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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Role of Mothering in Portuguese Women's Decision-Making within Abusive Relationships

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## Abstract

**Purpose** This article reports on the findings from a larger study focusing on women's experiences of abuse and subsequent criminal justice interventions. While mothering was not initially the central concern of this research, it soon became clear that it played a key role in informing women's decision-making within abusive relationships which could not be overlooked. As such, I explore the role of mothering and children in women's decision-making and responses to the abuse.

**Method** This research was underpinned by feminist principles. It involved semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty-nine Portuguese women, between September and December 2017. Data was analyzed thematically.

**Results** Findings from this research show that mothering identities surpass victim status. In explaining their decision-making, women more commonly draw on their mothering identities, their behavior being guided by their perceived responsibilities to protect and care for their children. Due to social constructions of motherhood and mothering, in the Portuguese context and beyond, women struggle with the coexistence of both mothering identities and victim status, with the first inevitably *erasing* the second.

**Conclusion** A better understanding of the complex ways in which women act to care for and protect their children within abusive relationships is needed. Contrary to the often perpetuated belief that abused women are incapable of caring for their children, this research highlights how their own victimization and risk is made secondary in their attempts to ensure their children's safety and wellbeing. The implications of these findings for policy and practice are considered.

**Keyword** Mothering; intimate partner abuse; children; victim status

## Introduction

Among the growing scholarship on intimate partner abuse, despite some recent developments, the issue of mothering remains away from the spotlight. Traditionally, research has focused on the impact of abuse on children, with portrayals of 'poor' motherhood and 'failed' mothering dominating the discourses despite the lack of consistent research (Lapierre, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). While feminist academics and activists have long highlighted the complex and highly restricted environment in which abused women are required to parent their children, a focus on women' suggested erratic ability to function within abusive relationships (Buchanan & Moulding, 2021; Levendosky et al., 2003) has left "little room (…) to view women as competent and concerned mothers" (Buchanan & Moulding, 2021, p. 666) and has failed to acknowledge and address the complexity of women's experiences in this context.

This article is based on findings from a larger study exploring women's experiences of abuse and subsequent criminal justice interventions. While mothering was not initially the central concern of this research, it soon became clear that it played a key role in informing women's decision-making within abusive relationships which could not be overlooked. As such, the role and impact of mothering identities on women's behavior within an abusive relationship and their responses to abuse is explored here. Based on a sample of Portuguese women, I advance the argument that motherhood status surpasses that of victimhood, contradicting common public discourses of women's inability to care for or protect their children. I develop the idea that due to social constructions of motherhood and mothering, in the Portuguese context and beyond, women struggle with

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the coexistence of both mothering identities and victim status, with the first inevitably *erasing* the second. This article begins with an overview of previous research on the impact of children on women's responses to abuse, followed by a review of the literature on mothering in the context of domestic abuse. A conceptual framework is then introduced, in which the use of the terms *decision-making* and *mothering* are discussed. After a description of the methodological approach, I explore the ways in which women's mothering identities shape their behavior in response to the abuse. I end with some concluding thoughts on the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

## Mothering and Motherhood in the Context of Intimate Partner Abuse

As mentioned above, historically, most research on mothering and motherhood in the context of intimate partner abuse has focused on its (negative) impact on children and their well-being, safety, and development (see e.g., Hester et al., 2007). While such focus is understandable, to an extent, it has inevitably led to a disproportionate review and evaluation of mothering in abusive relationships (Wendt et al., 2015). In both academic and professional spheres, concerns have been raised regarding women's inability to adequately protect their children, which has obscured considerations of agency and proactiveness in these constrained and volatile environments (Buchanan & Moulding, 2021; Wendt et al., 2015). This has led to discourses of 'adequate or not' or 'good or bad' mothering within abusive relationships, with little recognition of men's violence and its impact (Ateah et al., 2019; Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Lapierre, 2010a, 2010b; Maher et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, a growing body of research has turned its attention to the complexities of mothering through violence, highlighting the multiple ways in which mothering is impacted by and often instrumentalized within abusive relationships (Maher et al., 2021). Such work has brought to light the unquestioned burden of responsibility for children placed on abused mothers (Lapierre, 2010a, 2010b). It has revealed how women within abusive relationships, particularly those who are unable to put an end to the abuse, are often labelled as 'bad mothers', 'neglectful' or 'unprotective' (Hester & Radford, 1996; Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Lapierre, 2010a; Strega et al., 2008; Wendt et al., 2015). These damaging discourses around 'good' and 'bad' mothering have a tremendous impact on mothers and their responses to abuse. This is illustrated by Maher et al. (2021) and their analysis of secondary data gathered from two qualitative studies on women's mothering. The authors argue that,

> [u]nchallenged accounts of mothers as endlessly responsible for and responsive to their children animate persistent discourses of mother blame in a wide range of contexts; for women mothering in violence, these discourses may diminish their access to assistance and support, and threaten or undermine their relationships with their children (Maher et al., 2021, p. 660).

These narratives around 'good mothering' are undoubtedly based on unrealistic standards imposed on women, and are not only conducive to mother-blaming but also self-blame. Indeed, in the context of domestic abuse, women often question their own mothering abilities and performance (Lapierre, 2010a). For instance, a recent qualitative study with fifteen abused women involved with child protection services in the United Kingdom found that women had internalized high expectations surrounding their mothering, as set up by society more broadly and child protection services in particular. These expectations include 'showing children they are loved and nurturing the child's emotions; being warm, caring and supportive and spending time with the children; meeting the child's basic care needs and looking after them; protecting children and keeping them safe and for the mother to do her best and put her children first' (Stewart, 2021, p. 691). Another study conducted in England found that the socially constructed ideals of motherhood place highly unrealistic expectations on women as mothers and, within abusive environments, these are particularly unattainable. Women in this study reported guilt over their perceived failure regarding their mothering practices, even when they were broadly able to protect and care for their children. (Lapierre, 2010b). Similarly, in Australia, Moulding et al. (2015) found that mothers commonly blamed themselves for their apparent 'failure to protect'. The authors argued that 'mother blame draws on a range of femininity and victim-blaming discourses that can entangle women and children further in violence' (Moulding et al., p. 249).

Further research has continued to challenge these problematic depictions of 'abused' mothers, emphasizing women's efforts to protect and care for their children in the context of abusive relationships. A recent study by Buchanan and Moulding (2021) has highlighted how women exercise agency in a multitude of ways in order to protect their children. Countering traditional discourses of passiveness and inability, the authors argue that women within abusive relationships utilize protective agency to pre-empt partners' abusive outbursts and avoid conflict. Other research has noted the myriad of strategies women employ in order to protect their children from the abuse of their partners. These include 'pleasing' their partners and preserving their image as fathers among children (Wendt et al., 2015), attempts at predicting and avoiding conflict based on close monitoring

of partners' mood and behavior (Lapierre, 2010b), physically separating children from the abuser to avoid physical harm and mitigating the emotional toll of being exposed to abuse (Lapierre, 2010b; Nixon et al., 2017), among others. These strategies and others, including boundary setting, remain relevant even post-separation (Zeoli et al., 2013). Importantly, the choices made around protective strategies go beyond formal support institutions and separation and are shaped by mothers' perceptions of what is best for their children. While it is recognized that not all women are successful in protecting or caring for their children, these studies evidence the importance of recognizing women's agency and protective efforts to ensure that both them and their children are adequately supported.

## The Impact of Children in Decision-Making in the Context of Intimate Partner Abuse

Previous research has supported the complex and pivotal role of children in women's decision-making. On the one hand, the presence of children can act as a barrier to disclosure and help-seeking, for example, due to fears of children being harmed or loss of custody. Previous studies demonstrated that fear of losing children can hinder contact with the police (e.g. DeVoe & Smith, 2003; Wolf et al., 2003). For example, Evans and Feder (2014) conducted interviews with thirty-one women seeking help from domestic abuse services in England and found that disclosure to statutory agencies such as the police was influenced by concerns over repercussions for children, such as children being taken into care. Rhodes et al. (2010) also found that fears over the involvement of child protection services played into women's decision to seek help from the police and that this threat was sometimes used by abusive partners to their advantage.

It is also known that women refrain from reporting the abuse over fears of separating children from their fathers, which is centrally linked to ideas of motherhood, fatherhood, and family. Victimized women often refer to the importance of a father figure and the preservation of the family for children's wellbeing when providing reasons for not seeking help. For example, a study with middle-aged and older women in Canada has shown that responsibility for (young and adult) children and their protection loomed large as concerns for women; with the need to protect children posing as a challenge to help-seeking, as well as the desire to protect and maintain the family (Beaulaurier et al., 2005; see also Ahmad et al., 2009). Economic and financial concerns can also become challenging in this context, particularly when the abuser is the main income provider. Women are confronted with the responsibility to meet children's needs and fear they would not be able to do so without the financial support of their partners (Rasool, 2016). This reasoning is usually applied when considering whether to remain or leave the abusive relationship (e.g., Caridade et al., 2020; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Moe, 2009; Pinto, 2018); although there is not necessarily an overlap between seeking help and deciding to leave the abusive relationship.

Conversely, prior research has also suggested that children are a powerful motivator and a 'turning point' (Chang et al., 2010) for viewing IPA differently and attempting to end the abuse (see Djikanovic, et al., 2012; Ford-Gilboe, et al., 2015; Kelly, 2009; Petersen et al., 2005). In a study by Stephens and Melton (2016), 68.4 per cent of the interviewed women explained leaving the relationship and seeking services because of their children, namely wanting to provide them with a better life and protect them from abuse. Rasool (2016) also found that women often disclose the abuse and seek help to protect their children and provide them with a better life, and Rhodes et al. (2010) showed that help-seeking can be motivated by mothers' desires to protect children from the harmful effects of abuse. Overall, concerns over children's suffering from either exposure to abuse or direct victimization encourage women to leave and seek help (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Fugate et al., 2005; Kiss et al., 2012).

These studies highlight the dual role of children in abusive relationships. These different findings could mean the presence of children affects women in different directions and at different stages of their relationships (Meyer, 2011). Importantly, as demonstrated above, women often feel ambivalent about how to respond to their abuse (see e.g., Jordan, 2004; Simmons et al., 2011; Fugate et al., 2005), which results in apparently conflicting reasoning (e.g., wanting to protect children from the harmful impact of abuse whilst wishing to keep the family together).

## The Portuguese Context

The reader might have noted, in the review above, the dearth of research based in Portugal. Indeed, there has seemingly been little focus on the issue of mothering in the context of intimate partner abuse. Where research exists, it has focused predominantly on the issue of parental and educational practices in the context of abuse (e.g., Sani & Cunha, 2011). Nonetheless, research is slowly emerging. For example, a qualitative study conducted by Vieira (2019) with fifteen abused mothers highlighted how, despite the impact of abuse, women retain their abilities, motivations and skills surrounding their roles as mothers. The author found that protecting children from abuse was a key factor in women's decision to leave the abusive relationship. The study also highlights women's perceptions of the expectations surrounding 'good' mothering, including caring for children, showing affection, and putting children first.

Regarding the impact of children on women's decision-making more broadly, there has been some research conducted in this context. Similar to the findings discussed above, Sani and Pereira (2020) noted how concerns surrounding children and their protection can both motivate or hinder separation. Similarly, in a study with migrant women in Portugal, Ferreira (2021) also emphasized the dual role of children, who acted, on the one hand, as a reason for women to remain in the relationship and, on the other hand, as the much-needed trigger to seek formal and informal support. Other studies have echoed similar findings (e.g., Caridade et al., 2020).

While these have undoubtedly provided relevant insight into the role of children in abusive relationships, further research is needed to understand the impact of mothering identities on women's decision-making. This study attempts to contribute to this underdeveloped field.

## Conceptual Framework

### Reflecting on Decision-Making as a (Constrained) Process

While this article focuses on the issue of mothering identities and how these shape decision-making and behavior in the context of intimate partner abuse, it is crucial to acknowledge that, whilst a central one, this is but one factor shaping women's experiences. While I am not afforded the luxury of space, I acknowledge the need for a holistic view of women's decisions within an abusive context. As such, two caveats are in order. Firstly, it is important to reflect on the notion of 'decision-making'. Following Padfield and Tata's (2023) conceptualization, decision-making is understood in the context of this article as a "process rather than a momentary act" (p. 676). While snapshots of this process are provided, the *decisions* portrayed must be understood and interpreted within the broader context of intimate partner abuse, and the already well-documented factors which shape women's experiences beyond their mothering identities (e.g., resources, family support). Intimate partner abuse is marked by complex dynamics, and victims' decisions within abusive relationships reflect that complexity.

Secondly, one must recognize the contention around the term decision-making. Victims' space for choice or decision-making within abusive relationships is often limited. While there is no doubt that individuals within abusive relationships operate in widely constrained environments, it is important to recognize their agency, even if this is highly restricted. This is particularly relevant when discussing motherhood in the context of abuse. Often abused mothers are portrayed as passive and 'unfit' mothers, incapable of 'acting' to care for their children (Lapierre, 2007). Women who are abused seemingly challenge the certainly context-dependent, yet all too familiar, standards of 'good mothering'. By emphasizing their role as agents within the relationship, I aim to switch the focus to women's proactiveness and intentional responses in caring for and protecting their children.

### Defining Mothering Identities and Motherhood

Drawing from the work of Rubin (1975, 1984) and Podobina (2005), the term *maternal identity* is used in this context to refer to the social and behavioral role of women, their ideas about themselves as mothers, and their ideas about social expectations of the people around them. Central to this understanding, is women's recognition that they are competent as mothers as well as their knowledge and understanding of their children. Rather than conceptualizing mothering as a single or unique identity, the emphasis is placed on the multiple roles women assume or take on, and the narratives constructed around those roles, to highlight the multitude of experiences encapsulated within conceptualizations and understandings of motherhood. For the purposes of this research, motherhood is understood here "as a patriarchal institution that constrains, regulates, and dominates women and their mothering. It ensures that women perform their mothering in particular ways, according to high (and often unrealistic) standards of 'good' mothering (Lapierre, 2021).

## Methodology

The findings presented here are based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven women in Portugal who had had experiences of abuse perpetrated by male intimate partners. As previously mentioned, this research draws from a larger study of victims' perceptions and experiences of criminal justice interventions. Specifically, this project set out to explore victims and practitioners' perceptions of criminal justice interventions and their impact on women's lives. While there were no pre-established questions about the role of motherhood and children (aside from demographic data collected on number of children and their age), when exploring women's journeys after abuse and their decisions to engage (or not) with the criminal justice system, children emerged as a central element in women's discourses. For example, in questions surrounding women's disclosure and help-seeking (e.g., have you ever told anyone about it? Why did you decide to tell someone what was going on?), their contact with the police (e.g., was there any moment you thought you needed police help?), and their experience in court or expectations of criminal justice outcomes (e.g., what was the outcome of the process? What were you hoping would happen?), the role of children featured heavily

in women's discussions. The flexibility of semi-structured interviewing, therefore, allowed for these issues to be explored as they emerged throughout the interviews.

Given its focus, this research is framed by feminist principles. As I set out to explore women's stories, in an effort to privilege their voices and highlight the subjectivity of their experiences, I was particularly attentive to power dynamics during the interviews. Critical reflexivity was also a key element, and I was attentive to the impact of this research not only on participants but also myself, as a researcher.

This research received ethical approval from the Institute of Criminology Ethics Committee at the University of Cambridge, alongside independent ethics processes with some of the collaborating organizations. Once approval was obtained, data collection took place, across seven districts in Portugal, between September and December 2017. Women were recruited through third-sector organizations. I contacted organizations which provided services to crime victims (including victim support centers, refuges, and emergency shelters) and/or, broadly, socially vulnerable populations (social support organizations, social refuges, women's centers). Thirteen organizations helped with sample recruitment, by reaching out to service users with the desired profile – female victims of intimate partner abuse by male partners and/or ex-partners – and inquiring them about their willingness to participate. Beyond this profile, there were no specific eligibility criteria for this research. For the purposes of this study, however, only the views of women with children were included (twenty-seven out of twenty-nine originally recruited participants).

During the planning and implementation of this research, I was aware of the implications of recruiting participants through *gatekeepers*, and the ethical challenges surrounding this approach. Particularly, there were concerns regarding the extent to which women are able to exercise choice when participation was prompted by practitioners who provide them with help and emotional support and with whom they have an existing relationship. There are complex dynamics at play here between gatekeepers, the researched, and ultimately, the researcher. For instance, when discussing their involvement with this research, some of the women interviewed mentioned 'owing' their support workers for all the help they provided in times of great need. As a researcher, I inevitably benefited from the relationships between participants and their supporters. Since most contact had with the participants was brief and happened only during the interview, the relationship of trust they have with support providers facilitated recruitment. In a sense, the trust placed by support officers in my integrity as a researcher made women more confident to get involved. These concerns highlight the need to make certain that consent is not a 'one-off' exchange between gatekeepers and potential participants, but rather an honest and open discussion between potential participants and the researcher. Throughout the research, consent was constantly discussed and 'renegotiated' with participants, even during the interviews. This involved an assessment of women's emotional states and ability to engage without compromising their well-being and reinstating the voluntary nature of their engagement. Given the sensitive and emotionally demanding nature of this research, caring for participants was fundamental to minimize the negative impacts of participation.

The length of the interviews ranged between thirty-three minutes and two hours and seventeen minutes. These were conducted individually and face-to-face, and followed a semi-structured interviewing approach. This was particularly important as I hoped to provide participants with the space and flexibility to share their stories, feelings and emotions in a way that was comfortable and logical to them. For women who have been abused, these opportunities do not come often. Before the interview, I discussed the research project with participants in more detail, as well as the nature of their participation. An informed consent form was provided, and permission was requested to audio record the interviews. A brief questionnaire was applied at the start to gather data on demographic characteristics, along with details of possible contacts with the criminal justice system.

A complex and time-consuming task, analysis occurred in parallel with data collection (although continuing long after). After each interview, I noted down my immediate thoughts alongside a brief overview of the themes considered more relevant at the time. I then transcribed each interview, with as much detail as possible, including sighs, repetitive verbal aids, and emotional reactions such as crying.[1] Although transcribing began after the first interview was completed, it was not always possible to continue this process alongside data collection, due to its heavy emotional content. To avoid researcher burnout, this was a slower-paced process, but one which was strongly complemented with the revisiting of initial notes. Once transcription was completed, interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12. For the purposes of this article, a thematic analysis approach was roughly followed, as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with data familiarization, including reading and re-reading of transcripts and the noting down of initial ideas and points of interest. This was then followed by coding each individual transcript, which allowed for an initial set of codes to be generated to guidance subsequent coding. A working document was then created in which interview fragments were organized under different themes and sub-themes. This was then built into a coherent narrative,

[1] Given the context of the interviews, some of which was conducted in public spaces (as per participants preference) this was not always fully captured by the recordings.

supported by quotes from interviewees and linked to previous research.

In what follows, the findings from this research are presented. This section begins by reflecting on women's identities as 'mothers' and how that prevailed above their status as victims. This is followed by a discussion of themes around motherhood narratives, including 'mothers as protective agents', 'bad mothering and the disservice of mothering identities', and 'the holy status of fatherhood'. In exploring these themes, this article discusses the ways in which children intervened, directly or indirectly, to influence women's decision to disclose the abuse, leave/remain in the relationship, and engage with the criminal justice system. The compounding effects of these issues are considered, in interaction with religion and idealized conceptualizations of family. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

## Findings

### Mothering as a Dominant Identity

While women were not directly asked about their identities as mothers, it was clear that their maternal identities and narratives surrounding motherhood, for the most part, surpassed any other identities or status, including those surrounding victimhood. When reflecting on their experiences, women constantly referred to their role as mothers and their responsibilities towards their children as key elements in their decision-making within the abusive relationship. When attempting to explain their actions (or inaction) in response to the abuse (e.g., disclosing the abuse to friends or family, calling the police, supporting punishment or prosecution), more so than emphasizing their victimization, women constantly reasserted their maternal identities and roles: as carers, protectors, and providers. They highlighted their responsibility in maintaining the family unit and ensuring a 'complete' childhood for their children. That said, these considerations intersected with those surrounding 'idealized' notions of family and motherhood, religious conceptualizations of marriage, and assumptions regarding the necessary conditions to ensure healthy and happy children. Overall, assuming these identities meant that women represented themselves as the sole bearers of responsibility, not for the abuse itself, but for its consequences: for the family, for the children, and the abuser. This not only highlights the pervasive dominance of traditional gendered expectations and prescriptive gendered roles and responsibilities, but the immense value placed on 'love' as a rational element in decision-making within the constrained context of abusive relationships.

Several narratives emphasized the dominant motherhood identity over any victimization, including 'mothers as protective agents', 'bad mothering and the disservice of mothering identities', and 'the holy status of fatherhood'.

### Mothers as Protective Agents

A key example of mothering identities surpassing victim status was women's perceived responsibility in caring for their children and protecting them from harm.[2] Women often assumed the role of *protectors* towards their children, symbolically erasing their own risk and victimization. This was particularly evident when they had younger children. This need – or responsibility, as it was perceived by women – to protect children was evoked when discussing the decision to disclose abuse, contact the police, and/or support criminal justice processes.[3] For example, during the interviews, I asked Mónica (35 years old) if she had ever contacted the police before being stabbed by her partner. When explaining why she avoided doing so, she said:

> I wanted to protect my daughter and my family, but I couldn't protect them all. By protecting them, I was sacrificing myself. I would a thousand times rather be beaten up myself than her, than my daughter… she is my everything! I would give my life, for her to live!

Mónica's partner often made threats using her daughter to control her and intimidate her into staying with him. Her quote strongly encapsulates the great weight given to protecting others, particularly children, when responding to ongoing abuse. Mónica recognized how she 'sacrificed' herself (and ultimately her safety) in order to protect her daughter, but claimed she would have endured any violence in order to guarantee her safety. Her role as a *protective agent* (Buchanan & Moulding, 2021) surpassed her victimization status, which, whilst not completely removed, became secondary.

Similarly, Carla (42 years old) shared how her partner, the father of her children, threatened to kill them if she ever left him or attempted to end their marriage. During the interview, she recalled:

> At some point I had mentioned putting an end to our marriage, [I said] that I was tired, and that I couldn't do it anymore… he said: "You might not be mine, but

[2] *Harm* is used here to describe a wide range of potential negative impacts on the child. Not only constrained to physical harm, I use it to refer to possible emotional, psychological, and developmental harms (e.g., disturbing a child's routine, depriving them of an 'ideal' family) resulting from a perceived woman's failure to adequately carry out their motherhood role.

[3] It is important to acknowledge that women within abusive relationships often perceive very little or no alternative options to the abusive behavior. I refer the reader to the 'conceptual framework' section, on the conceptualization of *decision-making* within this paper.

> you won't be anyone else's, because I will kill the three of you".

Her despair was such that Carla came close to taking her own life.

> I went to the top of the dam, to try and do something bad, because I thought to myself: "If I- If he- If I hurt myself, I protect my children", because after I die… after I die, he wouldn't hurt my kids.

While she described this situation with shame and regret, Carla's narrative was constructed around her motherhood and her perceived ultimate responsibility to care for and protect her children. She explained, "If someone asks me if I want myself or my children to die, obviously I rather I die and not my children!". Not only do these narratives reflect the perceived primacy of motherhood above women's own safety, but they also clearly illustrate the highly constrained environment in which abused women, unsurprisingly, operate. In another example, Judite, a 37-year-old woman with two children, described how, at the entrance of the police station, she began to question her decision to report the abuse from her husband:

> I said I would go and report it. Me and my friend left, and she took me to the [police] to report. When I was arriving at the station, turned to my friend, and said: "Clara, I don't know if I should report it or not! Imagine [my son] in the middle of all this!?".

In this context, a decision 'not to act' on the abuse, translates effectively into a conscious 'action' to protect children. For example, Carmo (45 years old) explained, "I would take it for my children". This quote encapsulates women's perception of 'enduring abuse' as a protective strategy. This challenges common discourses surrounding women's passivity in abusive relationships (see e.g., Buchanan & Moulding, 2021; Lapierre, 2008, 2010b; Weisz & Wiersma, 2011).

The challenges in the coexistence of victimization, vulnerability, and motherhood are evident and perhaps unsurprising. In the context of abuse, it appears the status of *victim* is restricted. In the context of motherhood, women are not allowed the space to be vulnerable, as they are responsible for caring for their children. Once children are no longer in need of protection, then women can more easily assume that vulnerability and recognize the victim label. It appears that the potential for children to become victims prevents women from accessing this status for themselves. For example, Susana (41 years old) had different reasons for not contacting the police, including the fear that if she reported the abuse "things would get worse and somehow affect [the children]". When children are perceived as vulnerable, mothers find themselves unable to be perceived as such. While these seemingly occur in a self-identification process, mothering identities were also dominant in discourses involving agencies and institutions involved in responding to victimization (see *Bad mothering and the 'disservice' of maternal identities)*.

While women seemingly struggled with the coexistence of their maternal identities and their status as victims, this role was inverted for those with older, more independent children. These women recalled being *protected* by their children. When children assume the role of *protectors*, women more readily accept the status of victimhood. This is then brought into the decision-making process. For example, Sofia (68 years old) said her son asked her if she would be willing to report his father and accompanied her to the police station. She mentioned that all the attempts she had made at leaving the relationship were with the help of her son.

Commonly, children were perceived as the vulnerable element of the abusive relationship, in need of protection. However, considerations of vulnerability worked in complex ways. That is to say that the need to protect influences victims' decision-making in different directions (Meyer, 2011). Contrary to the experiences above, in some instances, and similar to what has been demonstrated in previous research (see e.g., Chang et al., 2010; Stephens & Melton, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2010) concerns over children's safety and well-being compelled women to break the wall of silence and disclose the abuse. It was the awareness or fear of the negative impacts of abuse on their children, and the need to protect them, that stirred change. Sandra (30 years old) explained she was worried about her son growing up in an unhealthy environment. She said she repeatedly 'gave in' and 'forgave' her partner's abuse, but the need to provide her son with a happy and healthy childhood made her seek separation:

> (…) because I don't want my son to grow up in an environment where he says: "Look, dad is stealing, dad is smoking those things that make him laugh…" and stuff like that. I don't want that! I'd rather my son grow up with only his mum, granny, and uncles from my side than… than being raised in this mockery!

This is an interesting example. Sandra justifies leaving the abuse due to concerns over providing her child with a healthy childhood environment. However, these concerns are not framed around her victimization, but rather other 'illegal' behavior from her partner (e.g., drug consumption, stealing). In this example, her victimization is doubly erased and her role as a mother, responsible for ensuring a healthy childhood for her son, prevails. Unlike other women, Sandra also highlights the poor parenting from her partner (see *Fatherhood as a holy status*).

Exposure to abuse, as well as direct violence against children by the abusive partner, were instrumental in women's decision to end the relationship, whether through formal (e.g., contacting the police) or informal approaches

(e.g., reaching out to family or friends). Often women referred to violence in the presence of children or against them as 'the last drop'. For example, Ana, a 30-year-old woman with an underaged child, said: "The first time he pushed me, he bruised my arm in front of my kid and that's when the cup started filling. While it wasn't in front of him…". Once Ana believed she could no longer shelter her son from the abuse she was suffering, a shift in thinking occurred and she grew intolerant to her partner's behavior. Once again, abuse and its impact are considered in relation to children and their vulnerability, rather than women's own safety and wellbeing.

Cila (63 years old) said, "that's what made me report it, him assaulting my daughter". Before this event, Cila had never reported the abuse, and the physical assault her daughter experienced was the 'tipping point' that pushed her toward this decision. Once again, while women saw themselves as capable of, or responsible for, enduring abuse, the need to protect children (regardless of their age) required formal intervention. With a similar experience, Lúcia (27 years old) recalled the day she decided to contact the police:

> [T]hat day he slapped me. But it wasn't the slap itself, it was the constant verbal abuse and [my daughter] used to witness a lot of it, and she was the one asking to leave. She didn't like that environment. That day, just because I asked if he was going to have lunch, he started fighting; and she got really scared. I asked my daughter: "Do you want to leave?"; and she said: "Let's go!". And I came to the [police force] to ask for help.

For Lúcia, the rupture of the relationship and the realization that she needed formal help were both prompted by concerns for her daughter. In her comment, it is also clear that the decision to seek help from the police was not immediate, but rather slow. Lúcia initially avoided separation because of threats against her daughter, but over time the impact of this barrier changed, and the need to shelter her children from the abusive environment prevailed.

These examples underline the role of children as the 'tipping point' that prompts, across time, a shift in attitudes (or acceptance) toward the partner's abusive behavior. Once again, it is worth noting that it was not women's victimization per se that prompted change, but rather the perceived impact it has on their children. In these decisions, women evoke their maternal identities, rather than victimhood status, to substantiate change. Women's victimization remains secondary, as it is their responsibilities as mothers that guide their behavior.

It is important to note that, despite the apparent triggering effect of direct abuse against children, the decision to report the abuse or leave the relationship is not a simple one. Rather, such decisions are often marked by conflicting feelings. For instance, the wish to provide children with a family was confronted with the recognition of the negative impact of the abusive environment.

## Bad Mothering and the 'Disservice' of Maternal Identities

Women's discourses not only illustrate the perceived high expectations or responsibilities associated with fulfilling maternal roles but equally the impermanence of such status. In other words, women's experiences show how easy it is to lose 'motherhood' status, particularly when this is equated with traditional understandings of 'good mothering'. In this study, women shared how they had their abilities as mothers questioned by others, both in their informal networks and broadly by formal institutions. Echoing the findings of previous research (e.g., Lapierre, 2010b; Mullender et al., 2002), the questioning of women's mothering abilities was used as a strategy to further perpetuate abuse and control. For example, Carolina (42 years old) said during the interview how her partner and his family 'blackmailed' her by denying her the status of motherhood:

> He and his family. They manipulated me, saying: "Ah, you don't work, you are sick, they're gonna take the boy from you because a mother…". Firstly, they never saw me as a mother! Right? They didn't consider me as such. And I was always the one who looked who looked after my boy.

It was Carolina's concerns about her child's well-being that led her to seek help. However, for a long time, the threat of losing her child prevented her from reaching out to the authorities. There was often an immediate link established between victimization and poor motherhood. In simple terms, victimized women were inevitably portrayed as bad mothers, as this was both a *tool* and an assumed *consequence* of abuse. Carolina shared how, even after disclosing the abuse to her son's pediatrician, due to concerns regarding his development, she thought to herself: "I am doing everything wrong".

Self-blaming was not uncommon and was often a reflection of social attitudes towards motherhood, particularly mother-blaming. That said, the crucial importance of motherhood was seemingly instrumentalized by police officers in attempting to encourage change. Two women mentioned contacts with police officers in which they threatened to remove their children if the abusive situation was to continue:

> two police officers came around, and one of them told me: "If this continues, do you know what I will do?" (…) "I am going to get your daughter and take her with me!". Because she was there! (…) And then

that's when I never called the police again. (Rita, 53 years old)

When the police officer comes to me and he says, the first time: "Another complaint to the [police force] because of 'lovers quarrels', we will take your son!" (Sandra, 30 years old)

Regardless of its intention (e.g., prompting women to leave the abusive relationship), these situations effectively deny women their victim status. By emphasizing women's mothering identities and evoking their responsibility towards their children, such interactions perpetuate the myth that victimization and good mothering cannot coexist. At the same time, having their mothering identities (i.e. their belief and perceptions of their roles not just as mothers but as 'good' mothers) under threat further raises the veil of silence which prevents women from seeking further support, in fear of losing their children. These situations emphasize the disservice of mothering identities, which undermine women's victimization and hinder their help-seeking efforts.

A similar experience was described by Carmo (45 years old), which illustrates this tension between motherhood and victimhood, whilst highlighting further complexities. Carmo mentioned how, after contacting the police about the abuse she was being subjected to from her husband, social services got involved and her child was signaled as at-risk, whilst nothing was done about her own victimization. During the interview, Carmo expressed her frustration and argued, "If you think about it, it wasn't my son's life that was at risk, it wasn't him that was being mistreated. It was me. Me!". While Carmo believed she had been able to adequately protect her son, the involvement of social services alongside a lack of support for herself served only to reiterate her inability to properly *mother* her children. While she disclosed experiencing abuse, she failed to acquire victim status. Instead, she perceived herself as having been labelled as an unfit mother, or a criminal.

I felt like a criminal… that's how they treated me! (…) I ended up with more problems because they sent my case to child protection. My boy was at risk? I went to get help for myself! I was the one being threatened, not my son!

This situation illustrates how women renegotiate and resist 'bad mother' identities by drawing on their victimization status, as doing so allows them to reinforce their mothering abilities. This does not occur in their own processes of self-identification – as mentioned above, when responding to their abuse women most readily draw on their identity as mothers and their perceived responsibility towards their children; however, when such identity is questioned by others, victimization comes to the fore.

Importantly, the stories shared by these women illustrate how the burden of responsibility for children is disproportionately placed on mothers (Lapierre, 2010a, 2010b). Within these abusive relationships, women portray themselves and are portrayed, as the sole bearers of responsibility for children and their safety. Fatherhood, on the other hand, remains largely unquestioned.

## The Holy Status of Fatherhood

Associated with the perception of women as the sole bearers of responsibility for children was the inevitable relevance of father figures. Contrary to motherhood, easily questioned and undermined, fathering assumed a seemingly *holy* status. While women struggled to have the space to be both victims and mothers, these identities being portrayed as 'either/or' categories, they often represented their partners' identities as 'fathers' (or father figures) and as 'abusers' as two distinctive, discrete categories. Unless children were *directly* victimized, abusive partners were not automatically perceived as abusive fathers.

When discussing their decisions to not seek help or pursue criminal justice avenues in response to their victimization, women often evoked their partners' status as fathers. For example, Cila (63 years old) explained how she did not want her partner to be sentenced to prison because she "wouldn't feel great seeing [her] children visit their father in prison". In a similar reasoning, Manuela (42 years old) said, "he is the father of my children, even though I don't feel love for him or want to be with him". Other women echoed these experiences, highlighting the need to prioritize children and not subject them to the pain of seeing their father suffer. Once again, women saw themselves as responsible for the potential consequences of the abuse, including the possibility of their partner's conviction. For example, Júlia (54 years old) explained how she did not want her husband to be imprisoned, because "He is the father of my children… Then I'd be with my children, and then [they'd say], "Mom, why did you convict dad…?".

Fatherhood was, therefore, a seemingly less relative status. While women saw their parental abilities (i.e., mothering) questioned when experiencing abuse and saw themselves held responsible for their alleged inability to care for and protect their children, the same did not occur for those perpetrating it. As Filipa (35 years old) put it, *"despite everything*, he is the father of my children" (emphasis added). The status of fatherhood and its importance, in the way in which is constructed, remained largely unaffected, whilst motherhood had to be constantly renegotiated and mothers had to resist (or overcome) judgements of poor motherhood, often unsuccessfully. As discussed in the section above, these different thresholds for 'good' mothering and 'good' fathering were often perpetuated and reinforced by formal

institutions. For example, Sílvia (38 years old) shared a situation in which a child protection representative attempted to arrange for visiting rights for her abusive partner to see their child after they had been moved to an emergency refuge.[4]

> (…) this lady even tried to get [daughter's] father to come here to visit his daughter because *he has the right to*! He doesn't! From the moment I am in an emergency refuge, he does not have that right. [emphasis in original]

Whilst this situation appears extreme, it illustrates the almost sanctimonious representation of fatherhood and the contrasting 'deficit model of mothering' (Lapierre, 2008), focused on women's 'failures' within the context of abusive relationships. The holy status of fatherhood was only undermined when children were exposed to the abuse of their mothers or directly abused themselves, as discussed above.

Associated with this almost untouchable status of fatherhood was the constructed notion of the 'ideal' family, as that comprised of a mother and a father. There was the pervasive idea that children need their fathers, and this featured heavily in women's decision-making. For instance, Lurdes (48 years old) did not want to report the abuse, as she wanted to create a "harmonious family" and because "le loves the kids and the kids love him". Cila (63 years old) remembered how she attempted to leave the relationship once. She moved to her parents' home, but eventually returned, having been told by her mother that "You have to go to your home, because it is your home, and your children cannot be raised without their father". Similarly, Sofia (68 years old) emotionally recalled how she struggled with the decision to end her marriage because she did not want to 'wreck her home'. Filipa (35 years old) explained how she attempted to 'salvage' the relationship multiple times, "I tried as much as I could! Only because he was the father of my children". The belief prevailed that children require a father figure, which motivated women to try and 'make it work' despite the abuse.

## Concluding Thoughts

This article explored the role of mothering and children in women's decision-making in Portugal, bringing to light the many ways in which these factors shape their attitudes and responses to abuse. Its findings have implications for both research, policy, and practice in situations of intimate partner abuse. However, this study is not without limitations, which might preclude its replicability and limit the transferability of the findings. For instance, the data was collected over five years ago. Despite its relevance today, given recent discussion within the Portuguese context and recent legislative changes, this should be kept in mind when reflecting on the research and its findings. Moreover, given the broader context of the research on which this paper is based, a more detailed exploration of mothering was not always the focus. Nonetheless, the fact that women raised these issues without prompting is also telling of the value it assumes in their experiences.

The findings presented in this paper demonstrate the 'greater meaning' that mothering assumes in the context of intimate partner abuse (Semaan et al., 2013, p. 70). In the constrained and highly complex environment created by abuse, women draw on their mothering as a source of identity, motivation, and empowerment. It is their responsibility to care for their children which guides their behavior and attitudes toward the abusive partner and his abuse. Indeed, the stories shared here add to the growing literature highlighting women's strength and endurance as well as their efforts to protect their children (Lapierre, 2008, 2010a; Semaan et al., 2013). What is often perceived as passiveness and inaction and used to substantiate stigmatizing notions of 'bad' or 'failed' mothering (Buchanan and Moulding, 2021; Lapierre, 2008; Weisz & Wiersma, 2011), has been demonstrated to be a conscious action guided by concerns over their children and potential repercussions for their health and wellbeing. Mothering empowers women to both remain and leave the abusive relationship, to stay silent but also to report the abuse. These findings sit alongside the work of feminist researchers' critique of the concept of 'failure to protect' (Buchanan & Moulding, 2021; Radford & Hester, 2006) and highlight the potential of a strengths-based perspective in supporting mothers and children affected by abuse (see Buchanan & Moulding, 2021). This approach must be guided by women's efforts and strategies, which should be built upon to support them and their children (Lapierre, 2010b).

It has been argued in this paper that mothering as an identity prevails over women's status as victims. The findings from this study substantiate the challenges in the coexistence of mothering and victimhood identities. As mothers, women in this research struggled to recognize and draw from their victim status. The responsibility to protect, care for, and provide children with a healthy childhood leaves little space for women to be victims and, in most cases, to be vulnerable as a result of the abuse. This is illustrated by the many experiences shared above in which women prioritized children, their safety and wellbeing, over their own risk. This is understandable, and far from unexpected. Indeed, as 'the most gendered of our social institutions' (Fineman, 2013, p. 665), motherhood continues to place on women the brunt

[4] Emergency refuges provide an immediate, usually short-term, accommodation response to people in situations of vulnerability, such as victims of domestic abuse and their young children (under 18 years-old).

of the responsibility for children and their needs. In their reflections on *victim as a relative status* in the context of child criminal exploitation, Marshall (2023) highlights the impermanence of victim status, which allows for this status to be transferred between agents. The same reflections apply to the context of mothering within abusive relationships. The experiences of women in this research appear to substantiate the idea that, when children are involved, the victim status of the mother is transferred. Their role as mothers and their responsibility towards their children seemingly surpasses their victim status and the challenges that come along with it. This is clear not only in the women's own understandings of motherhood and the primacy given to their mothering identity, but also in others' responses to women's abusive experiences.

The challenging or questioning of women's mothering by abusive partners, families, and institutions such as social services and the police, perpetuate the harmful notion of abused women as incompetent mothers (Lapierre, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Buchanan & Moulding, 2021; Semaan et al., 2013) and further illustrate how 'victim status' is rather limited and finite (Marshall, 2023). As in the instances described above, when the police threaten to remove children if women are unable to put an end to the abuse or leave the relationship, women's victimization is symbolically erased, alongside perpetrator responsibility. Women are thus denied of their victim status and all the support and resources that could potentially be ensured for them and their children. Moreover, such attitudes render invisible women's protective efforts and further labelling them as passive (and culpable) victims (see Buchanan & Moulding, 2021). This research has demonstrated that, in the eyes of such institutions, passive victims do not make for good mothers. Indeed, previous literature has demonstrated that practitioners often fail to recognize women's protective strategies and their agency (even if limited) when responding to the abuse (Lapierre, 2010a; Buchanan & Moulding, 2021). As Buchanan and Moulding (2021) argue, '[p]ractitioners, who may themselves subscribe to these discourses, are unlikely to enquire about women's nuanced efforts to protect their children so that women's feelings, motives, and exercise of their agency to protect remain unexplored and unknown' (p. 668). A lack of recognition and validation of such feelings, motives, and agency can further isolate women and place significant barriers to their safety and wellbeing (e.g., preventing them from calling the police), as demonstrated in this and other research (DeVoe & Smith, 2003; Heward-Belle, 2017). It is imperative that a culture is created in which both women and children can be recognized as victims in need of support and where mothering does not deny women their victimization status.[5]

There is an urgent need for a better understanding of the complex ways in which women, and mothers, respond to the abuse (e.g., beyond separation). Such recognition and understanding can be a powerful tool in promoting better access to support for both women and their children, rather than alienating them from services which can be life-changing. Practitioners within police forces, social services, and beyond should strive to adopt a supportive and empowering stance which acknowledges the myriad of ways in which women respond to the abuse in an effort to protect their children. They should seek to challenge, rather than exacerbate, the disproportionate responsibilization of victim-survivors (Lapierre, 2010b). Doing so is not at odds with the safeguarding of children and can indeed be harnessed in favor of such goal. For example, emphasizing women's efforts and protective strategies can be used to both encourage and empower women to seek additional support, whereas challenging their mothering can have a both punitive and disempowering effect which effectively disengages them and leaves them alone in caring for and protecting themselves and their children.

It is not to say, however, that all women experiencing abuse are successful in ensuring their children's safety. Victims and their experiences and circumstances are not homogenous, and there are situations where women cannot guarantee their children's safety, despite their efforts. Nonetheless, women's mothering needs to be understood in the context in which it occurs. It is argued, therefore, that while mothers' responsibility for their children's wellbeing is not to be erased, their inability to do so within abusive environments must not be conflated with culpability or responsibility for the impact of the abuse.

This study has also demonstrated how, contrary to mothering identities, easily questioned and undermined, fathering assumes an almost holy or sanctimonious status. Abusive partners were perceived as, *despite everything,* good fathers. This was clear not only in women's idealized notions of family and their perceptions of the relevance of a father figure in children's lives, but also in women's experiences with institutions such as social services. This serves to illustrate how victimized women continue to disproportionately suffer the consequences of both the abuse and the responses to it. As such, practitioners intervening in situations of intimate partner abuse and with its victims must enquire and challenge the often unrealistic expectations of abused women

[5] It is recognised that not all women see themselves as victims or desire access to victim status. Nonetheless, the term is used here to highlight the challenges in recognising women's role as mothers and their experiences of victimisation and its impact.

as mothers. It is certain that the balance between women's agency and child protection is not an easy one to strike. However, a disproportionate focus on the adequacy of women's mothering in the context of abuse, effectively obscures both women's and children's wellbeing. That said, efforts to empower women mothering in these contexts must be placed alongside a responsibilization of the perpetrator over the impact of the abuse, on both women and their children. As Lapierre (2010b) argues, "men's violence creates a context that complicates women's mothering, and it is the main problem that needs to be addressed" (p. 1447).

Important policy and legislative developments must be highlighted in this context. In 2021, the Law 112/2009 was updated to recognise children up to eighteen years old who have been exposed to domestic abuse as victims in their own right. Not only does this translate into more adequate support and protection for children, it also holds the potential hold perpetrators accountable for the impact of their abuse. Following the findings from this research, once again, this requires an active challenging of the overresponsibilization of mothers for children's safeguarding and safety, as well as the recognition of the potential for victim, mother, and agentic identities to coexist.

Finally, while this study has focused solely on the issue of mothering, it is important to recognize that decision-making is a complex and dynamic process. That said, women draw not only on their identities as mothers when responding to the abuse. A holistic understanding of the multiple factors which impact women's behavior is needed to successfully prevent and respond to the abuse. It is within this complex environment that motherhood exerts its influence. Future research should account for the dynamic ways in which motherhood impacts women's decision-making and how this intersects with other factors.

## Declarations

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