

Beyond 'Women vs. Children' or 'WomenandChildren': Engendering Childhood and Reformulating Motherhood*

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Abstract

The child rights movement has typically fallen foul of both feminists and antifeminists in its renderings of the relations between women and children. This article attempts to move the debate forward to consider the relations between women's rights and children's rights as neither adversarial, nor equivalent, but as allied – albeit as necessarily structured in tension and contest. It illuminates why and how such a situation has arisen, and identifies some key challenges for the adequate formulation of women's and children's interests and positionings. This conceptual analysis is given specific focus by taking two key arenas of intervention – child abduction and the support of children in shelters for battered women – as particular contexts in which conceptualisations and policies around women and around children often come into conflict. Using these examples, arising from involvement in practical action research projects, new directions for reconfiguring prevailing understandings emerge, in particular by highlighting how gender and culture/racialisation function to structure discourses of childhood. While resolution of these tensions may be neither possible nor desirable, the paper illustrates the value of being clear about what is at stake in these contests in order to identify specific strategies for action.

Keywords

developmentalism; intersectionality; racialisation; feminisms; children's rights; child abduction; state violence

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practical action research projects which I have directed, new directions are for reconfiguring prevailing understandings emerge, in particular by highlighting how gender and culture/racialisation function to structure discourses of childhood. While resolution of these tensions may be neither possible nor desirable, the paper illustrates the value of being clear about what is at stake in these contests in order to identify specific strategies for action.

This paper attempts to address the tense relationship I have observed in child rights arenas in relation to feminist claims and interventions. To illustrate: at a child rights conference I recently attended I heard a (female!) delegate say: 'I can't call myself a feminist because of what feminists have done to children'. Or to take a published example, a recent text on rights-based approaches to aid programming comments: 'While no development agency can afford to ignore gender issues, many continue to leave children's issues to child-focused organisations' (Theis and O'Kane, 2005: 167). Such comments – irrespective of their (in)accuracy – reveal how interventions on behalf of women and children have come to be seen as antithetical and even at each other's cost. In a key but in my view much under-referenced, article Denise Riley addresses this question directly:

Why has it been such an enduring charge, that feminism has nothing to say to or about women with children? An impression of child-dumping was conveyed, for some, by one of the original four demands of the women's liberation movement: that for 'twenty four hour nurseries'. This was, I think, conceived in the wish for some unchallengeable flexibility for mothers ... Against that, though, can be set the far greater evidence of extensive feminist work, not only against the myth of 'maternal deprivation' and the rosiness of domestic life, but, for instance, for child benefit to go on being paid to mothers, for better conditions for unsupported mothers... (Riley, 1987: 177)

While it will become clear that there are indeed some grounds for the complaints against feminists, my aim in this paper is, firstly, to help us understand better why and how this state of affairs has arisen; secondly, why feminist and children's rights activism are far from incompatible; and, thirdly, to explore what we can do to better address and work with the inevitably complex and contested interplay between women and children. I will be arguing that we have to resist getting caught into this competition and refuse its terms. Indeed at bottom lies a battle over claims to 'victimhood' that surely compromises both feminist and child advocacy commitments to agency as well as flying in the face of current claims to the indivisible and interconnected character of rights.

My work of the last 20 years or so spans this contested area – connecting debates about children's and women's studies with critiques of models of development – in terms of models of *individual psychological* development but also connecting this with notions of *economic* and *international* development (Burman, 2008a, 2008b). Early on, as a researcher with children, I found the debates happening within feminist methodology offered some of the only available conceptual resources for analysing

the power positions and relationships posed by work with children (far more rigorous and challenging than the developmental psychology of that time, for example).

Owing to the ideological functions of the iconography of children, debates about the roles and status of children and forms of childhood are always a key analytic lens through which to address and interpret what are perhaps the key socio-political dilemmas of our times. Reciprocally, a focus on gender illuminates a key way of interrogating the limits of prevailing models of childhood by exposing the implicit, assumed understandings that underlie them – including how the *state* of childhood is feminised, while the activity of *developing* is portrayed as culturally masculine¹ (Burman, 1995; Walkerdine, 1988). Yet political ambiguities arise in attending to gender, ambiguities that work the analytical interrogation in both directions: a focus on children and childhoods also challenges feminists and varieties of feminisms.

Language reveals the tensions: is one ‘child-less’ or ‘child-free’? For example, in Britain there has been much recent publicity regarding the gender pay gap emerging specifically for mothers: ‘career women’ who do not have children remain economically advantaged throughout their working lives (although they still – notwithstanding the feminisation of management under neo-liberalism – take home proportionately less money than their male counterparts for the same work). But this debate assumes a middle class, heterosexually paired household, inhabiting a post-industrial economy that emphasises waged labour participation as the route to economic sustainability, and the debate presumes (the fiction of) adequate and meritocratically-distributed employment for all. Similarly, the question of ‘choosing’ not to have children is still culturally specific – not only in terms of concrete issues such as access to contraception and abortion, but also in terms of gendered cultural norms that presume women will be mothers – indeed that motherhood confirms a woman’s adult-status, such that not being a mother maintains one’s child-like position (even within research contexts, Clark, 2006). Correlatively, having children ‘too early’ merely confirms a young mother’s pathological status (Phoenix, 1991; Burns, 2001). This example does, however, illustrate one of the key arguments of this paper – that debates that appear to be *between* women and children, or some women vs. others, actually turn out to be about other issues; in this case state childcare provision. As Riley (1987) notes: ‘It is uphill work but beneath the dull surface of child-care there are profound analytical difficulties and interests; and excitement can be got out of it. What I want to indicate is the range and volatility and the peculiar attractiveness of the questions which childcare can put to a feminist socialism. And, to repeat, there will not be an exhaustive canon of answers – but this does not so much matter.’ (p. 181).

¹ Until recently – with the recent ‘fit’ between feminised characteristics and economic flexibility marking the moral panic around the overachievement of girls in schools (see Burman, 2005).

My starting point is that current paradigms for thinking about the relationships between women and children are inadequate. Indeed I am going to suggest that both paradigms, of 'women vs. children' and 'womenandchildren', are inadequate on conceptual, political and practical grounds. Instead we need to find ways of going beyond these - though, as I will suggest, dispensing entirely with these formulations is unlikely given their history, cultural power and contemporary political influence. Rather, the project is one of being a bit more canny about how they work, conflict and contest each other, and how they might be better 'worked' with and on together. But first we need to consider the premises and terms of each model.

'WomenandChildren'

This is the old paternalist position that *equates* women and children – to the extent of running them together or combining them such that the feminist international relations theorist Christine Sylvester (1998) (among others) argues that they are seen as a single entity. We are long accustomed to such an approach, evident in the cry issued in emergencies: 'women and children first!' But as studies of both women and child refugees and involvement in political conflicts are now highlighting (Palmary, 2005, 2006; Marks, 2001; Jones, 1993; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Scorgie, 2002), preferential claims to support are predicated on an assumed victim position. As we know only too well from discussions of child sexual abuse (a relevant example that also highlights the *connectedness* between the category of women and child, Kitlinger, 1988), this position of 'deserving victim' relies on a notion of innocence that not only strips away agency but also pathologises those who do not appear so innocent (as where women and children have sex or fight in wars...). It also flies in the face of participatory models: state and international policy is much better at the 2 other 'ps' – of prevention and provision – than of participation.

However, it is important to note that there are some advantages to this model. It does somehow assert the indivisibility of the relationship between women and children, the interconnectedness of their conditions and positions and, beyond this, the impossibility of separating an intervention for one from that for the other. Once again, as Denise Riley (1987) put it:

Adults' needs and children's needs are neither necessarily consonant nor necessarily incompatible; not everything can be accurately read off from the categories of men, women, and children. It is likely to be an increasingly sharp question, though, for feminism, since more 'rights' may be increasingly named and laid claim to by more contestants. Who and what is a 'parent', for instance; is there a genuine democracy of parents, inclined harmoniously over the child? Or instead are there only 'mothers' and 'fathers' who are, because of their different power, capacities and histories, always irreconcilable? Neither alternative, I think, is right. (p. 184)

There is clearly something right about this. As the subtitle of Adrienne Rich's (1981) key book *Of Woman Born* highlighted, motherhood is both experience and institution. This point is relevant to the complaints I noted at the start of the paper. For women are not oppressed by children but by the *institution* of motherhood i.e. how their roles as mothers are configured. Similarly feminism is not a movement to liberate women from children (for example) but from oppression. That's not to say that a woman might not feel persecuted or undermined by her children, but this also arises because of the ways women's self-images and actual conduct as mothers is tied into the regulatory apparatus of the state through the 'psy complex'. Correlatively, children are oppressed by the institution of the family, sometimes personified by mothers and fathers.

All adults have been children, and all women – including all mothers – have also been children themselves, such that memories of childhoods we could have had, should have had, and even wished we had enter into our relationships with living, contemporary children. The significance of this blurring between women and children, or rather *all of us* and children, cannot be overestimated. It structures our dealings with children, and the ease with which we imagine we can know what's best for children.

So now we are sliding into an argument for separating, rather than eliding, women and children precisely by virtue of the ease of the slippage between adult/woman and child, such that the child's perspective gets lost in favour of some imagined or fantasised child and childhood. And so we begin to glimpse the instability of these apparently opposed formulations. In the case of girl children (with the girlchild as a key object for intervention within international policy), there is always a sense of instability or anomaly that is at least subsumed within the 'womenandchildren' approach. For girlchildren are somehow not *typical* children - precisely because they are gender-'marked' as such - and they are also positioned within developmental discourse as 'not yet' (but 'becoming') women. The combined category of womanandchild is therefore overdetermined by prevailing understandings of the links between children and women, alongside a shared characteristic of the political utility of the categories of both women and children: i.e. that both are treated as objects of societal manipulation as resources to be mobilised, embodying untapped, future economic potential, and as emotional touchstones of both tradition and futurity (see Burman, 2008b; Cannella and Viruru, 2005; Castaneda, 2002).

Yet at the policy level the assumption of common cause or interest on the part of care and humanitarian agencies, that aid given to women would automatically 'trickle down' to children (whilst assuming that aid given to men would not!), has not always turned out to be confirmed (Peace and Hulme, 1993). Notwithstanding this, child-focused agencies with a commitment to community development (in my view quite rightly) continue to support general initiatives on the presumption

that children will benefit. The current focus of the so-called 'second human rights revolution' on the 'independence and indivisibility of human rights, mainly with reference to civil political rights and social-economic rights' (Gready and Ensor, 2005: 13) works to blur the boundaries between children's and societal development.

The problems of the 'womanandchildren' approach are all too familiar. First, the approach originates from a historical and cultural frame where what was common to women and children was that they were considered as the property of men who were their husbands/fathers, and so who have responsibility to provide for them. Second, it runs the risk of infantilising women, or treating women *as* children – and it is this problem which has in particular given rise to calls to separate women and children's positioning. Thirdly, it elides the current and future positioning of the girlchild as incipient woman – so imposing onto her the limits and constraints of the position of woman *even when a child*. This is particularly significant given what is known about how entry into puberty can transform the freedom of mobility and general activity allowed girls (e.g. Invernizzi, 2000), and in general how the position of being a child (or by extension even that of an adolescent) can warrant claims for indulgence, freedom from responsibility and even individualism that until recently and only in some contexts are accorded women (Hudson, 1984).

Thus the children's rights lobby, alongside feminist movements, have clearly been justified in resisting the 'womenandchildren' model. For this essentialises the role and position of women as mothers even as much as it fixes the position of children as incomplete, immature and deficient. Moreover, this model has been given new form within prevalent iconography of women within the nation-building projects where – as in the imagery and policies promoting the 'new South Africa', for example – both women and children are portrayed as equivalent to and as unconditionally recruited into the nationalist project (Clark, 2006). Women are used to connote the full repertoire of associations of tradition, devotion and nurturance that shift the position of women from biological to moral and cultural reproduction (Yuval-Davis, 1997) – meanings that have, significantly, been mobilised within nationalist projects the world over (Ueno, 2004) – while children carry the burden of responsibility for a national as well as personal future.

'Women vs. Children'

So let us now move onto 'women vs. children'. I have already alluded to how this dichotomy already owes something to a rights discourse that has a recent, and specific, history (and there are other people much better qualified than me to talk to this). I will just mention the development of models of rights that move beyond notions of interest or choice to emphasise generative and relational features.

This is important to ward off a reactionary model of rights, merely confirming the access to power and privilege of those already accorded rights rather than engaging with a transformative and democratizing rights agenda. For example, children's rights and the right to health is cited by Gready and Ensor (2005: 9) as a key example of the 'legal reflex' to development programming, where 'establishing legal recognition can become an end in itself [and whereby] the real life of even progressive laws can easily become implicated in preserving the status quo as rights become institutionalised – and because ambiguity of legal recognition can include a reduction in creativity with regard to activism' (ibid.). Thus 'reference to the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant of Economic and, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESRC, specifically article 12 and General Comment 14), can serve to preclude combination strategies that may include but go beyond the law' (ibid.).

My first comment about this could be summarised as 'the high cost of equal rights'. The question is: why and how have women and children been seen to be counterposed? This, of course, depends on what is understood to be at stake between women and children: are we really talking about *competing* positions, interests or rights?

It would be easy to start at the present moment and point to the increasing political and economic power accorded to and wielded by women (from women prime ministers, to women millionaires, to women in the armed forces etc.) (Gordo-Lopez and Burman, 2004). Yet it is important to note that - notwithstanding the move towards gender mainstreaming (Rai, 2003) - this most probably owes more to current strategies of capital than the uptake of specifically feminist commitments – and so in this sense it is vital we distinguish between *feminisation* and feminism. Moreover that recognition of gender is itself a modern, and, at least historically, northern notion that has significance for the ways it permeates and is taken up across southern contexts (Hayami *et al*, 2003).

While feminism can be understood broadly as a movement to liberate women from gender-based oppression, and to transform relations of gender inequality, feminisation is a business-economic tactic to manage people more effectively by mobilising traditionally female interpersonal skills (the better to avoid conflict and political mobilisation by, for example, soothing the pain of redundancy with 'out-placement counselling'). Moreover feminisation extends *from women to men* the conditions of part-time, insecure home-based work (as in the 'feminisation of labour' debate). The feminine (and now feminised) iconography (of business, of war, of the business of war, Burman 2004) arises from the new forms of neo-liberalism that exploit the disjunction between child and woman in particularly stark ways. For even as – and precisely because - the call to deploy and manage emotions emerges as part of a feminised industrial strategy (Hochschild, 2000), the image of the child as a romanticised self-expressive zone of liberation and (consumer-led) indulgence acquires new force.

The successes of liberal, equal rights-based feminism have certainly brought *some* women access to some of the power wielded by men. It has been accompanied by an erosion of discourses of gender-specificity that mean that women can and do act like men (so that we have to ask: why should getting women into powerful positions make any difference whatsoever?). These developments have been associated with a general infantilisation of culture, and erosion of parental authority such that it seems we now need panoplies of child-oriented experts to advise and legislate upon relationships – most especially those between adults and children. Perhaps controversially for us here, is the suggestion put forward by some political theorists that the undermining of parental authority - as reflected in current child rights legislation - arises from a model of political subjectivity that is disillusioned and disempowered, so that it is positioned as in need of support from professional experts (Pupavac, 2002). Or indeed that our increasingly sophisticated psychological models of the hard-wired or 'full child' (Kessen, 1993) work to compensate for a world of escalating uncertainty and precariousness across familial, national and transnational levels. In a context where the global 'war against terror' comes to be reflected in the insecurity of personal and familial relations, such commentators ask whether this heralds a return to a new, but less confident, individualism that is all the more intent on regulating families and children? As Moss and Petrie (2002) point out, such wider crises appear to enter into models of services such that – especially in the UK - we have come to think of services *for* children, with children positioned as passive consumers in need of being contained and protected, instead of creating spaces *for* children to actively explore, interact with each other and participate with others.

Clearly, irrespective of these political ambiguities, the achievements of rights-based claims for both women and children have been considerable. From my context it is worth recalling that historically Britain outlawed cruelty to animals some sixty years before similar protections were accorded children (Franklin, 2002). This perhaps tells us as much about the British as models of rights. It certainly speaks to the interplay between international legislation and local cultural contexts of generation and application, and the hidden national legacies that can lie within globalized models of childhood (see also Burman, 1996; Kaufman, 2002).

At any rate we can conclude that there is still a long way to go, not least to ensure that the normative models inscribed within the rights of both women and children are generative and inclusive rather than prescriptive and conservative. Both women and children have typically been positioned as further down the ladder of individual development (as more immature or incomplete) than men. And some women and children – especially those of the (political as well as geographical) South - especially so. Distinguishing women's and children's rights and positions has been important in both questioning and shrugging off the victim-based models enshrined in aid and development models.

From Feminist Complicities to Analytical Contributions

We should admit that feminist movements have also been structured by their ambivalence surrounding children – whether to have them; in what contexts to give birth to them; and whether or how to care for them. Given that women the world over are accorded responsibility for childcare and household labour as well as bearing children, this is not surprising. Indeed it is significant that political positions around children have always been indicative of, and intersected with, other political axes. Thus, British working class women's movements in the early twentieth century were more preoccupied with advancing the campaigns for the vote and for equal pay than for childcare and free school meals (Riley, 1987). There is a structural tension in calling for comprehensive state-funded nursery provision (that parallels state economic agendas in the care vs. education debates): are we saying we don't really want to have children or to be with them? Does one have to biologically bear a child to 'have' a child (with adoption so rendered second best, and centuries of black, indigenous and working class traditions of 'other-mothering' ignored, practices that long preceded socialist and anarchist-inspired experiments in alternative living arrangements)? Such debates divided the emerging feminist movements, as much as they also revealed different priorities for working class, lesbian and black, than (white) middle class heterosexual, feminists.

It is significant that the very first issue of the journal *Gender & Society* carried an article entitled 'Re-visioning women and social change' with the subtitle: 'where are the children?' (Thorne, 1987). This article reviews the insufficiencies of models of children and childhood, sociologically-informed models of children as dependents or deficient adults that entered also into much feminist theory. But now we have much more complex understandings of, for example, the relationships between women and children's labour, and children's household (and sometimes waged) labour as vital to poor families' economic survival (Nieuwenhuys, 1996, 2000), while other feminist theories highlight the importance of analysing the interplay of gender and generational relationships to our understandings of children's agency (Alanen, 2003). Feminist and contemporary childhood studies converge in the project of formulating epistemological and methodological approaches that conceptualise the possibilities and limits for actions in contexts of specific social constraints. They are sensitive to the multidirectional character of power relations; where children – like women – are positioned neither as only victims nor as abstract, 'free' agents (Butler, 1995).

So I am suggesting that the ambiguities and ambivalences of feminist movements (and we should always see these as plural and diverse) should be seen as an illustration of the dilemmas of different formulations of 'empowerment' and 'rights', albeit alongside the exclusionary character of both first and second wave feminisms (as movements formulated from northern centres with their implicit - if not explicit - model of white, heterosexual and largely middle class women,

Burman, 1998). But we should not forget that ‘rights-based’ models force the contest between women and children. And while feminists may have – understandably perhaps - ignored children in their attention to women, we should not forget that models of childhood are always very vulnerable to fundamentalist agendas that naturalise the position of women as mothers as much as they instrumentalise children as ideological fodder (Sahgal and Yuval Davis, 1992). So, unless we are very careful, child rights and childhood studies arenas are likely to be antifeminist; which would of course be a big political and epistemological mistake (precisely because it would play into the hands of those who benefit from such ‘divide and rule’ strategies).

What’s Left Out?

If we are evaluating the limits of available conceptualizations of the relations between women and children, we clearly need to be thinking about what has been missing from our formulations so far. What’s left out? Well men and the state, of course! Where are the patriarchs? What is the role of fathers and the *in loco parentis* nation state? Fathers’ rights movements are burgeoning across the developed world right now, seeking to draw attention to their cause on the buildings of the British Parliament, and apparently (and most bizarrely) threatening to abduct Blair’s son Leo in late 2005. Laughable though their antics may sometimes be, but less amusing in relation to the mobilization of fathers against the recovered memory movement (Brown and Burman, 1997), it is a big mistake to trivialize such movements. In the UK the vilified Child Support Agency attempted to force the financial accountability of fathers separated from their children (with a spectacular lack of success). Women still carry disproportionate financial (as well as caring) responsibilities for children, while the move towards gender neutrality in legislation (in divorce and child custody) has actually worked against women (Smart and Sevenhuijsen, 1989). Indeed legal theorist Carol Smart (2004) has recently argued that current fathers’ rights groups demands for joint custody in contexts of marital separation privilege equality between adults over recognition of the position and preferences of children, and so once again re-inscribe a passive conception of childhood.

Thus it is important that we do not lose sight of *the state* as a key player in the woman-child relation, especially alongside the rather arbitrary or discretionary allocation of rights, and manipulation of the mother-child affective relation. Hence in the UK, as Freeman (2002) has pointed out, not only are immigration tribunals not bound by the ‘best interests’ principle, but the British state can take the children of so-called failed asylum seekers into care. Such measures – even if rarely enforced – work as forms of threat and harassment towards repatriation.

Indeed, refugee children in Britain enjoy few of the human rights they are formally accorded (and this situation has been deteriorating rapidly).

I want to move now to briefly discuss two examples – local to my context – which clarify how there is more than gender at stake. Or rather they remind us that gender is more than women and/or children. Categories like ‘woman’ and ‘child’ – separately and together – invite an easy abstraction from specific cultural-political and economic conditions. Yet the examples I will discuss bring into focus key issues that we cannot afford to ignore. They take up, and take further, the contemporary question preoccupying women’s studies – ‘*which* women?’ – and now apply this to ask: ‘*which* children?’. I draw on these examples precisely because they highlight the indissolubility of women’s and children’s positions both from each other, *and* from intersecting axes of ‘race’, class, and nationality-status. They are drawn from local, British-based research projects conducted under my direction, which I draw upon here in the belief that the issues they pose have wider relevance. What I aim to show via these is that we need to reconfigure not only our models of the relations between women and children, but also to structure into these understandings of citizenship, nationality and minority-majority status. The examples are: child abduction; and children in refuges.

Child Abduction

Child abduction is widely recognized as a crime,² although it is differently defined in different countries according to conceptions of family rights and relationships. In Pakistan, for example,³ a woman escaping a violent marriage who leaves with her children, could be charged with kidnapping and abduction of her own children – since children legally belong to the father. Equally, any agency supporting a woman and her children could be similarly charged, unless the woman files a police statement clarifying her position (a procedure which clearly introduces some significant additional dangers for the woman in making her more traceable, and so also compromises aspects of service provision) (Siddiqui, 2005; Siddiqui *et al.*, 2008).

Over the past years I have been involved in several projects addressing the complex service issues posed in providing support for women from minority ethnic backgrounds, especially in contexts of escaping domestic violence (although this is an issue that often becomes apparent through interventions in relation to

²) Since the Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (1980).

³) Pakistan is a context I have come to learn more about through my involvement as academic advisor to the Women Asylum Seekers from Pakistan project, a transnational project researching the intersection of domestic violence, migration and immigration between the UK and Pakistan (Siddiqui *et al.*, 2008).

mental health difficulties, and also – significantly – child protection, or educational concerns). A feature that the British service providers, managers and even commissioners we interviewed consistently failed to appreciate was the role of British state immigration legislation in creating barriers and limiting resources available to some such women. A woman who has entered the country to join her spouse and who leaves the relationship within two years is not allowed any recourse to public funds.⁴ In this context of ‘no recourse to public funds’, service providers (across health, housing, domestic violence support) have no obligation to offer provision, and indeed often refuse since they claim they have no resources to support their interventions. Typically, support has come only from black women’s refuges.⁵ As if this situation was not bad enough, there is a further ‘border clash’ between nationality status and women and children’s positioning surrounding child abduction, which (as Freeman (2002) and Kaufman (2002) point out), interacts with the vagaries and *ad hoc* applications of various interstate agreements.

It is widely recognized that children figure massively in women’s decisions about what to do about violent relationships with spouses. Women may stay longer for their children’s material security and, in the case of minoritised⁶ women, they may stay for community connections, schooling, reputation and even the children’s marriage chances (Burman *et al.*, 2004). But women also *leave* to maintain their children’s safety, often galvanized into leaving by their concern for their children (Chantler, 2006). Correlatively, mediation and contact arrangements are often championed in the name of children’s rights as well as fathers’ rights of access to their children. The fact that compliance with contact agreements often puts women in danger of further abuse and attack is now well documented (Radford *et al.*, 1999), while custody of children in relation to a woman whose immigration status is dependent on her marriage to her husband is often mobilized to force her to stay. (This is a specific example of how fear of losing one’s children can be used to silence women about abuse – a key challenge for all who work around children and families.)

But beyond questions of nationality, there are equivalent issues of parity of relations between nation states, or rather lack of parity. So in the research projects I have been involved with we have examples of women whose children were abducted by fathers during contact, and taken to countries where cross-national agreements on the return of children do not apply. It was clear in these cases that the removal of the children did not arise from any particular desire for involvement

⁴ The UK government is now considering proposals to extend this to five or even eight years, thus trapping women in abusive relationships further.

⁵ However, since 2005 Women’s Aid have allocated some funding to support refuge provision for women with ‘no recourse to public funds’.

⁶ I use the term ‘minoritised’ (rather than ‘minority’) to highlight how this position is the outcome of relational and institutional processes, rather than an identity or property of an individual or cultural group. So, an individual who in one context is a minority may in another be a majority.

in the care and provision for these children (in fact, the reverse is likely), but rather as a tactic to coerce the mother back into the relationship. Here we have a clear case where the needs of children are being subordinated to those of a father, and a mother is caught between the fear for her own survival and fear for her children. Such situations clearly concern both women and children's rights issues. I outline these here to illustrate how they could not arise without the potent exclusionary mix of racialisation, state immigration control and the 'perverse operation' (Freeman, 2002: 100) of international legislative agreements.

Children in Refuges

I have already begun to touch on the question of refuge provision. Refuges are perhaps a classic context where a feminist agenda appears to dominate – where refuges (or 'shelters' as they are called outside the UK) are seen as places of safety and interim housing for women leaving violent homes. Yet refuges are for children too – although, as our study of refuge provision documented, not too many! Some women who – in accordance with their cultural-religious backgrounds – had large families, found that they could not be accommodated in refuges, and sometimes even had to leave children behind because of this. Moreover, women's refuges in the UK typically do not accept boys over twelve years old.⁷ Once again, the role of the state comes into play in accounting for this, in terms of the financial constraints imposed by 'no recourse' status, as well as the failure to address the different material circumstances of women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

We now know that children whose mothers have suffered violence have often witnessed, and even themselves been subjected to, violence (Mullender, 2004; Graham-Bermann, 2001). Its psychological impact is now receiving attention, with some refuges now employing children's workers and even child therapists. But here tensions arise between supporting women and supporting their children. For some mothers it seems that giving permission for their children to see the therapist somehow compounds their sense of guilt and responsibility. They sometimes oppose such proposals, and experience recommendations from staff as disempowering (Levendosky *et al.*, 2000). Staff can experience a dilemma between wanting to support and enable the recovery and autonomy of the woman, and wanting to provide specific support to the child. Significantly, in a recent study (Bravo, 2006a), a disparity emerged between staff and mothers' perceptions of the longterm effects of violence. This poses a key question. Whose account should be taken as more credible? Are the mothers' (under)estimations

⁷ Elsewhere the age threshold for excluding boys can be half this – as is the practice in Pakistan (Siddiqui *et al.*, 2008).

motivated by the wish not to have been involved in damage to their children? Or are the staff wedded to a victim-based model of childhood innocence that de-emphasises children's resilience? The study also drew attention to the multiple impacts of fear – which is such a key feature of domestic violence; including the mothers' fears of knowing how the violence had affected their children. But, crucially, the fear of their children being taken away from them (or otherwise limiting their parental authority) was a key factor that entered into the willingness to disclose violence.

There is a lesson here that connects with my more general argument: what looked at the outset to be about women vs. children turns out to be about women vs. women, or rather particular women vs. the state. At issue was a power conflict between these (women) staff and (women) service users that exemplifies the key challenge of attending to the diversities of positions of women and children. Cultural issues also of course structure refuge provision (as with other sectors), and there is ample scope for cultural practices around childrearing norms to figure as a site of struggle between mothers and refuge workers, played out over the question of children's access to therapeutic support (given how 'talking cures' and even 'play' can be considered as shot through with assumptions of modern, western culture).⁸ I offer this example because it not only illustrates a key (though clearly non-normative) context where women's and children's interests can appear to be in conflict with each other, but also because this arises precisely through and across structures of racialization, minoritisation and poverty.⁹

Culture and gender are often set against each other in invidious ways (Burman *et al.*, 2004). We have to elaborate better strategies, including more adequate conceptual tools, to work with their complexities, and to avoid either privileging 'race'/culture over gender (and so colluding with women's and children's oppressions) or equally to avoid being recruited into a colonialist/imperialist/racist project of rescuing minoritised women and children from their supposed oppression without considering what we are providing for them instead – as if our notions of freedom, autonomy etc were not imbued with cultural-political histories. Indeed, sadly in our research project we encountered cases where women returned to abusive relationships because of the cultural isolation, and worse still, because of the racism they and their children encountered in the

⁸) Research conducted in black refuges indicates that such conflicts occur rarely and can be worked with in terms of addressing the women's anxieties (Bravo, 2006b). But this is clearly facilitated by a context in which there is both sensitivity to cultural practices and a commitment to support a woman and her children, to the extent also of challenging that woman to help her children further.

⁹) Class position clearly overdetermines which women appear as subject to domestic violence since, at least in the UK, refuges are funded via the woman's entitlement to welfare benefits so any middle class woman would either pay vast rents or more likely would seek out alternative housing and support.

neighbourhoods where they had set up new homes, and even because of the racism they and their children encountered within refuges (Batsleer *et al.*, 2002; Chantler, 2006).

Conclusion: Beyond Investment and Citizenship for Women and Children

I have already drawn attention to how concepts of investment and citizenship are frequently mobilised in relation to both women and children. Yet we need to move away from policy agendas that address fabricated, future or fantasy women and children, and deal with real, specific and current needs and issues posed by particular women, and particular children in particular contexts and conditions. This is no mean challenge under current conditions of neoliberalism, which threatens to co-opt radical and emancipatory discourse for its own ends. As Mohan and Holland (2001: 183) have noted: ‘...the neo-liberal establishment has successfully repositioned itself with respect to the rights-based agenda by championing accountability, transparency and the role of citizenship participation in demanding their rights’.

Moreover national and international economic policies increasingly formulate measures addressing women and children with reference to market generation and (in so-called ‘developed’ countries) welfare entitlements tied to models of active citizenship demonstrated by waged labour participation (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2002). ‘Investment’ may mobilize the anticipated progress of both individual and societal development, but at the cost of subordinating the individual to the state, and current actualities to future possibilities. Citizenship as a strategy for social inclusion may be rhetorically useful, but it always threatens to marginalize those (including those women and children) who do not qualify for nationality status. Social inclusion as a strategy for redressing inequality and disadvantage disallows criticism of what one is being included into and so social inclusion *precludes* an interrogation of how supposedly inclusionary policies actually rely upon exclusion. To be ‘canny’ about ‘women and children’ and ‘women vs. children’, I suggest we should subvert their deployment, including what presumptions they call forth in us, by keeping in mind the questions: ‘*which* women?’ and ‘*which* children?’

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