Conceptualising the agency of highly marginalised women: intimate partner violence in extreme settings.

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Abstract

How is the agency of highly marginalised women in coercive settings best conceptualised? This special issue explores this question against the backdrop of international efforts to reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) against women in heterosexual relationships in low and middle income settings. Papers seek to disturb a tendency to conceptualise women's agency, and the desired endpoints of programmes, in terms of actions by individual women (such as reporting violent men or leaving violent relationships) without attention to the economic, social and cultural contexts that make such actions unlikely or impossible. This *Introduction* highlights three sets of themes that cut across the papers. The first relates to unhelpful conceptualisations of gender and power in the binary distinctions of 'men-women' and 'victim-agent' underpinning many interventions. These often obscure hidden and multi-faceted forms of agency in women's responses to violence, and the complexity of the agency-violence intersection. The second series of themes unpacks how this neglect of complexity often results in a poor fit between intervention strategies and women's lives and relationships. A final set of themes relates to the need to acknowledge the multiplicities of agency, in relation to the competing challenges women juggle alongside IPV, differing levels of response to IPV, and the need to understand women's responses from a temporal perspective. Overall, this collection points to the need for an elaborated notion of 'distributed agency' as a multi-level, incremental and non-linear process distributed across time, space and social networks (both personal and institutional) and a continuum of action and activism ranging from survival to resistance. We do not dispute the need for both top-down and bottom-up involvement in struggles for social change. However in defining what counts as bottom-up involvement, the papers highlight the need for greater attention not only to women who openly challenge, report or leave violent men, but also to other women's hidden acts of persistence, survival and resistance. Such an understanding of social change suggests a very different approach to the one that currently underpins so many IPV policies and interventions.

INTRODUCTION

How is women's agency best conceptualised in highly coercive settings? We explore this question in the contexts of policies and interventions to reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) – specifically violence against women, by men, in intimate heterosexual relationships. The concept of agency has acquired tremendous currency in academic and activist inquiry, but is also often inadequately problematized and under-theorised. With this in mind, contributors to this special issue focus on initiatives by international agencies seeking to support highly marginalised women in low and middle income settings, and the often unstated conceptualisations of women's agency that underpin these efforts.

Contextualised by the wider proliferation of international and United Nations programmes seeking to eradicate violence against women over recent decades, initiatives informing our papers include programmes to increase women's awareness of their rights to non-violent relationships; efforts to work with men and women to co-construct norms that problematize violence; the provision of legal, welfare and hospital services; women's support groups, facilitating paid work and home ownership by IPV survivors; one-to-one counselling with violent men; women's community strengthening groups; training human rights lawyers; and laws and policies to outlaw violence and empower married women.

Defining agency as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act", Ahearn (2001:112) ascribes the burgeoning of intellectual interest in human agency in the past 50 years to several factors. These include the growth of post-structuralist critiques that reject grand linear narratives of history and social change, in favour of a focus on oppositional action by marginalised groups and individuals. Interest in agency has also been driven by the flourishing of social movements, campaigns and upheavals driven by individuals and collectives determined to challenge and transform social relationships they regard as unjust or undesirable -- in the interests of creating more equal and sustainable societies.

Within the social sciences, social psychologists tend to understand agency in terms of intentional individual actions that result from choices between different options.

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Gillespie (2010) defines agency as the exercise of choice, where a socially located person acts independently of an immediate situation, weighing up and selecting from alternative responses to social demands in light of goals that may be motivated by concerns outside of the immediate situation. Sociologists (e.g. Giddens, 1979; Mead 1934) speak of agency in the context of the structure-agency relationship. They recognise the constraints of social relations (structure) on individual action, and their moulding influence on the individual, whilst also insisting that individuals are often able to resist or reshape the social contexts in which they find themselves (agency). Agency and structure are seen not in binary terms, but as different aspects of the single process through which societies and individuals are co-constructed. It is this symbolic interactionist perspective that frames this special issue's interest in the potential for the actions of highly marginalised women to reproduce or transform the patriarchal social relations that frame IPV.

Our starting point is that opportunities to exercise agency are heavily constrained by social contexts, including the material resources available to women in coping with life challenges in extreme situations (Kabeer, 1999), the nature of the social relationships in which a woman is embedded (Cleaver, 2007), and the limits or opportunities presented by her physical health and strength (Nguyen, 2005). All these factors are particularly relevant in the 'extreme settings' that frame our studies. Here we use the term 'extreme settings' (interchangeably with 'coercive settings' and 'marginalised settings') to refer to contexts in which socially sanctioned gender inequalities are played out in varying combinations of social, cultural and political exclusion associated with challenges such as social conflict, displacement, social exclusion, illness, poverty, homelessness and food insecurity, all dramatically curtailing women's capacity to respond to violent men, and limiting the range of options available to them for doing so.

For Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000), an agent is not only someone who acts and brings about change of some sort, but also a person *whose achievement can be evaluated in terms of their own values and objectives, and their own understandings of what would constitute a good life*. Such considerations guide many of the papers in this issue, with many authors focusing on women's own understandings of their everyday options and priorities, and challenging 'top-down' and often Eurocentric visions of agency that underpin so many IPV interventions. Markus and Kitayama

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(2013) argue that agency is often understood and enacted very differently from one cultural context to another. Similarly, Madhok *et al* (2013) criticise western feminists' tendency to posit a neoliberal concept of the 'feminist revolutionary subject' as the ideal all women should be aiming for irrespective of the very different sets of social, economic and cultural constraints in which different women find themselves. Such an approach views social change arising from programmes of consciousness-raising in which women develop understandings of the roots of their personal oppression in social inequalities and injustices. Such *conscientisation* – a term associated with the critical methods of Paulo Friere (1973) – is said to lead oppressed women to act in ways that openly challenge and resist such injustices (Campbell, 2014). Many of this special issue's papers point to a poor fit between such a theory of change and the realities of women's lives in many settings.

The field of global public health places great emphasis on strengthening women's agency to take care of their health (Campbell & Nair, 2013). In programmes responding to IPV, the notion of agency is often invoked as a leverage point for efforts to increase women's ability to protect themselves in violent relationships. It often goes hand in hand with a rejection of the term 'victim', associated with passivity and/or a lack of ability to fight back. This agency-victim binary often informs interventions that define success in terms of women reaching particular endpoints – such as seeking out IPV support services, reporting the violence to the authorities or leaving an abusive partner. Critics of this approach warn that public health workers may expect too much from women IPV survivors in contexts where mutually reinforcing economic, political and cultural factors make it extremely unlikely that women will choose or be able to act to protect themselves from physical abuse. Within such contexts does it really make sense to speak of the agency of women in violent relationships, and if so, what might be the most realistic and actionable way of doing so?

Common denominators across very different contexts

IPV blights the lives of at least one in three women around the world, with devastating physical and mental health consequences (WHO *et al* 2013, Devries *et al* 2013). Whilst IPV occurs across all socio-economic strata, women living in poverty are often the most severely affected, especially in contexts where poverty and the

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inability to control women are associated with a crisis in male identity and where the use of violence is a socially accepted norm (Jewkes, 2002). In the United States, for example, the most vulnerable women are those facing poor housing, insecure immigration status, unemployment and racism (Haaken, 2010).

Mohanty (2013) warns against loosely essentialist statements about patriarchal social relations, as if phenomena such as gender violence were enacted and experienced in the same way in every settings. She emphasises the importance of exploring women's potential for agency through paying close attention to their "historical and cultural specificity as situated subjects" (p. 968). This volume takes up this challenge by including research conducted in Australia, Barbados, Cambodia, Colombia, the Grenadines, Guyana, Haiti, Kenya, Liberia, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, St. Vincent, Tanzania, Uganda, USA and Vietnam. Despite significant cultural and local differences in the way in which IPV was experienced in the everyday lives of women in these very different research contexts, a series of intertwined common denominators cuts across all the papers. These undermine the likelihood that women will seek help or report violent men as envisaged in many global health and gender programmes and policies.

All the settings in our papers are characterised by coercive social norms that position women as subordinate and subservient to men in the family – in settings where women are often totally dependent on men for their own and their children's economic survival with men having vastly superior or even sole access to work, money and land. In such contexts, leaving a marriage involves not only the possibility of total economic destitution for many women, but also devastating social isolation arising from the loss of social status and respect. Women tend to be seen as responsible for maintaining family harmony and preserving family dignity by silent endurance of difficulties within the home rather than challenging or publicising them. In such settings violence is often accepted as the norm, with IPV seen as part and parcel of notions of masculinity that include the acceptability of using violence to control women and children. Such assumptions are strongly reinforced in conditions of poverty. Poverty and the associated stresses often causes pressure-cooker situations, with an increased likelihood of alcohol abuse, in situations where the ability to control women is often said to be as one of the few forms of power available to men who are battling to live up to their socially constructed role of breadwinners.

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These intersecting sets of factors often reduce the likelihood that women will challenge violent men, seek help or leave them. Even in settings where women's rights to non-violent relationships are enshrined in policy and law, and where services exist to support battered women, papers here describe how women frequently lack the confidence to assert their rights to safety within the home. There is often strong stigmatisation of women who speak out or complain about violence (rather than enduring it). This stigmatisation frames a frequent lack of support from family and community members if women ask for help. The papers also highlight a lack of political will within male-dominated criminal and legal justice systems to implement pro-women laws and policies, often rendering the latter tokenistic and ineffectual. Even when such systems work, the imprisonment of a violent wage-earning male partner may put women and children's economic survival at risk.

While the notion of 'powerful women exercising control over their own lives and relationships' is obviously a vital long-term ideal for policy and intervention, it may be the case that blindness to the obstacles to this idealised notion of agency too often lead to overly optimistic and unrealistically ambitious interventions and policies. Much work remains to be done in mapping out the pathways from situations of extreme economic, social and cultural oppression to situations of unencumbered female freedom to negotiate relationships that are free of violence. And much work remains to be done in developing strong and realistic understandings of the possibilities and limitations for women's agency in coercive situations.

This Introduction seeks to provide an analytical integration of key insights arising from our 16 papers in the interests of moving the IPV literature towards these objectives. We provide a selective review of the contribution of this corpus of work in three sections. The first section ('Beyond Binaries') involves a critique of the IPV field's over-dependence on binary thinking about gender, power and agency, failing to capture the complexities of women's lives. The second ('Competing rationalities') focuses on the frequent conflict between international IPV interventions and policies and local experiences in specific economic, political and cultural settings. A third section ('Embracing Multiplicity') highlights some of the dimensions we see as necessary for thinking about the agency of highly marginalised women. The Conclusion presents our conceptualisation of 'distributed agency' as a framework for

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summarising the cumulative insights of the papers, and for advancing theory and practice in this field.

BEYOND BINARIES: THE COMPLEXITIES OF WOMEN'S LIVES

The field of IPV management and research is increasingly criticised for its dependence on two interlocking conceptual binaries that dominate analysis and action (Haaken, 2009). The first is the categorical distinction between men and women. The second is that between agency and victimhood. These interlocking splits are often associated with zero-sum notions of the distribution of power, underpinned by the assumption that men have power and women do not, for example. Particular women or particular actions by women are flagged up as evidence either for agency or for victimhood as if a clear distinction could be made between the two states in complex social settings.

The role of feminist researchers in perpetuating binaries

Shefer (this volume) highlights an urgent need for greater self-reflexivity by feminist researchers in order to disrupt conceptual binaries that she identifies in the academic literature on heterosexual sex and violence in South Africa. In her review of this literature, she criticises research studies that seek to essentialise the way in which poverty, age, gender and culture shape the social construction of gender and limit women's opportunities for sexual agency. Framed by Foucauldian notions of governmentality and knowledge-power (Foucault, 1982), she warns that well-intentioned academics often play a key role in perpetuating the very victim-agent binary that sustain the gender stereotypes supporting violence against women. For Shefer the solution does not lie in lurching to the other extreme of this binary through unrealistic efforts to portray highly marginalised women as 'agents'. Such efforts include the over-reading of the actions of southern women as evidence for agency e.g. through applying the language of 'survivors of violence' in a way that neglects the multiple inequalities that constrain women's lives. Rather she argues for the need for more detailed accounts of the complexities of women's lives to open up new ways of thinking about power and agency – ways that are more open to the tensions, contradictions and complexities that characterise women's lives.

Choosing to stay in a violent relationship may itself be evidence for agency rather than victimhood

Mannell *et al.*'s (this volume) study of women's responses to IPV in Rwanda challenges the tendency of interventions to regard leaving violent relationships and/or reporting violent male partners to the police (both highly constrained in Rwanda) as the key markers of agency. Mannell *et al.* argue that attention to women's ability to report or leave a violent relationship can silence the myriad of ways in which women counteract violent behaviour while remaining within their relationship. They illustrate the range of often less overt ways in which women act to cope with IPV, strategies women themselves regarded as the most effective within their own realistic assessments of the possibilities and constraints of their daily lives. These include mobilising emotional support from other women, managing and reducing violence through getting a job to alleviate the poverty that might be a flashpoint for abuse and behaving in ways most likely to pacify potentially violent men.

Mannell *et al.*'s work is influenced by Mahmood's (2012) path-breaking research on women in the piety movement in Egypt. Mahmood argues that activities such as donning a veil in public – which some neoliberal feminists would see as a sign of limited agency – is highly agentic insofar as it reflects women's desire to construct valued religious identities. Mahmood argues for attention to a wider range of modalities in evaluating women's agentic capacities. Evidence would be accessed through methodological approaches foregrounding the ways women themselves made sense of their lives rather than the interpretations of western feminist researchers. Against this backdrop, Mannell *et al.*'s study highlights the need to consider women's own understandings of their actions and the patriarchal social structures that constrain them as the foundation for potential IPV interventions.

The same action may serve as evidence for agency by some women and victimhood by others

Turan *et al.* (this volume) explore the behaviour of pregnant HIV positive women in Kenya, more particularly the decision to leave or stay with a physically abusive husband. Whilst Kenyan women have formal property rights, in reality their ability to control access to food and income is conferred through marriage and they are often

almost totally dependent on their husbands' families. When they act to leave their husband's home, they do so in defiance of marriage systems, property rights, land use and inheritance. Also seeking to disturb a neat distinction between actions that signify agency and victimhood, the researchers highlight how the very same action – that of leaving a violent husband's home – constitutes evidence for agency in some cases and victimhood in others. In the best situations, migration is undertaken freely by women who are unwilling to tolerate a situation of abuse - an expression of agency, ensuring not only a woman's survival, but also the preservation of her dignity and ability to exercise life choices. However in the worst situations migration may be forced - the result of a woman being 'sent packing' by an angry partner as a punishment for being infertile, refusing sex, going for HIV testing or taking on new societal roles such as education or working away from home. With few alternatives, such a situation may lead to complete destitution by unskilled women whose families are unwilling to take them back.

Men and women may have very different understandings of what constitutes agency and victimhood

Two studies in this volume highlight another way in which the victim-agency binary may serve as a blunt conceptual tool for analysis and action through looking at interventions that have sought to involve men as well as women. In two very different settings, the Caribbean (DeShong and Haynes, this volume) and the United States (Keller and Honea, this volume) men have used such involvement as a platform for rejecting IPV campaign messages that portray them as the most likely perpetrators of domestic incidents, despite strong statistical evidence to support this view. In the Caribbean study, DeShong and Hayne explain how men often dominate the space of interventions, using them as a platform to portray themselves as hapless victims driven to violence by badly behaved women (discussed further below). Keller and Honea highlight how women were more likely to explain the decision to stay in a violent relationship in terms of patriarchal gender norms, such as economic dependence and culturally sanctioned beliefs in marital obligations. Men were more likely to explain such decisions in terms of individual female vulnerability or pathology (such as a woman's personal insecurity or history of family abuse). Unresolved differences in understandings of the drivers of IPV potentially undermine

the efforts of interventions that seek to facilitate men and women working together to co-construct new social norms that regard violence as unacceptable.

Women's agency may often itself be a driver of violence

The feminist literature is often assumes that agentic behaviour is inevitably in a woman's interests, with agency by women usually posited as a solution to violence, and with women's participation in paid work viewed as a marker of agency. By contrast, the paper by DeShong and Haynes (this volume) includes attention to the way in which the Caribbean media often represent IPV as a male response to the emasculation of husbands when women work outside of the home. Public spaces beyond the home are depicted as spaces that open the potential for women to be lured away from responsible wifehood, leading to gossiping, independence, neglect of household duties and infidelity – and humiliating their husbands in the process. The authors link these representations to a wider tendency to explain violence as loss of control by men in response to intolerable female behaviour. Wider media representations of men as breadwinners and women as mothers and romantic partners are part and parcel of the social construction of harmful gender ideologies as common sense in the Caribbean public sphere. Ironically the authors argue that the involvement of men in programmes to reduce IPV – widely regarded as best practice in international responses – has unwittingly served to perpetuate male rationalisations and excuses for violence against intimate partners in a 'landscape of competing narratives' where notions of women provoking men to fatal violence are common (p. xx).

Agentic responses to violence do not necessarily have positive outcomes

A different dimension of the agency-violence intersection is highlighted in Pells *et al*.'s (this volume) study of the co-construction of responses to IPV by women and their children in Vietnam. It resonates with the growing emphasis on 'ambiguous agency' in children's studies (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012), contesting assumptions that agency is inherently positive or necessarily supports resistance to the status quo. Speaking of 'invention within limits', they highlight how this co-constructed agency may reinforce the domination of violent men, and often seemingly undermine women's self-interests. The authors stress the impossibility for many Vietnamese women to respond to IPV in ways western researchers might call resistance.

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Vietnam has made significant strides in anti-IPV legislation and policy, and support services are increasingly available, especially in cities. However, women remain locked into religious frameworks that prescribe women's 'three obediences', to fathers, then husbands, then sons. Cultural pressures on women to 'endure' violence to create a semblance of family harmony make it impossible for many women to approach IPV services. The only options facing women are to tolerate violence and 'work around' men to achieve other life goals.

COMPETING RATIONALITIES: LOCAL REALITIES VS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME AND POLICY GOALS

Many papers in the special issue highlight a poor fit between the realities of women's lives and the assumptions underpinning international programmes and policies. They argue that programmes are often based on inappropriately individualistic understandings of women's potential for action. Papers highlight how such interventions pay too little heed to the constraints on women's action including both the normative/cultural and the economic – with economic considerations ranging from local considerations of day-to-day livelihoods to the impacts of the global political economy.

'Punishing men' seen as an externally imposed discourse

Women's own views and priorities often contradict the assumptions of IPV interventions, as illustrated in Horn *et al*.'s study of work by an international agency supporting women in violent relationships in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Women rarely wanted men to be punished for IPV. They longed for violence to end, but their priority was nearly always to continue living with their husbands, as peacefully as possible. In part this came from women's lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system, which extracts bribes in exchange for services. The imprisonment of men was also seen as providing no benefit to women or their children because of the risks it posed for women's financial stability and child custody. The authors argue that interventions would resonate much more directly with women's needs if they supported them to survive in violent relationships, and focused interventions on reducing or managing violence, rather than pressurising women to report the violence to police. Positioning women who report violence as 'agents' and those who do not as 'victims' makes little sense in such a context.

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Women may not regard IPV as a problem

In many contexts women did not see IPV as a problem, challenging programmes to reduce it. In a Tanzanian study, McLeary-Sills *et al.* (this volume) problematize the notion of help-seeking as an agentic act as often assumed by interventions. Men are seen as providers and decision-makers who exercise violence as a legitimate use of their power in the household in this context, while it is women who are framed as the problem and 'at fault' for displeasing their male partners. Their resulting shame often deters women from mentioning the violence to anyone at all. Both men and women clearly distinguished between forced sex in marriage as normal and acceptable, and rape by a stranger, which was not. In this context, a woman who reported a stranger for raping her would be seen as an empowered agent, whereas a woman who complained about marital rape would more likely be regarded as disobedient and shameful.

In a similar vein, South African research by Stern *et al.* (this volume) explores how women's understandings of hegemonic gender norms undermines their likelihood of resisting sexually coercive situations with male partners. Women normalise sexual coercion as part of normal male sexual behaviour, and don't see forced sex with a husband or boyfriend as 'rape' (a label that they *would* apply if a stranger forced them to have sex with them). Resonating with Shefer's (this volume) critique of binary stereotypes of men and women, they show how women's beliefs that 'normal' men are controlling and sexually coercive leads to guilt and self-blame for IPV, making it less likely that women in violent relationships will seek help.

Stern *et al.* (this volume) also discuss the lack of consensus between legal and everyday understandings of what constitutes unacceptable violence in intimate sexual relationships in their South African study. DeShong and Haynes' Caribbean study highlights a further disconnect amongst media, NGO and state understandings of IPV, and amongst each constituency's motivations for taking up the issue. They express scepticism about the integrity of some state interventions, saying national governments may often set up IPV programmes to access international aid – with IPV being taken much more seriously by donors than by state departments that receive funding and run programmes.

'Training programmes' are a blunt tool for complex problems

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Harcourt (this volume) discusses her experience as a global gender activist, invited to facilitate training of Nepalese human rights lawyers to support IPV survivors. Such training is a pillar of multi-million dollar UN efforts to empower women. Feminist understandings of IPV and 'women fighting for their rights' had little resonance with lawyers, who found the training workshops of little practical help. Harcourt describes the training as 'cultural invasion' (Freire, 1973), with UN-funded foreigners parachuted into Nepal having decided what issues were important, with little reference to trainees' needs or experiences.

Nepal is often cited as an IPV success story with government policies supported by UN and other western agencies. Yet the problem persists. The paper highlights western feminists' collusion in perpetuating wider systems of power-knowledge that support IPV. The training perpetuated, rather than disrupting, a view of women as victims, trapped by economic dependence on men. In the process it reinforced a wider religio-cultural discourse of the inevitability of women's suffering. In private conversations, trainees spoke of poverty, post-conflict relations, displacement, the emptying of rural areas, the polarisation of economic success and poverty, and appalling suffering of migrant men working in the Middle East as drivers of IPV. However the hierarchical nature of the programme, and donor views of IPV as a training challenge rather than a political or economic one, left no space for attention to the social drivers of IPV, or of the need to focus on how best to advance the rights of all women in addition to rescuing individual women and punishing individual perpetrators. Citing True's (2012) seminal work on the political economy of IPV, Harcourt holds that negative impacts of patriarchy and global capitalism on women's well-being cannot be 'trained away'.

Complex mediations between economic resources and IPV

Several very different papers deal with the intricate interaction of women's access to economic resources on the one hand, and political, legal and cultural factors on the other, in shaping women's responses to violent relationships. In the first of these, Burgess and Campbell (this volume) discuss grassroots Ugandan women's unexpected and widespread rejection of a Marriage and Divorce Bill designed to increase their agency to leave violent marriages. Both rural and urban women rejected the Bill – which had been advanced by Ugandan lawyers, activists and

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feminist MPs – in an emotionally fraught and controversial public consultation exercise. The paper highlights the mismatch between the openly assertive anti-IPV strategies envisaged by the human rights lawyers and gender activists, and the more subtle and complex forms of agency practiced by women juggling complex and competing priorities for physical and economic survival. Many women lack economic alternatives to marriage, and political and legal systems have historically served as unreliable protectors of their sexual rights and physical safety. In such contexts, relationships with violent husbands, and commitments to conservative cultural and religious norms that scaffold these relationships, may be the most promising economic survival strategy for women and their children. It may be the case that rather than representing their collusion in their own subjugation, as suggested by a disappointed feminist MP, women's rejection of the bill was a highly agentic act given their economic realities.

Burgess and Campbell's Ugandan findings raise questions about placing too heavy an emphasis on political and legal tools to tackle a problem that is also often deeply rooted in women's economic dependence on men.

The complexity of the interaction of economic and other social factors is also the focus of a very different paper by Hynes et al. (this volume) which warns against viewing isolated women's economic empowerment programmes as magic bullets for reducing IPV in the absence of significant changes in cultural norms. They report on the unintended negative consequences of an economic empowerment programme amongst highly marginalised displaced women in Colombia. The programme, which increased women's participation in the labour force as well as their opportunities for home ownership, failed to increase women's agency or bargaining power within their households, or their opportunities to leave violent relationships. Male anger at the resulting transgression of traditional gender roles by their wives sometimes became an additional driver of violence, or led to husbands' withdrawal of economic support for children and households. Citing Kabeer's (2005) conceptualisation of agency as 'a woman's ability to act on her choices, even when power relationships are in direct opposition to such choices' (p. xx), this study highlights the myriad of complex factors shaping whether increased access to resources translate into increased agency by women in violent relationships. In their research, patriarchal norms often persisted even when the economic realities of gendered work and roles changed,

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with women's economic advancement sometimes leading to more rather than less violence.

Sprague *et al*. (this volume) also address the complex mediations between women's economic independence and their opportunities to exercise agency in violent relationships in their study of nurses in a South African hospital. Nurses are amongst the most highly educated and economically self-sufficient group of women in South Africa. Given the particularly strong stigma associated with being victims of IPV amongst highly educated middle-class women, and the realistic fear of damaging gossip arising from disclosing one's personal circumstances at work, nurses were less willing to disclose their plight than their less privileged patients. Ironically the nurses were more successful in getting medical and legal help for these patients (empathising with their plight and hence very motivated to help them) than for themselves (because they were too embarrassed to admit they themselves were victims). Their paper provides a particularly fascinating account of how social institutions (in this case the hospital) may simultaneously undermine and support women's agency in responding to IPV in infinitely complex ways.

EMBRACING MULTIPLICITY

In the sections above we have outlined some of the critical perspectives this volume offers on the efforts of international academics, activists and policy/development specialists to understand and increase women's opportunities for agency. We now turn to explore some examples of the many alternative ways our papers suggest we might think about women's agency in situations of IPV in highly coercive settings.

Agency as negotiating multiple constraints

Pells *et al*. (this volume) query the frequent assumption by feminists and public health specialists that escaping IPV is necessarily a woman's top priority, and that staying with a violent man represents victimhood or lack of agency. Their study is framed by Kabeer's (1999) view that agency may often be about more than observable action, also including "the meaning, motivation and purpose people bring to their activities", which may arise through a range of varyingly direct and hidden strategies such as "bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, and more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection

and analysis" (p. 438). This view of agency opens up the range of possible acts by women that can and should be considered agentic within particular contexts.

For instance, Pells *et al*.'s findings suggest that Vietnamese women often experience their decisions to stay with violent men as highly agentic – with marital relationships serving as pathways to achieving other highly valued priorities in their lives: preserving the dignity and social status of their own fathers and their children by keeping their own marriages intact, having access to resources to finance the education and marriages of their children and so on. They strongly disagree with those who would argue that this represents women's willing participation in their subjugation, arguing for the need to respect women's extraordinary courage and ability in constructing meaningful lives through weighing up their options, and making realistic choices in extremely constrained circumstances. For them, the key question for researchers of women's agency is not so much 'how is agency constrained?' but 'how are these constraints negotiated?'.

Similarly, in an Australian study, Meyer (this volume) seeks to extend understandings of women's agency in violent relationships to acknowledge that, in some circumstances, a woman's decision to stay in an abusive home may be as agentic as the decision to leave a violent partner in the absence of acceptable housing alternatives for their children. Staying with a violent man was some women's only way of minimising the risks associated with homelessness, precarious housing or dangerous housing options – which they often regarded as presenting even greater risks of harm to themselves and their children. Women often explained decisions not to leave violent men in terms of their view that the risks of violence were easier to manage than the risks of poor housing alternatives.

Agency as a multi-level phenomenon

In their study of a community-based project seeking to tackle the interlocking scourges of HIV and IPV in Haiti through small support group meetings, Logie and Daniel (this volume) draw attention to the complexities of women's needs for support, given the proliferation of demands and constraints they have to tackle to ensure the survival of themselves and their families. They present a multi-level model to analyse Haitian women's accounts of how they cope with IPV, drawing attention to far more subtle and invisible forms of agency than are often

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acknowledged. Their work resonates with Ahmed's (2010) emphasis on the need to include internal psychological processes as evidence for women's agency, in addition to more overt acts of resistance. They also refer to Madhok *et al.*'s (2013) critique of the 'action bias' inherent in neoliberal notions of agency. They say that the tendency to focus on overt actions (such as speaking out or acting out) by individual women overlooks the immense constraints on action in conditions of structural inequity. It also potentially ignores the often hidden and invisible strategies of persistence, resistance and survival that women engage in in contexts where levels of IPV are high, and recognition of women's rights to safety and well-being are low. In contexts of patriarchal social norms, poverty, stigmatisation of survivors of violence and civil and political conflict, reporting a violent intimate partner may lead to social isolation, lack of social protection and further violence. Using the four-point framework developed by Mannell and Jackson (2014), Logie and Daniel identify hidden agency at the *intra-personal* level (developing confidence to even imagine mentioning experiences of violence to a confidante), the *inter-personal* level (speaking of violence in a peer education group), the *relational* level (developing a sense of social support, unity and happiness with similar women in an HIV/IPV support group) and the *collective* level (developing and perhaps even starting to articulate an awareness of women's rights protect themselves from harm). Women in their study nearly always chose to stay in violent relationships. Yet their choices to stay often converged with significant gains in intrapersonal and interpersonal agency through their participation in women's support groups.

The temporality of agency

Compared to those who would identify agency in discrete acts of resistance by women at identifiable moments, several papers refer to its temporal and cumulative nature. In the Haitian study, Logie and Daniel (this volume) varyingly characterise the multi-level forms of agency as "complex, non-linear and incremental" (p. xx) and as "unstable, elastic, fluid, partial and dynamic" (p. xx). In several papers women were depicted as experiencing gradual and 'stop-start' increases in relationship power over time, with agency developing in small steps in patchy and non-linear ways, flowering in some situations only to disappear or grow in other situations. Such temporal complexity reveals the limitations of those who would seek to label

particular women as either victims or agents, or to identify particular discrete actions by women as possessing or lacking agency.

Stern *et al.*'s (this volume) use of life history narratives describes how some South African women's agency in relationships developed slowly over the course of their lives. Over time, they developed an increasingly negative view of the coerciveness of previous intimate relationships, which their younger selves had regarded as normal and unavoidable. This awareness went together with them actively seeking out new non-violent relationships based on trust and respect as they got older and wiser. Women also spoke of how their agency in sexual relationships increased as they became increasingly confident about their own sexual desire over their life course. Time is also a theme in the papers of Pells *et al* (this volume) who illustrate the multiple, and often contradictory, forms that agency take as Vietnamese women engage in trial-and-error strategies to manage violence over time, and Mannell *et al* (this volume) who highlight how Rwandan women's various attempts to manage violence may be the first steps along a path to eventual reporting or leaving relationships some time later.

The temporality of agency is also central to Lilja and Baaz's (this volume) paper. Their starting point is that IPV is not a fixed, but varies due to differing and ever-evolving combinations of legal, social, cultural and other factors – and as such can be redressed and reduced (WHO, 2010). Drawing on the work of legal and social theorists Verges (1981) and Deleuze (1994) on rupture and repetition, they argue that whilst IPV often consists of fixed and almost scripted behaviours that are repeated again and again, repetitions are never stable, leaving room for the possibility for 'rupture' of violent behavioural patterns over time.

They report on a civil society programme including one-to-one counselling of violent male partners in Cambodia, seeking to help men deal with the uncontrolled and unexamined rage contributing to physical abuse of female partners. Counsellors worked with men to predict and substitute negative behavioural responses to female partners with less damaging ones. Whilst the actual details of this counselling method are akin to those of cognitive behavioural therapy (an individual-focused western psychotherapy), their use of Verges' and Deleuze's radical ideas provides rich potential for extension to more relational approaches to IPV, offering a promising

starting point for conceptualising the potential for rupture in damaging behaviours over time.

CONCLUSION: AGENCY AS A DISTRIBUTED PHENOMENON

Together this volume's papers build a compelling picture of the distributed nature of women's potential for agency that transcends the narrow and individualistic view that they seek to disrupt. They highlight the short-sightedness of IPV-related academics and activists who limit their understandings of agency to overt, discrete and identifiable actions by individual women at identifiable moments.

Overall, the corpus of research points to four dimensions of distribution: the distribution of agency across time, across social networks (personal and institutional) and across space. It also points to the need to conceptualise women's agency along a much more distributed continuum of activism. The first three dimensions draw attention to the features of those situations within which agency is constructed, and the final dimension highlights different forms of action.

Our papers repeatedly show how opportunities for agency are distributed across *time*, as women engage in stop-start and trial-and-error efforts to manage IPV, often only one of the multiple challenges they face in their day-to-day struggles for economic survival and dignity over their life course. The possibility of agency is also distributed across *social networks*. These include the quality and availability of personal support networks such as women's relationships with friends, children and other family members, as well as wider networks, such as access to intervention programmes and legal, welfare, medical and other services, as well as the availability of more powerful allies. Opportunities to exercise agency are also distributed across *space*, not only in terms of opportunities for women's physical migration away from violent households, but also including their positioning in relation to the local-national-global continuum of varyingly motivated institutional actors (IPV-relevant donors, politicians, civil servants in health, welfare and law, policy-makers, feminist activists) and their differing styles of response to the challenge.

This volume's body of papers also repeatedly highlights the limitations of the neoliberal concept of the 'feminist revolutionary subject' that underpins many

western donor, activist and academic notions of women's agency. This by no means implies any rejection of the *ideal* of a confident and conscientised women collectively or individually fighting to resist and transform the multiple injustices associated with gender inequalities such as IPV. Furthermore we would not seek to draw attention away from the for 'top down' support for women from more powerful allies, including feminist activists or development agencies. Clearly, where possible, open activism by IPV survivors and their allies has a role to play, and such an ideal is undoubtedly something to pursue over the long term for all women. However in the immediate term, our papers suggest that such a notion of agency pays inadequate attention to the constraints on the freedom of many women to openly challenge their abuse. It also pays too little attention to the many hidden acts of persistence, survival and resistance that many women engage in from one moment to another as they battle to handle violent relationships without the options of confronting, reporting or leaving their abusers. This links to our fourth proposed dimension for thinking about the distribution of agency, namely the distribution of women's responses to IPV across the continuum of activism from survival/coping at the one end, to open resistance/radical social change at the other. There is need for much greater recognition of the range of behaviours right across this continuum in understanding and supporting women's agency.

Achieving better recognition of women's own perspectives and their own understandings of their daily realities would commit the interventions and policies to a whole new layer of activity. As stated above, top-down efforts – by feminist, development and global health actors and agencies – have a vital role to play. Social change in favour of the most powerless can only come from a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives. However our papers suggest that the perspectives of these more powerful participants currently dominate programme design and implementation. Without more attention to the everyday experiences and perceived needs and priorities of programme beneficiaries their potential impact will continue to be much reduced.

Above we have mentioned the urgent need for much more careful thinking about the pathways from situations of extreme economic, social and cultural oppression to situations of unencumbered female freedom to negotiate relationships that are free of violence. What can programmes do to facilitate opportunities for more women to

engage in behaviours moving towards the resistance end of our continuum of activism and not just the survival end? This would involve careful stage-wise planning for goals and activities that marginalised women themselves saw as achievable and desirable in the light of their daily realities (Campbell and Skovdal, 2013). Programmes would need to incorporate activities and strategies embracing a much more careful breakdown of stages on the pathways to this ideal – identifying and working towards 'small wins' that were realistically achievable by real women in real situations (Wieck, 1984). Ideally small-scale successes would then provide a material and experiential basis for more ambitious future action over time (Alinksy, 1973). In her classic work on 'subtle strategies for women's empowerment', Scheyvens (1998) describes how participants in a women-driven empowerment programme in the Solomon Islands prioritised the creation of opportunities for them to travel to an adjacent village without their husbands, to optimise the prices they could get for the food they had grown. This was a 'small win' they regarded as an achievable and significant sign of increased agency, one that was more likely to advance their interests in the short term than openly challenging oppressive men.

These four dimensions of distributed agency, and this emphasis on the recognition of a wider range of bottom-up forms of action and activism, resonate with our rejection of what we elsewhere refer to as an outdated '20th century' notion of radical social change (Campbell, 2014; Campbell and Cornish, 2014). The latter approach puts heavy emphasis on the open engagement of marginalised individuals in projects of open resistance to the powerful. Clearly open resistance has a vital role to play where women have the opportunities to engage in it. However this option will not always be available to the women portrayed in this volume's papers. The most significant social struggles may often be equally importantly tackled through small-scale, hidden acts of resistance located in small, often barely visible, cracks in the social order (Holloway, 2013; Scott, 2012; Wright, 2010). Recognition of such distributed and complex forms of agency and activism across alongside more overt ones, and the need for programmes shaped by bottom up as well as top down visions and strategies, are key to the challenge of rejuvenating both analysis and action in the on-going fight against IPV by marginalised women and their allies.

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