

Moral Responsibility for Coerced Wrongdoing:
The Case of Abused Women Who “Fail to Protect” Their Children

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All moral agents are vulnerable to coercive pressures to do wrong. This paper deals with cases of abused women who have been intimidated by the abusive men in their lives into letting those men abuse the women’s children. In the US, such women are sometimes convicted of the crime of “failure to protect” their children. In many such cases the men are not convicted of any crime at all or they are convicted of a lesser crime, a misdemeanor instead of a felony. The coercive pressures those women faced suggest that they were helpless victims rather than morally responsible agents. Yet we have to be careful not to regard abused women as devoid of moral agency. This paper explores different ways of understanding the moral responsibility of abused women who fail to protect their children.