

Do we accept the unacceptable? The role of family and friends in either preventing or perpetuating domestic violence.

By Shahana Rasool

In this paper I argue that women's accounts of help-seeking from family and friends after domestic violence suggest two paradoxical strands. On the one hand, the normalisation and privatisation of women abuse by family and friends led to high levels of tolerance and acceptance of women abuse which serve to hinder abused women's help-seeking. Family and friends normalise and reinforce abusive behaviour and associated cultural norms at all costs despite abuse, rather than helping women deal with abuse. On the other hand, when family and friends are supportive of abused women, they play a central role in assisting women with becoming agents of change and attaining empowerment through seeking assistance. Hence, family and friends were important in preventing women from experiencing further violence when they assisted women, especially with linking them to professional services. These arguments are based on qualitative abuse history interviews conducted with 17 abused women living in shelters who had tried to seek help for abuse on several occasions over numerous years. These findings argue for the importance of mental health and social service professionals working with family and friends in preventing the abuse of women in South Africa. This research also points to the need to address various socio-cultural norms that perpetuate abuse which contribute to the reluctance of family and friends to assist women in effectively dealing with the violence they experience.