PHYSICAL VIOLENCE COMMITTED BY WOMEN IN FINLAND: PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS

Emmi Lattu, University of Tampere

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Introduction

Women’s studies have traditionally focused strongly on women’s oppression from the perspective of power and lack of power. The leading mission of the field has been to empower women and to reveal their powerless position with regard to men in an intimate relationship and generally in society. As a consequence of this, feminist research has largely neglected and almost denied women’s misuse of power and use of violence. However, also women use violence in different contexts intentionally and in a powerful way. Analysing women’s violence against men, children and other women complicates the picture of gendered violence and challenges the idea of universal model of men oppressing women and women being victims (Russo, 2001).

Finnish gendered violence research replicates the international model and women as oppressors or criminal offenders have often been of a minor interest of research. Violence research has traditionally been criminological, historical or focused on biology and women have been absent even in these approaches. (Ronkainen 1998). The approach in violence studies has become more gendered and terms such as “violence against women” and “men’s violences” have started to be part of the vocabulary of Finnish academic research and also policy practices since 1990’s. Women’s violence has been studied from a psychiatric point of view (Putkonen 2003), a psychological approach was applied in Haapasalo & Petäjä’s (1999) study on women who had killed their child, women’s criminality from a historical point of view since 1950’s has been studied by Tuula Luukkanen (1997, 2001), and women’s aggression by Kirsti Lagerspetz (1998).

However, there clearly appears to be a growing awareness and interest in female violence in society. In the Finnish media, women’s violence has become a hot topic. There are speculations about whether women’s violence has increased, whether women have become more like men in their behaviour and whether younger girls are also using violence. The media have been interested in girl gangs or tough girls’ groupings (Honkatukia & Aaltonen 2001). Especially the tabloid papers write in a scandalous-seeking way and tend to emphasize the increase in women’s criminality. In popular culture, such as some Hollywood films and computer games, violent or aggressive female characters have also become more popular. For example, already in the classic Ridley Scott’s film Thelma and Louise (1991) and Anja Kauranen’s novel Pelon maantiede (1995) women are depicted as victims of men’s violence who finally have had enough and decide to take revenge on men. (Nykyri 1998). New French film has also addressed female violence: a film by Virginie Despentes & Coralie Trinh Thi Baise-moi (Fuck me) (2000) has received a relatively lot of attention due to its hardcore female violence and pornographic scenes. In popular speech, women’s violence and violent women are often strongly stereotyped. Gilbert (2002, 1282) writes in her article on women’s violence and gender stereotypes that “society needs to see violent women as different-either mad or bad- because, otherwise, we would need new discourses to understand that both men and women can be violent”.

Work in progress
Emmi Lattu, University of Tampere
This paper is based on my ongoing PhD research on Finnish women’s use of physical violence. I concentrate here on the interviews I have carried out with women who have used violence. Firstly I will introduce the interview contexts and describe the access to them. Then I will tell about interviews in general and finally I will concentrate on the themes of violence and motherhood, feeling of shame, and distance. The findings are highly preliminary and tentative, and citation without permission is not allowed.

**Project**

My PhD research deals with the physical violence used by women in Finland. Research questions at this early stage are

- How do women themselves experience their violent acts?
- What kind of meanings they give to them?
- How does gender mould women’s experience of their own violent behaviour?
- How is women’s violence related to the gender system in Finland?

The study is qualitative, and my theoretical framework will be largely feminist criminology and gendered violence research. Mainstream criminological research has analysed crimes and violence mainly through men, and this has often also been done without gendered analysis on men and masculinities or concentrating on the reasons why it is men who commit more crimes (Messerschmidt 1993). However, the purpose is not just add women in the criminal agenda and compare women to men keeping men as norm and applying traditional scientific methods to criminal women. Feminist criminology aims to analyse women’s different position in relation to crimes, violence and criminal justice. In the feminist research on crime and criminal justice researcher’s self-reflexion is important; why s/he is studying that particular topic, why s/he is studying it with that method? The relationship between the researcher and the researched is reflected on and ideally the hierarchy between them is diminished. (Naffine 1997.)

I have started to work full-time on this research in March 2003. Before that, I had written a first version of a research plan and established some contacts to future interview sites. So far I have mainly conducted interviews. The data consist of thematic interviews carried out in two institutional contexts. I interview women who are in contact with a family counselling centre as well as women who are convicted of violent crime. The data collection is still ongoing.

**Interview contexts and access to them**

**Family Counselling Centre**

Finnish family counselling centres offer counselling services for families with children, which have various kinds of problems. Centres are maintained by municipalities, and the staff consists of psychiatrists, social workers and psychologists. Their services are free of charge and individuals can themselves contact the centre or they might be advised to contact it by some other helping organisation. In my research, the selection of interviewees among clientele is done by the personnel of the counselling centre. I visited the centre a couple of times during the winter 2002-2003 and explained about the research. We discussed a lot about how to motivate women for the interview and which would be the best way to contact them. It was decided that this would happen in a meeting between the woman and the social worker who would suggest the woman to participate in the research and if the woman was willing, the worker would then inform me. I have no information of how women’s violence is

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1 I have decided to use the term “women who have used violence.” There is some discussion of the terminology (Das Dasgupta 2002, 1383) and such terms as “women batterers”, “women charged with crime”, “women who use violent” and “domestically violent women” have been used variably in research.

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addressed in meetings between the client and the worker; the family counselling centre served only as a channel for me to meet potential women for interviews.

This method of selecting the informants has so far turned out to be problematic, at least in terms of the number of informants. Through this process I have met 3 women in spring 2003, although I was hoping to interview around 6. The personnel in principal had a positive attitude towards the research, though it seemed difficult for them to suggest the client for the interview. For example, I feel that some social workers are regarding only extremely violent individuals as potential interviewees whereas I would be also interested to meet women who have been violent even only once. They are probably suggesting the interview to “safe and sure” cases (where the violence has very clearly come up) in order to avoid stigmatising the woman as violent and then maybe also risking the therapeutic contact. Also the staff has been changing due to maternity and sick leaves. The process of getting women into interviews is quite slow as workers might see some clients quite rarely. The atmosphere during the woman’s (and sometimes with children and/or partner) visit to the centre is not always suitable for proposing the research. At this context the construction of the field became a little problematic as the selection is only through staff. In his study of men’s violences, Hearn (1998, 50-51) writes that difficulties to get informants is not always just that violent men do not want to talk about their violence. Difficulties might be due to the organisational construction of violence and organisational reluctance to be involved in violence, both at the policy level and the level of individual worker.

**Prison**
The other context for interviews is an open unit of a prison, where it turned out to be much easier to recruit interviewees. Finnish Prison Service is a part of a bigger organisation, Criminal Sanctions Agency, which operates under the Finnish Ministry of Justice. Prison Service is responsible for the enforcement of prison sentences and conversion of fines. Probation Service is in charge of community sanctions: supervision of conditionally sentenced young offenders, community service, juvenile punishment and supervision of conditionally released prisoners (parolees). Prisoners who are expected to be able to adapt into freer and open circumstances and who are not expected to leave the unit without permission are placed into open units. In the open units prisoners either go to work or to some other activity such as training and rehabilitation. In open units inmates use their own clothes. All open units in Finland are intoxicant-free which includes that the inmates are required to commit to being drug-free and they are systematically tested for the use of any intoxicants. This unit has 38 places, 8 for men and 30 for women. It also has a small mother-child subunit where small children are allowed to live with their mothers. The age limit is not defined in the law, but there are usually no children more than three years old in the open units.

http://www.vankeinhoito.fi/14994.htm

Globally and also in Finland, women are in the minority in a prison population, in Finland about 5% are women. The following requirement is set on Prison Service in the Sentences Enforcement Act: "Prisoners may not be placed without grounds in an unequal position because of their race, nationality or ethnic origin, skin colour, language, gender, age, family status, sexual orientation or state of health or religion, social opinion, political or labour activities or other such similar thing". Also the Gender Equality Act is relevant for female prisoners. Despite these legal obligations, women in Finnish prisons are in an unequal position for example in terms of activities organised for them in prison. Also the public discussion on prisoners is almost automatically on male prisoners. Women and men are incarcerated mostly for the same type of crimes, that is violent, drug and property crimes. The proportion of violent offenders is, however, higher among female convicts. (Tammi-Moilanen 2002.)
In the prison context, the selection of interviewees was clearly based on the woman’s sentence. If the women had a sentence for violent offence, the study was suggested to her. First the personnel distributed the presentation of the project and then I met women briefly personally and explained more and asked them to participate. Only two women refused as they both denied their act completely. In prisons, inmates’ violence is explicitly recognised (Hearn 1998, 49) and prisons’ own control is ultimately based on the possibility of violence. However, this criteria for selection leaves out for example the cases where the prisoner is convicted for other type of crime than violence, but would be interested and willing to talk about her use of violence anyway.

**Interviews**

This paper concentrates mainly on 6 transcribed interviews; 3 women met in family counselling centre and 3 from the prison. So far I have interviewed 9 women in the prison, but not yet transcribed all the interviews. The interviewees are all over 18 years and living in Finland². During the moment of writing this paper I am in the process of gathering data and carrying out interviews, so I decided to limit the paper to the 6 transcribed interviews. Out of these 6 women, I have met 2 women twice, they are both from family counselling centre. I will probably meet at least some of the female prisoners second time as well, though some of them will be released soon or transferred to another prison. Before the second interview, I transcribe the first one. The questions asked in the second interview are meant to clarify and deepen the talk. I do not raise any new themes, unless some of the main themes have remained untouched in the first interview. Interviews were recorded by a tape-recorder with a permission from the women, no one refused this. Interviews in the prison were carried out in a room that is used for example group sessions, and for example I didn’t go to women’s own rooms. Women who were contacted through the family counselling centre were interviewed in the centre. I have a loose thematic schema whose main themes are: women’s actual living situation and relationship, their childhood and their own parents, the woman’s own use of violence with many subthemes, violence she has experienced, self-harm, and generally women’s and girl’s violence. Prisoners were also asked about the life in prison and possible violence inside the prison.

These 3 interviews with non-convicted women and 3 convicted women differ quite a lot, and altogether my 12 interviews give a variable picture. Especially in the interviews with prisoners, the talk mainly concentrated on the offence they had been convicted of. It was hard to get any information of other acts of violence they might have done. They might mention these, but they did not speak about them in more detail even if I asked. They defined themselves in relation to that criminal offence, not to violence in general (Hearn 1998, 82). These 3 prisoners are all convicted of voluntary manslaughter. One of them had killed a drinking pal and the two others their male partner with whom they had had a long relationship of 7-8 years. Among the 9 interviews there were also sentences of aggravated assault, attempted killing, voluntary manslaughter done during the act of exaggerated self-defence and aggravated (involuntary) manslaughter. I have not seen the official sentences, I only asked the definition of the sentence in the interview. The women who have killed their child will be excluded of this study due to personal reasons. I am pregnant and having my first child in December 2003, and I think I need to protect myself and my own coping with this difficult topic. Killing a child is extremely rare, and at least this summer, 2003, there weren’t any one convicted of such offence in that particular prison.

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² In the Finnish prisons there are more and more foreign inmates, especially from the Eastern Europe and Russia. Even though the question of ethnicity would be interesting in this context, I have however decided to limit my focus on Finnish women or Finnish-speaking women, already for language reasons.
A first impression of the interviews with the women from the family counselling centre is that they were more used to talk about their problems. This is in a way evident, as they have contacted the centre and talked about their problems there. Also it seemed that it was easier for them to talk about their violence, as they had all admitted it at least to some point to their social worker. It could be assumed that as they have never been convicted of their behaviour, violence did not stigmatise them to such an extent. On the other hand, these particular three women were all very talkative and it seemed that expressing their feelings was relatively easy for them. The child custody issue is always present and one of them said to me that she has not told her social worker everything that she has told me (especially on her use of violence against her children). The feeling of shame was perhaps not so strongly present in their narratives whereas it was very evident in many prisoners’ talk.

After getting some kind of access to interview sites, I had no special problems with the interviews; there were no interruptions on behalf of the women or such. However, I find the interviews somewhat difficult for various reasons. As mentioned, with the prisoners it was hard to talk about any other forms of violence that they had committed than the sentenced act. I hope I might be able to meet them again and focus on this. Secondly, I felt like I was making women guilty when asking about violence. Many of them had suffered violence in their childhood or their partner(s) had been abusive. Thirdly, the interviews were emotionally difficult to me as well. The women’s lives had often been full of multiple problems; heavy use of alcohol or drugs, violence, suicide attempts, broken marriages and relationships with child custody cases, rape and sexual abuse, bitter childhood memories due to parents’ drinking and violence. I felt really uneasy and uncomfortable at times. In addition, I was already pregnant when doing the interviews (except first 3 women at the counselling centre) and quite tired with severe pains. Besides my own condition, my days were a mixture of a wonderful joy of the baby and on the other hand angst and sadness because of the women’s miserable lives.

Violence represented in these interviews is various and its victims are varied in terms of their relationship to the woman. Women mentioned violence used against their husband, ex-partner, partner, children, mother, friend, acquaintance, stranger and a pet. The way they had used violence varied in a great deal and the same woman had often done different kinds of acts. On other hand, some women might as well have been violent only once in her lifetime. The most serious acts of violence were killings; they were all conducted by stabbing, which is the most common method of killing for women in Finland (Putkonen 2003). I very briefly describe here the six woman’s stories.

I met Susanna in the family counselling centre. She is 30 years old and has three children, two elder ones are with the one man and the youngest one is with another man. She is currently a widow, her partner and the father of the youngest died of cancer last year. She told her experiences of violence against her children, especially the two elder ones, relatively seriously violence to their father, as well as violence against her cat in her teenage years. In the following relationships, she had experienced control and also physical violence, sometimes she had resisted these. In her own childhood home violence was often present; her alcoholic father used to abuse her mother and her grandmother.

Anne is 32 and has three children with different men. I met her in the family counselling centre. Anne had a history of sexual abuse by her stepfather for many years. She told me about her arbitrary violence against strangers during her teenage, her violence against her three children especially during her drug and alcohol abuse, violent relationships with men where both had been violent, and her violence against her own mother. Anne said later that the violence against her children is the only violence that she regrets and everybody else had got what they deserved. Now she has been able to control herself and withdraw from violence better for some time after she has stopped taking drugs.
Ursula is in her mid 40’s and also has three children with different men. The youngest one is 13 years and taken into custody due to her drinking problem, the other two are grown up. She had killed her male partner in a drinking situation by stabbing and does not remember much about it. There had been violence in the relationship before. Ursula had had a short community service for slight stabbing and the man had been in prison for attempted killing. Ursula told that it was like a habit that in the conflict situations the man took the knife and sort of waved with it. She was worried of this and even asked him to rather hit with the fist. She was very worried about her own behavior as well, that she would take the knife, which eventually happened. Ursula was raped when she was a virgin. According to her, this pulled her away from her successful sport career and she started to drink and smoke.

Merja is 41 and had killed a drinking pal by stabbing. They did not have a relationship. She has two teenage children, the husband divorced her because of her drinking. She does not remember at all what had happened in the killing, since they had been drinking for some time with a group of people. On the police’s tape she had said he had called her a whore and crazy. Her own father had been abusive and belittled her and since she was 8 he had called her a whore. She mentioned some physical abuse towards her children, but this was left open.

I met Tiina through the family counselling centre where she had looked for help for her child. She is 37 and has two children, she is still together with their father. The form of violence she talked about in the interview was her violence against her partner. It was mostly started by her, in situations of frustration and rage about why they were not able to talk things over. She described the violence having been more like wrestling and it had not injured the man seriously. Tiina told about her sadistic father who had been very abusive during her childhood and also about her ex-partner who had beaten her.

Viivi is in her late 40’s and she had killed her partner by stabbing. They had been together many years, with no shared children. Viivi has one grown-up child from her earlier marriage. The killing was an accident according to her; it happened in a conflict situation where the man told her to be quiet and started to twist her hand. She had been in prison once before, for aggravated assault. According to her, the situation had been more a less the same, he had teased her and she had stabbed him. However, she says she did not mean to harm, just to get rid of him.

I have here a data, which includes many types of violence by women. These are quite different in context, consequences and motives and the research could easily focus only on one form. However, as my intention is to study women’s own accounts and experiences of violence they’ve done, I have decided to keep them together.

Preliminary findings
In this paper, I try to raise a few issues that came up in the interviews. These are very preliminary themes driven mainly from 6 interviews and rather descriptive. I will look at motherhood, feelings of shame and distanciation of violence. As my data gathering (or producing) is ongoing, new themes might appear and seem relevant and equally these first findings might start to seem inappropriate. I make here also some mentions to other interviews that I have done with female prisoners, but cited paragraphs are from 6 interviews. The sample is small and these should be considered as cases. I do not try to give a general picture of violence by women in Finland. The quotations from the interviews are in italics. I met Anne, Susanna and Tiina in the family counselling centre, all the others are from prison. Women’s names are changed. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and the paragraphs cited here are translated to English.
Motherhood

Stereotypes of mothers and motherhood emphasize care, nurture and softness. A violent mother is transgressing many norms of womanhood, motherhood and also legal norms sometimes. They are easily, perhaps more than violent men, considered as inappropriate parents. Among others Ann Russo claims that feminists have been reluctant to take mothers’ abuse to political agenda and that it has been rationalised or minimized (Russo 2001, 16). However in Finland, neither motherhood or fatherhood and violence have been not problematised in research (Hautanen 2002). Some groups (e.g. antifeminist men’s movement) are eager to raise the issue of mother’s use of violence to agenda as to show that men and women are equally violent, or women even more violent against their children. In Finland, there are not really reliable surveys, which would describe the prevalence of child abuse by mothers and fathers. However, many international studies have indicated that mothers who abuse their children are likely to be abused themselves by the male partner (Worcester 2002). Feminist approaches to female child abuse have tended to emphasize the victim position of women. Featherstone stresses, however, the shifting power positions: women may be in a powerless position in relation to their husbands and use power in interaction with their children (Featherstone 1996, 183).

All my interviewees had children. Many of them had children with different men and one or more children were in permanent or temporary custody. Prisoners’ underage children lived either with their fathers, relatives or in a custody family. The traditional nuclear family model had collapsed for many women already before the crime and they were single mothers or one or several of their children had been taken into custody mostly due to substance abuse.

The relation of violence done by women and mothers, and its consequences, came up also in other ways than child abuse. Motherhood in my interviews came up at least in four significant ways 1) mother’s own violence against her children 2) child custody and new living arrangements when the woman is in prison 3) the joy that children and grandchildren bring to women’s lives 4) fear of traumatising children.

1. Woman’s violence against children is a very delicate topic. It is quite difficult to talk about it as it makes women feel guilty and as failed mothers. Women’s violence towards children can also be, as many forms of violence taking place in the private sphere, very hidden and difficult to notice. For example, Susanna 30 years, was surprised that her children’s teachers had never asked anything about bruises in her kids’ faces. She continued that it is so natural for kids to have small bruises from plays. Susanna has 3 underaged children with two men. In the interview she talked about her abuse towards her children and fights and violence with male partners. The limit of violence and “educational” punishment can also be blurred. Even though the Finnish law denies any kind of physical punishment, relatively prevalent beliefs are that small slaps are not so harmful. Emma Wincup (1999) studied women awaiting trial in three bail hostels and found that the gap between idealised expectations of motherhood and caring and the realities of their lives was difficult to handle for women. Women in hostels defined their identity largely in terms of their relationships with other people and evaluated themselves by their ability to care for others. In my interviews, some women felt strongly that they have the sole responsibility to take care of the children. This caused them unbearable stress, which sometimes led to violence against the children. Women’s stories of their violence against their children were often labelled by feelings of heavy responsibility and tiredness.

But then it went to that point that I started to hit the kids...But of course, if I had been drinking at the weekend, and during the weekdays it was like, that I was tired and I felt that nobody cares about me and loves me. Like I am not been taken care of, I have to be so responsible for others. But it is myself who have done the kids. But every human being needs that love. (Susanna)

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Responsibility was experienced as hard and tiring. Sometimes, unbearable tiredness was related to a heavy use of intoxicants. Susanna, a single mother of three, was desperate to be loved herself. It is interesting that she raises the lack of love as her motive or justification for violence. Culturally, excusing violence with alcohol would be very typical in this kind of speech. Susanna also told in the interview how she had to in a way take care of her own parents when she was a child. Eeva Jokinen in her research of mothers’ tiredness is critical towards normative motherhood and gives room to weak and tired mothers. She is hoping that mothers would have the right to be weak and tired and at the same time good, loved and loving persons. She uses D.W. Winnicott’s concept of holding environment or facilitating environment, or lack of it, to describe the mothers’ loneliness and need for contact to other adults. Also adults need company and interaction, and Jokinen claims that Finnish mothers with young children are most alone and most lacking of holding environment than they probably are ever in their lives. (Jokinen 1996, 39-40, 177.)

I have just felt so bad, that I have poured that out...My own bad feeling and loneliness. Like nobody loves me and like nobody cares about me. Somehow. And when the kids were so small, their dependency got me angst. (Susanna)

Yeah, I was emotionally so tired that I couldn’t handle one wrong word, not from kids or anywhere just hoped that everything disappears and goes away and I can just be and lie here and nobody disturbs me...actually the younger one was so small that I remember being many times a pillow in my hand and that now this crowd will be shut up. Luckily I never did that...from their hair I have taken them and ear and dragged them to their room. And I have slashed and like hit. I can clearly admit that. (Anne)

Ursula’s talk and almost her appearance were strongly marked by shame, she said that she could never get rid of. Ursula talked about how she was worried that the offence and shame linked to it would take away her possibility to care. She had often cared and nurtured her relative’s children and they had stayed with her long periods. The idea that maybe they would not allow the kids come to her anymore, and that her capacity of care and nurture would be taken away was devastating.

2. Riitta Granfelt (1998) in her study of homeless Finnish women described their motherhood as broken, shared or different motherhood, the motherhood of margins, as they have been forced, voluntarily or involuntarily, to give up their child because of the difficult living situation. Her findings are at some point very similar to my informants, especially prisoners’ experiences. As motherhood is in the very heart of womanhood, giving up the children is very likely to destroy the identity. Custody decision can be a final starting point to woman’s lose of control of her life. Granfelt outlines that maybe a motherhood good enough could be a capacity to give up the child when she is herself not able to take care of it. Ursula’s youngest child has been taken into custody because of her drinking. During her sentence she has done a lot of thinking and sort oft self-examination and is finally capable to admit that the custody decision was correct and it was “her fault”, she used that expression herself. It had been a long and a painful journey to admit it. Anne’s eldest child is also in a temporary custody for two years and is with her every weekend. She sees it more as a positive thing as she can have more time to recover, as the child is very difficult, and time to take care of the other children, which are at home.

The act of violence or meanings and feelings related to it transformed the mother-child relationship. The fact that child denies the mother was experienced as extremely sad and hurting (also Granfelt, 1998, 130). This was the case at least with two women. Merja’s 15 year-old daughter has refused to meet her and did not invite the mother to her confirmation party. Tanja is in her 50’s and has one child. Tanja had killed the father of the child and her
husband very suddenly. She said the marriage was a normal happy marriage, except that she drank a bit. In the killing situation itself, the man had taken the bottle away which had apparently made her angry. She does not find any other motive for the killing. Tanja’s grown up son had broken the contact as the mother had killed the father. Later the son had re-established the contact and this was an immense source of consolation for her.

3) Furthermore, motherhood and children brought a lot of joy and hope to women’s lives. Women in prisons waited for the holidays to see their children, and especially grandchildren were mentioned in many interviews of women who were in their late 40’s and early 50’s. Merja is waiting to start a new life with her younger child, who will be 12 years when she is released. Anne said that motherhood is the most important thing in her life. According to herself, she was even ready to get pregnant again to be able to stay home with the eldest child who was kicked out of school.

4) A strong fear in many women’s interviews was a fear of traumatising their children with violence and continuing the circle of violence. These women were well aware of the possible harm done to their kids. None of the woman told about serious injuries they have done to children. Susanna told about her physical abuse towards her two elder children. Besides her fear that she “has done them crazy”, she felt the connection to them is broken because of her abuse. She said she was not anymore able to show them tenderness and care because she had earlier abused them. The fear of trauma caused to children also applied to children witnessing violence by father.

**Feeling of Shame**

As women are not supposed to show aggression and use violence, doing this transgresses many norms. I asked each of my interviewees how she feels about her being violent and committing a violent act. I sometimes had to clarify my point on this and then I often added “how do you feel as a woman about the fact that you’ve used violence”. This might have led the answers to some direction. This question gave various answers, but women often mentioned the feeling of deep shame and of not being a normal woman, being a stranger.

Broadly and simplified, feelings can be separated as social feelings and moral feelings. Social feelings include love, shame, guilty and surrender. Moral feelings can be characterised as feelings that are result of violations of right and wrong, becoming a victim, crime and punishment. Shame threatens the social position and belonging to a certain group, such as normal women (Takala 1999). It is difficult to make a distinction between guilt and shame. Guilt is a result of doing something wrong and often transgressing a certain limit or norm. One can feel shame just because of his or her existence. One’s personality is wrong and especially in relation to others (Ronkainen 1999). In the interviews, the shame and feeling of not being normal were related especially to the normative womanhood. Women did not feel that they were normal women and the feeling of abnormality was definitely negative. Women talked about hurting the victim being shameful as well, but I got the impression that the shame was especially due to deviating their gender role. We discussed shortly about violence generally and when the talk was more on a general level, some women said that neither men nor women should use violence and men should feel shame in the same way.

_EL: Do you have then more like any feelings, that you as a woman have used violence?_  
_Tiina: Of course, ’cause I realise that the majority of women don’t behave like this…I can’t stand them (long periods of silence with her partner, EL) At some point I started to think, that is he taking use of them, like in a way I have such a strong will. Like he gets me in to that point, that I drink, I come home and then I make fool of myself in the eyes of whole neighbourhood (She’s referring to fights and noise of them, EL). Like the whole fucking Helsinki would be interested in what I’m doing. But that’s how I feel. I really feel when I even go to a bus that everybody’s staring at me, like “There she goes”._ (Tiina)
At least to some point, feelings and shame are culture-specific. For example, women’s violence and feelings related to it are not so suppressed in some other than Judea-Christian cultures. Hinduism and Islam do not regard femininity and aggression as opposites and it might be more acceptable to Black women to resist their partners’ violence (Das Dasgupta 2002, 1380).

Merja: Well, I guess. I think it’s awfully shameful.
EL: Why do you feel shame?
Merja: Well, a woman isn’t like that. I asked my workmate (in prison, EL) when I left (to the interview, EL) or maybe even before that when we chatting that you will come here. Well, I asked her, or, I said, that I don’t feel myself as a violent offender in any way...I think women don’t fight, at least don’t stab with a knife. (Merja)

Merja killed a drinking pal with whom she had no intimate relationship. The motive is unclear and she doesn’t remember the incident at all. Her first memories are when she woke up being arrested.

Ursula talked about the shame many times during the interviews. She did not link the shame so clearly to womanhood, rather she felt that the nature of her act was so shameful. She did not believe that the experienced shame and sentence would reintegrate her to the society and to group of normal people, normal women (see Braithwaite on reintegrating shame 1989). It is difficult for her to react to what happened, as she does not recall the killing. This is apparently due to drinking and medication, but also some psychological shock and denial. In addition to these, humiliating experiences during the court procedure decreased her position as a subject.

I don’t know, somehow it is. The nature of my act. That I take a human being’s life. I got that kind of ideas that oh god, how can anybody trust me anymore... It is that feeling it never goes away, it is always. Of course it can fade away a bit. But it never goes away from my life...
EL: When you talked about the shame and that you also believe in the Finnish criminal justice system, could you think that when you have completed your sentence then you have got what you deserved? That it would set you free from the shame?
Ursula: I don’t think so. It is that kind of thing that a human being’s life is taken away. Maybe if I had a clear picture what happened. That I could like build on that. But I can’t build anything...I feel like, you know, it like touches, if I even think about going back to civil life, like I somehow feel that I have a label in my forehead, that hey, I’ve done (killing, EL).
(Ursula)

Viivi is one of the rare persons among the interviewees who did not have such a moral loading on this issue. On the other hand she sees that as she did not mean it, she cannot feel shame or guilty. In the end of paragraph, however, she almost justifies the act with the man’s violence. Her talk was in a way full of inconsistencies, as she said clearly many times that there was not violence in her relationship with this man. However, she had been in prison earlier for aggravated assault for stabbing the same man. After six days of release she killed him. She also mentions that the man teased her and she told about the incident when he had pushed her down the stairs, which resulted in injury.

I can’t say that I had ever felt shame, but rather like I’ve just been so sorry for this. Cause I didn’t for God’s sake mean to kill the person I thought I loved. But as I’m short-tempered, I just waved that go to hell now from me now...I can’t really feel guilty. Once I even wrote my thoughts and feelings down to a paper, as I can’t feel guilty, ‘cause I did not mean it in any way. If I had killed him in purpose, then I might feel guilty. But as I’m short-tempered, like thought that I’ve 8 years suffered his constant teasing. I was like his maid. (Viivi)
For Susanna, shame was related to weakness.

Susanna: Towards a man I was last time (violent, EL) when I was with that Antti, something three years ago. I only once slapped him. And also then it was jealousy and I was sober. And oh God I felt ashamed afterwards. I went to another room and thought, damn I’m stupid. Like a horrible feeling of shame...
EL: Why were you ashamed?
Susanna: My own reaction. That I had to be so weak, that to hit another one. (Susanna)

Other types of feelings were also linked to the women’s use of violence. Shame was the prominent feeling related to their state after the violence. During and before the violent incident at least the following feelings were mentioned fear, rage, hate, jealousy, angst and frustration.

Distance and denial
Jeff Hearn (1998) found out in his study on men’s violences and how men talk about it that men had difficulties to define themselves as violent man. Men often described themselves as being non-violent today and violent in the past, which has changed now. The tactics to talk about violence used among men included for example minimizing, denial at different level, not knowing or forgetting and blank out. In my interviews, this same style of speaking was evident in the narratives of the counselling centre’s women. They were willing to make a distinction with the past and claimed that they are more able to control their aggressive feelings now. This might be of course a genuine change in their behaviour as the woman had started to seek help and had also talked about violence with the social worker. Also some women interviewed in the prison took a distance to their violence. They said it was only one fatal incident and that normally they are not violent.

In my interviews none of the women actually denied their use of violence. Many women, however, dissociated themselves from the violence. They defined themselves as non-violent and especially those who had killed another person had difficulties to remember anything of it. Many women were intoxicated during the violent event and some of them had diagnoses of brain damages due to heavy use of alcohol. In a recent study of forensic psychiatric examination statement of homicidal women in Finland in 1982-1992 (Putkonen 2003), it was found out that 71% of the perpetrators were intoxicated. However, as Merja ironically says below, violence cannot be explained with alcohol. Psychological denial or forgetting plays its part as well.

When I’m sober, I’m not violent, anything else than that…Well, I’ve been drinking 20 years of my life, there would be a hell of lot dead bodies, if I was like that always when drunk. At my case, it is a one particular incident…I’ve said on the film, that I got so mad at him, that I thought that I’ll hit him right to the heart…I have to believe it, that it has happened like that. ‘Cause I don’t remember anything of it…This killing happened at 1 o’clock in the daytime and the next thing I remember is 7 o’clock next morning. (Merja)

Somehow it felt just, ‘cause I don’t consider myself as a violent personality and then a poor girl suddenly has to face 8,5 years from killing and then even from a killing of such a loved one. It surely was hard to take...
EL: How it well, how did you feel then (after the killing), do you remember?
Viivi: I don’t really remember…Apparently been very shocked. That I didn’t mean it would happen like that. (Viivi)

Laila’s case was the classical example of woman killing a man after decades of abuse and rape. They had 4 children and the husband’s behaviour sounded monstrous including
threatens to kill the kids, rape, and severe physical and mental violence. The last time he tried to abuse her, she had stabbed him. Laila was completely sober, she never drank and was very religious. She does not remember the actual stabbing at all, and was incapable to answer the police’s questions such as how she held the knife when she stabbed him.

On the other hand, some interviewees did define themselves as violent or aggressive. Anne said she is aggressive and anything can be expected from her. Also Tiina and Susanna clearly named their behaviour as violence. Denial or admitting is also dependent of the form of the violence. It surely is easier to accept and admit the violence or resistance towards a controlling and abusing partner than towards a small child. Nykyri (1999) also suspects that women’s relation to violence is age-dependent; elder women would deem violence by women more while younger generations would accept it better. Denial and distanciation are closely linked to the issue of responsibility, i.e. how the individual is ready to admit and take full of responsibility of his or her behavior.

Conclusion
This was a first attempt to describe some parts of the data that I have collected during spring-summer 2003. The three subthemes motherhood, shame and distance, have been chosen in a relatively arbitrarily way. There would have been other possible themes as well, such as trauma, justification and the blurred relation of victim-offender. I find it challenging to write about this issue being at the same time empathetic to women’s own experiences but not slipping into a total victim paradigm in which experienced violence could easily justify the committed violence. Interviews with women who have been violent raise many interesting questions on gender, violence and power. The women’s interviewed reality is very complex and when analysing the data, the multiple causality of women’s violence needs to be kept in mind (see Das Dasgupta 2002).
References


