

McDonald-Harker, Caroline. (2016). Mothering in Marginalized Contexts: Narratives of Women Who Mother in and Through Domestic Violence. Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press.

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Caroline McDonald-Harker published her book, “Mothering in Marginalized Contexts”, to help her readers open their eyes to the hardships and turbulence hundreds of mothers experience in their day to day lives, more specifically, mothers who experience domestic violence. McDonald-Harker reveals the harsh and sobering reality of how much pressure is put on women to be the ‘perfect mother’ and how these standards are almost impossible to meet. These impossible standards are then looked at in the context of abused, and marginalized mothers, and how they not only cope with living through abusive situations, but also how they cope with the unrealistic stereotype of mothers, and, how they re-define mothering in their own terms.

McDonald-Harker developed this study because she believes that there is a significantly sparse amount of studies done on mothers themselves in these violent situations. She demonstrates how the focus of these studies had “specifically been on the impact that domestic violence has on women’s mothering, and, in turn, the impact that their mothering has on their children” (p. 26). McDonald-Harker expresses her concern that since these studies on the abused women have solely been focused on the impact the abuse has on their mothering towards their children, little is known about how the victimized women view themselves and their own mothering. “This book provides

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a rare and in-depth feminist sociological examination of the individuals narratives, experience, and lived realities of abused women...” (p. 18).

In the study, McDonald-Harker composed interviews with twenty-nine abused women taking refuge in abused women’s shelters throughout Calgary. Each of these women varied in age, race, and socio-economic classes. The book discussed seven of these twenty-nine narratives, and each story had their own tear-jerking experience of abuse, ranging from verbal, financial, emotional, sexual, and physical. Every woman had gone through at least one form of harm, and most having experienced multiple throughout their lives. Although each story was unique to each woman, it was evident in the book that the abuse took an extremely negative toll on each individual. Multiple women studied expressed feelings of helplessness, depression and a few even contemplated suicide. A leading similarity in each story of domestic violence is that the final straw for majority of the woman was the effect the abuse was starting to have on their children. Every woman was motivated to finally leave their abusive partners, to ensure the safety and well-being of their children.

Feminist mothering is an ideology used in this study that disregards the stereotypical definition of motherhood as it is “disempowering if not oppressive” (p.101). The idea that motherhood is oppressive is because “the mainstream standards of mothering are idealized and impossible to achieve; mothering is a privatized, all consuming and endless act; and, the roll and work that mothers do is devalued” (p.101). Because in broader society, it seems to be expected that perfect mothers are there for their children every minute of every day, and expend all their

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time, energy and money on children, these mothers then have no time to take care of themselves to be healthy enough to provide for their children. Mothers who conform to this ideology are regarded as 'good mothers', and if mothers do not live up to this unrealistic standard, they are then considered 'bad mothers'.

In the study, all of the women related their own definitions of mothers to the dominant ideology of motherhood, as it had become internalized since they were young children. They had expressed that "mothering is considered to be women's 'maternal nature', that it is their 'natural' role" (p.112), or that caring of the children rests solely on the mothers shoulders, instead of distributed amongst both parents. Another example of the moms in the book agreeing with the dominant ideology of motherhood is how a handful of them agreed that mothering is caring for the children before themselves, or making sure their children have everything they need and that they are a role model for their kids.

Not only did these mothers tie their definition of motherhood in with the dominant ideology of motherhood, they also challenged it. In the context of the caring for the children always being solely the mothers responsibility, the abused women had stated that it is unrealistic and unachievable to take care of their children in an "intensive all-encompassing way" (p.124) because of the situation they are in, and it leaves no room for the capability to take care of themselves. They also stated that society makes it solely the mother's responsibility for the children, not the father or other adults in the child's life, therefore blaming the mother and looking down on them if their child misbehaves. The abused mothers had also expressed their concerns with these

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unrealistic assumptions that mothers must always put their child above themselves because it “obscures the fact that mothers themselves also have needs” (p.129). This lack of regard for the mothers’ needs causes them to become worn down and helpless, especially in such hostile and violent situations.

For abused mothers, they automatically get the ‘bad mother’ label because society sees them as weak and selfish for allowing their children to witness those types of situations to begin with, completely ignoring the actual context of the situation, and if the mothers even allowed their children to witness any violence. The mothers interviewed for this study challenged the motherhood stereotype in multiple different ways. In some, the mothers denied that they were bad moms because they made the time to care for and be with their children to make them happy and safe, even in the given situation they were in. Other women denied being a bad mother because they protected their children, they “prioritized the safety and well-being of their children” (p.183) mostly by making sure their children weren’t abused themselves, that they didn’t witness the abuse and majority of mothers left their abusive partners for the sake of their children safety.

There is another stigmatization that abused mothers are ‘bad mothers’ because they do not provide for their children or teach them what it’s like to be in a healthy household. The individuals presented in this study again challenged this societal view by providing the knowledge that they always made sure the child’s basic needs were met. All of the women used multiple different strategies to obtain the clothes and food they needed for their children, often leaving them emotionally and physically drained because of the lengths they went, but also left a sense of gratification and satisfaction that they did what they could to take care of them. Ultimately, all of

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the mothers denied any accusation that they were bad mothers because they “made both their children and themselves happy” (p.197). Although they were experiencing some of the most inhumane treatment from someone who is supposed to love them, they always found a way to enjoy the little moments with their children, and the happier their kids were, the happier they were.

In McDonald-Harker’s study, she interviewed women of different ages, races and social classes. In this diversity of the study, the book was able to shed light on how the stigmatization of the ‘bad mom’ worsened for those who were apart of multiple minority groups. For example, the women who were aboriginal and in abusive relationships, were often looked at in a negative light, constantly getting accused of not being capable mothers, even whilst residing in an emergency shelter. Another example is those women living in poverty. Most women coming out of abusive relationships are starting their life again with nothing, and because they are working minimum wage jobs or receiving help from the government, society sees them as incompetent mothers. This again proved to be false allegations because of the mothers proving that they do not need to conform to societies standards of being a mother and knowing that they are doing the right thing when it comes to their children.

In conclusion, Caroline McDonald-Harker created this study to open her readers eyes to the real life events that are currently taking over the lives of many women around the world. She used her research to make a breakthrough in the range of studies already done, adding the voices of the mothers themselves and how they view motherhood. The study challenged the already cemented ideology that society has towards women, and created an opportunity for women to finally be heard and understood. A small limitation to this study is that McDonald-Harker used

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limited number of participants. A much larger study would prove to be more valid, but nonetheless, these twenty-nine women should be thanked for helping break the stigma that abused women are bad mothers. The academic audience that would be interested in this book would include sociologists and feminists, as well as those involved with gender studies, psychology, and social work.