and where I've come from, so I do tell. I don't tell it in a way where oh it was a bad thing for me, I'm like this is who I am, and this is where I was, and this is what I've done. And there's some people that are like 'Oh well that's really cool that you're doing something else,' you know. And other people are like, 'Yeah, so anyways it's time to go,' you know. And I mean I've had a few confrontations. There was people at the bus stop by the shelter that I saw every morning, and they said good morning to me until they saw where I came out of. The day they saw where I came out of I

went to the bus stop, and they just kind of looked at me and turned away like they didn't want any part of me. And I'm like, 'Did I change?' But cuz they didn't know where I was from, as soon as they found that out they're like 'Oh well you know, we're gonna stay away from that person! So I mean a lot of my perception of that is from just people, you know, and you read it on the news all the time where there's a man and woman fighting and they call the cops after the gun shot right...So I think people should change their view of abused mothers.

Like Kate, Louisa affirmed that abused mothers' capabilities are called into question. As a result, abused mothers are viewed differently and judged more harshly. Louisa declared that such views contribute to the inaccurate portrayal of abused women as "bad mothers" who prioritize their needs over their children's needs. Louisa called into question this view that abused women lack necessary skills. In this regard, Louisa claimed that many abused mothers are capable of dealing with crises and have effective coping strategies because they "hold it together" even under the difficult circumstances of abuse. However, these aptitudes largely go unnoticed.

Louisa: If you are a person that's been abused people wonder what are you really like? What are you really capable of? Are you really capable of handling a good job? And I don't want a lot of people to know what I've come through because I'm afraid they will view me differently. I don't want to be viewed differently. For that reason I make sure that I look normal and like I think anybody should look. I don't want to be different, I don't want to act different, I don't want to speak different, I don't want anything different about me...If they didn't know me and know my kids they would make a judgment that I would not be a good mother. That's unfortunate but I think that how it's gone...They would probably think I hadn't done very well, and just because I'm abused I have some other kinds of problems. Not necessarily! But other people may think so...And how will I deal with um, say a bad crisis? What would I do in a crisis? Would I be able to handle it? That sort of thing. Actually I think the opposite is true. I've had lots of crisis in my life and I've dealt with them really well, so I know how to do that. But the outside observer wouldn't probably

think about it that way right off hand. I think a lot of abused mothers have those skills that we don't realize they have. They have wonderful coping strategies and things like that, that we don't often think about. In my own mind I think the abused mothers that I see out there are very, very strong women, because they have their children, they are holding it together, and I see that a lot of them have jobs.

**b) Articulating and Challenging Other Discourses - Reiterating and Colliding the Dominant Discourses of Victim-Blaming and Mother-Blaming**

While some of the abused women described “abused mothers” by referring to the intensive mothering discourse, most of them described “abused mothers” by colliding the victim-blaming and mother-blaming discourses, and then articulating five other deviancy discourses. These abused women claimed that “abused mothers” are mostly portrayed as: 1) “weak mothers”; 2) “abusive mothers”; 3) “looked down on mothers”; 4) “to blame mothers”; and 5) “in need of help mothers”. However, these abused women also challenged the portrayal of abused women according to these deviancy discourses by stating that such depictions are biased and misconstrued.

The abused women often made references to the victim-blaming perspective, which places responsibility for domestic abuse on the victim. They expressed that abused women are blamed for the abuse because of numerous myths, such as they were insufficiently obedient, subordinate, and attentive to their male partners' needs and desires; they provoked their male partners; and they seek out violent male partners. In this sense, women are blamed for the abuse because it is assumed that it results from their own failures in some capacity. However, the abused women challenged such views by pointing to how preconceived notions about women's responsibility, provocation, and culpability

holds them accountable not only for the abuse, but also for remaining in the abusive relationship. In this sense, the focus is on why women stay in abusive relationships, rather than on why men abuse and are allowed to continue to abuse women. The women's narratives reveal the pervasive conceptualization and understanding of power as "circulating evenly through all interpersonal relationships," which obscures the reality that "women, and particularly women in abusive relationships, have limited access to power" (Radford et al., 1996).

The abused women's references to the victim-blaming perspective were intertwined with their references to the mother-blaming perspective. In this sense, the abused women expressed that abused women are not only blamed for the abuse, but also for exposing their children to the abuse. That is, abused women are blamed for failing to protect their children from witnessing and/or experiencing abuse because they have lived in an abusive environment. However, the abused women challenged such views by indicating that abused mothers make considerable efforts to protect their children, and go to great lengths to counteract the effects of abuse on their mothering. The women's narratives reveal the prevalence of a "deficit" perspective of mothering, which "shifts the focus away from men's violence to emphasize women's 'deficiencies' and 'failures' as mothers" rather than their strengths and efforts (Lapierre, 2008, p. 460).

***i) "Weak Mother" Discourse***

A large number of women claimed that abused mothers are portrayed as "weak mothers" because they are viewed as not being strong enough to leave their abusive partner and protect their children. These abused women stated that

consequently, there is the assumption that abused mothers must be constantly interrogated and closely monitored to ensure that they are properly caring for their children. However, these abused women challenged this depiction of abused mothers. For example, Zahra affirmed that abused mothers are incorrectly portrayed as “weak mothers” because they became involved and remained in an abusive relationship. Zahra criticized this unfair assessment of abused mothers’ by indicating that abused mothers often do not have “the choice” to immediately leave their abusive partner, and that if they did have the opportunity to make such a choice they most definitely would.

Zahra: Abused mothers are seen as weak, as you know not responsible. Definitely weak...Because why would anybody be in a situation where they get hit and verbally and physically abused. It’s like, ‘What’s wrong with them? Why are they in that situation? Why can’t they leave?’...You know, if we had a choice to choose then we would choose...well we don’t have that choice!...Every society expects every mother to protect their kids. Anybody that’s a mom takes care of their kids and protects them, but if you’ve been abused then it’s in question. You know like for other moms it’s like ‘Okay she’s a mom, she’s good.’ But for abused mom’s it’s like ‘You’ve been abused, okay is she taking care of the kid? Why is she abused? Is it because she’s weak? Is it because she’s not smart enough? Is it because she’s not educated? She doesn’t have the money?’ So then if she’s all of that, then it’s ‘She’s not strong enough or responsible enough to take care of the kids, then she can’t protect the kid.’ So it’s out there for them to judge and put things together, and take things out of there, and, play with it.

Tammy claimed that abused mothers are inaccurately portrayed as “weak mothers” as a consequence of experiencing abuse. In this sense, abused mothers do not have the strength or courage to leave their abusive partner, and therefore require help. Tammy criticized this biased perception of abused mothers and their abilities, which presumes that leaving an abusive partner is a simple process.

Tammy described how leaving her partner was a “big battle” for her, and how it took her “eight times” of leaving her partner before she was finally able to successfully leave him and not return. The only reason Tammy stated that she kept returning to her partner was because she was not aware of the resources that are available to abused women. As such, Tammy affirmed that successfully leaving an abusive partner is based on a progressive learning process, and not solely on one’s personal strength.

Tammy: Mothers who aren’t abused got a good family and stuff, and they got a nice enough family. But mothers who are abused, well they’re not the person who’s got the rich family chalet. I’m not talking about materialistic things, but the kind of family....And abused mothers are more weaker (laughs). Yeah, they look at them like they’re more weak because of abuse, they need help or something...But it’s a big battle. It’s not that easy though. It’s taken me eight times of leaving to figure it out...I finally called the cops and they brought me here. I didn’t know! If I would have known you could have all these tools and resources [at the shelter] three or four years ago, I would not be in this position right now. Cuz I won’t be doing this twice.

Aliya also declared that abused mothers are inaccurately portrayed as “weak mothers” because they have experienced abuse. Aliya further stated that because abused mothers are viewed as “weak”, their mothering abilities are called into question and more is expected of them. Aliya described how when she was at the shelter she felt as though the management staff were “looking down” on her and viewed her as “weak” because she was a victim of abuse. Aliya criticized these unfair views and expectations that are imposed on abused mothers, which she states are “unrealistic” and unattainable.

Aliya: I think women who are abused are looked at as weak. And so I feel like there’s more of a spotlight on us. Like (sigh), for instance when I said politics at the shelter I meant some of the women



there, and I'm not talking about my counselors but my counselors' supervisors and the women that are running the building and stuff. I would feel as if they were looking down on me like 'You come from a family of abuse, um, that's trashy... You know if you were brought up properly in society with a good home and a good family, you would not be in this situation. And you're weak, and you know you're a statistic now! You're a single mom, living off welfare trying to raise your kid.' And um I feel almost like they look at it like if we were stronger women and more so in our right mind, we never would have ended up in those situations. At the same time I feel like it's not so much necessarily expecting, it's can you even mother? Can you do your job? Questioned, I feel that we're questioned much more. But the system isn't the best, and their expectations are unrealistic! How can women last?

Madelyn elaborated on the expectations that are imposed on abused mothers because they are assumed to be "weak mothers". According to Madelyn, abused mothers are expected to put on a strong face and carry on with their lives for the sake of their children. Madelyn criticized this inaccurate depiction of abused mothers as "weak" and as unable to care for their children, by emphasizing that many abused mothers, including herself, protect their children yet are still blamed for not doing so.

Madelyn: I think because you are abused, they think you're not capable emotionally, and they expect something of you, like you have to be strong, you still have to be strong because like life goes on. If you're going to be weak what's going to happen to your kids? So you still have to put up a face even if you sometimes cannot be that strong. So they expect something from you...And I was blamed for many reasons...But I was the protective! I was the shield, yes I was the shield, and I was always there...but they will still blame me!

Coreen stated that abused mothers are wrongfully portrayed as "weak mothers" because they are believed to be unable to "stand up for themselves". Coreen outright denied this erroneous belief by asserting that abused mothers can and do express their needs, but that it falls on deaf ears. That is, rather than

asking abused mothers what they need, abused mothers are told what they need.

As such, there is a disconnect between abused mothers' actual needs and what is perceived to be their needs. Coreen described how when she sought help from the agencies in her community, they offered her help in areas that she did not need, such as help with nutrition and anger management, when all she needed was help with clothing her children. As such, there is an assumption that abused mothers lack mothering skills, and therefore must be taught these skills.

Coreen: In a way I think they think abused mothers are really weak, and can't stand up for themselves you know, can't say what they need. But they can and they do! But nobody listens! A lot of people don't listen...Because that's what happened to me with my kids. Like I was asking for this help, yet they were giving me help in a way I didn't need help (laughs), you know like what meals to feed my kids. Like hello, I need clothes here! I don't need you to tell me how to cook for my kids, I know how to cook for them, and I know what they like and what they don't like. And then they're telling me to go to programs for like anger management, and I was like 'Um excuse me? I think he needs to go not me!'

These abused women's descriptions are consistent with Levendosky et al.'s (2000) research findings, which indicated that abused women are not helpless victims that are focused solely on their abusive partner's needs, but rather are active agents who mobilize their resources to respond to the violence on behalf of their children (p.247).

## ***ii) "Abusive Mother" Discourse***

Several abused women also claimed that abused mothers are portrayed as "abusive mothers", that is, as mothers who abuse their children. These abused women asserted that there is the assumption that because abused mothers have been abused by their male partner, they will in turn begin to abuse their children.

However, these abused women challenged this depiction of abused mothers. For example, April stated there exists a misconception that abused mothers are not only “bad mothers, but also “abusive mothers”. April described how when she was in the shelter the counselors continuously asked her if she was feeling “aggressive” towards her children, as they anticipated that she would surely begin to abuse her children. As such, April criticized this stereotypical belief that abused mothers will, in due course, abuse their children.

April:            They think that because we were abused and most people that are abused or have been abused turn into the abuser you know. And they are just waiting for you to start abusing. They [shelter staff] said ‘So how are you feeling today? Are you feeling aggressive towards your kids?’ No, I’m not!

Leena also indicated that abused mothers are portrayed as “abusive mothers”. Leena asserted that this is a false supposition, because abused mothers are in fact less likely to abuse their children as they would never want to subject their children to the same pain and suffering they endured. Leena also asserted that non-abused mothers are just as likely to abuse their children. In this sense, Leena pointed to the biased and faulty reasoning that is used to suggest that abused mothers are at risk of abusing their children.

Leena:            With abused women they automatically think that because they’re abused they’re going be abusive. But then most of the times sometimes they change, like they’ve been abused but then they’re not abusive. But people who come from like a strict family where they weren’t abused, like they’re just as dysfunctional as the person that was getting abused, but worse.

Zahra, stated that abused mothers are not only incorrectly portrayed as “weak mothers”, but also as “abusive mothers”. Zahra upheld that there is an assumption that abused mothers will not only begin abusing their children, but

will also allow their abusive partner to start abusing their children. As such, abused mothers are blamed for the abuse that their male partner perpetrated against them, as well as for the potential abuse that their male partner may perpetrate against their children. Zahra denounced this unfair portrayal by indicating that abused mothers are “under the microscope”, and therefore many exaggerated and biased assumptions are made about who they are as mothers and how they carry out their mothering.

Zahra: When you’re abused you’re under the microscope and they have different views, different opinions, and different ideas about you. So they might think if you’ve been abused you’re gonna abuse your kid, or you know you’re gonna let that abuser that abused you abuse them, and, stuff like that... Abused moms are out there, everybody knows their story, everybody knows something. Like as humans we know, we think about it, we analyze it. Whereas for moms who are not abused, then nobody knows about that. So they are viewed differently...I’ve seen it through family, and friends, and other people in society. Just different people that you meet everyday, on daily basis that you hear about.

These abused women’s assertions echo Holden and Ritchie’s (1991, 1998) extensive research, which found that there is no evidence of diminished parenting among abused mothers in comparison to non-abused mothers. That is, abused mothers are no more aggressive, no more punitive, no less affectionate, no less proactive, and no less capable of providing structure to their children than are non-abused mothers (Holden and Ritchie, 1991, 1998).

### ***iii) “Looked Down on Mother” Discourse***

Many abused women also claimed that abused mothers are portrayed as “looked down on mothers”. These abused women maintained that abused mothers are viewed as inferior because they have been abused. Nevertheless,

these abused women also challenged this portrayal of abused mothers. For example, both Leena and Emma declared that abused mothers are “looked down on”. They claimed that abused mothers are viewed as second-rate individuals who come from bad circumstances, and who are unable to make the necessary changes to improve their current life situations. Leena and Emma equally criticized this unfair perception of abused mothers. Leena, who indicated that abused mothers are portrayed as “abusive mothers”, also pointed to the erroneous perception that they are “different”, “pitiful”, and “not good people”. Yet Leena affirmed that such views of abused mothers are but “stereotypes”.

Leena: I think it’s kind of like stereotyping them [abused mothers]. They [society] think ‘Oh she grew up in a good family, their well off, and she’s a good person. But her, look at her! Like she’s been abused, and did this and that, and you know she’s probably not even a good person!’ kind of thing right. Or else look down on them like ‘Oh she’s so pitiful’, or you know ‘Feel bad for her’, or ‘She’s different,’ kind of thing.

Emma drew attention to the naïve presumption that to overcome their abuse, all abused women have to do is leave and not return to their abusive partner and seek counseling. However, Emma stated that doing so is “easier said than done”, because abused mothers have often lived under controlling conditions for a long time.

Emma: I don’t know, I always feel like society looks down on people like abused women...Like it’s easy to say ‘Don’t go back to that person, go to counseling, do this do that.’ Like it’s easier said than done because you’re so used to being in that kind of environment.

Carly also claimed that abused mothers are “looked down on”. She asserted that abused mothers are viewed as “lower class citizens” who willingly allow themselves and their children to be abused. Carly called into question this

unfair perception of abused mothers by declaring that it should be the male abusers and not the female victims who are scrutinized and condemned. As such, Carly emphasized that the focus should be on the abusive behavior of male partners, and not on the potential deficiencies of female victims.

Carly: Abused mothers, I believe, are looked down upon... You know what, I think that child welfare looks at a mother that's been abused as letting themselves and their children be abused. I think they see them like they're a lower class citizen, you know, they look down at abused mothers and that's bullshit! They should not be looking down at them, but they should stop the abuse, and do something to stop the abuse!... There's too many people out there that are reading textbooks that don't know what's going on, that have never experienced it, and that have never taken the five minutes that it might take to know about somebody that has experienced it or that has gone through these things. That's where you need to find out what to do, and society doesn't do that. To me it's just a bunch of people fresh out of college that have done nothing but read a couple of textbooks that are made from nineteen seventy-two. You know one thing that I'll say that really hurt me being in the shelter is the books there. I don't think there was one book made pass nineteen eighty-two. Now what kind of updated material is that? That's bullshit! That's more than twenty five years gone by you know! There's just too much bullshit out there about abused mothers, you know!

#### ***iv) "To Blame Mother" Discourse***

Other abused asserted that abused mothers are portrayed as "to blame mothers". These abused women affirmed that abused mothers are held responsible on all accounts for their own abuse. However, these abused women challenged this portrayal of abused mothers. For example, Gabrielle said that abused mothers are blamed for getting involved in an abusive relationship in the first place. As such, abused mothers are also accused of, and blamed for being unable to care for their children. Yet Gabrielle declared that this blameworthy depiction of abused mothers is but a label.

Gabrielle: Well, some people just say ‘Well how could you let yourself get in that situation?’ So I think society views them [abused mothers] differently. Like they just label you, and just say that you can’t look after your kids and then therefore it’s your fault, they blame you.

Mandy upheld that abused mothers are not only blamed for becoming involved in an abusive relationship, but also for provoking the abuser in one way or another. In cases where abused mothers return to their abusive partner in an attempt to reconcile their relationship, they are also blamed and criticized for doing so. Mandy criticized this unfair view and assessment of abused mothers by stating that judging rather than understanding abused women’s personal situations demeans and diminishes abused mothers.

Mandy: Some people will be like well it’s their own fault you know, the negative people would be like well that’s their own fault, so they’re blamed because they’re the ones who went into the relationship. So the negativeness. Some of the guys who are probably women abusers themselves would be like ‘Oh she probably asked for it,’ you know, or ‘She did something. She probably fucked around on him,’ or whatever you know...And say social services for instance, like I’ve heard stories and I’ve talked to a few women, and some of them keep going back to the same guy, and then like some of the social workers or even police will have comments like ‘Oh well, why? Why go back?’ and stuff. But some of the women have this thought ‘Oh well no one else is gonna love me and my kids. Who’s gonna do that? This is their father!’ So if he says he wants to try it again and stuff they’re gonna give him the benefit of the doubt. But it’s the negative feedback that they get, the comments and stuff, you know it just brings a mother down more...You know being put down for going back to somebody because you love that person, and that person does love you to an extent but.

Similarly, Arika asserted that abused mothers are blamed for anything and everything that goes wrong in their and their children’s lives. In this sense, the blame is always laid on abused mothers because they were the ones who were

involved in an abusive relationship. Arika called into question this unfair judgment of abused mothers because they mother under different circumstances than non-abused mothers.

Arika: I feel like mothers who are abused are singled out...they're blamed...So if something goes wrong in the child's life, or if something goes wrong in our life, it's because of abuse, it's always because of abuse. And the mothers that aren't abused don't have to go through what abused women go through...They're just two different, two totally different lives.

***v) "In Need of Help Mother" Discourse***

Finally, a couple of abused women claimed that abused mothers are portrayed as "in need of help mothers". According to two abused women, abused mothers are viewed as requiring guidance and assistance because they have numerous weaknesses, inadequacies, and limitations. Both of these abused women challenged this false portrayal of abused mothers as "in need of help". For example, Maggie claimed that abused mothers are considered to have a number of emotional and psychological difficulties, and therefore should go to counseling. Maggie described how she experienced this first hand. When she was residing in a shelter, the staff told her that she should "go to counseling because she "needed help". However, Maggie refuted this assumption and stated that she and her children were indeed happy in many "ways" and at many "times", despite the abusive context in which they lived. As such, Maggie denounced this inaccurate presumption that abused women, because they experienced abuse, are inherently discontent and despondent.

Maggie: With abused mothers I think that they always look at them like they need help and counseling, and like they should go for counseling and just stuff like that. And it seems like they're just



watching out for you, for women that go through abuse. So abused mothers are looked at as people in pain because we're single that's why, and because we were abused... So I think they just look at it like just to go for counseling, you know... Because I was told that a lot... When I first went to a shelter back when we were staying on the reserve, cuz my husband went through some charges, they told me that I should go for counseling, that I still need help. And it just seems like that's how I was getting looked at, you know, like we're not happy. But we were in a way and in times. We were! But I guess it was just when you looked at it, I was always being abused, he was always drinking.

Tammy declared that abused mothers are not only portrayed as “weak mothers”, but also as mothers who are “in need of help”. According to Tammy, abused mothers are perceived as needing help not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of their children. As such, abused mothers are expected to get help in order to prevent the perpetuation of the cycle of violence in their lives as well as in the lives of their children. Tammy criticized this false supposition that all abused mothers have many problems and therefore need help, by indicating that everyone, and not just abused mothers, face dilemmas and difficulties in their lives.

Tammy: They think that maybe because you have been in an abusive situation, and maybe because it's for the benefit of the children in that household, that you get some help because you need help. Plus for the benefit of the child you need help to get stronger, to not repeat a pattern so that it becomes a family cycle. I think there's a little more expectations of that, I would think anyways. But, I think there's lots of different variations besides abuse that are hidden, because everyone's got their dirty skeletons in their closets if you go look.

These abused women's accounts provide further evidence to support previous research on abused women's mothering which argues that mothers in domestic violence situations often cope very well with the violence, and therefore

do not suffer from learned helplessness (Buchbinder, 2004; Letourneau et al., 2007; Levendosky et al., 2003). In this sense, many abused mothers compensate for the abuse in their mothering interactions with their children.

#### ***vi) Summary***

Overall, the abused women's understandings of the portrayal of abused mothers were significantly influenced by the dominant intensive mothering, victim-blaming, and mother-blaming discourses. The abused women described that "abused mothers" are portrayed as "bad mothers", "weak mothers", "abusive mothers", "looked down on mothers", "to blame mothers", and "in need of help mothers". Although the abused women described the portrayal of abused mothers according to these discourses, they also challenged these discourses by actively questioning and criticizing these negative portrayals of abused mothers. As such, abused women were not only able to articulate the dominant discourses that cast abused mothers as "bad mothers" and other deviant mothers, but were also able to identify and challenge its subjugating and unjust nature.

### **3) Conclusion**

Mothers today live under the influence of an ideology of intensive mothering which prescribes a type of mothering which is wholly child-centred. Nowhere is this more evident than in the narratives of the abused women that I studied. The abused women's narratives reveal that most of their understandings about mothers and mothering are shaped and influenced by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. In this sense, the abused women commonly reiterate several of the standards of intensive mothering. What is significant and

notable is the fact that not all of the abused women subscribe to the beliefs and expectations that underlie these standards. Rather, many of the abused women challenge these standards by actively questioning and criticizing the beliefs and expectations that are imposed on mothers. As such, the abused women in this study not only articulate the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but also identify and challenge its constricting and oppressive nature.

The power of this ideology of intensive mothering is seen in its ability to not only define how women must mother, but to also judge and regulate mothers' lives. Abused women are one of the groups of mothers who have been harshly judged, regulated, and labeled as "bad mothers" by this ideology of intensive mothering for failing to meet the standards of intensive mothering. The abused women's narratives reveal that their understandings about how abused mothers are portrayed are also shaped and influenced by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, as well as the dominant victim-blaming and mother-blaming discourses. In this regard, the abused women commonly describe that abused mothers are portrayed as "bad mothers", "weak mothers", "abusive mothers", "looked down on mothers", "to blame mothers", and in need of help mothers". Like in their discussions of the social construction of mothers and mothering, many of the abused women challenge the view and portrayal of abused women according to these discourses. In this sense, the abused women not only articulate the dominant discourses that casts abused mothers as "bad mothers" and other deviant mothers, but also identify and challenge its subjugating and unjust nature. As such, despite their subordinate position, abused women are able to challenge to

various degrees the dominant discourse of intensive mothering which oppresses them.

## **Chapter Six: Abused Women's Subjective Constructions of their Mothering Identities and the Role of the Dominant Discourse of Intensive Mothering**

"I think I'm a good mom. I think I'm a very good mom actually. I think it's one of my strong points as a person and as a woman, that I'm a very good mom. I think about how things will influence her [daughter] and then I don't let those situations happen, whereas her dad just doesn't think of the repercussions. At the beginning of this journey I thought very little of myself as a mother. I still felt like I was doing a good job as a mom, but he would belittle that and cut that on a regular basis, and that would affect me. From the time that she's [daughter] been around, I have been the sole parent, the sole person, the sole adult doing the parenting. He [partner] was off working in BC, and then it became at the pub, and so he wasn't ever there. So I would be the sole parent doing the parenting, and I felt like I always made good choices and I felt like I was parenting well, but he would cut that down. Maybe because it was the one thing that I did know that I was doing well. So, he would cut that down. That made me sometimes not have the confidence that I needed to parent effectively... But there's a difference between a good mother and um, not necessarily not an effective mother and a bad mother. I guess when I think of a bad mother there's not many bad mothers that I can think of. I just think, you know, we all have our journey, we're at different places in our life, we have different experiences, we have different learning blocks, we make different choices in life, and there are different things we've come to terms with and different realizations. Especially going through this process [abuse]. When I think about what I used to think of as a bad mother, I don't think of as a bad mother anymore. I just think now of a person in a different place in the journey (laughs), at a different level, and they haven't quite gotten it yet or whatever the case may be. There's some people it comes faster for and some people it comes slower for, and I don't think that's a bad mom because they keep on, they're still trying, they're still plugging away at it, and they're doing the best they can everyday... Um, so I don't think of that as a bad mom anymore. I used to, maybe because of societal assumptions, but now I realize how sometimes we get pushed to a certain level that we respond badly, and that doesn't make us a bad mom it just makes us responding badly. But as long as we're working towards responding well most of the time, I think that makes a good mom. Like what I've gone through, having to stay in shelters, I would have never imagined it in a million years! Never would I have imagined it! Actually I would have thought of that as a bad mom before. But now I think of it as a good mom because you're trying to make changes to what happened in your life, and you're doing whatever you can to make that happen. It might have been ideal if I could have waited till I was at a certain level, you know financially and that sort of thing, before leaving. But realistically, that wasn't gonna happen. Not with the financial abuse that we had, and everything being stretched, and my credit down the tubes just to have milk, or whatever. It wasn't gonna happen. No... So when I think of mothering I think you have to be very selfless, but you also have to be not selfish but you have to meet your own needs. That's a big part of what I'm

learning now. So a big part of being a good mom is exploring what you need to do and what's true to your soul, and doing what you need to do to keep yourself healthy and to keep yourself happy. That helps you to be a good mom. As opposed to before, I just felt like I had to completely focus all of my life on the house, the home, and parenting and trying to make it positive. I used to think that as a mother I had to be all the hats...I just felt like I had to do all everything because there's an absentee. But realistically...I don't have to provide all of it. I don't have to be her mother, and her therapist, and her community. She has a good, great one around her, so I just have to open my arms to that...So I thought I was a good mother before, now I feel like I'm a very good mother.

This quotation from Abigail, a 37-year-old Caucasian woman who is the mother of a seven-year-old girl, illustrates well the main themes related to abused women's personal views of themselves as mothers, which I will be discussing in this chapter. Mothers are not only surrounded, but also influenced by the dominant ideologies of motherhood. Dominant ideologies of motherhood, which materialize in dominant mothering discourses, are powerful and shape how women view and think about themselves as mothers. That is, dominant mothering discourses influence what mothers know and do not know, what they see and do not see, and what they say and do not say in complex ways (Weingarten, 1995, pp.12-13). As such, the way mothers come to experience and understand their social identity is discursively constructed (Davies and Harré, 1990). By establishing what is accepted as normal, good, and desirable, dominant mothering discourses construct criteria that lead mothers to regulate their own behaviours without the presence of force or coercion. Compliance to the ideals of motherhood occurs when mothers internalize the dominant mothering discourses, and therefore become self-monitoring subjects (Code, 1991; Cooper, 1994).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cooper (1994) indicates that power is exercised rather than possessed, and can be productive as well as repressive. In this light, power is not held by only one group in society, but rather exists within various social relations throughout society. As such, individuals can resist dominant

However, dominant mothering discourses are not monolithic and all powerful. As such, not all mothers are passive victims who merely accept and internalize mothering discourses. Rather, some mothers are active agents who question and resist the dominant mothering discourses in their lives (Gordon, 1990, McMahon, 1995).

Both the literature on mothering and the literature on domestic abuse have failed to examine how dominant discourses of mothering frame and influence abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering. As such, this raises a number of questions: How do abused women personally perceive their mothering? How are abused women's personal perceptions of their mothering experiences similar or different? What role does the ideology of mothering play in the lives of abused mothers? How are abused mothers' lives shaped by the ideology of mothering discourses? This chapter, which examines and discusses abused women's subjective mothering identities, begins to address some of these questions.

Abigail's narrative provides a good example of the role and influence that dominant mothering discourses play in shaping how abused women view and think about themselves as mothers. Abigail clearly draws on the dominant discourse of intensive mothering and its associated "good mother and bad mother" discourses in constructing her identity as a mother. Despite the fact that the dominant discourse of intensive mothering portrays abused mothers as "bad mothers" for having mothered in the context of abuse, Abigail does not describe

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discourses by challenging and opposing these discourses which are constricting and oppressive (p. 436).

herself as a “bad mother”. Rather, Abigail describes herself as a “good mother”, and makes reference to being a “good mom” not only one time, but four separate times. In fact, Abigail states that being a mother is one of her “strong points as a person and as a woman”. Abigail does admit that there were times when she thought “very little” of herself “as a mother”, particularly when her abusive partner would “belittle” her and “cut” her down. Nonetheless, Abigail always felt like she was doing “a good job as a mom” because although she was “the sole parent doing the parenting”, she carried out her “parenting well”, she made “good choices” as a mother, and she thought “about how things” would “influence” her daughter and didn’t “let those situations happen”. In this sense, Abigail asserts that despite having mothered in the context of domestic abuse, she is no less capable and no less competent than other mothers. Consequently, Abigail clearly and uniformly evokes images of herself as a mother and details practices of her mothering that illustrate her capabilities as a mother.

What is interesting in this narrative is that Abigail describes herself as a “good mother”, but defines a “good mother” not according to the standards imposed by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but rather according to her own personal standards. As such, Abigail redefines what a “good mother” is so that it has more inclusive boundaries. According to Abigail, a “good mother” is someone that “keeps on”, is “still trying”, is “still plugging away”, is “doing the best they can everyday”, is “working towards responding well most of the time”, and is “trying to make changes to what happened” in their “life” by “doing whatever” they can to “make that happen”. In this sense, Abigail denies



the standard that a “good mother” is someone who puts their children’s needs before their own needs, and instead upholds that a “good mother” is someone who “meets their own needs”, who is “exploring” what they “need to do” and what is “true” to their “soul”, and who is “doing” what they “need to do to keep” themselves “healthy” and “happy”.

Abigail even recognizes that much of what we consider to be a “good mother” and a “bad mother” is based on “societal assumptions”. In fact, Abigail’s views of mothers changed as a result of her experiences of abuse. She claims “When I think about what I used to think of as a bad mother, I don’t think of as a bad mother anymore”. As such, Abigail now claims “there’s not many bad mothers that I can think of”, and instead of categorizing mothers according to the “bad mother” versus “good mother” discourse, Abigail views and describes mothers as having their own separate “journeys”, as being “at different places” in their lives, as having “different experiences” and “different learning blocks”, as making “different choices” in their lives, and as “coming to terms” with “different realizations”. Indeed, Abigail’s narrative is one example that demonstrates that abused mothers resist the dominant discourse of intensive mothering which casts them as “bad mothers” by drawing on the “good mother” discourse, and then redefining what a “good mother” is so that it has more inclusive boundaries.

This chapter presents abused women’s mothering identities. In this chapter I present abused women’s subjective constructions of themselves as mothers. I draw on O’Reilly’s (2006) theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” in order to examine the dominant discourses of mothering that

abused women draw from, negotiate, and resist in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. I discuss how the abused women's narratives reveal that mothers resist the intensive mothering discourse not just in their mothering practices as O'Reilly discusses, but also in the ways that they subjectively construct their mothering identities. That is, while a small minority of the abused women engage in "patriarchal mothering" by drawing on the "bad mother" discourse, the large majority of the abused women engage in "empowered/feminist mothering" by resisting the "bad mother" discourse. As such, I argue that my findings support and build on O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" by demonstrating that although some abused women engage in "patriarchal mothering" by constructing their mothering identities in accordance with the discourse of intensive mothering, the majority of abused women engage in "empowered/feminist" mothering by constructing their mothering identities in ways that outright resist the discourse of intensive mothering. I also argue that my findings suggest moving beyond O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" and towards what I refer to as "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood", by demonstrating that abused women construct their mothering identities in ways that not only resist, but also redefine and replace the discourses of intensive mothering.

### **1) Constructing Their Mothering Identities: Accepting and Resisting the Dominant Discourse of Intensive Mothering**

Andrea O'Reilly's (2006) theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" provides a useful theoretical framework to examine the ways that

abused women subjectively construct their mothering identities, and the role that the dominant discourses of intensive mothering plays in shaping abused women's subjective mothering identities. According to O'Reilly (2006), patriarchal motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 11). As such, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power. In other words, mothering, freed from motherhood could be experienced as a site of empowerment (O'Reilly, 2006: 11). O'Reilly therefore argues that patriarchal motherhood must be differentiated from the possibility or potentiality of mothering in order for motherhood to be recognized and experienced as not naturally, necessarily or inevitably oppressive, and more importantly for mothering, when freed from motherhood, to be recognized and experienced as a site of empowerment and a location of social change (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 11).

According to O'Reilly, the ideology of intensive mothering functions as a master discourse that defines how women must mother. As discussed in the previous chapter, O'Reilly (2006) upholds that the ideology of intensive mothering dictates that: 1) children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; 2) this mothering must be provided 24/7; 3) the mother must always put children's needs before her own; 4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; 5) the mother is fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed

in motherhood; and finally 6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children (p.43). Each demand is predicated on the eradication, or at the very least, sublimation of a mother's own selfhood and in particular her agency, autonomy, authenticity, and authority (O'Reilly, 2006).

The ideology of intensive mothering is the mode of motherhood by which all mothers are regulated, evaluated, and judged. Women who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering are considered "good mothers", while women who do not conform to the ideology of intensive mothering are considered "bad mothers". However, O'Reilly indicates that mothers do challenge the demands of intensive mothering and the mandate of powerless responsibility (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 46). In this regard, O'Reilly distinguishes between two types of mothering that women engage in- "patriarchal mothering and empowered/feminist mothering" (O'Reilly, 2006, pp. 16, 37-38). "Patriarchal mothering" signifies an acceptance of patriarchal motherhood, while "empowered/feminist mothering" signifies a resistance to patriarchal motherhood and is characterized by agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity (O'Reilly, 2006, pp. 21-23). More specifically, "empowered/feminist mothering" consists of mothering practices that resist patriarchal motherhood, and therefore marks the movement from motherhood to mothering and makes possible a mothering against patriarchal motherhood (O'Reilly, 2008, 4). According to O'Reilly, the agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity of empowered/feminist mothering are as available to marginalized women as they are to women of privilege, and in fact are more evident in the

mothering practices of mothers who are young, lesbian, poor, or women of colour. This is because privileged women with more resources and status in motherhood are often less able or likely to perceive and oppose their oppression (O'Reilly, 2006).

O'Reilly's (2006) theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" provides a good theoretical framework to examine the role and influence that the dominant discourse of intensive mothering plays in shaping abused women's subjective mothering identities, as it examines one way that mothers accept, negotiate, or resist the discourse of intensive mothering in their personal mothering practices. My research builds on O'Reilly's work by examining if mothers, particularly abused mothers, also accept, negotiate, or resist the discourse of intensive mothering in their subjective constructions of their mothering identities.

The findings reveal that in this study almost all of the abused women constructed their mothering identities by drawing on, negotiating, or resisting the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. During the interviews I asked the abused women participants how they viewed themselves as mothers. I was surprised to discover that the majority of the abused women described themselves as "good mothers". As such, I then asked the abused mothers what they meant by the words "good mother". Below I discuss how while a few of the abused women accepted the dominant standards of intensive mothering, most of the abused women resisted these dominant standards of intensive mothering by questioning and criticizing these socially prescribed standard of mothering.

## **2) Accepting the Dominant Discourse of Intensive Mothering that Constructs Abused Mothers as “Bad Mothers” – Patriarchal Mothering: Building on O’Reilly’s (2006) Theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood”**

In constructing their mothering identities, a small number of abused women accepted the discourse of intensive mothering. That is, these abused women viewed and described themselves as “bad mothers”. As such, these abused women engaged in what O’Reilly refers to as “patriarchal mothering” by accepting the dominant discourse of intensive mothering that constructs and portrays abused mothers as “bad mothers”. Overall, these abused women had less than positive views of themselves as mothers. Interestingly, none of these abused women except one, directly referred to the “bad mother” discourse. Instead, these abused women referred to an altered form of the “bad mother” discourse- they described themselves as “not good mothers”.

### **A) Drawing on the “Bad Mother” Discourse – “I am a bad/not a good mother”**

Four of the twenty-nine women engaged in “patriarchal mothering” by drawing on the “bad mother/not good mother” discourse when describing how they personally viewed themselves as mothers. These abused women viewed and claimed that they were “bad mothers/not good mothers” because they failed to meet the standards of intensive mothering, specifically the following standards: 1) mothering must be provided 24/7; 2) children can only be properly cared for by their biological mothers; and 3) mothers must always put their children’s needs before their own. Most of the abused mothers stated that they wanted to be “good mothers”. As such, in each case, the abused mothers were pressured and constantly made efforts to live by and maintain the standards of intensive

mothering. When the abused women failed to achieve the standards of intensive mothering, which are unrealistic and unachievable for any mother to achieve in the first place, they nonetheless judged themselves harshly. Clearly, these abused women shared a strong commitment to the ideology of intensive mothering, and experienced the push and pull of a no-win situation.

These findings support and build on O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" by demonstrating that some, but not all mothers challenge the demands of intensive mothering and the mandate of powerless responsibility (O'Reilly, 2006, 46). These abused women who viewed and defined themselves as "bad mothers", did not challenge, but rather accepted the standards imposed on them by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering.

***i) "Bad Mother" – Fails to provide mothering 24/7***

Most of the abused women who claimed that they were a "bad mother/not good mother" indicated that they viewed themselves as such because they failed to live up to the intensive mothering standard which stipulates that mothers should provide care to their children on a constant basis, that is, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Three of the abused women felt that it was their maternal obligation to constantly care for their dependent children, but claimed that they were often unable to give their children this constant attention and attendance because they mothered in an abusive context. As a result, these abused women stated that they were unable to always "take care" of, and "be there" for their children. Lacey is a good example of an abused mother who viewed and described herself as "not a good mother", because she was not always there to

care for her children. According to Lacey, she was often not physically there for her children because she was trying to respond to her abusive partner's needs. When she was not taking care of her abusive partner's needs, she was still unable to physically be there for her children for a variety of different reasons, such as she was "always on edge" as a result of being abused, she was away working outside of the home, and she was taking care of the household duties. Lacey also asserted that she was often not emotionally there for her children as she did not take the time to tell her children that she "loved them". This caused Lacey to feel guilt and sorrow. However, not once did Lacey call into question the expectation that constantly caring for her children is a responsibility that rests exclusively on her shoulders.

Lacey: I tried to be such a good mother but I was not, because of everything that was happening... There's so many things I wanted for the kids, but then with him too, but I ended up... giving it to him, instead of to the kids! So I always wanted to give the kids everything they wanted, but it was like I was trying to con them, or not conning them but trying to make up for it... because I was concentrating on him, instead of concentrating on the kids... I was always on edge, always, always, always on edge. I couldn't just like play with the kids cuz I was always so busy dealing with him, and then dealing with work, and then getting the house done... When I was raising the kids, I guess I wasn't a very happy person. I feel like I was someone who gave up. So I guess I can't say that... I was always there for the kids... I guess I just felt as long as they had a home where there was no alcohol and they had their meals. But I guess there was something missing too. Something that I never got that I didn't know how to say and that was that I loved them. It took me a long time to be able to tell someone that I loved them, cuz I never heard it before. And I think my son and daughter felt, well they knew that I was always there, but I guess you need a verbal too... I don't know how I felt... I tried, and I tried, and I tried.



Like Lacey, Aileen described herself as “not a good mother” because she was unable to constantly be there for her children when they were young. Aileen stated that when her children were growing up she was unable to love her children the way she was “supposed to”, she was not able to be with her children as she “wanted to”, and consequently she was not “close” to her children because she was controlled by her abusive partner and lived in fear. Aileen also claimed that since her children have grown up and moved away from home, she still has been unable to be there for her children because they have cut off communication with her. This has only increased Aileen feelings that she is “not a good mother”, and has caused her to feel much pain and regret. Like Lacey, Aileen did not question the expectation that she should be the one that is exclusively responsible for always responding to her children’s needs, desires, and wants.

Aileen: I wanted to be a good mother... but I was not... (starts crying), and I would have been too. It’s really painful because I went through years when I was not able to love my children how it’s supposed to be. Opposite of love is hate, but also opposite of love is fear. If you live in fear you cannot love... Like I could not be with the children as I wanted to. I could not be close to my children. I could not love them because I was controlled somehow, you know. I was full of worry when I was at work- What’s happening to the kids? I was worried when I was at home- How will I carry on alone? What if I lost my job? So this constant worrying. It was like my daughter used to say: “Mom you run around like a chicken with her head cut off.” Yeah, like I was panicking you know. I’m getting closer to kill myself. And sometimes, honestly, I thought maybe I should kill my family too. I’m telling you because sometimes people do that, because they wanted something a lot better for the children but they cannot provide, so they would rather see that they don’t suffer, and so it’s killing out of love...And what the psychologist said to us in the Foothills Hospital is: “How a husband acts with the woman, that’s how she acts with the children,” and this is very, very true. Like I had the death sentence from my husband, and I feel sometimes I give the death sentence to my children. I did not want to, and two years

ago, (starts crying), they [children] moved away and they don't want to talk to me. My daughter said they don't talk to me until I prove myself.

Taahira also viewed herself as “not a good mother”. However, Taahira was the only woman who also explicitly described herself as a “bad mother”. Taahira claimed that she was a “bad mother” because she was both physically and emotionally unavailable to her daughter. Because she was “emotionally broken” from experiencing abuse, and because she had to work full time, Taahira was only able to give “twenty percent” of herself and her time to her daughter. Taahira affirms that she “would have been a more loving and affectionate mother” had she been in a happy and non-abusive relationship. Taahira believed that being a “loving and affectionate mother” should come naturally and normally to all mothers, and therefore felt much agony and anguish because she was not able to live up to this standard. In this sense, Taahira equated the constant maternal work of caring for and loving children with women's motherly obligation to their dependent children. Taahira held herself to the standard that she must constantly ensure her child's well being by supporting, securing, and pleasing her daughter at all times. Consequently, Taahira expressed that she wanted to be a “good mother”, and since she left her abusive partner she has been doing everything in her power to try to be that “good mother”.

Taahira: I don't say I'm very good mother...I don't say I'm very different mother...I just think inside “That is kind of example of bad mother you giving her [daughter]”...Emotionally I got broken, you know...I feel very bad because sometimes when you don't even deserve something, still you have to have it, then you feel demoralized, disappointed. Plus you, you have to fight for the things, and you sometimes you know you loose your strength...I was only able to be there for her [daughter] twenty percent...plus I

worked so many shifts. If I had um, happy marriage life and if mostly was good, then I would have been a more loving and affectionate mother...It's not a matter that society expects or I have to do, it is just a natural and normal relationship...I don't want to be extraordinary mother, I just want to be good mother and strict mother, because I'm alone. I wanna teach her discipline, a routine, what life is, what I never saw. In India I lived like a princess because I was a daughter of a King, I lived like a princess. But, even though my dad had a status, he taught us really good things. My dad taught us hardships, we can live in a hut or we can live in a palace. I don't say we are very good, but we are civilized, educated, and disciplined people. So same thing, I just want to be a mother who teach her religious things, good values, how to be a good human, and a disciplined and organized person. So I don't say I'm a very good mother, but I'm still proud of my teachings, what I got from my parents, like all the hardships or just above, and discipline and all that. And I wanted to uh teach her same thing. Until now I couldn't, but now when, she's in my hands, I'm trying my level best to uh, you know, pass it on her.

***ii) Bad Mother” – Fails to care for her biological children***

Two of the abused women also claimed that they were a “bad mother/not good mother” because they failed to live up to the intensive mothering standard, which stipulates that children can only be properly cared for by their biological mother. These abused women believed that solely the mother and no one else should care for their biological children, but claimed that the abusive social context in which they carried out their mothering required otherwise. As a result, these two abused women asserted that they were not the sole care providers for their children. For example, Lacey not only described herself as “not a good mother” for failing to constantly care for her children when they were younger, but also for not remaining at home and close to her children once they were older. At one point, Lacey left home and went to another city to get away from “everybody and everything for a while”, particularly her abusive partner. Even

though her children were adults, Lacey claimed that they felt like she “deserted them”. Consequently, Lacey felt “like a failure” for not being there to care for her adult children. Lacey did not question the standard that she should be solely responsible for providing for her children’s emotional and psychological needs.

Lacey: I ran away from everybody and everything for a while, like when I went to Chilliwack I just left everybody. And I know the kids, even though they’re adults, they felt like I deserted them. So like I said I feel like I’m not a good mother, and I feel like a failure. I should have been stronger and thought more about them [children] than the partner...But, I’m just so tired of being hurt.

Likewise, Aileen not only described herself as “not a good mother” for failing to constantly care for her children, but also for working outside of the home and sending her children to a daycare. Aileen expressed a lot of remorse and disappointment for not being able to remain at home to care for her children. Consequently, like Lacey, Aileen felt “like a failure” because she was not able to “enjoy” her children and provide them with a “better life”. According to Aileen, she “could have been a very good mother” had she not experienced financial abuse by her partner, because then she would have been able to remain at home with her children. Aileen clearly held herself to the standard that her children could only be properly cared for by her and only her, given that she was the biological mother.

Aileen: I supported the family for years, on my own. I always had to leave the children so I can make a living, and I still can remember one occasion when my son says “Please don’t leave me.” Well what can I do, you know? I’m just sorry what the kids went through. When I was working they [children] were in a daycare center. I did not want them to go there. I thought I will always be home. But I did what ever I could. Even when I see young mothers now (starts to cry), I start to cry because I could not enjoy the children for a long time. I wanted to, but....So, I, it bothers me that my

children could have a lot better life. I feel bad, I feel real bad. And this is my wish, that for the rest of my life, try to correct whatever was not right...I could have been a very good mother if I would not go through this [abuse]...In a way I say I'm a failure.

***iii) Bad Mother” – Fails to put her children’s needs before her own needs***

Finally, a number of the abused women claimed that they were a “bad mother/not good mother” because they failed to live up to the intensive mothering standard which demands that mothers put their children’s needs before their own needs. Three of the abused women believed that mothers must prioritize the needs of their children over their own needs. However, these abused women declared that living with an abusive partner often made putting their children’s needs first a challenge. Consequently, these abused women asserted that they found it difficult to live up to this mothering standard, and experienced lots of culpability in this regard. Both Lacey and Emma described how they viewed themselves as a “bad mother/not good mother” because they periodically used substances as a way to cope with the abuse. Lacey, felt that she was a “bad mother/not good mother” not only for failing to meet the two previously discussed standards of mothering, but also for failing to put her children’s needs before her own needs because she self-medicated with drugs as a way to cope with living in an abusive environment. As such, Lacey was committed to the standard and belief that she should sacrifice at all times and in all ways her own well being for the well being of her children.

Lacey:           Actually I found a very good thing to cope with the abuse. I smoked weed to keep me calm, rather than me drink alcohol....So of course my son and daughter later started smoking weed, and I couldn’t very well say well you couldn’t do that because I was doing it to.....I used to hate my mother, and now I find that I did

the exact same thing as her, not turned to alcohol but to drugs....It just calmed me down and I could cope with anything... So there were times when I was not a good mother.

Emma is the only woman who directly referred to herself as a “bad mother”. Emma described herself not only as a “bad mother”, but as a “terrible mother”. Like Lacey, Emma viewed herself as a “bad mother” for failing to be singularly responsible for catering to the needs of her children. Emma described how she would drink alcohol to “forget” the pain she was experiencing from the abuse, and to “calm” her “nerves down”. Emma also described how she was “not the PTA mom” who devoted all of her time to her children. Consequently, Emma had a low view of herself as a mother because she strongly believed in, and held herself to the standard that she should prioritize the needs of her children over her own needs.

Emma: I don't know, sometimes I feel like a terrible mom. Like I'm not the PTA mom. I was a bad mom when I drank to just forget, just to calm my nerves down, and to numb myself...I just feel bad my kids would just look. I felt they were looking down on me. Then they'd be like 'Mom...you should just quit drinking, we don't like it when you drink.' Like that. That's when I feel like a terrible mom.

#### ***iv) Summary and Discussion***

A small number of abused women's experiences and lives were influenced by the cultural myths contained in the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. These abused women were committed to the tenets of the discourse of intensive mothering. This was evident by the fact that these women held beliefs that were congruent with the discourse of intensive mothering. Consequently, these abused women attempted to live up to the standards of intensive mothering, and when

they failed to as a result of their circumstances, they viewed themselves in a negative light- as “bad mothers”.

By accepting the dominant discourse of intensive mothering and consequently defining themselves as “bad mothers”, these abused women engaged in what O’Reilly refers to as “patriarchal mothering”. None of these abused women questioned or resisted definitions of themselves as “bad mothers” as perpetuated by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. Rather, these abused women believed that they were indeed “bad mothers”, and defined themselves as such. As such, I argue that these findings support and build on O’Reilly’s theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” by demonstrating that some, but not all mothers challenge the demands of intensive mothering and the mandate of powerless responsibility (O’Reilly, 2006, 46). Clearly these abused women did not challenge, but rather accepted the standards imposed on them by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. Attempting but failing to live by the standards of intensive mothering caused considerable guilt, disappointment, and distress in the lives of these abused women, leading even one woman named Aileen to contemplate taking her life. This demonstrates the power of the discourse of intensive mothering, and therefore it is not surprising that some abused women accepted this discourse. However, it is important to note that although these abused women accepted the discourse of intensive mothering, this did not silence them from voicing the negatives effects that living up to these standards had on their mothering experiences. As such, this points to the fact that these abused women may not explicitly resist the discourse

of intensive mothering, but they do recognize that it does exist, and that it does have an influence on their mothering experiences.

**B) Resisting the Dominant Discourse of Intensive Mothering that Constructs Abused Mothers as “Bad Mothers” – Empowered/Feminist Mothering: Building on O’Reilly’s (2006) Theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” and Moving in the Direction of “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood”**

In constructing their mothering identities, a large number of abused women resisted the discourse of intensive mothering. Of the twenty-nine abused women, twenty women resisted and did so in three ways: 1) by negotiating the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses; 2) by drawing on and then redefining the “good mother” discourse so that it had more inclusive boundaries; and 3) by rejecting the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses and then replacing them with experientially-based alternative mothering discourses. As such, these abused women engaged in what O’Reilly refers to as “empowered/feminist mothering” by resisting the dominant discourse of intensive mothering that constructs and portrays abused mothers as “bad mothers”. Overall, these abused women had positive views of themselves as mothers, and therefore resisted negative portrayals that they were “bad mothers” because they mothered in the context of abuse. The extent to which these abused women resisted the dominant discourse of intensive mothering varied. While some abused women resisted by negotiating the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses, other abused women resisted by drawing on and then redefining the “good mother” discourse, or by rejecting the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses and creating new experientially-based alternative mothering discourses.



These findings support and build on O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" by demonstrating that some mothers do challenge the demands of intensive mothering and the mandate of powerless responsibility (O'Reilly, 2006, 46). These abused women who viewed and defined themselves by negotiating the "bad and good mother" discourses, by redefining the "good mother" discourse, and by rejecting both the "bad mother" and the "good mother" discourses did not accept, but rather challenged the standards imposed on them by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. These findings also suggest moving beyond O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" and towards what I refer to as "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood", by demonstrating that abused women construct their mothering identities in ways that not only resist, but also redefine and replace the dominant discourses of mothering.

**a) Negotiating the "Bad Mother" and the "Good Mother" Discourses – "I am a bad mother and a good mother"**

Two of the twenty-nine women engaged in "empowered/feminist mothering" by negotiating the "bad mother" and "good mother" discourses when describing how they personally viewed themselves as mothers. These abused women resisted the "bad mother" discourse by claiming that although at times they may have been "bad mothers", for the most part they were "good mothers". Both of these abused women claimed that at times they were "bad mothers" because they mothered in an abusive context and this prevented them from always mothering successfully. However, these abused women claimed that overall they were "good mothers" because despite mothering in an abusive environment, they

were very capable and competent mothers. These abused women clearly and uniformly evoked images of themselves and detailed practices that illustrated their attempts to take care of their children and their positive abilities and accomplishments as mothers, despite their circumstances. In this sense, these abused women avoided the cultural claim that they were solely “bad mothers”. As such, in both cases these abused mothers were not always pressured nor did they make efforts to constantly live by and maintain the standards of intensive mothering. When these abused women failed to achieve the standards of intensive mothering they did not personally judge themselves, but rather attributed their deficiencies to the abusive context in which they mothered. Nonetheless, these abused women’s views and descriptions of themselves as “bad mothers” and “good mothers” were still based on whether or not they conformed to the intensive mothering standards. As such, these abused women resisted the dominant discourses of intensive mothering by maneuvering around, but not explicitly subverting these discourses.

The two abused women who claimed that they were both “bad mothers” and “good mothers” indicated that they viewed themselves as “bad mothers” when they were with their abusive partners because they could not be the mother they wanted to be, but that they viewed themselves as “good mothers” once they left their abusive partners because they were able to care for their children on their own. Both of these abused women claimed that they were “bad mothers” when they failed to conform to the standards of intensive mothering, and likewise that they were “good mothers” when they successfully conformed to the standards of

intensive mothering. For example, Leena claimed that when she was with her abusive partner at times she was a “bad mother” because she was not always able to live up to the intensive mothering standard which stipulates that mothers should provide care to their children on a constant basis, that is, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Being abused caused Leena to feel like she was living under a “fog”, and consequently she was not able to adequately care for her children at all times. However, once Leena left her abusive partner she asserted that she was a “good mother” because she was able to conform to this intensive mothering standard and devote more time to her son. Leena also declared that she was a “good mother” when she began to work because she was able to financially provide for her son, and this was in line with the intensive mothering standard which stipulates that mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children.

Leena: Sometimes I think I’m a bad mother because when I was with him and I was abused I was not super. Like it was very, very hard sometimes because if you have children you can’t always take care of them, and you can’t do things with them, you know, cuz it’s under a cloud and you can’t even see the kid cuz it’s like a fog right...But then I know I’m a good mom, and other people see it and they tell me like ‘You know, you’re a good mom.’ Like I was a good mother with my son because I worked. I never had that, I never seen my mom work, I just used to see her high and drunk...I’m a good mom because he [son] tells me ‘Mommy I love you, thank you.’ you know thank you for this, thank you for that, and then he’ll come kiss me and say ‘I love you so much.’ and then he’ll kiss me like all over and I’m like, oh I’m a good mom...He [son] gets everything he wants cuz I give him that cuz I never had that. And then plus too my other kids got taken away when they were young, and I wasn’t able to give that to them, so I give him that. Like I feel bad that this is what I should have did for them that I didn’t because I was too wound up with this and that, and I was abused...It [abuse] shaped me, because being abused until now, I just think of it as a life learning experience and as part of

life, and you either go the bad way or the good way, you either go left or right kind of thing, or you either go up or down. So it could be like a bunch of positives and negatives...But I think it [abuse] made me learn to be stronger, like you learn off it, either good or bad. That's just the way life is...Like it's hard being a single mother, but then sometimes being single is good...because my mothering has been up and down, and I just want to keep it up now.

Maggie also alternated back and forth between viewing and describing herself as a “bad mother” at some times, and as a “good mother” at other times. Maggie asserted that at times she felt like a “bad mother” because she did not always live up to the intensive mothering standard, which indicates that children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother. When Maggie first left her abusive partner he took their children and refused to let her see them. This caused Maggie to feel much guilt because she believed that it was her primary responsibility as the mother to care for her children. Nonetheless, once Maggie's children returned to live with her she felt like a “good mother” because she was able to conform to this intensive mothering standard and be solely responsible for caring for her children. Like Leena, Maggie also felt like a “good mother” when she was able to “spend time” with her children, “always be with” her children, and direct all of her “attention” to her children, which was in accordance with the intensive mothering standard which demands that mothering should be performed on a 24/7 basis.

Maggie: I think I'm a good mom. I mean, I know how to handle my kids. I mean like I know my kids are well disciplined, they're well behaved, um, it's not like all the time they need to be, you know, to get mad at them. They're very helpful, and, I'm glad they're like that. They're really helpful especially with the baby, and my daughter's only five and she's already doing dishes, and she tries to do mom things. So I mean I think I did a good job in raising my

kids. I don't know how to say it but, sometimes I don't think I was a good mother. Like when I was with their dad I used to like get mad at them the way my husband would because that's what he wanted. But that was before. Now I realized that I wasn't gonna do that anymore. But, just times like that where it seemed like I wasn't prepared because of him... Then when me and their dad had split up he took them and I never spent time with them when they were with their dad. It's not that I didn't want to, it was hard because I wasn't allowed to go there when they were living with their dad. But now they're with me, and now I think I'm a good mom. I mean I take care of my kids, they're always clean, and I try to do the best I can. I know there's times where I can do better. As in like I should have taken them away from the abuse earlier and stuff like that. But now like I'm always with them all the time. Like from when they were born and even after me and their dad split up and they were living with him until the I got them back, I've always been with them... It seems like I feel better when I'm on my own, like by myself taking care of the kids because my attention is always to them, like I always put my attention to them and nobody else. Even when I'm visiting I don't just like leave them out, they're always with me. So I think I do better when I'm on my own cuz I can raise my kids on my own. I'm not scared of raising them on my own, it's just unfortunate that they have to grow up being with just one parent. But then I also felt like I was not a good mom when I was with him.

**b) Drawing on and Redefining the “Good Mother” Discourse: Reconstituting the Boundaries and Standards of the Intensive Mothering Discourse – “I am a good mother”**

Nineteen of the twenty-nine abused women engaged in “empowered/feminist mothering” by drawing on the “good mother” discourse, and then redefining what a “good mother” is. These abused women did not merely oppose the discourse of intensive mothering, rather they went beyond this by redefining this discourse. In this sense, these abused women positioned themselves within the existing discourse of good mothering to challenge the label of the “good mother”. They then provided alternative explanations to the label of the “good mother” to argue that they were indeed “good mothers”. As such,

rather than articulating the “good mother” discourse in the same sense as that perpetuated by the standards of intensive mothering, these abused women reframed the “good mother” discourse based on their own standards of mothering which consisted of more inclusive boundaries. These abused women specifically redefined the “good mother” discourse according to the following six characteristics. A good mother is someone who: 1) spends time with her children whenever her circumstances permit; 2) protects her children; 3) rears her children in love; 4) provides for her children’s basic needs; 5) rears her children in ways that make both her children and herself happy; 6) teaches her children; and 7) takes care of both her children’s needs and her own needs. The majority of the abused women cited several of these characteristics when defining themselves as “good mothers”. Of the 29 women, 1 woman listed four of these characteristics, 8 women listed three of these characteristics, 8 women listed two of these characteristics, and 2 women listed only one of these characteristics.

For these abused women the standards of “good mothering” were dependent on the context in which mothering takes place. According to these abused women, mothering in the context of domestic abuse called for different standards, and therefore these abused women felt that they were “good mothers” because they did all they could within the confines of an abusive social context. As such, these abused women opposed the societal stigma that they were “bad mothers” because they viewed themselves as mothers in positive terms. In fact, many of these abused women cited mothering as the only thing that they felt they did right and did well in their lives. Many of these abused women also mentioned

that mothering brought them reprieve from the abuse, and that their children brought them much happiness, fulfillment and hope. These abused women often stated that being a mother and having their children in their lives was the only thing that got them through the abuse and encouraged them to carry on despite the pain and suffering they experienced as victims of abuse. One abused woman named Arika stated:

“If it wasn’t for my children I don’t think I’d be alive cuz sometimes I just wished that I wasn’t here. But I wouldn’t ever do it [end her life], because I know how it is to lose a mom and I wouldn’t want them [her children] to grow up without a mother.”

In this sense, many women lived for their children, as being a mother was a positive experience in their lives despite living in the context of abuse and the many challenges it posed for them as mothers. Nonetheless, these abused women made many efforts to “do the best” they could as mothers. As such, these abused women resisted the dominant discourses of intensive mothering by explicitly redefining the “good mother” according to their own definitions. Interestingly, during the interviews many of the abused women reiterated numerous times that they were “good mothers”. Below I discuss the various ways in which the abused women redefined the “good mother”.

***i) “Good Mother”- Spends time with her children whenever circumstances permit***

The most pervasive theme in the abused women’s descriptions of their good mothering focused on spending time with their children whenever they could within their personal and varied circumstances. Ten of the abused women claimed that they were “good mothers” because they made efforts to “spend time”

with their children, despite living in an abusive environment. Many abused women described how when they were with their abusive partners, these partners did not support them in performing the work involved in mothering. Other abused women described how when they were with their abusive partner, these partners intentionally and directly targeted and controlled their mothering. As such, these abused women reported that at times they felt a loss of control over their mothering. This loss of control was often due to the fact that their abusive partners monitored and restrained so many aspects of their lives, which resulted in significant consequences for their physical, emotional, and mental health. As such, this made it more difficult for these abused women to carry out their mothering the way they personally wanted to. Nonetheless, these abused women went to great lengths to find and create opportunities to spend time with their children, such as doing things with their children when their partners were not home, or taking their children to activities outside of the home. Interestingly, these abused women emphasized that it was not necessary for them to be with their children at all times, nor was it necessary for them to do specific types of activities with their children such as playing, reading, or doing recreational activities in order to be “good mothers”. Rather, these abused women asserted that as long as they spent time with their children whenever they could doing whatever interested them and their children, then they were “good mothers”.

Many abused women stated that they felt like a “good mother” when their abusive partners were not at home and they were able to spend time alone with their children. For example, Arika described how she was a “good mother”, but



that the times she mostly felt like a “good mother” was when she was able to “do whatever” she and her children wanted to do without her partner being there to control her and their children.

Arika: I think I’m a good mother. But the only time I really felt like a good mom is when I was allowed to spend an hour alone with my children without him there because we could play and fool around and do whatever we wanted. When they got older we could colour, we could read, and I could read the bible to them when their father wasn’t there. So it was very seldom that I felt like I could be the mother that I wanted to be.

Likewise, Carly described how she was a “good mother”, and that “a lot of the times” she felt like a “good mother” was when she was able to freely spend time with her children and not worry about her partner being there and becoming angry and abusive. Carly stated that spending time with her children, “having fun”, “bonding”, and loving one another” was not always easy because she was dealing with the emotional difficulties of being abused. Nevertheless, Carly made the time to be there for her children and to do “something together”, even if it was just “sitting” and “talking” with one another.

Carly: I’m a good mother. A lot of the time I feel like that. Like being with my boys and them getting along, and us doing something together whether it be just sitting here talking, you know. We could be doing the funniest thing, like I miss the snow, you know out there building a snowman. That time with them, and you know nobody’s fighting, nobody’s under stress, nobody’s looking over their shoulder, nobody’s worried about some angry person, and nobody’s worried about being abused in any way, shape, or form. You’re being yourself, you’re having fun, you’re bonding, and you’re loving one another...But it hasn’t been easy. Um, just because with abuse you’re broken down, because you’re weak, and because something’s been taken from you and you’ve been made to feel that you’re not worthy, you know. How do you have that strength to take every day and what is brought to you every day, which is always something new, how do you deal with that? You know, you have to be a strong person to make it. You know, as

many mishaps and misfortunate things that have happened to me, I'm still here for my babies.

Several abused women declared that they felt like a “good mother” particularly once they left their abusive partners and were able to carry out their mothering how they wanted to, and not how their partner wanted them to. These abused women indicated that they had much more time to devote to their children as they were no longer forced to dedicate all their time to meeting the needs of their abusive partners. For example, Josephine considered herself to be a “good mom” because she always spent time just “having fun” with her son and paying attention to his needs. Josephine indicated that since she left her abusive partner she has realized that she has “much more psychic space to spend” with her son, and much more time to just “be there” for him. Josephine felt like a “good mom” on a “daily basis” because although she worked full time and her son went to daycare, she was able to spend time and connect with him in the car on the way to and from daycare. As such, Josephine believed that it was not necessarily the quantity of time, but rather the quality of time that she spent with her son that was important. Interestingly, Josephine called into question and criticized the intensive mothering discourse, which stipulates specific standards of mothering that all mothers must abide by. Josephine asserted that there are numerous ways to mother, and neither is “good” or “bad”.

Josephine: I think I'm a good mom. I think that having fun is a very important part of mothering, and I'm noticing that not every other mother feels that way. My friend Lisa she says that I'm really attentive to my son, like I really pay attention to what he needs and what is going on with him. She says that I'm a good mom and I'm like I don't know I'm just treating him like I would like to be treated, you know I don't have anything brilliant to offer, just this

is how I would like someone to treat me if I was completely helpless and dependent on them... So I feel like a good mom on a pretty daily basis. It's pretty fun when we're in the car together and he's like making a noise and I'm like 'What's up?' and he'll go 'Blah blah blah blah,' cause he can't talk properly yet and I'll be like 'Okay here's your milk (laugh). It's just like I guess anytime that we make that connection, cause he can't talk yet so communication is a little more tough. You have to be really there, and I am... But when I was with him [abusive partner] there were demands that everything is kept nice and easy for him. This made it much harder to look after my son and be with him because I had to make sure that my son was conforming to this pattern also right?... I really notice how much more psychic space I now have to spend with my son and to be there. Like a lot of real estate was being taken up by taking care of things to do with him [abusive partner], and now that I don't have to do that I'm very much more free... There is a lot of things lately about labeling mothers which really bother me. I don't do that... It's okay to screw up! I found out fairly early on that they [children] don't remember if you do, so let's hurry up and make all the mistakes now while they don't remember (laughs). I mean, who's to say what's good or bad! It's hard to sort of put a value judgment on it. It's just I can't see any other way to do it [her mothering]. I mean I know there are other ways to do it, I see other people do it then say no I wouldn't do that, but as for which is good and which is bad who could know? What's right for one child is not right for another.

Makayla also viewed herself as a "good mom" because she was always "doing stuff" with her children or at least "trying to", even if it meant putting aside the housework. Makayla stated that when she was with her abusive partner she did not really "consider" herself a "mother" since most of her time and energy was spent on "trying to do what" her husband "wanted" more than her "kids". However, ever since she left her abusive partner she considers herself to be more of a "mother" because she now has the time and energy to focus on her children. Makayla believed that just "having them around" and "being with them" was what really mattered.

Makayla: I think I'm a pretty good mom. Like I said, I like doing stuff with them...and I am always trying to. But when I was with him [abusive partner] I was always worrying about trying to please them [the children] and trying to please my husband too. I was just confused! Then I noticed that I was always trying to do what my husband wanted more than my kids. So I really didn't consider myself a mother when I was with my husband cuz I was always worried about him. But since I left and I've been a mother by myself, I find I'm more attentive, my kids are my focus, and I like having them around and being with them. Sometimes it's like 'Ah, go on!' But overall I always like having them around, like they're mine, you know what I mean?

***ii) "Good Mother" – Protects Her Children***

Another central theme in the abused women's talk of their good mothering related to the protection of their children. Seven of the abused women maintained that they were "good mothers" because they prioritized the safety and well being of their children. These abused women's primary concern related to the protection of their children against the abuse that was occurring in their homes and that was being perpetrated by their abusive partner. The abused women discussed the various efforts they engaged in to protect their children. First, they ensured that their abusive partner was not abusive towards their children, and second, they ensured that their children did not witness their abusive partner's abuse towards them. Some of the abused women remained in the abusive relationship and continued to adopt strategies to ensure that their children did not witness the abuse because at the time it was not safe for them and their children to leave. However, most of the abused women eventually decided to leave their abusive partner when it became too difficult to conceal the abuse from their children and when the risk of their children potentially witnessing or even experiencing abuse became too high. These abused women usually left only

when it became safe enough for them to leave with their children, as leaving their homes without their children was not an option for any of the abused women, even if it meant continuing to endure the abuse. Clearly, the safety of their children, and not their own personal safety, was their primary concern. As such, these abused women criticized the stereotype that abused mothers are automatically “bad mothers” because they do not immediately leave their abusive partners. These abused women argued that to the contrary, they are “good mothers” because immediately leaving their abusive partners was not always the safest option at the time, and therefore would not have been in the best interests of their children’s safety and protection.

Some of the abused women affirmed that they were “good mothers” because while in the abusive relationship they made many attempts to prevent their children not only from witnessing the abuse, but also from even being aware that the abuse was occurring. For example, Arika viewed herself as a “good mom” not only because she “spent time” with her children as previously discussed, but also because she protected her children when she was in the abusive relationship. Arika described how she would take the abuse “silently” so as to not wake her children at night and risk having them witness the abuse. When the marks of abuse were physically visible and her children would inquire, Arika would make up excuses for her injuries so as to protect her children from worry and fear.

Arika: I’m a good mother because when I was with him [abusive partner] I made sure my kids were safe at all times. I was just very protective over them. I never wanted them to go through what I went through. So I was very protective and tried so hard for what happened to me not to happen to them. Everything, every decision that I made was based on the abuse I went through, and I didn’t

want my kids to go through that... When my first child, my daughter, was younger and was sleeping he would do things to me and I wouldn't make a noise, I would take it silently. Then when my kids started to get older um, I told them lies to hide the abuse. They would ask 'Mom, what happened you have a bruise? How come you got a black eye? How come your nose is bleeding? How come your mouth is bleeding? How come you have a fat lip?' I couldn't tell them the truth, and they used to feel really bad, I know they used to feel really bad for me, but at that time I thought well if they don't know, like if they think I fell off the stairs or I banged into the cupboard or something then they won't be so worried or scared.

Most of the abused women asserted that they were “good mothers” because they ultimately decided to leave their abusive partner to protect their children. For many of these abused women, this final decision to end their relationship with their abusive partner coincided with an increased risk to their children's safety. For example, Josephine described herself as a “good mother” not only because like Arika she spent time with her son, as discussed earlier, but also because she finally decided to leave her abusive partner when her son became caught in the middle of the altercations. Even though Josephine loved her abusive partner, she cared more about the safety of her child and resolved that no matter what, she always was and always will be a mother who does “whatever it takes to keep my child safe”. As such, Josephine left her abusive partner without any second thoughts, and this made her realize that she was a “good mother”.

Josephine: Once I was sitting in the bathroom holding onto my kid because earlier he was ranting and raving and he was holding onto our son and I'm like 'You give me him.' That makes me cry (starts crying). I'm like 'You give me my baby now,' you know, 'Give him to me,' and he got all mad and he started like, you know really mad, but I wasn't moving you know? And then I felt so bad for putting our son in that situation. I thought this can't go on, I'm not doing the right thing by this child. I'm a mother who won't take

any crap. I'm a mother who'll do whatever it takes to keep my child safe, you know no matter what it costs me personally.

Similarly, April described herself as a "good mother" because she protected her children from potential sexual abuse at the hands of her abusive partner. When April discovered that her abusive partner hid the fact that he sexually abused his six-year-old sister when he was sixteen years old, she was consumed with the fear that he could also sexually abuse her eldest daughter, who was not his biological child, and then hide that from her as well. As such, April chose to immediately leave her abusive partner even though it hurt her to see her children experience so much pain as a result of being separated from their father and only being able to have short visits with him. However, the pain of seeing her children miss their father outweighed the costs of the immense guilt she would have to live with if ever she later found out that her abusive partner had also sexually abused her daughter.

April: I know I'm a good mother, and I am a good mother because I chose to leave and protect the kids. But his family makes it like it's my fault for leaving, and I should have stayed and worked it out, and he was there when I was a drug addict, and blah, blah, blah. They're comparing my experiences with drugs to him being a pig. And I told them 'I beat my addiction, I faced my addiction, and I've been clean and sober. He didn't get any help, he didn't get any counseling, and you guys didn't help him you just swept it under the rug like it was no big deal. You know, you should have put him in counseling'. They put her in counseling [his sister that he sexually abused], but they forgot about him. But I feel like I'm breaking their [children's] hearts. My one daughter said 'What did we do for you to leave, daddy?' I said 'It had nothing to do with you, it's mommy and daddy' She then said 'Well you said he wouldn't play with us,' and I said, 'Yeah but that had nothing to do with why I left him,' and she's too young for me to state what he did to his sister, and so it's difficult to try and explain to them. Then the baby just doesn't understand at all, and so she's 'Daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy.' When the visits are over she's screaming

and crying, and, it's hard, it kills me every time. But I just keep telling myself I'd blame myself more if they came to me and told me 'Daddy's touching me,' and I could have prevented that. I was sexually assaulted as a teenager and I know how it felt at sixteen to go through that. So to watch them go through it, I won't, I won't, I won't put them through that! I want them to have a good life.

Another abused woman named Julie worried about how her daughter would “get through” the confusion and sadness of no longer living with and seeing her father. Nonetheless, she felt like a “good mother” because she knew that she was ultimately protecting her daughter. Julie even contacted child welfare to report that her partner was abusive, even though she knew that her daughter might potentially never be able to see her father again. However, Julie felt that the long-term safety of her daughter was more important than the short-term difficulties she may experience as a result of being separated from her father.

Julie: When I was being abused I had a lot of negative thoughts. Like I was always like am I doing this right, Because I was always under the impression I could never do anything right cause I was always asking him like what should I do because whatever I did was always wrong. When I first left I was really low on myself, and stressed, and worried about my daughter and how she was gonna get through it. But I feel like a good mom for sure because I left him to protect her [daughter]. Like the first time I left I called Child Services for help and they said ‘No we can't step in because you've already taken her out of the danger.’

### ***iii) “Good Mother” – Rears her children in love***

Another important theme in the abused women's descriptions of their good mothering focused on rearing their children in love. This consisted of their ability to meet their children's emotional needs, to be physically affectionate with their children, and to parent with care and respect. Six of the abused women asserted that they were “good mothers” because they were “always there for” their



children, they “cuddled, hugged, and kissed” their children, and they raised their children in a “kind and loving” manner despite mothering in an abusive context. These abuse women discussed how their abusive partner never showed them love, and therefore they often felt hurt, alone, and even ashamed. As a result, these abused women were determined and committed to show their children love, and found much comfort and fulfillment in the loving relationship they shared with their children. The abused women also expressed that although they loved their children deeply, they did not feel loving towards them all the time. These abused women explained that children can be very difficult to care for at times, and they acknowledged that, like any other mother, they did not always react with patience and tenderness. As such, these abused women pointed to the false myth of the “perfect mother”, and affirmed that to be a “good mother” they did not need to be a “perfect mother”.

Some abused women stated that they were “good mothers” because they tried to be emotionally available to their children when their children needed them. For example, one of the abused women named Tammy, viewed herself as a “good mom” not because she was a “perfect mom”, but because she was doing her “very best” as a mom and tried to “be there” for her son whenever he needed her. In fact Tammy states “I don’t think there is a perfect mom,” and therefore points to the ideal of the “perfect mother” as being non-existent. Tammy described how she parented her son not by “following any directions” or prescriptions of how to mother, but rather by “doing” her “own thing”. As such, Tammy criticizes the universal standards of intensive mothering which are

imposed on women, and instead advocates a personal and individual style of mothering.

Tammy: I always think I'm a good mom, because I think I'm doing my best. I'm not gonna say I'm a perfect mom because I don't think there is a perfect mom, but I am gonna say that I'm doing my very best to keep that child happy. So I'm just doing the best I can, and I'm learning as I go. I think I'm a good mom too because I'm wanting, warm, comforting, loving and understanding. I'm the one that's there for him [son] anytime he needs me. I love him, he's the love of my life...Everyone parents their kid differently. I'm not gonna take a side as to how you should. Just do it on your own, and you may listen to little bits here and there but the thing is I never really decided to follow any directions, I just kind of did my own thing. You just kind of take your own path and stick with it.

Another abused woman named Dani also described herself not just as a “good mother”, but as a “good loving mother” because she was “there” for her children. If ever her children needed her for “anything”, Dani stated that she was “there for them”. Dani also expressed the fear that others may misjudge and view her as a “bad” mother because she is a victim of abuse, when in reality she is a “good” mother regardless of the abuse she experienced.

Dani: I find that I'm a good loving mother. I take care of my kids and I'm there for my kids. I try to make them understand that if they ever need me, like for knowledge, advice, anything, I am there for them. I want them to be able to come up to me and ask me ‘Hey mom, this is how I feel today,’ or ‘I didn't have a good day Mom,’ stuff like that, that's what I want for my kids. I want my kids to realize that they have me, that I'm here you know? I just don't want people to think bad and wrong about me. I'm too good.

Other abused women affirmed that they were “good mothers” because they showed their children affection. For these abused women showing physical affection was important to them, and was a large part of what made them feel good as mothers. For example, Makayla described herself as a “good mom” not

only because she spent time with her children as previously discussed, but also because she often “cuddled” with her children. Another important reason why Makayla felt like a “good mother” was because she often told her children that she loved them, something that her abusive partner never did, at least not sincerely. Makayla also pointed to the fallacy of the “good mother” who appears to be a “good mother” on the exterior because she is organized and her house is cleaned, but who in reality is not a “good mother” on the interior, that is in her heart, because she does not love and show affection to her children. According to Makayla, a “good mother” is someone who sincerely loves her children.

Makayla: I think I’m a good mom because I’m always cuddling, loving, and holding them. I love saying the word I love you, and I’m always telling them that. I never hear that from him [abusive partner], except after he hurt me then he would say ‘Ooh I love you, I’m sorry it ever happened.’ But with my kids I’m actually saying it without having to be mean to them, you know what I mean. They know that it’s real and true. So a good mother is someone who just loves her children. It’s the way you look at them, and it’s the way you actually show some kind of emotion towards them, and it doesn’t matter if house is clean or not. I’ve seen difference where there’s a spotless woman, but she doesn’t really like her kids to be with her, and where there’s a really messy woman who actually loves her kids.

Similarly, Aliya stated that there is always room for improvement, but that overall she viewed herself as a “good mom” because she loves her son, and always hugged and comforted him. Aliya criticized agencies such as child welfare who automatically assumed and insinuated that removing her son from her home was in her and her son’s best interest, even though she had already left her abusive partner. Aliya declared that doing so would not be in the best interest of her and her son because she loves her son and he would be “sick” without her.

As such, Aliya called attention to the discourse of intensive mothering which falsely casts abused mothers as “bad mothers” because they have been the victims of abuse, and which fails to pay attention to the fathers who perpetrated the abuse in the first place.

Aliya: I always think there’s room for improvement, always, always, but for the most part I think I’m a good mom. It’s something I have to take day by day, but I love my son, and I’ve been taking care of him from day one. I still let him sleep with me (laughs). There are lots of times I feel like I’m a good mother. Like today I woke up next to my son and felt like a good mom because he was so happy and he was playing and he came up really close to my face. When I hug him I feel like I’m a good mom. When he comes to me when he’s upset and he knows he can come to me I feel like a good mom. I feel like a good mom because I know how much he needs me and that if he didn’t have me he would be devastated. That’s what bugs me about child welfare. If they think they would be doing me a favor by taking him away when I’m all he’s had, and it might have only been two and a half years that he’s been alive, but when I’m the only one that’s been there for him consistently, then if they take him away from me they’re gonna make him sick.

Finally, some abused women maintained that they were “good mothers” because their mothering practices and relationships with their children were based on love and kindness, and not on harshness and brutality like what they experienced in their relationships with their abusive partners. According to these women, to love and raise their children with respect meant accepting their children for who they are and encouraging their children to be the best they can. This was part of learning and getting to know their children in a non-domineering and non-subjugating manner, and this constituted “good mothering” for these women. For example, April affirmed that she was a “good mother” and a “great mother” because she knew that she protected her children, as previously discussed, but also because she knew that she would love her children “no matter

what” they would ever “do”. As such, she tried to always mother in a “peaceful” and “kind” manner. April acknowledged that although she loved her children, she “struggled” as a mother and was not always the perfect picture of serenity and composure. At times she did get “angry” and she did “yell” at her children. Nonetheless, April stated that this did not make her any less of a “good mother” because her love for her children was “unconditional”.

April: I’m a good mother. I love my babies no matter what they do. I struggle as a mother cuz I’ve never really been in this type of position where I’ve been a single mom, and a single mom with so much pain behind it. But I’m a good mother, a great mother. I love my kids, I’m peaceful, and I’m kind. I get angry once in a while, and I’ve yelled at them a few times, and, I’ve lost it with them a couple of times, but generally I’m a good mom. Sweet, and kind, and caring, and unconditional. Everything that I want to be as a mom, so far anyway.

***iv) “Good Mother” – Provides for her children’s basic needs***

Another salient theme in the abused women’s dialogues about their good mothering focused on fulfilling their children’s basic needs for shelter, food, cleanliness, and clothing. Six of the abused women asserted that they were “good mothers” because they ensured that their children’s basic needs were always met. Several of these abused women mentioned that their abusive partners’ control over the financial resources meant that they sometimes struggled to provide the basic needs, particularly food, for their children on a regular basis. Nonetheless, these abused women utilized various methods to obtain these basic needs for their children, including accessing food banks and other referral services for food and clothing. A number of these abused women also revealed that they were so physically and emotionally drained from the abuse that they found it difficult to

always carry out their daily household duties. However, these abused women always made sure that their children were clean and clothed. This gave the women a sense of gratification and satisfaction knowing that their children were well cared for even while they were going through the abuse. These abused women indicated that to be a “good mother” did not require expending copious amounts of time and money to provide children with all their wants and desires, but rather merely required providing for their children’s basic needs.

A lot of the abused women declared that they were “good mothers” because they went to great lengths to find the resources to feed and clothe their children when they were unable to do so within their own means. For example, Badriya who had four daughters was on social assistance and her family of five had to subsist on a monthly income of only one thousand dollars. As such, Badriya employed many strategies to make ends meet, and this made her feel like a “good mother”. Badriya volunteered at drop in centers where she was permitted to take five items of clothing home with her after each shift, she went to food banks all over the city to get food for her children, and she even employed cost saving strategies to stretch their budget by, for example, bringing food from home instead of purchasing food when they were out doing errands. Badriya felt an immense sense of pride when she was able to find in the donations brand name clothing for her daughters because it made her daughters so happy. However, Badriya stated that finding ways to provide her children with basic needs such as food and clothing is a lot of work, is taxing, and wears her out. She questioned the impact it will have on her long term. Badriya also criticized the societal view

that a “good mother” lavishes excessive amounts of time, energy, and money on their children, and that because she is unable to meet this standard she is viewed as a “bad mother”. Badriya asserts that this is not true, that she is indeed a “good mother” because she provides for her children, and she does not need others to judge her or to tell her what kind of a mother she is.

Badriya: I see myself like I’m very good mom. I’m not smart, I’m not beautiful, I’m not strong, but with mom, I’m very good mom. Like, even I act little bit old style, but I’m very very good mom. I feel I’m good mom and my kids they are good to me because I volunteer you know, I volunteer at the Drop-In and I volunteer at the Mustard See and we allowed to take five items per person. I always like so happy when I find like Lululemon hoodies with the tag in it. I know! I was so happy my kids they was all day screaming they were so happy. Yeah, and um, like my kids now this one she has about ten piece Lululemon (laughs). Yeah, I know. But I’m running, working all day for them [children], and then get bread from here, like you know to cover my bills because thousand dollar all I’m getting. So like running from here cuz otherwise like I can’t buy them clothes or something. Like many people they know, plus they are popular like how they dress at school. Even I hear ‘Everybody talking about your kids’. So that make me so happy...Then we went someday to the mall, so I take them snack from here [house]. Then we went to Zellers, and I have donation credit for Zellers for twenty dollar. So we bought pizza pop, and we went to the bathroom and we heat it up, you know they have microwave there. We heat up in the bathroom and we sit and eat, and make my kids so happy, and yeah make me so happy. But in the same time many times it comes to myself you know, if I stay like this I will get tired and sick and older because my life is always the same. Like I told you like in two to three weeks if my phone ring it just from counseling or something. Nobody phone me. My mom like every three months she phone me, she’s back home [Lebanon], right? I have no one to phone, no one to talk to...Like of course, like the society they expect to be good mom you have education, you teach them, you give them. But like I don’t go by society, I go by my own, I go by my kids, I go by myself, you know. I’m, as a mom, like for my kids I know what to do. So I say you know I don’t wait for my counseling or somebody to tell me do this, this. Even I’m good mom you know. Like I give, give, give, give and love my kids, but wait for somebody to tell me that? I don’t want that.

Another abused woman named Eden not only described herself as a “good mom”, but also as an “awesome mom”. Like Badriya, Eden went to great lengths to provide food for her children, particularly when her husband was unemployed and they did not have any money to buy food to feed their three children. When they would run out of milk for their baby in the middle of the night, Eden would go out searching for resources to obtain milk, even in the middle of winter. Eden felt like a “good mother” because even though she could not afford to cloth herself, she knew that, as she stated “I’m doing everything I can to feed my children.”

Eden: I’m not perfect (laughs), I know that, but I think I’m a good mom. We’re in a bad situation now, but I value myself as a strong woman cuz I’ve been through so much... Personally I describe myself as an awesome mom... The time that I felt like a good mother was like when my husband wasn’t working and there were times we had no food and no milk for our children. It would be minus twenty whatever, and I’d get up, I’d go out in the cold and even though I had no money, I would try my hardest to find resources for food bank or referrals for milk. I remember this one time this resource centre had milk for kids, and it was freezing cold, and I remember walking in the snow to the bus and I was really, really cold. I remember cuz I was asking my husband if he can buy me a winter jacket but he always had an excuse, and ‘We don’t have enough money, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.’ I remember thinking well at least I’m doing everything I can to feed my children, even though it’s minus twenty whatever. So, that experience made me feel like a good mother. Just doing whatever I can to feed my children.

A number of abused women stated that they were “good mothers” because they always ensured that their children were cleaned and cared for. These abused women asserted that despite the fact that they were in abusive relationships, it never interfered with their ability to care for their children physically. These



abused women said that they may not have always had the energy and the ability to “play with” or “entertain” their children, but they never neglected to take care of their children’s physical needs. Taking care of their children’s basic needs was often the only thing these abused women had control over, and was something that they could visibly accomplish and feel satisfied about in their lives where they otherwise experienced control, manipulation, and suffering as a victim of abuse. For example, Shyan described how she was “organized” when it came to “taking care” of her children. When her children were “clean”, “fed”, “watered”, and “in bed” Shyan felt like a “really good mom” despite the fact that she was abused, because she experienced contentment and fulfillment at being able to care for her children.

Shyan: People tell me ‘You’re a good mom,’ and it’s not phoniness either, it’s just how I am when we’re home alone. Like I would take care of him [son], cause I’ll feel better then if I’m taking care of him and bathing him...I’m organized. I’ll be organized for them [children]. I’ll do things for them, like make sure they’re fed and watered, and cleaned, you know? I just feel really close bathing them and stuff, I just feel like a good mom when they’re all clean and in bed, and fed and watered, that’s when I feel like the really good mom. So even though I was abused, I think I’m still a good mother anyways.

Similarly, Aliya who earlier asserted that she was a “good mother” because she reared her son in love, also affirmed that she was a “good mother” because she always took “really good care” of her son by “feeding”, “bathing” and “keeping his clothes clean”. According to Aliya, she still had to work on being a better disciplinarian with her son, but the one thing she felt proud about was her ability to completely provide for her son’s physical needs, even while she was living in an abusive context.

Aliya: I really struggle with, I said it over and over again, I really struggle with the whole discipline thing but I'm working on it. But I know I take really good care of my son with feeding him, bathing him, keeping his clothes clean, and taking care of him. I find I'm very specific about those things too.

***v) “Good Mother” – Rears her children in ways that make both her children and herself happy***

An additional theme that was prevalent in the abused women's descriptions of their good mothering related to their mothering practices, and how they reared their children in ways that made both their children and themselves happy. Six of the abused women declared that they were “good mothers” because both they and their children were happy despite having lived in abusive context. A number of the abused women described how living in an abusive context often made it difficult for them to feel joy and contentment because they were being controlled and oppressed by their abusive partner, as well as dealing with the pain and suffering of being abused. However, these abused women made many attempts to find ways to experience moments of relief and joy. When these abused women saw that both they and their children were happy, they felt like “good mothers”.

For example, Badriya not only viewed herself as a “good mother” because she provided for her children's basic needs as discussed previously, but also because she reared her children in ways that made both her children and herself happy. When Badriya left her abusive partner she found it difficult to raise her four daughters all on her own as she rarely had the opportunity to be alone with just one child. However, Badriya made efforts whenever she could, to spend one on one time with her children. During these times Badriya felt that she was able

to connect with her individual children and express her love and appreciation for them. Badriya described how even spending a few minutes alone with her eldest daughter as they sat in the car in traffic on their way to pick up take out food brought her such joy. She was able to see that her daughter was happy, as she was, that they were spending time together just the two of them. As such, Badriya felt like a “good mother” because both she and her daughter were “happy”.

Badriya: Being happy, like uh, you know I told you like since day one, like I know I’m good mom. I heard it from million people, not just like whoever see me, but if you want to ask, like very very happy. Like I’m always happy with my kids, you know, to see them happy. The moment happy with my kids, like always to see my kids healthy, just to make them happy. Like yesterday I was a bit stressed, but I have my six years old, and her friend her name Taylor, so she came to my apartment her with her mom, and her mom she said ‘You know guys I wanna buy you Chicken On The Way,’ just right here. The mom she give me fifty dollar and she said ‘How about if you go buy Chicken On The Way.’ So I left my kids with her, and then I went with my twelve year old and we went buy Chicken On The way. There is too much traffic and Navine she said ‘Oh my gosh, it’s too much traffic.’ I said ‘You know what Navine, I love that I have time with you,’ and I hug her in the car and kiss her. She said ‘Oh, yeah, you’re right mom.’ I’m with my four kids, so I never have time with one of my kids. But she was very happy when I was talking to her. I was very happy with her cuz I have time alone with her.

For Belinda, being a “good mom” meant spending time or engaging in activities that brought both her children and herself joy. When Belinda was with her abusive partner and even when she initially left him, she felt worn down and tired because she was trying to overcome her experiences of abuse. As such, Belinda often did not have the energy to physically go out and engage in all sorts of activities with her children. However, she did spend time cooking, doing crafts, and playing sports with her children whenever she could. Also, Belinda

did the activities that meant the most to her children, such as going to her son's school dance. This made her children happy, and in turn made Belinda happy because they were spending time together doing activities that they enjoyed. As such, Belinda felt like a "good mom" because she was with her children.

Belinda: I think I'm a good mom...I feel like a good mom whenever I see my kids smiling and my kids are happy, and that makes me feel like a good mom. But when I was with him and when I first left him, there was not much I could do because I could feel myself just dying inside. I couldn't be playful then, like say let's go swimming, let's do crafts, let's bake cookies, let's do something. I just didn't have it in me because I was so drained. Even my sister, like I remember her saying to me that her and my best friend said talking to me was like talking to a dead person. Because I was just so, like I couldn't concentrate anymore, and I was just miserable. At one point I actually thought to myself the only way out would be suicide. It's not something I would have ever considered, but I actually felt like the only way out would be if I died. So I prayed all the time, cause I believe in God, and I prayed my whole relationship...So I think it just physically affected me, like I started to not have any energy anymore, and I was always like, I would do something and it's like okay I just gotta sit down for a minute. Like I was completely exhausted. I would get up and get the kids a drink of juice or do the dishes and it's like I gotta sit down for a minute. Like it completely wiped me out, little things like that, which were not normal. So when I was with him I tried doing things, like I bought a jogging stroller and I tried to take them out and go for a walk or we would go out in the backyard, things where I wouldn't have to exert too much energy. But since I've been gone now we've made cookies, we've made pizza together, and I've taught them how to skate which is something I always wanted to do. I'm still feeling the physical aspect of it, but I'm starting slowly to get a little better. For example, one night at my son's school they were having some dance or something, and I was tired and it was really cold, it was like minus 30 something, and he's like 'Mom let's go to the dance,' and I'm like 'Are you sure you really wanna go cause I'm really tired and it's cold out there,' and he's like 'Mom!' He really wanted to go, and inside I really did not want to go to this dance because I was so tired and it was minus whatever weather. But then he was like disappointed, so then I was like "Alright let's go, we'll go." And you know, that made me feel like a good mom cause we went, and we had a good time, and he even won a door prize, and my son loves popcorn and

it was like a big popcorn bowl with popcorn in it and pop. So it was like this big deal and he was really happy he got to go. So being with them makes me happy.

Unlike Badriya and Kylie, Zahra only had one child and he was only four months old. As such, what made Zahra feel like a “good mom” was just being physically present for her son and caring for him to the “best” of her “ability”. Zahra described how her son would smile and laugh a lot, and that in turn made her smile and laugh. At these times she knew that both her and her son were indeed happy despite the abusive environment in which they were living. In turn this made Zahra “feel good”, and feel like a “good mother”. Interestingly, Zahra criticized how mothers, particularly abused mothers, are often judged as either being “bad” or “good” mothers when they make mistakes. But regardless of the mistakes mothers may or may not make, they will always be judged. As such, Zahra claimed that the “only thing” mothers can do is “ignore” and not “care” about what others say. As long as mothers themselves know “deep inside” that they are “good” according to their own definition of “good”, then that is all that matters. Clearly Zahra advocates a personal definition of a “good mother”, and not the definition of a “good mother” espoused by the intensive mothering discourse.

Zahra: Most of the time I really felt like I was like a good mom because I do such a good job, and then you know my son is happy, he’s healthy, and you know I think he’s happy cuz of the mom like me and that makes me feel good. When he smiles that means happy too. I take care of him to the best of my ability and I make sure whatever is going on with me and whatever that’s happening doesn’t affect him, like at least not in a bad way. When I do that it makes me feel good...Like he always makes me laugh, it doesn’t matter what kind of night I had or what kind of yesterday I had, like when I wake up and he sees me he starts laughing so hard, he’s

like, ‘Finally somebody’s gonna get me out of the crib.’ I like that, so then I take him out and yeah. Everyday is like a blessing, like I said, not everyone’s like lucky enough to have kids. And like they’re the best gift God can give you, you know, the best gift. So he’s the best gift, and we’re so happy...But people are always quick to judge, you know we all make mistakes. But at the end of the day if people will judge you as bad or as good it doesn’t matter, they always have something to say. So the thing you can do is just ignore it, who cares! If deep inside you, you know you’re good, you’re doing a good job, and you know you’re doing the best you can, then don’t worry about others because it’s human nature to say ‘Oh, I’m not gonna look at what I’m doing wrong, but what is she doing wrong?’

**vi) “Good Mother” – Teaches her children**

Another theme in the abused women’s talk of their good mothering related to teaching their children. Six of the abused women maintained that they were “good mothers” because even though they were not perfect role models for their children as a result of being victims of abuse, they were committed to learning from their experiences of abuse and therefore teaching their children. This involved teaching their children to overcome and become stronger from the abuse they witnessed, as well as recognize the unacceptability of abuse in relationships. Most of the abused women stated that experiencing abuse made them more aware of inequalities between men and women, and more determined to teach their children about mutual respect in relationships and about the signs of abuse.

Some abused women were committed to teaching their children strategies to overcome the domestic abuse they witnessed between their parents, and to therefore become stronger individuals as they grow up. For example, Abigail viewed herself as a “good mother” because the way that she parented her daughter. Abigail described how she learned many effective parenting strategies

not only from her experiences of abuse but also from taking parenting classes and workshops. Abigail described how she made many efforts to teach her daughter to build up her self-esteem, to make good choices, and to stand up for herself, particularly when interacting with her father who was often dishonest. Abigail felt like a “good mother” when she saw that as a result of nurturing and guiding her daughter in a “gentle, kind, loving way”, her daughter was learning the tools that she was trying so hard to teach her, such as the ability to stand up for herself when her father was controlling.

April: I thought I was a good mother before, but now I feel like I’m a very good mother because I’ve taken classes and parenting classes and workshops, and it’s been quite eye opening, you know the importance of her [daughter] self esteem and how I can help to nurture that, and maybe what I was doing previously was hanging and clinging too tight to her because she’s an only child as opposed to giving her the tools that she needs to develop self-esteem. So I think going through abuse, and being a single parent now, I want to make good choices, and you know we all make mistakes and we can’t always make those good choices, but in general it’s important to me, especially as I’m a one unit family, to make sure that I make good choices, and that I’m able to pass good choices onto her and move forward and give her the tools that she needs for success. That’s really important to me... And so it’s really got me thinking about the choices that we make, and even just general things like how do I react to this, what do I need to you know to talk to her about the abuse, how do I incorporate you know her standing on her own two feet and standing up for herself. She’s doing really good with that now. It was really important to me to give her the tools to stand up to dad, because he’s the fun parent and quite often he puts her into situations that she’s not comfortable and she’ll come home with a broken arm or something from skiing, and it’s not because he would purposely do that it’s just through negligence. So it’s been really important to me for her to tell her when daddy’s lying and saying that it’s not dangerous for her and when she feels that it is that she stand up when something is not a good situation for her. Like if they’re skiing and he wants her to do a black run and it’s icy and she knows it’s icy and she’s tired that day, to stand up and just say that to him instead of just going along and being put in a situation that she comes home with a

broken arm cuz she couldn't handle it. So, it, it's been important to me to give her that tool. And she's doing good with it, she's developing it. But I see the confusion along the way sometimes and I just really have to nurture and guide her in a gentle, kind, loving way to give her the tools to, to do that... So I really feel like a good mom when I handle a situation well. Like after taking parenting classes and learning the techniques and I handle a situation well.

Other abused women were committed to teaching their children the message that violent behaviours are unacceptable in relationships. This was seen as having more implications for boys than for girls. Despite the fact that all of these abused women had both sons and daughters, they were specifically concerned about their sons' potential violent behaviours than their daughters' potential victimizations. As such, these abused women focused on teaching their sons about equality between men and women and about respecting and not engaging in abusive behavior towards women. This made these abused women feel like "good mothers". For example, Josephine, who earlier stated that she was a "good mother" because she "spends time" with her children and "protects her children", also proclaimed that she was a "good mother" because she dedicated much time to teaching her son. Josephine taught her son to "respect" and establish "healthy" relationships with other people, particularly as a "man", because she did not want him to ever become an abuser like his father. Consequently, this made Josephine feel like a "good mother" because she was using effective parenting strategies.

Josephine: You know cause he's [son] gonna be a man, so what kind of man is he gonna be right? When he spends time with his dad I don't worry about his physical safety, but I worry that his dad will play the victim story and get our son to take care of him rather than the other way around. Right now, he's too young for that! So the



thing that I really worry about is that he will think that the way to get what he wants is to use other people and manipulate other people, rather than coming forward and straightforwardly asking...But I think the way that I live in general, like I really get upset when I see prejudice, bigotry, unfairness, intolerance, will help. So I think the only thing I can do is just go ahead and do the things that I believe in and hope that that's a strong enough model...So I mean I'm really conscious of inoculating him against that and trying to sort of verbalize you know this is what I want, what do you want? And just like it's okay to ask for what you want kind of thing, and you know all these things that kinda lead to clean interactions rather than muddled with guilt and manipulation and all that stuff. So I'm talking to him a lot more, and that makes me feel good as a mom. But the only thing I can really do is sort of point out what it means to respect people and what healthy looks like, right? Which is, you know, really the main reason I left because it was not a healthy place to grow up in, right? I mean for me I'm strong for myself, but I couldn't do it anymore and take care of my son effectively. Like I was exhausted and I never had a break, so something was gonna slip and I didn't want it to be him.

Similarly, Makayla who previously stated that she was a “good mother” because she “spends time” with her children and “loves” her children, declared that she was also a “good mother” because she was committed to teaching her children to be respectful. Like Josephine, Makayla worried that her son would turn out to be abusive just like his father because he witnessed domestic abuse. As such, Makayla tried to teach her son to “show respect to other people”, despite the fact that he had never witnessed his father show respect to her, his mother. As a result, Makayla felt like a good mother because she was trying her best.

Makayla: I try to teach them [children] respect. I try to teach them to show respect, like respecting other people cuz they've never exactly seen that. My oldest son to this day says 'You always like, people always took advantage of you.' Sometimes he can be a pretty mean person because he's seen how I was treated, and so when someone takes too much from him he'll be like 'No!' So I'm scared he might turn out to be abusive and not very good like his dad. I try to take care and teach him respect, so I'd say I'm a good mother.

Like both Josephine and Makayla, Kylie viewed herself as a “good mother” because she put much emphasis on “teaching” her two sons. Kylie worried because when her sons were younger they witnessed numerous occasions when her abusive partner brutally assaulted her. Although Kylie stated that her sons “don’t remember what happened”, they are aware that their father was abusive towards her, their mother. As such, Kylie teaches her sons to “respect” and “protect” their little sister, as well as to do “chores”, particularly domestic chores, in the hopes that they will learn to view men and women as equals.

Kylie: I think I’m a good mom. I know it’s been hard, but I am. I want the boys to go through some therapy cuz they don’t remember what happened, but they know that their dad did abuse me and I want them to understand what it is and what they went through and stuff so it doesn’t happen again... So I just teach them to have respect for their sister, like just the little things that they do for her and just like they’re really protective of her too, like when we’re walking they go run to her and like grab her hand and they walk her across the street. Just little things like that. I taught them how to do chores so they know how to do chores, like they do the dishes everyday, they sweep the floor, and they clean up, that’s what they have to do. I teach them to do chores cuz I’m like ‘Men do chores too.’ I talk a lot with them cuz they don’t really have any male role models, and like their dad doesn’t work but just lives off his current girlfriend, so I teach and tell them that’s not right and when they grow up I expect them to have jobs too, and I want them to go to school and they know that. So wet talk a lot.

***vii) “Good Mother” – Takes care of both her children’s needs and her own needs***

The last theme in the abused women’s talk of their good mothering focused on taking care of both their children’s needs, and their own personal needs. Five of the abused women asserted that they were “good mothers” because they prioritized meeting both their children’s and their own needs. Several of the

women indicated that when they were with their abusive partners they were forced to juggle their partners demands and needs, their children's necessities and needs, and their own wants and needs. Often their partners forced them to sacrifice their own needs in order to meet everyone else's needs. This led many of the abused women to feel much dissatisfaction and discontentment because they believed they had a right to meet their own personal needs as well. As such, many abused women attempted to not only meet their children's needs, but to also meet their own needs when they were with their abusive partner, and particularly once they left their abusive partner. Once they left their abusive partner, these abused women felt that they were better able to focus on meeting both their children's needs and their own needs, without sacrificing one for the other. What was important to these abused women was keeping a balance between meeting their children's needs and their own needs. When doing so, these abused women felt like "good mothers".

Some women relied on family, friends, and other resources in helping them care for their children. For them sharing the responsibility not only freed them to take care of and heal themselves from the abuse, but also allowed their children to have time away from them and learn to interact with and develop relationships with other adult figures. For example, Josephine viewed herself as a "good mother" not only because she "spent time" with, "protected", and taught her children as previously discussed, but also because she balanced both her children's needs and her own needs. Josephine described how when she was with her abusive partner she had to completely give up her own interests and projects,

things that she knew she needed “to be sane”, because her abusive partner refused to help care for their son. As such, Josephine often felt drained and exhausted. Therefore she accessed and used a serviced called “The Children’s Cottage” a few times to receive help with her son. When Josephine had a chance to take care of herself, while ensuring that her son was also safe and taken care of, she felt like it helped her “mothering”, and she was therefore a “good mom”. According to Josephine, taking care of herself did not make her an inadequate mother, but rather helped her to be a better mother.

Josephine: When I was with him, I think what really bothered me too was the fact that I didn’t have any time for my own projects. I didn’t have time for my painting, I didn’t have time to meditate, I didn’t have time to do any of the things that I know I need to do to be sane. And those things help me with mothering also, and I was a good mom. He [abusive partner] would refuse to like take him [son] for a while, you know like let me get out of the house. He’d come home late and say ‘Oh I’m too tired,’ or you know he wouldn’t come back when he said he would come and things like that. So getting that time to myself I really missed that, so that made it really hard. So basically no help. I just wanted some help!...I was just exhausted!...So I used the children's cottage. You can leave your children there for 72 hours, but I never left him there for 72 hours but I’ve left him there for a couple of nights. It’s the most awesome thing on the planet. It’s a not for profit, so they’re just regular people. You don’t take, milk you don’t take formula, you don’t take diapers or wipes, you just take him there and drop him off. It’s a beautiful thing. They’re really great and they’re always like ‘Is there anything else we can do to help you? Is there any other services we can give you?’ You know there’s quite a lot of paperwork but, that doesn’t faze me. The paperwork is where you fill out an inventory of how you felt then, and what you did with your time, and how you feel now. I hear about through a post-partum group. A lot of people in my post-partum group were like ‘Oh my husband would never let me do that,’ and I’m like ‘Your what? Your husband would not let you? Okay, then you just give your child to your husband and then you leave for 24 hours!’

Similarly, Dani, who earlier stated that she was “good mother” because she “loves” her children, also affirmed that she was a “good mother” because she tried to find a balance between meeting her children’s needs and her own needs. When Dani decided to leave her abusive partner, she left her children at home with her parents and went to stay at a shelter in a nearby city. Dani described how she was probably viewed as “bad mom” because her children were not with her in the shelter, but how she was actually doing what was best for both her children and herself. She needed time alone to heal from the abuse and her children needed to remain at home with her parents so that they could continue to attend school and maintain their regular schedule. Because she was doing what was best for both her children and herself, Dani felt like a “good mother”. Clearly, Dani called into question the standards of intensive mothering, which demand that mothers prioritize their children’s needs over their own needs. Dani pointed to the unfair judgment this demand places on mothers who are in abusive situations, such as herself, and who need to think not only about their children, but also about themselves in order to deal with and heal from abuse.

Dani: All the time I feel like I’m a really good mom. I’m there for all of them [children]. I was always there for my kids right through, from when they were born to their age now. So I think I’m a very good mother...But like right now, I am in this shelter and I don’t have my kids with me. And right now probably people are viewing me as a bad mother because I’m not with my kids, but they don’t understand what I’m going through. I don’t have them with me because I don’t wanna put my kids through this. I could have the, but they belong back at home with my parents because they are in school.

Other women gave up permanent care of their children to other individuals in order to ensure their and their children’s best interests. For these abused

women, passing on the care of their children to other individuals was the best choice for all involved. For example, Brandy claimed that she was a “good mother” even though she relinquished the primary care of her children to child welfare, because she put both her and her children’s needs first. Brandy stated that she felt that it was beneficial to give up custody of her children to child welfare because she was too young to adequately care for both herself and her children. As such, Brandy did not see herself as the only possible caregiver in her children’s lives, and therefore she resisted the idea that she was the best and only caregiver for her children. According to Brandy, in circumstances such as hers “good mothering” is not necessarily having your children with you, but rather being “there” for your children, communicating with them, and “giving them everything they need” however you can.

Brandy: Society says that a good mom is someone who has her children with her, but I know that I’m a good mom. I think the hardest thing for a mother like myself to give up their children for the sake of their children, you know? I don’t wanna blame me being a young mom, and I don’t wanna say excuse as my reason for letting them go to child welfare, but I just couldn’t do it. I didn’t know how to be a mom. I knew what a mom was, but I just couldn’t do it, especially being single. But even if they can’t be at home with me, I know I’m there anyway. Like for my oldest girl, you know, thank goodness for Facebook (laughs). Even though we can’t communicate on the phone we can do it via the internet and stuff, and I can still do the motherly thing of you know asking you know about like the boyfriend thing you know. I ask a lot of questions about him, cuz he’s 3 years older than her. But I try to give them everything they need and then some however I can.

### **c) Rejecting and Replacing the “Good Mother” Discourse: Creating New Experientially Based Alternative Mothering Discourses**

Finally, three of the twenty-nine women engaged in “empowered/feminist mothering” by specifically rejecting both the “bad mother” and “good mother”

discourses and replacing these discourses with experientially based alternative mothering discourses. In fact, twenty-two of the twenty-nine women who engaged in “empowered/feminist mothering” by either negotiating the “bad mother” and the “good mother” discourses, or drawing on and then redefining the “good mother” discourse, also referred to themselves according to a number of these experientially-based alternative mothering discourses. Like the abused women who redefined the intensive mothering discourse, these abused women did not merely oppose the intensive mothering discourse, but rather they went beyond this by outright replacing this discourse. In this sense, these abused women positioned themselves outside the existing discourse of good mothering to contest the labels of the “bad mother” and the “good mother”. They provided their own definitions of themselves as mothers to describe how they personally viewed themselves as mothers. As such, rather than articulating the same “bad mother” versus “good mother” discourses as perpetuated by the standards of intensive mothering, these abused women created their own mothering discourses based on their personal experiences.

The abused women created the following five experientially based alternative mothering discourses: 1) “strong mother”; 2) “loving mother”; 3) “super woman/hero mother”; 4) warrior mother”; and 5) “not a normal mother”. These abused women clearly avoided the portrayal of themselves as either/or “bad mothers/good mothers”. Instead, they portrayed themselves as mothers in other positive terms, terms which were based on their own expectations rather than expectations imposed on them by the intensive mothering discourse. In this

regard, these abused women had visions of what a mother is, and how they believed they fit into that vision. These visions were based on realistic expectations that they had for themselves as women who were mothering in the context of domestic abuse. As such, these abused women were committed to their roles as mothers and tried hard to care for their children despite the challenges of mothering in the context of domestic abuse. Consequently, these abused women felt an immense sense of pride about the quality and adequacy of their mothering. These abused women, therefore, resisted the dominant discourses of intensive mothering by creating other mothering discourses according to their own definitions. Below I discuss the various ways in which the abused women created these new mothering discourses.

***i) “Strong Mother” Discourse***

Several abused women viewed and described themselves as “strong mothers”. Eleven abused women asserted that they were “strong mothers” because they survived being a victim of abuse all the while ensuring the well being of their children. For these abused women, this was an important accomplishment, one which they were proud of. Rather than allowing themselves to feel diminished by their abuse experiences, these abused women chose to learn and grow from their victimizations and in turn contribute to improving their and their children’s lives. As such, these abused women described themselves in a positive light, one which reflected and emphasized their strengths as mothers. For example Coreen, who was one of the women who exclusively described herself as a “strong mother”, stated that she viewed herself in this light because she “made it



through” the abuse, and her children were all “safe” and “okay”. Although Coreen stated that she would “never be perfect”, she was proud of the fact that, as she stated “I do the best I can with what I have”. Coreen clearly had a realistic expectation of what she could accomplish given her circumstances. This made Coreen feel proud of herself that despite all odds, she was able to leave her partner, “survive” the abuse, and “get through” by doing the “best” she could with what she had.

Coreen:            Being abused has affected me a lot. Like really not negative! I think and feel strong as a mother cuz I’ve made it through you know, and my kids are okay and they’re all safe now...When they were small I knew I had to get out for they sake, cuz I didn’t want him to kill me in front of him. Plus my oldest daughter wasn’t his and she was really suffering from it cuz he was really mean to her too because that wasn’t his child. And he would like sit her on the couch and beat me up in front of her and tell her ‘This is what you’re gonna get when you’re older, you’re gonna meet somebody that’s gonna do this to.’ And my daughter was just crying, and you know I knew I had to get out for her. But I’m strong cuz I’m trying to survive, I’m trying to get through...I’ll never be perfect, but I do the best I can with what I have.

Many abused women who viewed themselves as “good mothers” as previously discussed, also viewed themselves as “stronger mothers” as a result of having successfully mothered in the context of domestic abuse. Abigail affirmed that when she left her abusive partner she “felt very little” of herself. With time she “built up” her confidence in herself and her future. Abigail described how when she left her abusive partner she lost her support system and had to learn as a sole parent how to care for her daughter on her own, and how to reach out to other support systems. This made Abigail feel like a “stronger mother” as she had the courage and the ability to be “everything” she could for her daughter.

Abigail: I started from a place where I felt very little of myself, and then I built that up, and became a stronger person, a stronger mother. Yes, I'm a good mother, but I'm a stronger mother now because as a single parent it's been really important to me to be a single parent who supports. Our support group is back in Newfoundland where my family is. So, when we left our community in Banff and in Canmore we were out here on our own. So, as no man is a mountain, it takes a community to grow a child effectively, since we left we don't have that here. So in a lot of aspects it's us on our own here. So having to reach out to other networks, or whatever the case may be within the community to help, as a sole person I just realized how important it is to be positive and to try to be everything that I can be to her [daughter].

Like Abigail, Kylie also viewed herself not only as a "good mother", but also a "stronger mother" because she survived an abusive relationship and was able to maintain the care and custody of her children. Kylie described how after she left her abusive partner she felt "really bad" about herself to the point of developing an eating disorder and needing to be hospitalized. However, with a bit of time Kylie was able to "build" herself "back up", and as a result she felt like a "stronger mother", one who could conquer anything in the name of her children. In fact, Kylie stated that she was "glad" she went through what she did because she is now aware of the warning signs of abuse. Kylie was proud that despite the difficult experiences she has had in her life, she has always "maintained her children".

Kylie: I used to feel really bad about myself after it [abuse] happened. Like I felt really bad about myself, like I was anorexic and I went from a size eleven to a size three and then I ended up in the hospital for an eating disorder because I felt so badly about myself. Then it took a while to just kind of build myself back up. I don't know, now I feel like a stronger person and mother. I feel like I could pretty much handle anything now, and I could be there for them [children], and be stronger, and teach them how to be strong... So I'm really glad that I've had that experience. I'm glad I went through what I've went through cuz it's just made me a

stronger, better person. It makes me more aware, of people that are around...I know that it's been really hard but I've always maintained my kids. Most of my friends have lost their kids at one point or another, but they've always been with me.

Like both Abigail and Kylie, April viewed herself as a “good mother” and particularly as a “stronger mother” because overcoming an abusive relationship has given her the “strength to do whatever it takes to make sure” her children are always “safe”, even if it means not dating until her children are adults.

April: I think it's [abuse] made me a stronger mother. In a way because now I know that I have the strength to do whatever it takes to make sure my children are safe, no matter what the consequences may be for myself. So, I will probably never be in a relationship again unless they're [children] over the age of eighteen, and practically married and safe, you know what I mean.

## ***ii) “Loving Mother” Discourse***

Many abused women viewed and described themselves as “loving mothers”. Six abused women asserted that they were “loving mothers” because despite having lived in the most heinous of situations where love was certainly not present, they were still able to deeply feel and show love towards their children. Although experiencing abuse had many negative impacts on who the abused women were as women, such as lowering their self esteem, decreasing their confidence, and casting doubt on their ability to trust both others and themselves, it had the opposite affect on who they were as mothers. These abused women affirmed that experiencing abuse made them become more loving and better able to express their love towards their children. For these abused women, showing love to their children was important for them as it was something that they never experienced from their abusive partner, and something that they yearned and

longed for. As such, these abused women did not carry on the cycle of hatred and abuse, but rather built up and fortified a cycle of love and respect. Consequently, these abused women affirmed their loving devotion and care for their children as one of their strengths as mothers. For example, Madelyn and Gabrielle both exclusively described themselves as “loving mothers”. These two abused women asserted that they were “loving mothers” because they made many efforts to show their children the love they were never shown, and to shelter their children from the pain and hurt that they themselves experienced. In fact both of these abused women stated that their love for their children motivated and encouraged them to persevere and to carry on in their lives.

Madelyn: I’m a very loving mother. Because of it [abuse], I became more loving, and the love in my heart just doubled, tripled. Right now like I said earlier, my children are the one that motivates me to live, to go on with life after what has happened to us...It’s difficult, you have to be so different personalities at just one circumstance. Like for example you have to be a father and you have to be a mother at the same time. Like you have to be so different people in one. So that was for me difficult, and yet, I’m able to accomplish it because when you have love, love overcomes everything...I give support not only emotionally but physically, and the sincerity in my heart is there, true love is there.

Gabrielle: I’m confident, I’m caring, but I’m a loving mom. I want the best for my kids. You know after how I was raised and treated I believe that no one should suffer like hurt and pain. So loving is the way I am with my son and daughter. I am just caring, supportive, compassionate, and loving. I have a lot of perseverance. I strive to look out for my children.

Similarly, Shyan who viewed herself as both a “good mother” and a “loving mother” declared that she was a “loving mother” because she not only cared for and protected her children, but more importantly she showed her children the love she “never had and was never shown”.

Shyan: I'm a loving mother cuz I take care of them and make sure they don't get hurt, you know what I mean? I just try to protect them the best way I know how or can. I try to get along cuz I never wanna be hitting any of them cuz I've been hit lots all my life and that's why I'm like that. So I give them the loving I never had and was never shown.

Lastly, some abused women viewed and described themselves according to other individual mothering discourses. Three abused women described themselves as mothers in relation to their individual and unique circumstances and experiences. These individual mothering discourses include: 1) "super woman/hero mother"; 2) warrior mother"; and 3) "not a normal mother". Each of these mothering discourses had positive meanings for the abused women and revealed their varied lives, struggles, and accomplishments as mothers. For these abused women, remaining true to who they were and what they had experienced as mothers was important to their mothering identities. As such, these abused women described themselves as mothers in ways that reflected the individuality and distinctiveness of their mothering. The one common thread that wove through these abused women's narratives was the marked effect that experiencing abuse had on their mothering identities, and how these abused women's positive perceptions of themselves as mothers successful endured and in fact were strengthened despite having mothered in such oppressive circumstances. Below I discuss these four other mothering discourses.

### ***iii) "Super Woman/Hero Mother" Discourse***

Madelyn, who viewed herself as a "strong mother" and "loving mother", also described herself as a "super woman" and a "super hero" mother. As a result of experiencing years and years of domestic abuse, being abandoned by her

abusive husband, being disowned and threatened by her husband's family, being left to raise her four children on her own, losing her home and all of her belongings, and being forced to move from to Canada to work and earn money to provide for her family, Madelyn felt beat down. Nonetheless, Madelyn survived and persevered, which she attributes to the super woman/hero-like strength and ability she learned to develop while attempting to endure and overcome the abuse. Despite the fact that on the inside Madelyn was experiencing tremendous pain and trauma, she had the driving force and determination to put on a strong front for the sake of her children. Although Madelyn stated that this was difficult at times, it actually enabled her to seek out resources to help her with her mothering and to accomplish all of her goals. In this sense, Madelyn viewed herself in positive terms, what she refers to as a "super woman/hero mother".

Madelyn: I'm a super woman mother...When I lived in all that [abuse], after I would close door and then I'm in my room and that's when I cry out all my frustrations to myself and to God. Then before I go out of the room I put on this face like nothing happened, like I'm this strong superwoman. It was very hard, very hard! Like you have to make believe that there's really nothing wrong, that you can do it, that you are able to do it. I don't want my kids to see me like that when I'm down, cuz I don't want them to be down cuz they're already affected from the time that their father abandoned us. So I don't want to add more to that one, I want to show them that we can do it, we can do it!...So I did more researching, I tried to learn other things that will help me to be a better mother. There, that's what happened to me. From life experiences, from other people, from books, and from the guidance of God. Believe it or not God guides me and he has a helping hand. Although sometimes he does not give it on the spot. Sometimes he trains you, in life, and then when you're ready for that you go to the second stage, and then you when you're in the second stage you will understand why you had to undergo the first stage. So because of all that I was able to meet my goals.

#### *iv) “Warrior Mother” Discourse*

Josephine who viewed herself as a “good mother”, also described herself as a “warrior mother”. Josephine experienced intense feelings of betrayal, mistrust, and even disillusionment as a result of experiencing abuse. Given that the abuse came on slowly and subtly beginning with financial abuse, progressing to emotional abuse, developing into verbal abuse, and then culminating to physical abuse, Josephine did not immediately recognize the signs that she was in abusive relationship, what she referred to as the “red flag”. As such, Josephine spent much time trying to work out her relationship with her abusive partner hoping things would get better, but they never did. As such, Josephine felt much pain and regret for having exposed both her son and herself to the abuse. However, once Josephine recognized that she was in an abusive relationship she immediately left and vowed never to return, and never to become involved in an abusive relationship again. Josephine struggled but succeeded in caring for herself and her son on her own. In this sense, Josephine viewed herself as “warrior mother”, that is, as someone who will always protect her child and herself, and as someone who will fight to survive despite the difficult circumstances in which they may find themselves.

Josephine: I’m definitely more of a warrior mother. Like nobody’s gonna get me for sure. It’s like it’s me and my kid and don’t mess with us. So it’s [abuse] not gonna happen again, cause this time I’m more aware you know, and I’ve learned some lessons you know. I can’t promise I won’t get in that relationship, but the red flag’s gonna come up a hell of a lot earlier, and you know I’m not gonna think that I can fix it. So yeah, and I’ve proved I can do it, that I’ve found myself a place to live, I have a job, I’ve figured out the taxes, I go to court, and yeah, I can do this and I don’t need anybody!

v) *“Not a Normal Mother” Discourse*

Like Madelyn and Josephine, Louisa experienced many challenges as a result of mothering in the context of domestic abuse. In fact, Louisa experienced severe abuse at the hands of her husband the whole 37 years they were married and the entire time she raised her two children. As such, Louisa never knew what it was like to be a mother in a non-abusive environment. Consequently, Louisa described herself exclusively as “not a normal mother”. However, Louisa believed that this description of herself as “not a normal mother” did not have negative meaning and connotations. Rather, according to Louisa, “not normal” merely meant different compared to other mothers, particularly mothers who were in non-abusive situations, but certainly not inferior or deviant. As such, although Louisa did not mother according to the norm, she still had positive views of herself as a mother. Louisa described how her children were “wonderful people”, and that she was proud that they “turned out really well”. In this sense, Louisa viewed herself as a “not normal mother” who, despite her non-normative circumstances, was still someone who cared deeply about her children and was successful in effectively raising them.

Louisa: I can't say that I'm a normal mother (laughs) because I don't know what being a mother in a non-abusive situation is like because I have never been a mother without being abused...I'm not a normal mother, but I know that I feel like I had been there for my kids, cared for them as best I could, appreciated them, and like you know just helped them to be the best that they can be... When I step outside myself and sort of think about how another mother would view the kids that I have raised, she would think that she did an okay job, that they turned out really well, and that they're wonderful people...I feel that my heart is compassionate to others who are experiencing abuse and especially to children, and when



my own children are hurting I'm very sensitive to that. Maybe all mothers are, I don't know.

***vi) Summary and Discussion***

All of the abused women lived under the influence of the cultural myths contained in the dominant discourse of intensive mothering. However these myths did not influence or affect the way that many of these abused women constructed their mothering identities. The majority of the abused women were not committed to, but rather resisted the tenets of the discourse of intensive mothering. This was evident by the fact that these abused women held beliefs that were contrary to the discourse of intensive mothering. That is, these abused women did not attempt to live according to the standards of intensive mothering, but rather called into question, criticized and opposed these standards of intensive mothering and the portrayal that because they are abused mothers they are “bad mothers”. These abused women resisted the dominant discourse of intensive mothering in three ways: 1) they negotiated the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses; 2) they drew on and then redefined the “good mother” discourse so that it had more inclusive boundaries; and 3) they rejected both the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses and replaced them with experientially-based alternative mothering discourses that they created.

By resisting the dominant discourse of intensive mothering these abused women engaged in what O'Reilly refers to as “empowered/feminist mothering”. All of these abused women resisted definitions of themselves as “bad mothers” as perpetuated by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering because they did not believe that they were “bad mothers”, but rather believed and proclaimed that

they were “good mothers” and therefore described themselves as such. I argue that these findings support and build on O’Reilly’s theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” by demonstrating that some mothers do challenge the demands of intensive mothering and the mandate of powerless responsibility, and that abused mothers, like other marginalized mothers, are more likely to challenge such demands because they have less resources and status in motherhood and therefore are more able to perceive and oppose their oppression (O’Reilly, 2006, 46). In specific, I argue that the majority of the abused women in this study engaged in “empowered/feminist mothering” and did so not by engaging in mothering practices that opposed the discourse of intensive mothering as put forth by O’Reilly, but rather by resisting this very discourse of intensive mothering.

What is interesting is that the abused women constructed their mothering identities in ways that not only resisted, but also redefined and replaced the dominant discourses of mothering. In this sense, abused mothers were active agents in the face of powerful mothering discourses. The abused women’s constructions of their mothering identities revealed this power of the discourse of intensive mothering, but further revealed the exercise of agency in their lives. As such, I also argue that these findings suggest moving beyond O’Reilly’s theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" and towards what I refer to as “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood”.

O’Reilly’s “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” consists of engaging in feminist mothering practices that oppose the discourse of intensive mothering which is male-defined and oppressive. An example of such, as

O'Reilly explains, would be that “as the patriarchal ideology of motherhood mandates maternal selflessness, a mothering against motherhood practice would insist upon a life outside and beyond motherhood”, or “as the patriarchal ideology of motherhood defines mothers as nonsexual subjects in accordance with the age-old whore-madonna dichotomy, the mother would claim and celebrate a robust and vibrant sexuality” (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 12-13). In this sense, O'Reilly states that “a mothering against motherhood is thus a transgressive and transformative practice; it seeks to both challenge and change” (O'Reilly, 2006). A “transgressive/transformative maternal practice originates from and depends upon the realization that patriarchal motherhood is indeed oppressive” (O'Reilly, 2006).

However, “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood”, which I propose, does not consist of engaging in feminist mothering practices that oppose the discourse of intensive mothering which are male-defined and oppressive. Rather, I claim that it consists of re-defining and even replacing these very discourses of mothering (as the abused women did in this study) so that they are female defined and empowering. An example of such would be that if the current ideology of patriarchal motherhood claims that all mothers must selflessly devote all of their time to their children- which in fact it does- “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood” would not consist of mothers trying to engage in mothering practices that oppose these standards, such as only engaging in their own individual self-pursuits. Rather, “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood” would consist of abolishing this standard of mothering and instead putting forth and advocating a standard of mothering that women themselves

believe is important, such as spending time with one's children within one's own circumstances and according to one's own schedule- which is in fact what the abused women in this study did.

I argue that in order for mothers to be truly empowered it is necessary to make this move because while "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" allows a male-centered and oppressive motherhood to continue to exist alongside and be juxtaposed against a newly created woman-centred and empowering mothering, "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood" demolishes a male-centered and oppressive motherhood (patriarchal motherhood) and replaces it with a woman-centred and empowering motherhood (women's centred motherhood) so that it is the only one that exists. In this sense, I argue that the only way that women, such as these abused women in this study, can be allowed to freely feel empowered in their mothering is not merely through their mothering experience (mothering practices that oppose patriarchal motherhood), because this mothering experience will always be practiced alongside the continued existence of the institution of patriarchal motherhood. Rather, it is through the process of eradicating this actual institution of patriarchal motherhood and replacing it with an institution of women's centred motherhood. As such this can only be accomplished when both mothering as experience, and mothering as institution are women's centred.

I also argue that women's centred mothering is best defined by what it is- it is female-centered, female-defined, and based on female experiences and voices. Women's centred mothering is taking on discourses, whether it be by

redefining current discourses or creating new discourses as the abused women did in this study, in a way that seeks to replace the current patriarchal motherhood which makes mothering limiting and oppressive for women with a women's centred motherhood that makes mothering liberating and empowering for women. As such, both the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood would be empowering. This is not to say that "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood" is not in opposition to, and does not negate patriarchal motherhood, because it does. However, opposition and negation is not the primary focus. That is, women's centred mothering does not consist of putting patriarchal motherhood (institution) at the center and then engaging in mothering (experience) that opposes patriarchal motherhood, which is working from the outside-in. Rather, women's centred mothering is putting women's mothering (experiences) at the centre and then engaging in creating a women's centred motherhood (institution) by redefining the discourses of mothering and creating new discourses of mothering, which is working from the inside-out.

Finally, I argue that a "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood" is indeed possible, and this is evident by the fact that the abused women in this study engaged in women's centred mothering, that is, they did not accept but rather resisted the standards imposed on them by the dominant discourse of intensive mothering by redefining the existing discourses and by creating new discourses. I do not suggest that the mothering standards that these abused women defined and created for themselves were right or wrong, as that is not of importance. What is of importance is that the mothering standards that

these abused women defined and created for themselves were right for them personally as individuals, and were right given their own personal circumstances.

As one of the abused women Josephine insightfully and rightly stated:

Who's to say what's good or bad! It's hard to sort of put a value judgment on it [mothering]. I mean I know there are other ways to do it [mothering], I see other people do it, then say no I wouldn't do that. But as for which is good and which is bad, who could know? What's right for one child is not right for another.

I put forth a similar logic and argument- who is to say what is good or bad mothering? It is erroneous to put a value judgment on how women should mother. There are numerous ways that women carry out their mothering, as clearly demonstrated in this study, and one way of mothering is not better or worse than the other. Just as Josephine stated "What's right for one child is not right for another", I uphold that what is right for one mother, is not right for another mother. Although each of the abused women in this study carried out their mothering in their own unique ways and within their own unique circumstances, all of these abused women did the very best they could, and deeply cared about and loved their children. As such, it is no wonder that these abused women felt like "good mothers", because they were in fact good mothers according to their own personal standards of mothering. These abused women did not live their lives according to the standards set out by the patriarchal ideology of motherhood, which evidently would leave even the most perfect of mothers, if one ever could realistically exist, feeling incapable and deficient. Rather, these abused women set their own personal standards of mothering that worked for them within their own circumstances, and then lived their lives according to their

personal standards of mothering. Therefore, despite the many difficulties that these abused women undoubtedly faced, viewing and defining themselves according to their own personal standards and definitions caused them to feel a sense of liberation, autonomy, fulfillment, and empowerment in their mothering. This demonstrates that even among the most marginalized and subjugated of women who mother, and even in the most constrictive and oppressive of contexts in which women mother, women find ways to exercise agency, resistance, and power. In this sense, the abused women in this study provide a first step in the direction of “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood”.

### **3) Conclusion**

All mothers, including marginalized mothers, are not only surrounded, but also influenced by the dominant ideologies of motherhood, which materialize in dominant mothering discourses. The dominant discourse of intensive mothering is powerful and shapes how women view and think about themselves as mothers. This was evident in the narratives of the abused women who were part of this study. However, these abused women’s narratives also revealed that not all abused mothers are passive victims who merely accept and internalize the discourse of intensive mothering. Rather, some abused mothers are active agents who question and resist this discourse. As such, while a small minority of the abused women accepted the dominant discourse of intensive mothering and drew on the “bad mother” discourse, the large majority of the abused women negotiated and resisted the dominant discourse of intensive mothering in subjectively constructing their mothering identities. These abused women specifically resisted

the dominant discourse of intensive mothering by 1) drawing on the “good mother” discourse and then redefining what a “good mother” is so that it had more inclusive boundaries; and 2) rejecting both the “bad mother” and the “good mother” discourses and then replacing these discourses with experientially-based alternative mothering discourses. Interestingly, although the abused women stated they are viewed and portrayed as “bad mothers” for failing to meet the standards of intensive mothering, they do not personally perceive and construct themselves as mothers in this negative light.

The findings of this study support and build on O’Reilly’s theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” by demonstrating that although a small number of abused women engage in “patriarchal mothering” by constructing their mothering identities in accordance with the discourse of intensive mothering, the majority of abused women engage in “empowered/feminist” mothering by constructing their mothering identities in ways that outright resist the discourse of intensive mothering. But more importantly, these findings suggest moving beyond O’Reilly’s theory of “Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood” and towards what I refer to as “Mothering Towards Women’s Centred Motherhood”, by demonstrating that abused women construct their mothering identities in ways that not only resist, but also redefine and replace the dominant discourses of mothering.

Clearly, abused women as a group of marginalized mothers find ways to resist in order to strengthen their sense of identity which is delegitimized and subjugated by the discourse of intensive mothering. As such, the voices of the



abused women in this study add yet another critique to the discourse of intensive mothering. Just because abused women do not fit the model of the “good mother” does not mean that they are not “good mothers”, or that they in fact view themselves as such. Quite the contrary. The abused women in this study effectively cared for their children and personally viewed themselves as mothers in a positive light. This suggests that if women, such as abused women, who are labeled under the discourse of the “bad mother” engage in resistance to the dominant discourse on mothering, then other women who are also labeled as “bad mothers” may also resist these same discourses of intensive mothering.

## **Chapter Seven: Contextualizing Abused Women's Subjective Constructions of Their Mothering Identities – The Role of Intersections of Gender, Social Class and Race**

I think I'm a pretty good mom. Like I said, I like doing stuff with them...I'm attentive, my kids are my focus, and I like having them around and being with them...I think I'm a good mom because I'm always cuddling, loving, and holding them. I love saying the word I love you, and I'm always telling them that...I try to teach them [children] to show respect, like respecting other people...But with us Natives what I experienced is that when Native women get abused they are thought of as unfit mothers. It's just a racial thing, because right away you would see okay like a white woman, a Caucasian woman, with her kids and they will be doing lesser and they won't be keeping care of their kids, and I've known a few white women like that, and then you would see us sitting there trying to look after our kids, but whose kids will get taken away? It'll be us. I've seen that happen where there's two women in the same shelter, and I'm sitting there watching this one Native lady with her kids and a white woman with her kids, and this white woman will be like meeting men on a street corner and saying 'Oh can you watch him [son] for about twenty minutes.' Or, the two women's kids would be sick, but the counselor would come up to the Native woman and tell her 'Take your daughter or your son to the doctor! Look at him or her!' and they would say something to her. Or when a Native woman is trying to discipline her child, like her daughter had a tantrum, like you know one of those screaming tantrums, she got child welfare called on her and boom, her kids were gone. That's happened, I've seen that. So my point of view is that Native women are looked down upon. Like right away if we're abused, boom, well gotta get the kids out of there. But if it's a white person they're trying to work with them, you know what I mean? So I got scared and afraid to go to shelters. I'd always ask them [counselors] 'Are you guys gonna phone child welfare on me because I've seen it?' Like once I had lived at a shelter and I had to leave her [daughter] who was sleeping in my room just to make a bottle and go right back. So basically I was like make this bottle, boil the water, and race back to the room, then again go back, make a bottle, and race back, you know. So I went to do that, and left her in the room, and they [counselors] came and said 'Who's in this room?' and I said 'That's me,' and then I walked out of there and then all these white women tried to avoid me, the face you know. They started complaining about me saying 'Oh she leaves her kids all the time, blah, blah, blah,' and one Native woman goes 'No she doesn't! No she doesn't! Why you guys saying that?' and she's like 'Ah,' and she walks away. So then she comes and knocks on my door and she goes 'Watch yourself, cuz I've seen a lot of Native women come in here and lose their, you know, they come in here and a week later their kids are all getting taken away.' So yeah, I'm constantly walking and looking around, like I'm constantly worried that I'm doing something wrong. Even now that I'm by myself I have in the back of my head that I am doing something wrong, like say I was late giving her [daughter] a bath I'd feel bad cuz she didn't take a bath for an hour, like you know what I mean. I'm always constantly having to look over what I'm doing and making sure. So

like I said, we're treated different. I have to watch everything that I do cuz I'm Native. It just seems like we are a different category, we're all together, and I know it sounds bad but it's what I see.

This quotation from Makayla, a twenty-seven-year-old Aboriginal woman who is the mother of seven children, illustrates well the main themes related to the role that social context plays in shaping abused women's personal views of themselves as mothers, which I will be discussing in this chapter. Women's social location based on gender, social class, and race frames their experiential knowledge of their mothering. These categories are fluid and shifting, and represent not only women's individual characteristics, but also aspects of their social identity. Women's social location therefore reflects real differences among mothers from diverse backgrounds.

Dominant discourses of mothering are based on ideals of gender, social class, and race. In this regard, the dominant discourses of mothering are constructed and represent only one experience of mothering- that of married, middle-class, white women. This experience is positioned and codified as the only "real, natural, and universal" experience of mothering (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 80). According to Kline (1993):

Motherhood "has been constructed ideologically as compulsory only for those women considered 'fit', and many women have been judged 'unfit' on the basis of their social location. This has been the case for disabled women, Black women, First Nation women, immigrant women, Jewish women, lesbian women, sole-support women, poor women, unmarried women, young women, and others. For these women, procreation has often been devalued and discouraged. The ideology of motherhood therefore speaks not only to gender roles and behaviour, but it also constructs some locations within social relations of race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on as more appropriate for motherhood than others. Thus, motherhood is conceptualized as a privilege, than as a right, a privilege that can be withheld both ideologically and in more material ways for

women who are not members of the dominant groups in society or who are otherwise considered ‘unfit’...When women considered ‘unfit’ do have and raise children, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to meet the societal image of the ‘good mother’ (pp. 312-3134).

In “contemporary discourses of motherhood, however, the origins and operation of motherhood ideology within social relations of oppression, including overlapping ones of gender, social class, and race are submerged and rendered invisible (Kline, 1993, p. 315). It is within these existing power relations that women carry out their mothering.

Both the literature on mothering and the literature on domestic abuse have failed to examine how membership in different social groups frames and influences abused women’s experiential knowledge of their mothering. As such, this raises a number of questions: How do abused women’s individual social contexts shape their views of their mothering? How are abused women’s individual social contexts similar or different? How do various elements of abused women’s individual social contexts intersect to influence their lives as mothers? How do intersections of gender, social class, and race shape abused mothers’ views of their mothering? This chapter, which examines and discusses abused women’s subjective mothering identities, begins to address some of these questions.

Makayla’s narrative provides a good example of the role and influence that intersections of gender, race, and social class play in shaping how abused women think about themselves as mothers. Makayla points to the ways in which discourse of intensive mothering constructs the racial category “Aboriginal” as less appropriate for motherhood, and therefore Aboriginal mothers are portrayed

and viewed as “unfit mothers”. Makayla describes “With us Natives what I experienced is that when Native women get abused they are thought of as unfit mothers.” Makayla criticizes the discourse of intensive mothering which casts Aboriginal mothers as “bad mothers” by affirming that Aboriginal mothers are not indeed “bad mothers”, but rather are constructed as such because it is a “racial thing”. That is, Aboriginal mothers are put into a “different category”, are “looked down upon”, and are “treated different” simply because they are non-white women. Makayla provides many examples of how Aboriginal women’s mothering is subjected to greater surveillance and scrutiny, resulting in Aboriginal mothers being judged more harshly than white mothers. Makayla discusses for example, how Aboriginal women’s children are more likely to be apprehended by “child welfare” because they are automatically judged as incapable. Makayla states “Right away if we’re [Aboriginal mothers] abused, boom, well gotta get the kids out of there. But if it’s a white person they’re trying to work with them.” As such, Makayla describes how she was often “scared and afraid to go to shelters”, as she feared that the shelter counselors would “phone child welfare” due to the false belief that all Aboriginal mothers are “unfit mothers”. Makayla even discusses how other Aboriginal mothers were aware of this unfair treatment and would try to “watch out” for each other in order to warn, protect, and defend one another.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the intensive mothering discourse doubly portrays Aboriginal mothers who are abused as “bad mothers”, Makayla does not describe herself as a “bad mother”, but rather as a “good mother”. In this

sense, being in a racially marginalized position permits Makayla to see and to resist this discourse of intensive mothering which is oppressive. Makayla resists the discourse of intensive mothering which casts Aboriginal abused mothers as “bad mothers” by redefining what a “good mother” is according to her own personal mothering standards. As such, Makayla claims that she is a “good mother” because she “spends time” with her children, “loves” her children, and “teaches” her children.

This chapter presents the role that social location plays in shaping abused women’s mothering identities. In this chapter I present how abused women’s social location based on gender, social class, and race influences how they subjectively construct themselves as mothers. I draw on Collins’ (2007) theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” in order to examine if and how mothers, particularly abused mothers, engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers. I specifically examine how intersections of gender, social class, and race influence whether abused women draw from, negotiate, or resist the discourse of intensive mothering in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. I discuss how the abused women’s narratives reveal that marginalized mothers engage in “motherwork for identity” not just for their children’s identity as Collins discusses, but also for their own identities as mothers (Collins, 2007). Abused women who are single women, poor, and non-white resist the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. As such, I argue that my findings support and build on Collins theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” by demonstrating that abused women also engage in

motherwork for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity” by resisting the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities.

### **1) Constructing Their Mothering Identities: The Role of Intersections of Gender, Social Class, and Race**

Patricia Hill Collins (2007) theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” provides a useful theoretical framework to examine the role that intersections of gender, class, and race play in shaping abused women’s subjective mothering identities. According to Collins (2007), “intersections of race, class, and gender frame and shape mothers’ experiences across specific social contexts” (p. 208). Collins argues for the need to focus on and examine “motherwork”, which is centred on non-white and non-middle-class women’s mothering experiences. Collins (2007) specifically discusses how women of colour and of lower social class engage in “motherwork for identity”, whereby they attempt to foster a meaningful and independent identity in their children by either submitting to or challenging dominant race, class, and gender ideologies (Collins, 2007, p. 314, p.321-325). That is, “motherwork for identity has two dimensions: 1) Fostering a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of colour; 2) Equipping children with skills to confront the contradiction of the larger effort to assimilate racial children, and to challenge systems of racial oppression (p.321-322). In this regard, Collins indicates that mothers make varying choices in negotiating the complicated relationship of preparing to fit into, yet resist, systems of race and class domination. Some mothers submit to racist, class, and sexist ideologies by remaining powerless in the face of

oppressive external forces, by becoming unwitting conduits of the oppressive dominant ideology, or by choosing to fit in for reasons of survival. However, other mothers espouse sophisticated skills that facilitate the appearance of being submissive while at the same time being able to challenge inequality (Collins, 2007, p.324-325). For women of colour and of lower social class, the struggle to maintain an independent identity takes many forms and is mediated by membership in different racial and social class groups.

Collins' (2007) theory of "Intersectionality and Motherhood" provides a good theoretical framework to examine the role and influence that intersections of gender, class, and race play in shaping abused women's subjective mothering identities, as it examines how non-white and non-middle-class mothers engage in motherwork for the identity of their children. My research builds on Collins work by examining if and how mothers, specifically abused mothers, also engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers. That is, I examine if and how abused women attempt to foster a meaningful and independent identity for themselves by either submitting to or challenging the discourse of intensive mothering. I specifically examine how intersections of gender, social class, and race influence whether abused women draw from, negotiate, or resist the discourse of intensive mothering in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers

The findings reveal that in this study abused women did engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers, and that their social location based on gender, social class, and race affected the way that they subjectively



constructed themselves as mothers. That is, abused women who were single women, poor, and non-white were more likely to resist the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. During the interviews I did not directly ask the abused women participants how their gender, social class, and race impacted their personal views of themselves as mothers. Rather I asked how the abused women viewed themselves as mothers, and why. In discussing how they personally viewed themselves as mothers, many abused women freely spoke about how their social location influenced not only how others viewed them as mothers, but also how they personally viewed themselves as mothers. Below I discuss how abused women who were marginalized resisted the discourse of intensive mothering, which casts them as “bad mothers”, in constructing their mothering identities.

## **2) Intersections of Gender, Social Class, and Race and Abused Women’s Constructions of their Mothering Identities - Resisting the Discourse of Intensive Mothering**

Although all of the women in this study were abused, not all of these women occupied equivalent positions of marginalization. While some abused women occupied only one position of marginalization in the areas of gender, social class and race, other abused women occupied multiple positions of marginalization in these areas. As such, the abused women’s experiences of oppression varied. Overall, of the 29 abused women, 12 women were single women, 22 women were residing in abused women’s shelters due to low incomes, and 19 women were non-white. However, only 15 abused women specifically mentioned and discussed how being single women, poor, and non-white

influenced their mothering identities. Interestingly, all 15 of these abused women resisted the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their mothering identities. These abused women resisted in the three ways discussed in the previous chapter. One abused women resisted by negotiating the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses, a few abused women resisted by redefining the “good mother” discourse according to their own standards of mothering, but most of the abused women resisted by both redefining the “good mother” discourse according to their own standards of mothering, and replacing the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses with their own alternative mothering discourses. Clearly, these abused women did indeed engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers by resisting the discourse of intensive mothering that constructs abused mothers, single mothers, poor mothers, and non-white mothers as “bad mothers”. What is noteworthy is the fact that of the 29 abused women in this study, 20 women resisted the discourse of intensive mothering, as discussed in the previous chapter, and that of these 20 women who resisted, 15 of these women were marginalized.

These findings support and build on Collins theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” by demonstrating that abused women also engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity”, by resisting the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their mothering identities. Also, the abused women’s social location based on gender, social class, and race affected the way that they subjectively constructed themselves as mothers. Abused women who were single women,

poor, and non-white were more likely to resist the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities.

**a) Intersections of Gender, Social Class, and Race - Resisting Dual “Bad Mother” Discourses**

Of the 15 abused women who mentioned and discussed their social location, 11 women mentioned and discussed only one aspect of their social location. These abused women discussed how their gender, social class, or race had an impact on how they viewed themselves as mothers.

***i) Gender and Resisting Dual “Bad Mother” Discourses – “Abused Mother” and “Single Mother”***

The influence of gender on abused women’s views of themselves as mothers was evident in the women’s narratives. Six abused women discussed how being a single mother shaped how others viewed them as mothers, and how they personally viewed themselves as mothers. These abused women discussed how cultural stereotypes that prevail portray single mothers as deficient, incapable, and doomed to lead lives of despair, poverty, and failure. These abused women pointed to how the assumption that female-headed households are worse off socially and economically fails to take into consideration that female household headship is often a positive strategy for survival in the lives of abused women, as remaining with abusive partners poses a risk for them and their children (Chant, 1997a, 1997b).

These negative cultural stereotypes about single mothers are reinforced by the intensive mothering discourse that portrays “single mothers” as “bad mothers”. What remains invisible is the fact that “single mothers” are portrayed

by the intensive mothering discourse as “bad mothers” because they represent a challenge to hegemonic patriarchal understandings of conventional familial configurations, and male paternal authority and female maternal subjection within this family structure. As such, many of the abused women in this study stated that they are viewed as “bad mothers” not only because they are “abused mothers”, but also because they are “single mothers”. In this sense, they are viewed as doubly deviant. Nonetheless, these abused women resisted this intensive mothering discourse which portrays them as “bad mothers” by claiming that being “single mothers” and “abused mothers” did not indeed mean that they were “bad mothers”. These abused women pointed to the numerous ways in which they effectively carried out their mothering, despite being single and abused. Several abused women claimed that they were not only “good mothers”, but also “strong mothers”. These abused women redefined what a “good mother” is according to their own definitions, and created the “strong mother” discourse as an alternative discourse. In fact, many of the abused women viewed themselves as “good mothers” and as “strong mothers” because they refused to allow their abusive partners to continue to exercise paternal authority which manifested itself in the form of control and abuse, and therefore they left their abusive partners to protect themselves and their children even if it meant having to care for their children on their own.

For example, Abigail described how leaving her abusive partner was a “big decision”, one that she “struggled with as a mom”, because she was aware of the expectation that mothers are responsible for keeping the family unit together.

Abigail felt much “disappointment” when she was informed by a police officer that her credibility as a mother would be questioned in the courts if she attempted to seek full custody of her daughter, because she had left her abusive partner and was now a “single mother”. Abigail explained how she was told that she would have to prove that she was “as effective as she should be” as a mother, and that she was indeed capable of providing and caring for her children despite the fact that she was single. Although Abigail was aware that she was doubly viewed as a “bad mother” because she was both a single and an abused mother, she did not perceive herself as such. Rather, Abigail resisted this discourse of intensive mothering by claiming that she was a “good mother” and a “stronger mother” because, despite raising her daughter on her own and despite being a victim of abuse, she supported and cared for her daughter by accessing community networks and services.

Abigail      At first we left just the house to be safe, and then we left the community too because it too became unsafe for us because he was always there lurking...I think it was a big decision [to leave], like it's something that I really struggled with as a mom. As a woman you are expected to hold the pieces together in the family, to be able to make things work, to be the glue of the family, and to make things okay, pleasant, and a nice place to be. I think that is a societal expectation...One of the big disappointments is that the judge, I learned from this constable actually that women quite often respond in an emotional level, and that he said ‘You know in the courts it's a man's world and you have to play the man's game,’ and he said ‘As a single woman you can't be a woman there, you have to be a man for the best of your daughter. You know, you need to document everything, you need to present this, you need to present that because responding as a woman, quite often what happens is initially women respond with fear, concern, confusion and that sort of thing, and the courts keep on pushing the children more and more with dad because the mom may be not able to be so effective as she should be.’ So it's been a year later and the whole time the judge is saying innocent until proven guilty,

and when there's abuse it's difficult to prove guilty. So the judge keeps on pushing them [police] to get more... Yes, I'm a good mother, but I'm a stronger mother now because as a single parent it's been really important to me to be a single parent who supports... So having to reach out to other networks, or whatever the case may be within the community to help, as a sole person I just realized how important it is to be positive and to try to be everything that I can be to her [daughter].

Like Abigail, Carly stated that because she left her abusive partner and was now a "single mom", her ability to properly care for her children was subjected to much doubt and speculation. Carly explained that although she shared joint custody with her abusive partner, child welfare only scrutinized and offered her counsel about what she needed to do to improve her parenting. Carly felt that it was unfair that her mothering and not her partner's fathering was being "looked upon" and judged, when she was the victim and her partner was the perpetrator who had abused her. Nonetheless, although Carly was conscious that she was doubly viewed as a "bad mother" because she was both an abused mother and a single mother, she did not view herself in this negative light. Instead Carly asserted that she was a "good mother" and a "strong mother" because despite the abuse she experienced and despite having to mother her children on her own, she spends time with her children and loves and cares for them. In this sense, Carly resisted the discourse of intensive mothering that cast her as a "bad mother".

Carly: On the ninth of January, that was the final day that I left, I phoned child welfare and found out where I could go, what I could do because here I was a small town girl in a big city and I didn't know what to do... So since then they [child welfare] are telling me as a single mom that I need to seek this, this, and this, you know. But my son is still with his father. Why is he not in anger management? Why is he not being looked upon? I mean he's supposed to have in home care. Well it's been a month in a half and there hasn't been not one thing happen. Not one thing happen!

So what does that say? But yet you know they tell me as a single mom I've got to do this. But they don't even need to tell me I've got to do this, this, and this, because I've been asking to do this, this, and this, and to get the ball rolling. I thought that I got the ball rolling. I'm here, I'm at this second stage shelter!...You know, as many mishaps and misfortunate things that have happened to me, I'm still here for my babies...I'm a good mother. A lot of the time I feel like that. Like being with my boys and them getting along, and us doing something together whether it be just sitting here talking, you know...I'm a strong mother too. I'm very strong at being a mother because my babies are my babies, you know. It doesn't matter how big they get, they're still my babies, you know.

Like both Abigail and Carly, Coreen's mothering was also subject to much inquiry and criticism because she was a "single mom". Coreen discussed how child welfare was constantly informing her about what she "did wrong" as a "single mom", rather than recognizing what she "did right". Yet child welfare did not inquire about or criticize her abusive partner who was not providing "child support" as he should have been, who was not helping her raise their children, and who was having other children with other women. In this sense, Coreen pointed to and criticized the wider social expectation that mothers, and not fathers, are ultimately responsible for caring for children. Even though Coreen recognized that she was viewed as a "bad mother" because she was not only an abused mother but also a single mother, she resisted this discourse of intensive mothering and instead viewed and described herself in a positive light- as a "strong mother". Coreen may have experienced abuse and may have been forced to raise and care for her children on her own as a consequence of leaving her abusive partner, but she still viewed herself as a "strong mother" because she successfully ensured the safety of her children and survived the abuse.

Coreen: I had five kids, and oh my gosh they were forever telling me as a single mom what I did wrong. But they weren't looking at what I did right, and then they weren't looking at his [partner's] part. Like he's not giving me child support, he's not even there to help me discipline these kids, you know, and then he's going out and making more kids you know... Being abused has affected me a lot. Like really not negative! I think and feel strong as a mother cuz I've made it through you know, and my kids are okay and they're all safe now... When they were small I knew I had to get out for their sake, cuz I didn't want him to kill me in front of him... But I'm strong cuz I'm trying to survive, I'm trying to get through... I'll never be perfect, but I do the best I can with what I have.

***ii) Social Class and Resisting Dual “Bad Mother” Discourses – “Abused Mother” and “Poor Mother”***

Social class also had an influence on how the abused women viewed themselves as mothers. Four abused women discussed how being of lower social class impacted the ways that they were perceived by others, as well as the ways that they personally perceived themselves as mothers. These abused women pointed to the cultural stereotypes that pathologize poor mothers and depict them as lazy, dependent, and deprived. These abused women also underlined how suppositions about poor mothers attribute poverty to mothers' personal irresponsibility rather than to structural conditions, such as domestic abuse within the home, and abused mothers' need to leave their abusive partners and therefore financially provide for the family on their own.

These negative cultural stereotypes about poor mothers are reinforced by the intensive mothering discourse, which portrays “poor mothers” as “bad mothers”. The intensive mothering discourse defines “good mothering” as involving large financial expenditures on children, that is, as devoting a great deal of financial resources to children. What is not readily discernible is the fact that



despite social and material contradictions, the intensive mothering discourse remains the normative political and cultural standard against which individual mothers are evaluated, and as the monetary cost of normative ideals continues to increase, poor mothers are left at an increasing disadvantage (Arrendell, 2000; Hays, 1998; Clarke, 2007). In this light, many of the abused women in this study declared that they are viewed as “bad mother” not only because they are “abused mothers”, but also because they are “poor mothers”. As such, they are viewed as deviant on two fronts. However, these abused women resisted this intensive mothering discourse that constructs them as “bad mothers” by instead defining themselves as “good mothers”. These abused women indicated that even though they were victims of abuse and as a result of fleeing their abusive partner they did not have the financial means to provide for themselves and their children on their own, they always ensured that their children had shelter, clothing, and food. That is, despite the most difficult of circumstances, these abused women always provided for their and their children’s basic needs. As such, these abused women also redefined the “good mother” according to their own standards of mothering, ones which reflected the realities of their unique circumstances, and their abilities to carry out their mothering even within the very trying circumstances of abuse.

For example, Tammy spoke about how being homeless affected how she viewed herself as a mother. Tammy described how she remained with her abusive partner because she did not know where to turn for help. She felt that she would not be able to survive financially if she left her abusive partner. However, once she found out about abused women’s shelters, Tammy immediately left her

abusive partner. Even though she became homeless as a result of leaving her abusive partner and had no other choice but to reside in an abused women's shelter, Tammy viewed herself as a "good mother" because she was doing her "very best", and was always "there" for her son. For Tammy, securing shelter for her and her son defined her identity as a "good mother". As such, Tammy resisted the discourse of intensive mothering that portrays her as a "bad mother" by claiming that she was in fact a "good mother".

Tammy: I'm stuck here [in the shelter] because of money. I was stuck there [with abusive partner] cuz I needed money. I used to tell myself 'You can do it,' but then I was like 'No, you can't.' I honestly thought I could not. There's no steps written down in a format to get you out of it [abuse], and there is nothing even written announcing where you can go or what you need to do when you leave him [abusive partner]. There's not a handbook that says like, okay if you're getting abused go here, go here, or go here, or go talk to this person, and this is the next thing you do. There's not a hand out for that, just like there's not handout for parenting. Luckily I found out about shelters, and I had to go to a shelter to get help. You know since I've left I think how I was putting up with it [abuse] to just get the twenty bucks he gave me everyday to live. I feel so stupid. But you just don't know though right?...But I think...I'm a good mom, because I think I'm doing my best. I'm not gonna say I'm a perfect mom because I don't think there is a perfect mom, but I am gonna say that I'm doing my very best to keep that child happy. So I'm just doing the best I can, and I'm learning as I go. I think I'm a good mom too because I'm wanting, warm, comforting, loving and understanding. I'm the one that's there for him [son] anytime he needs me.

Like Tammy, Badriya also spoke about how experiencing material deprivation affected her identity as a mother. Badriya and her four children resided in a second stage shelter, obtained their clothing from donation centers, and procured their food from food banks. Badriya described how she enjoyed going to shopping malls with her children and looking at all of the items, but how

she often felt such anguish and despair because she did not have the money to buy her children any of the items. In fact, Badriya described how she did not even have the money to buy her children food at the shopping malls, and therefore she had to pack lunches from home to take with them. Despite the fact that Badriya did not have the financial means to provide for her children, she resisted the intensive mothering discourse that cast her as a “bad mother” by affirming that she was indeed both a “good mother” and a “strong mother”. Badriya viewed herself as a mother in a positive light because both she and her children were happy, and she spent a lot of time with her children.

Badriya: I take them [children] to the mall and we go walking in the mall. But I cry sometimes when I look at them cuz I can't, I can't buy them nothing, not clothes, not toys not even food. I even make them sandwiches and snacks from home and bring them to mall... Since day one, like I know I'm good mom... Like I'm always happy with my kids, you know, to see them happy... The moment happy with my kids, like always to see my kids healthy, just to make them happy... I love that I have time [with children]... I feel myself like uh good mom, rich. I don't know how to explain it. Yeah, good mom, strong mom.

Finally, Leena spoke about the social stigma of receiving government assistance and how this impacted her identity as a mother. When Leena left her abusive partner she remained in a shelter for a short period of time, and then she applied for social assistance so that she could move into an apartment on her own with her baby son. As such, the money Leena received from social assistance covered their rent, but not their food. Therefore, Leena was required to obtain her food from food banks. However, Leena articulated feelings of inferiority because she received social assistance and felt that she was therefore labeled in a different way than middle-class mothers. Leena described how the popular scripts about

“welfare mothers” collapse the difficult experiences of abused mothers who are struggling not only to survive emotionally from their victimizations, but also to survive physically from the consequences of leaving their abusive partners and therefore having to find the means to meet their basic financial needs.

Nonetheless, although Leena did not have the financial means to provide for all of her and her child’s needs, she resisted the intensive mothering discourse by sometimes describing herself as a “bad mother”, mostly when she was with her abusive partner, but for the most part describing herself as a “good mother”, particularly once she left her abusive partner, because she survived the abuse, spent lots of time with her son, and at one point had a job. Leena also viewed herself as a strong mother because she vowed to never allow herself to be emotionally manipulated and controlled again by an intimate partner. Leena resisted the discourse that constructs her as a “bad mother” by negotiating the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses, as well as by creating new alternative mothering discourses based on her personal experiences.

Leena: Because I’m low income and then I go to donation centers and food banks and stuff I always feel like people, like for example people from my apartment, are just looking down at me and are looking at me weird. Like today I got food bank, and there was a lot of people in my lobby for some reason when I got food bank, and I was signing my papers and saying ‘Oh thank you for bringing my food bank up,’ and I wasn’t ashamed but was just real happy, then I noticed that everyone was looking at me, and I felt like they were looking down at me like I’m a bum and just real poor. Yes, I am on welfare, but I’m not so poor that I don’t have no place or whatever. Like it pays my rent and my utilities, but not my food, so I get food bank. But you still get that feeling... You know when I was with him I felt like a bad mother because it was hard being in an abusive situation and trying to take care of my kids... I think before I was a bad mother, but now I’m a

good mother and I'm a survivor, and I'm a strong mother. I'm not suckered into all that emotional bull anymore.

**b) Intersections of Gender, Social Class, and Race - Resisting Multiple “Bad Mother” Discourses.**

Of the 15 abused women who mentioned and discussed their social location, 4 women mentioned and discussed multiple aspects of their social location. Interestingly, among the abused women who mentioned and discussed their racial position, all of the women but one also mentioned their class position in conjunction with their racial position.

***i) Social Class and Race, and Resisting Multiple “Bad Mother” Discourses – “Abused Mother”, “Poor Mother”, and “Non-white Mother”***

The influence of race on abused women's views of themselves as mothers, and particularly how race intersects with social class to affect abused women's mothering identities, was evident in the women's narratives. Four abused women discussed how being a non-white woman influenced how others viewed them as mothers, as well as how they personally viewed themselves as mothers. Of these four abused women, all but one of the abused women described how their position as a non-white woman intersected with their class position, and affected their mothering identity. As such, these abused women verbally located themselves not only in the race hierarchy with lack of racial privilege, but also in the class hierarchy with lack of financial privilege.

The intensive mothering discourse certainly does not hold non-white mothers in the highest esteem, regardless of socioeconomic status. This discourse is fuelled by centuries of systemic racism and reflects dominant social mores that equate non-whiteness with poverty (Cooper and McCoy, 2009, p. 46).

As such, it is not difficult to see why race and social class were inextricably linked in many of the abused women's accounts and discussions of their mothering identities. However, it is clear that the poverty of many non-white families, particularly mothers, is "greatly influenced by a host of systemic issues such as inadequate public education, escalated unemployment rates, lack of affordable housing", and therefore is not due mothers' individual deficiencies. Still, non-white families and the mothers within these families are "pathologized" (Cooper and McCoy, 2009, p. 47). In this sense, non-white mothers are blamed for "many of the challenges their families incur even when the structural inequality that has evolved over centuries" contributes "to families' lingering challenges" (Cooper and McCoy, 2009, p. 47). The "politics of blaming" poor non-white mothers for their "family's poverty" is linked to what Collins refers to as "the new politics of containment", which is a "political phenomenon that depoliticizes women's oppression, dissuades their resistance, and helps contain them at the bottom of the socioeconomic and political hierarchies despite other indicators of racial progress (Collins, 1998, p. 11). As such, Collins suggests that the new politics of containment "relies much more heavily on surveillance tactics that fix" non-white women in the "public eye" through "the development and maintenance of stereotypical controlling images" (Collins, 1998). This continues to perpetuate the myth that poverty is "personally induced rather than a result of structural and political realities" (Cooper and McCoy, 2009, p 48).

Given that almost half of the abused women participants in this study were Aboriginal, it is not surprising that most of the abused women who discussed how

race and social class intersected to influence their mothering identities were Aboriginal. These abused women discussed how cultural stereotypes that prevail portray non-white mothers as idle, incompetent, reliant on the state, and ultimately poverty-stricken. First Nation mothers are “particularly vulnerable to being constructed as “bad mothers” because, as a consequence of colonialist oppression and different cultural norms, they do not always meet the dominant cultural and middle class expectations that constitute the ideology of motherhood” (Kline, pp.308-309). In this sense, it is the individual Aboriginal mothers who are blamed for the difficulties they face as mothers, and there is no recognition given to the roots of those difficulties in history and current structures of colonialism and racial oppression. In this sense, Aboriginal women’s experiences of domestic abuse are often attributed to “personal lifestyle” problems, implying they asked for the abuse. Characterization of abuse as personal problems emphasizes the individual deficiencies of Aboriginal mothers, and obscures the effects of these social ills that are largely the consequence of these historical and continuing colonialist and racist practices.

These negative cultural stereotypes about Aboriginal and low income mothers are reinforced by the intensive mothering discourse, which portrays “non-white mothers” and “poor mothers” as “bad mothers”. What is hidden is the fact that “non-white mothers” and “poor mothers” are portrayed by the intensive mothering discourse as “bad mothers” because they do not conform to the white, middle-class model of mothering. As such, many of the abused women in this study stated that they are viewed as “bad mothers” not only because they are

“abused mothers”, but also because they are “Aboriginal mothers”, and consequently are viewed as deviant mothers on multiple levels. However, these abused women did not submit to this discourse of intensive mothering which constructs them as “bad mothers”, but rather resisted by declaring that they were in fact “good mothers”, as well as “strong mothers”, and “loving mothers” despite the fact that they were abused and non-white. In this sense, these abused women redefined what a “good mother” is according to their own definitions, and created the “strong mother” and the “loving mother” discourses as alternative discourses.

For example, Makayla spoke about how being an Aboriginal mother affected her identity as a mother. Makayla described how when she resided in abused women’s shelters she often felt “looked down on” because she was Aboriginal. Makayla also discussed how Aboriginal mothers were more likely to have their children apprehended and taken into custody by child welfare merely because they were Aboriginal and therefore considered “unfit mothers”. Makayla pointed to this stereotype that Aboriginal mothers as less effective mothers compared to white mothers. Makayla detailed one incident in particular where the police automatically assumed and then reported that she was poor and was not able to provide food for her children simply because she was Aboriginal. Despite the fact that Makayla was an abused and a “non-white” mother, she negated the stereotype that she was automatically a “poor mother”. As such, Makayla resisted the intensive mothering discourse that cast her as a “bad mother” by stating that she was indeed a “good mother”. Makayla proclaimed that she was a “good



mother” because she spent time with her children, she loved her children, and she taught her children.

Makayla: First thing when I go to shelters, I feel really funny, like, looked down on. I see in the shelter how there’s two different ways- there’s Native and there’s White. I’ve been in the White people’s homes and they’re just absolutely disgusting, and I’ve been in the Native’s homes and they’re like clean and I’m thinking, well how come they’ve got their kids and I have to fight for mine you know, like it’s stupid. There was one incident where the kids were actually taken from my home, and that wasn’t because of lack of food, or the house was messy, or the kids were dirty. My kids were in the living room watching TV and we had this, well it was supposed to be a social drink in the other room. I wasn’t gonna allow them to have it in the living room or anywhere the kids can play and touch the alcohol. But then I called the police because a fight had broken out, and it’s a good thing I happened to look at the cops report because the cop had said we had no food, that there was liquor bottles everywhere and I think it was because we were Native. Honestly, because I seen this report and then I opened up the fridge and I was just like to the police ‘Tell me to my face I got no food. Tell me and to my face there is alcohol or beer bottles here,’ but my kids still got taken...I think I’m a pretty good mom. Like I said, I like doing stuff with them...I’m attentive, my kids are my focus, and I like having them around and being with them...I think I’m a good mom because I’m always cuddling, loving, and holding them...I try to teach them [children] to show respect, like respecting other people...But with us Natives what I experienced is that when Native women get abused they are thought of as unfit mothers. It’s just a racial thing.

Like Makayla, Shyan discussed how being an Aboriginal mother impacted her identity as a mother. Shyan described how abused mothers, particularly abused mothers who are Aboriginal are “pinpointed” as “poor and low income”. According to Shyan, it does not matter how successful she is in her family life or from a financial standpoint, she will always be “categorized” as “poor and low income” and therefore viewed as “bad mother” because she is Aboriginal. Shyan declared that she did not “care” what “other people think”, and therefore although

she is an abused and “non-white mother”, she criticized the stereotype that she is a “poor mother” who receives financial support from her Aboriginal band.

Consequently, Shyan resisted the intensive mothering discourse that she is a “bad mother” by stating that she was not only a “good mother”, but also a “loving mother” because she cares for and protects her children the “best way” she knows how and the best way she can.

Shyan: I think abused women are pinpointed like poor and low income. To me that's what pops into my mind, I don't know why, maybe because a woman's self-esteem is down? Or the way they look at being a Native woman. They think Native mothers probably drink, their kid's are probably apprehended, and their poor, or their getting money from their band. But it's not like that, cuz I don't get money from my band cuz I have a poor dad. It's like people expect this anyway, so you're already categorized. That's the way I look at it. I mean I could be having a beautiful home and everything else but I'll still be judged like this and I'm already pinned right there....I don't care like what other people think, really... You can look at any woman and you don't know what's going on in their life... People tell me ‘You're a good mom,’ and it's not phoniness either, it's just how I am when we're home alone. Like I would take care of him [son]... I'm a loving mother cuz I take care of them [children] and make sure they don't get hurt, you know what I mean? I just try to protect them the best way I know how or can.

Finally, Eden also discussed how being an Aboriginal mother influenced her identity as a mother. According to Eden, there exists master racist narratives about Aboriginal mothers, particularly those who live on Aboriginal reservations, which cast them in a negative light. Eden detailed how Aboriginal mothers are perceived as alcoholics, drug addicts, and poor individuals. Consequently, Aboriginal mothers are constructed as “bad”, and are expected to prove that they can indeed have “a good life too”. However, Eden stated that she knows mothers who are white and who are not abused, yet they do not have a “perfect life”, hence

highlighting this contradiction. In this sense, Eden pointed to the hegemonic false belief that all Aboriginal mothers are lower class and “bad mothers”, whereas all white mothers are middle class and “good mothers”. Regardless of the fact that Eden is an “abused”, “non-white”, and “low-income” mother, she did not view herself as a “bad mother”, but rather as a “good mother” and a “strong mother”. As such, Eden resisted the discourse of intensive mothering which upheld and perpetuated that she was a “bad mother”.

Eden: I think when you’re abused a lot of the times they expect you work extra hard, to prove to everyone that, you know, you’re not bad, that you’re not doing drugs or alcohol, and that you can have a good life too...I know this comes from, I hate to say it, but a little bit of racism. Like everyone thinks that Native mothers from the reserve are, you know, all drunks, poor and whatever. And then when you come to the city everyone expects everyone to have this perfect life, like the white picket fence and the big house. But I think both sides are misunderstood. I know some white mothers that are not abused and I know they don’t have a perfect life...I am Native...and I am homeless...but I view myself as a good mom in a bad situation. Now that I left him, my confidence is already starting to go up. I feel proud of leaving him. I feel even though we’re homeless right now and we’re fleeing, I feel proud that I’m on my way to a better life with my children. Yeah, right now I feel very hopefully and I’m excited for a new life without him...I value myself as a strong woman cuz I’ve been through so much.

### **c) Summary and Discussion**

All of the women in this study were abused, but not all of them occupied equivalent positions of marginalization based on gender, social class, and race. While some abused women were marginalized in just one of these areas, other abused women were marginalized in a number of these areas. As such, the abused women had various experiences of subjugation. However, all of the women who stated that being single, poor, and non-white influenced their

mothering identities, resisted the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing these mothering identities. These marginalized abused women resisted in the three ways discussed in the previous chapter: 1) by negotiating the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses; 2) by redefining the “good mother” discourse according to their own standards of mothering; and 3) by both redefining the “good mother” discourse according to their own standards of mothering, and replacing the “bad mother” and “good mother” discourses with their own alternative mothering discourses.

By resisting the discourse of intensive mothering in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers, I argue that these abuse women engaged in “motherwork for identity” not only for their children’s identity as Collins discusses, but also for their own identities as mothers (Collins, 2007). As such, I argue that my findings support and build on Collins theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” by demonstrating that abused women also engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity”, by negotiating, redefining, and replacing the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their mothering identities. In this sense, marginalized mothers confront and challenge the contradictions of the intensive mothering discourse. Collins argues that marginalized mothers engage in motherwork for the identity of their children because the survival of their children depends on gaining the skills of fighting class and racial oppression (Collins, 2007, p.321). Their class and racial identity is not validated by the schools, the media, and other social institutions. Likewise, I argue that marginalized mothers

engage in what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity” because their survival as mothers also depends on gaining the skills of fighting the oppression they face as marginalized mothers. Like their children, marginalized women’s identity as mothers is not validated by the schools, the media, nor other social institutions. As such, marginalized mothers, as demonstrated in this study, have to cope with and survive within systems that oppress them as mothers, and they do so by defining and creating their own mothering identities. That is, the marginalized mothers in this study did not remain powerless in the face of hegemonic intensive mothering discourses which encourage and fortify their alienation and oppression as mothers. Rather, they outright resist these intensive mothering discourses, and in doing so find ways to support their own self-definitions as mothers, ones which are empowering and not repressive.

Placing the experiences of single, poor, and non-white women in the center of this study’s analysis revealed that marginalized mothers perform motherwork that challenges not only “social constructions of work and family as separate spheres” and “male and female gender roles as dichotomized”, but also the discourse of intensive mothering which constructs and divides mothers as either “good mothers” or “bad mothers”. These marginalized abused women may not have had gender, social class and racial privilege, but they did seek to create personal autonomous identities for themselves as mothers instead of submitting to identifying themselves as members of a stigmatized group of “bad mothers”. In this sense, these marginalized abused women struggled for the right to self-definition as mothers in the face of much oppression and adversity. The findings

of this study are useful as they suggest how feminist theorizing about motherhood may be shifted when marginalized mothers' voices become central in feminist research and theory. The abused women's narratives in this study revealed that marginalized mothers sought self-definition not only for their children, but also for themselves as mothers, hence revealing that issues of identity are crucial to all motherwork. In this sense, marginalized abused mothers are also conduits for mothers' oppression, and engage in ways to free motherhood from patriarchy.

### **3) Conclusion**

All mothers occupy different social locations based on gender, social class, and race. However, while some mothers occupy positions of privilege, other mothers occupy positions of marginalization in these areas. It is within these diverse existing power relations that women carry out their mothering. Indeed, mothers various social locations frame their experiential knowledge of their mothering, and reflect real differences among mothers from diverse backgrounds. This too was evident in the narratives of the abused women who were part of this study. What is significant is the fact that abused women's positions of marginalization impacted the way that they subjectively constructed their mothering identities. Abused mothers who were single, poor, and non-white were more likely to resist the discourse of intensive mothering which casts them as bad mothers (on multiple levels) in subjectively constructing their mothering identities. These abused women resisted by negotiating, resisting, and redefining the intensive mothering discourse. As such, even though these marginalized abused women were portrayed as "bad mothers" because they were abused,

single, poor, and non-white, they opposed and withstood such negative characterizations of themselves as mothers. Instead these marginalized abused women stood firm in their belief and description that they were indeed “good mothers” who cared for their children to the best of their ability within their circumstances.

The findings of this study support and build on Collins theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” by demonstrating that abused women also engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity”, by resisting the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their mothering identities. Also, the abused women’s social location based on gender, social class, and race affected the way that they subjectively constructed themselves as mothers. Abused women who were single women, poor, and non-white resisted the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities.

Despite the realities of abuse, single motherhood, poverty, and racism that often define the lives of mothers, marginalized women do find ways to resist the oppressive and demeaning discourse of intensive mothering. By doing so, they are able to create valued, empowered and fortified identities for themselves as mothers.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

Despite years of awareness and research in the area of domestic abuse, little is known and little has been written about abused women's mothering experiences. Many of the abused women in this study pointed to the dearth of research about mothering in the social context of domestic abuse, and the imperativeness of gaining an understanding in this area. One abused woman named Tammy spoke about the importance of being aware of the prevalence of mothering in situations of abuse, and then acquiring and disseminating such information about this reality.

I just hope that you can get this research out there and help others, cuz there's really nothing out there. At least I could help you out with this so that everyone could be educated on what it's like to be a mom who is abused. I'm sure there's millions of women out there right now that are going through what I just went through.

Another abused woman named Carly spoke about the struggle that many abused mothers such as herself face as a result of mothering in the context of domestic abuse, and the necessity of gaining more knowledge in this area:

I can't take much more, you know. I'm grasping right now at being an abused mother, and I'm grasping for my children and myself. I don't know where to go, and I don't know what to do, but you're here and the research you're doing is going to help women be able to reach out and grab that knowledge, you know.

Finally, one abused woman named Louisa spoke about the need to gain a greater understanding about abused women's mothering, and the support that women can offer one another by sharing their stories:

The questions that you're asking are deep thought provoking, and often something I had never actually thought about, so I'm glad for that. I hope I've provided some insight into that because we need so much more knowledge about this. If I can be of some help some way, I want to do



that. I don't think that I have gone through this for nothing, I'm hoping I haven't, and I don't think God would allow that to happen. There's got to be some good that comes out of my experience and I want to work towards that good. If I helped in this way, then I'm happy for that.

As demonstrated by these abused women's narratives, there is a great need to give abused mothers a voice, to pay close attention to their everyday lives and realities, and to understand the challenges and complexities that they face in order to learn about and contribute to discussions about their unique mothering experiences. This research study was born out of my strong conviction of the importance of beginning to study and understand abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering. I firmly believed that such research was not only necessary but crucial, given that in recent years abused women are one group of women who have become a target of dominant ideologies and have been unjustly constructed and portrayed as "bad mothers".

### **1) Gaps in the Criminological Literature on Mothering in the Context of Domestic Abuse**

There has been, and there continues to be a burgeoning literature in both the area of domestic abuse and motherhood/mothering. However, there is surprisingly little overlap between these literatures, as both of these literatures have examined domestic abuse and motherhood/mothering as two separate issues, despite the fact that many abused women are also mothers. Recently, a small body of feminist criminological literature has begun to examine mothering within the social context of domestic abuse. This literature examines the impact of domestic abuse on mothering practices, the impact of domestic abuse on mother-child relationships, and to a lesser extent the impact of protective interventions on

mothering. However, there are some gaps in this literature, namely that this literature does not specifically consider abused women's subjective mothering experiences, nor does it critically examine abused women's mothering in light of dominant ideologies of mothering and individual social contexts. Consequently, there is little knowledge about abused mothers' individual voices and lived realities, as well as the effects of dominant ideologies of mothering and individual social contexts on abused mothers' everyday lives and experiences.

I argue that it is important that we begin to study abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering, as well as the ways in which dominant discourses of mothering and membership in different social groups frame abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering. Such research is crucial given that abused women are one group of women who in recent years have become especially stigmatized and unjustly vilified by dominant mothering ideologies for having lived in circumstances of abuse, and therefore having failed to protect their children from witnessing and/or experiencing abuse. Only when we give abused mothers a voice, pay close attention to their everyday lives and realities, and understand the challenges and complexities that they face are we informed enough to contribute to discussions about their unique mothering experiences. My research was a step in this direction.

## **2) My Research: Filling the Gaps in the Literature**

The overall objective of my research was to examine abused women's subjective mothering identities, the role, influence, and effects that dominant ideologies of mothering have on abused women's subjective mothering identities,

and the ways in which intersections among the social context of abuse, gender, social class, and race shape abused women's subjective mothering identities. As such, I framed the following research questions to guide my research: 1) How do abused women construct themselves as mothers? 2) What discourses do abused mothers draw from, resist, and negotiate in constructing themselves as mothers? 3) How do intersections of the abusive social context, gender, social class, and race and ethnicity, shape abused women's constructions of themselves as mothers?

### **3) Key Findings and Contributions of My Research**

My research drew on critical feminist theorizations of motherhood and mothering. In specific, my research drew on Rich's work in order to examine abused women's personal meanings and experiences of mothering. As such, my research examined abused women's cultural knowledge about motherhood, and their personal experiences of mothering. Moreover, my research examined abused women's personal constructions of themselves as mothers in light of the existence and influence of the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood. The findings, which were based on face-to-face in-depth interviews with 30 abused mothers residing in abused women's shelters in Calgary, Alberta, revealed that abused women's personal constructions of themselves as mothers were influenced by the patriarchal ideology of mothering, but that many abused women's mothering experiences were empowering. As such, this finding is an important contribution of my research as it builds on Rich's work by

demonstrating that abused women's own experience of mothering are a source of power.

My research also drew on O'Reilly's work (2006) in order to examine the mothering experiences of abused women, who also constitute a group of marginalized mothers. In this regard, my research examined the dominant discourses of mothering that abused women drew from, resisted, and negotiated in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. In specific, my research examined whether abused women engaged in patriarchal mothering by accepting the dominant discourses of mothering, or engaged in empowered/feminist mothering by negotiating and resisting the dominant discourses of mothering. The findings revealed that abused women were not only able to articulate the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, but were also able to identify and challenge its constricting and oppressive nature. That is, the abused women resisted the intensive mothering discourse not just in their mothering practices as O'Reilly discusses, but in the ways that they subjectively constructed their mothering identities. This is evident by the fact that the large majority of the abused women engaged in "empowered/feminist mothering" by resisting the "bad mother" discourse. These abused women resisted the dominant discourse of intensive mothering in three ways: 1) they negotiated the "bad mother" and "good mother" discourses; 2) they drew on and then redefined the "good mother" discourse so that it had more inclusive boundaries; and 3) they rejected both the "bad mother" and "good mother" discourses and replaced them with experientially-based alternative mothering discourses that they created.

This finding is a major contribution of my research as it builds on O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" by demonstrating that abused women are also among the groups of marginalized women who engage in "empowered/feminist" mothering as they constructed their mothering identities in ways that outright resisted the discourse of intensive mothering. This finding is also a significant contribution of my research as it suggests moving beyond O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" and instead towards what I refer to as "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood", by demonstrating that abused women constructed their mothering identities in ways that not only resisted, but also redefined and replaced the discourses of intensive mothering. In this sense, my research makes an important contribution to the current research on mothering in the context of domestic abuse as it illustrates that abused mothers are not passive victims who merely accept and internalize the discourse of intensive mothering. Rather, they are active agents in the face of powerful mothering discourses, who question and resist these very discourses.

Finally my research drew on Patricia Hill Collins' (2007) work in order to examine how intersections of gender, class, and race influence whether abused women draw from, resist, and negotiate the dominant discourses of mothering in subjectively constructing themselves as mothers. In specific, my research examined whether marginalized abused women submitted to dominant mothering ideologies by accepting the dominant discourses of mothering, or rejected dominant mothering ideologies by resisting the dominant discourses of mothering.

In this sense my research examined if and how marginalized abused mothers engaged in motherwork for their own identities as mothers. The findings revealed that marginalized mothers engaged in “motherwork for identity” not merely for their children’s identity as Collins discusses, but also for their own identities as mothers (Collins, 2007). This is evident by the fact that abused women who were single women, poor, and non-white were more likely to resist the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. These marginalized abused women resisted by negotiating, redefining, and replacing the intensive mothering discourse.

This finding is another major contribution of my research as it builds on Collins theory of “Intersectionality and Motherhood” by demonstrating that marginalized abused women also engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as “Motherwork for (M)other Identity”, and did so by resisting the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. In this sense, my research makes another important contribution to the current research on mothering in the context of domestic abuse as it illustrates that marginalized abused mothers do not remain powerless in the face of hegemonic intensive mothering discourses which encourage and fortify their alienation and oppression as mothers. Rather, they outright resist these intensive mothering discourses, and in doing so find ways to support their own self-definitions as mothers, ones which are empowering and not repressive.

#### **4) Implications of My Research**

##### ***i) Implications for Research and Theory on Mothering in the Context of Domestic Abuse***

My research has important implications in terms of research and theory on mothering in the context of domestic abuse. At the research level my research is one of the first qualitative studies that focuses specifically on abused women's subjective mothering experiences as they relate to dominant mothering ideologies and intersections of race, class, and gender. As such, my research contributes many informative insights into women's personal experiences and meanings of mothering within the social context of domestic abuse. My research findings provide a detailed account of the challenges, struggles, and difficulties of mothering in the context of abuse by putting abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering at the forefront and making their subjectivity visible. Also, my research findings highlight the influence that historically specific systems of meaning have on abused women, by directing attention to the ways in which abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering was framed. Moreover, my research findings demonstrate the variation and diversity in abused women's lives, by focusing on variations in abused women's experiential knowledge of their mothering. Overall, my research has important implications for research on mothering in the context of domestic abuse as it points to how even in the most constrictive and oppressive of contexts in which women mother, and even among the most subjugated and marginalized of women who mother, women find ways to exercise agency, resistance, and power. Far

from supporting a deficit model of mothering, my research demonstrates that abused women love and care deeply for their children, that their mothering is something they feel proud of, and that they overall have positive views of themselves as mothers despite dominant discourses of mothering which casts them in a negative light.

At the theoretical level, my research is located within feminist criminology. Within this discipline, my research is one of the first that is specifically aimed at building theory related to mothering in the context of domestic abuse, which is currently lacking. As such, my research contributes many informative insights towards building theorizations about abused women's mothering experiences. As discussed above, my research findings build on as well as suggest moving beyond O'Reilly's theory of "Mothering Against Patriarchal Motherhood" and instead towards what I refer to as "Mothering Towards Women's Centred Motherhood", as the findings reveal that the abused women constructed their mothering identities in ways that not only resisted, but also redefined and replaced the discourses of intensive mothering. My research findings also build on Collins theory of "Intersectionality and Motherhood", as the findings demonstrate that marginalized abused women also engage in motherwork for their own identities as mothers, what I refer to as "Motherwork for (M)other Identity", by resisting the discourse of intensive mothering in constructing their personal mothering identities. Overall, my research has important implications for theorizations of mothering in the context of domestic abuse as it builds on and extends current theorizations of mothering in order to



include and provide a more comprehensive understanding of abused women's unique experiences as mothers.

## ***ii) Implications for Domestic Abuse Services***

My research also has important implications in terms of support for women who mother in the context of domestic abuse. My research findings demonstrate that the dominant discourse of intensive mothering constructs abused mothers as “bad mothers”. Therefore abused mothers are often automatically perceived and viewed as “bad mothers” as the focus is placed on their deficiencies as mothers in the larger community, such as by domestic abuse shelters counselors, child welfare workers, and school staff, among others. Many of the abused women in this study claimed that they were reluctant to access domestic abuse services, and when they did access these services they were fearful that their mothering abilities would be called into question. Overall, my research has important implications for domestic abuse services as it suggests that agencies that offer services and support to mothers who have experienced domestic abuse ought to move away from a deficit model of mothering which leads to mother-blaming and results in male partners' abuse being obscured and redefined in terms of women's failures as mothers. Rather the focus should be on understanding abused women's own personal experiences of mothering and the ways that they themselves feel they can best be aided and assisted with their mothering.

## **5) Directions for Future Research**

My research points to a number of directions for future research. First, my research inquired about abused women's mothering experiences among abused

women who had successfully left their abusive partner and were, at the time residing, on their own- whether it was in an abused women's emergency shelter, a second stage abused women's shelter, or their own housing. As such, these abused women's perceptions of themselves as mothers were based on that point in time. Future research should examine how abused women who are currently in abusive relationships view themselves as mothers. Mothering while currently in an abusive context may provide different understandings of abused women's mothering identities and how these identities are varied, fluid, and shifting.

Second, my research exclusively examined the subjective mothering identities of abused women who were in heterosexual relationships. Future research should also examine how abused women who are in lesbian relationships view and describe themselves as mothers. The mothering experiences of abused women in lesbian relationships may shed light on different mothering discourses that these mothers encounter and face, and may reveal important insights into their experiences of being held to the dual discourses of mothering and heterosexuality. Examining the mothering experiences of abused lesbian women would help to broaden our understandings of how dominant intensive mothering discourses as well as other discourses impact various abused women's mothering experiences.

Third, my research mainly focused on abused women and their mothering. However, dominant ideologies of mothering are closely linked to dominant ideologies of childhood and related notions of children's exposure to domestic abuse. It would be useful for this connection to be further explored, as it would

provide a greater understanding of how these two discourses are intertwined, and how they influence abused women's mothering experiences.

Finally, my research focused on examining abused women as a group of mothers. Future research should examine ways that other groups of mothers who are constructed and portrayed as "bad mothers" subjectively construct their mothering identities. It is possible that these women's social positions, social contexts, and understandings of dominant mothering ideologies vary and differ from those of abused women. This research could examine how these differences impact if, whether, and how these women resist dominant mothering discourses. Such research could point to other groups of women labeled as "bad mothers" who resist dominant mothering discourses.

All in all, it is my hope that my research, which is but a preliminary examination of mothering in the social context of domestic abuse, will encourage and incite further research in this area. It is crucial for future research to open a window to our understanding of abused women's unique mothering experiences, which has been an area that has been silenced and neglected for far too long.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Interview Schedule

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I am Caroline McDonald-Harker. I appreciate you agreeing to meet with me today to talk about your experiences. I just want to start by telling you a bit about myself. I am a mother of a 3-year-old boy and a 6-month-old girl. I am doing this research study as part of my doctoral program in Sociology at the University of Alberta. This research study is part of my continual efforts over the last several years to listen to abused women's experiences, to raise awareness about abused women's concerns, difficulties, and needs, and to attempt to contribute to ways to further help and support abused women. A few years ago I worked as a Counsellor at Maison Baldwin House, an abused women's shelter in Cornwall, Ontario. After working there I became interested in abused women's experiences. As a result, I decided to investigate, as a researcher, abused women's use of substances as a way to cope and deal with their abuse for my Masters thesis at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec.

As you are aware, I am interested in discussing your mothering experiences. There are a variety of different topics that I am hoping we can cover today, and these include a bit of information about yourself, your mothering experiences in general, your mothering experiences while in an abusive situation, and finally your experiences as a mother who has experienced abuse in relation to your definitions/descriptions, standards/expectations, and images of mothering. Before we begin, I would like to go over the consent form with you (*provide the woman with the consent form*).

#### **I. Sociodemographic Information:**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

- Where were you born?
- Can you tell me when were you born?
- How would you describe your ethnic background?
- Can you tell me the last grade level you finished?
- Do you work outside of the home? If so, how many hours do you work each week?

2. Tell me about your immediate family.

- Who are the members in your immediate family?

- Can you tell me your relationship status? (if a woman has been in more than one relationship, I will ask her to indicate each relationship)
- Can you tell me if you are in a relationship with a man or a woman?
- How long have you been/were you in the relationship?
- How many children do you have?
- What is (are) your child(ren)'s ages?
- What is the sex of your child(ren)?
- Are your children currently living with you?

## **II. Abuse Experiences:**

3. Tell me about your experience being in an abusive relationship (if a woman has been in more than one abusive relationship, I will ask her to indicate which abusive relationship she is referring to).

- What types of abuse did you experience?
- When did the abuse start?
- How long did the abuse go on for?
- How did the abuse make you feel?
- How did the abuse affect you?

## **III. Mothering Experiences:**

4. Tell me about your experiences as a mother.

- Have you always wanted child(ren)?
- What was your experience(s) like being pregnant?
- What was your experience like as a new mother?
- What, for you, are the easy aspects/parts of being a mother?
- What, for you, are the difficult aspects/parts of being a mother?
- What are the joys you experience as a mother?
- What are the disappointments you experience as a mother?
- How do you view yourself as a mother?

## **IV. Mothering Experiences in the Context of Abuse:**

5. Tell me about your mothering experiences in an abusive situation.

- How has experiencing abuse affected your mothering?
- What strategies helped you mother in an abusive situation?
- What are the difficult aspects of mothering in an abusive situation?
- What are the disappointments of being a mother in an abusive situation?

- How has experiencing abuse affected how you view yourself as a mother?

## **V. Mothering Experiences in the Context of Abuse and Dominant Mothering Discourses:**

6. Tell me about your experiences as a mother who has experienced abuse in relation to definitions, standards, and expectations of mothers and mothering.

### **a) Definitions/Descriptions of Mother and Mothering**

- How do you define/describe mother? That is, what do you think of when I say the word ‘mother’?
- How did you come up with this definition/description of mother?
- How do you personally define/describe yourself as a mother?
- How has being abused affected how you define/describe yourself as a mother?
- How do you define/describe mothering? That is, what do you think of when I say the word ‘mothering’?
- How did you come up with this definition/description of mothering?
- How do you personally define/describe your own mothering?
- How has being abused affected how you define/describe your own mothering?

### **b) Standards/Expectations of Mothering**

- What do you think are the standards/expectations of mothering?
- How did you come up with these standards/expectations of mothering?
- Do you feel that there are different standards/expectations of mothering for woman who have been abused, and what are they?
- How did you come up with these different standards/expectations of mothering for woman who have been abused?
- Are there times that you feel that you don’t live up to these standards/expectations of mothering?
- What are your own personal standards/expectations that you have for your mothering?

### **c) Images of Mothering**

- What qualities/characteristics come to mind when you think of a “good” mother?
- What qualities/characteristics come to mind when you think of a “bad” mother?
- How did you come up with these qualities/characteristics?
- Do you feel that mothers who are abused are viewed differently than mothers who are not abused, and why?



- Has there ever been a time when you felt like a good mother, and tell me about it?
- Has there ever been a time when you felt like a bad mother, and tell me about it?
- As a mother who has experienced abuse, has there ever been a time when you felt judged by others, and tell me about it?

We have discussed everything that I was hoping to focus on today. Is there anything else that you would like to add to your experiences and that you would like to discuss, or are there any questions that you may have?

I appreciate you meeting with me today to talk about your experiences. I also want to thank you for being so open and honest with me in discussing these experiences (*provide the woman with a list of support groups and services if needed*).

**Description of Research Project**

**Dissertation Research Project**

*Abused Women: Mothering Under and In Difficult Circumstances*

Researcher: Caroline McDonald-Harker, M.A.  
Doctoral Student  
Department of Sociology  
University of Alberta  
Email: [caroline.mcdonaldharker@ualberta.ca](mailto:caroline.mcdonaldharker@ualberta.ca)  
(403)828-5802

Dr. Bryan Hogeveen (PhD)  
Co-Advisor  
Department of Sociology  
University of Alberta  
(780) 492-2977

Dr. Lise Gotell (PhD)  
Co-Advisor  
Department of Women's Studies  
University of Alberta  
(780) 492-0326

*Purpose of the research:*

The purpose of this research project is to learn about 1) abused women's personal perceptions of their mothering identities; 2) the role, influence, and effects that dominant mothering ideologies have on abused women's personal perceptions of their mothering identities; and 3) the ways in which intersections among the social context of abuse, gender, social class, and race and ethnicity shape abused women's personal perceptions of their mothering identities.

*Description of research:*

I would like to interview women who are mothers and who have experienced abuse by their intimate partners in Calgary, Alberta. I anticipate that the interview will take between one and two hours. During the interview I will ask about your experiences as a mother, your mothering experiences in an abusive situation, and your experiences as a mother who has experienced abuse in relation to society's definition, standards, and expectations of mothering. You are not required to answer any of my questions, you may pass on any questions, and you may stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

The interview is completely confidential. The interview will be tape recorded so that I have an accurate record of the interview. After the interview I will transcribe the interview. I am the only person who will have access to the interview tapes and transcripts. I will not tell anyone else about what you say during the interview. I will use pseudonyms during the analysis and reporting stages of my research so it will not be possible for anyone to find out that you were part of the study or to identify you in the findings.

*Potential harms and benefits:*

The potential harms of participating in this research are minimal. It is possible that the topic of research (mothering in the context of abuse) may be sensitive for some people. I will give you some information and contact phone numbers after the interview in case you would like to talk with someone about any personal questions or concerns you may have.

There are no known benefits to you for participating in this research. By participating in this research you will be contributing to the understanding of mothering in the context of abuse. This is very important for the development of policy and practice in relation to the services and support for women who have experienced abuse, because these policies and practices can benefit greatly by being informed about the actual needs of women who have experienced abuse, particularly the needs of mothers who have experienced abuse.

**Consent form**

**Dissertation Research Project**

*Abused Women: Mothering Under and In Difficult Circumstances*

Please initial each line if you agree with the statement and sign at the bottom.

- I am at least 18 years of age.
- The project has been explained to me and the researcher has answered any questions regarding the study.
- I understand that my participation in the research study is completely voluntary.
- I am free to withdraw at any time.
- I am under no obligation to disclose information I do not want to.
- I may refuse to answer any question.
- Information gathered will be strictly confidential, pseudonyms will be used throughout the analysis process
- I understand that the interview will be audio recorded.
- I understand that the researcher may use a short quote from the interview transcript and that she will ensure that there is no identifying information in the quote.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

**List of Counseling Services**

If you feel you would like some counseling following our interview, please contact any of the following services:

**Calgary Counseling Center**

***Walk-In:***

Suite 200, 940-6 Avenue SW  
Calgary, Alberta  
T2P 3T1

***Phone:***

403-691-5991

***Email:***

[contactus@calgarycounselling.com](mailto:contactus@calgarycounselling.com)

***Online:***

<http://www.calgarycounselling.com/contact.htm>

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**Calgary Distress Center**

***Phone (24 hour help line):***

403-266-1605

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## Appendix E

### **Letter of Request to Shelter Directors**

Caroline McDonald-Harker  
Department of Sociology  
15-5 HM Tory Building  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T6G 2H4  
(403)938-1829-Calgary Home Office  
(403)828-5802-Calgary Cellular  
caroline.harker@ualberta.ca

January 20, 2008

Dear Shelter Director,

My name is Caroline McDonald-Harker and I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta in the Department of Sociology. I am currently residing in Calgary, Alberta. I have been working for the last 4 years as a Research Assistant on the Resolve Healing Journey project in association with RESOLVE Alberta and Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS). In December of 2008, Brigitte Baradoy from Discovery House forwarded this letter to you via email on my behalf. I have also decided to send this letter to you via mail.

I am currently doing my own research for my PhD dissertation, and as such I am writing to request your support with this research project. The focus of my research project is on women's mothering experiences. I firmly believe that it is important to hear from abused women themselves to be able to understand their mothering experiences. As such, the goal of my research project is to allow for abused women who are mothers to speak about their own mothering perceptions, experiences, and needs, in order to learn how we can better help assist women who are mothers and who have been abused. I am interviewing abused women who are mothers and who are currently residing in women's shelters in Calgary, Alberta in order to gain an understanding of their unique experiences as mothers. The women who voluntarily decide to share their experiences with me will remain anonymous, and the information that they share with me will remain strictly confidential. As a way to thank women for their time, I will give them a \$50 honorarium and a copy of my research project once it is completed.

The support of your organization is important for my research project because I would like to get in contact with abused women who are mothers. My request is twofold. First, I respectfully ask for your permission to place the two included posters within the office of your organization to advertise my research project. I would also benefit from verbal support for my research project from the staff within your office. Second, I respectfully ask for your permission for your

Outreach Worker to hand out the twenty included postcards to women who are not currently residing in the shelter but are receiving outreach support. I will provide your organization with a copy of my research project once it is completed for having supported my research project. If you would like further information about my research project, if you have any questions in regards to my research project, or if you would like to further discuss my research project with me, I can be reached at the above telephone numbers and email address.

This research project is part of my continued efforts over the last several years to listen to abused women's experiences, to raise awareness about abused women's concerns, difficulties, and needs, and to attempt to contribute to ways to further help and support abused women. A few years ago I worked as a Counsellor at Maison Baldwin House, an abused women's shelter in Cornwall, Ontario. After working there I became interested in abused women's experiences. As a result, I decided to investigate, as a researcher, abused women's use of substances as a way to cope and deal with their abuse for my Masters thesis at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Caroline McDonald-Harker

# Looking For Mothers

ARE YOU A **MOTHER** WHO  
HAS SURVIVED **ABUSE**?  
WOULD YOU LIKE TO  
SHARE YOUR STORY?

I am a mother and a PhD student studying how women with children cope when they are victimized by domestic abuse. Your voluntary participation would involve a **private** and **confidential** interview.

For more information or to participate please contact  
Caroline (403)828-5802 or email [motherstudy@hotmail.com](mailto:motherstudy@hotmail.com)

Caroline McDonald-Harker  
with Dr. Bryan Hogeveen and Dr. Lise Gotell  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta

Caroline McDonald-Harker  
(403)828-5802  
[motherstudy@hotmail.com](mailto:motherstudy@hotmail.com)

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[motherstudy@hotmail.com](mailto:motherstudy@hotmail.com)



A pink flyer with a black border, decorated with white flowers and green leaves in the corners. The text is centered and reads: "Looking For Mothers" in a large, black, serif font. Below this is a decorative flourish. The text continues: "ARE YOU A MOTHER WHO HAS SURVIVED ABUSE?" and "WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE YOUR STORY?". Below this is a paragraph: "I am a mother and a PhD student studying how women with children cope when they are victimized by domestic abuse. Your voluntary participation would involve a private and confidential interview." followed by contact information: "For more information or to participate please contact Caroline (403)828-5802 or email [motherstudy@hotmail.com](mailto:motherstudy@hotmail.com)". At the bottom, it lists the researchers: "Caroline McDonald-Harker with Dr. Bryan Hogeveen and Dr. Lise Gotell University of Alberta Edmonton, Alberta".

# Looking For Mothers

ARE YOU A MOTHER WHO  
HAS SURVIVED ABUSE?

WOULD YOU LIKE TO  
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I am a mother and a PhD student studying how women with children cope when they are victimized by domestic abuse. Your voluntary participation would involve a private and confidential interview.

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