

## **Why Women First\***

by **Kathleen Carlin, Founding Executive Director**

Recently I conducted a workshop for people working in alcohol and drug programs. The group included technicians, counselors, and family therapists. One of the workshop members, a battered woman, shared her story. When she finished, the first response was from a man who said, "It sounds, from what you said, as if this man is an alcoholic -- is he?"

A discussion about her husband continued for several minutes until I stopped it and asked the group to examine what was happening. I pointed out that no one had acknowledged the woman in any way - how she felt, what was happening to her, or even what it meant for her to tell her story to the group. Most significantly, even when I described what was happening, some people understood, but others did not. Some were, in fact, bewildered by what I said. Their confusion stemmed from their sense that no one actively denigrated, judged, or attacked her. In fact, the group felt they responded to her. What was probably outside their experience to understand was that their focus on her husband told this woman he was the one who counted in her story. Their responses implied her value was as a conduit to him, to illuminate him for others to understand, judge or vilify.

From the moment caring about battered women became an identifiable movement, another phenomenon moved with it - the question of how caring about women relates to caring about men. This phenomenon involves issues at the heart of the battered women's movement and feminism itself. For battered women's advocates, it manifests itself most explicitly in the issue of how our movement and individual programs relate to the abuser and programs serving him.

We must control abuser services at every level. We must determine when they ought to be established, require that they operate in conjunction with our projects, define appropriate strategies for working with such men and evaluate the projects.

This issue has not been a major theme of dialogue within the movement. Rather, it has been a shadow issue, recognized by our failure to address it. Consequently, there are battered women's programs identified by their refusal to serve abusers, on the basis that it is men's responsibility to work with men; programs that identify themselves as combating "domestic violence" through serving "the whole family," and programs for abusive men that exist separate from any contact - physical or philosophical - with battered women's shelters.

These positions represent two poles: one service considers only women, in and of themselves; the other two do not.

Some battered women's programs act as if these positions represent a spectrum, and try to achieve a precarious balance between them that invariably results in an energy-sapping lack of clarity. In fact, no spectrum exists. But until now the battered women's has not discussed this element of woman abuse. The imminent danger in not making this issue explicit is that it will be taken up by others, giving the illusion that it is being resolved.

To understand why this essential dialogue has not occurred, we must first examine our resistance to it. The resistance stems mostly from fear. We fear we will misunderstand each other (we will); we fear the dialogue will be incomplete and we will lack the language for necessary resolution (true); we fear it will expose divisions between us that we can't resolve when we can't afford to be divided (possible); we fear

we are getting sucked back into and swallowed up by the myths and beliefs about men-woman relationships that prevail around (and in) all of us.

Some of our resistance has been based on these fears. However, resistance based on our fear of exposing our inchoate "knowing" to a well-organized, institutionalized opposition can be a healthy defense. For our purposes, the key resistance to discussing abusers' programs within the movement has been an active, conscious refusal to deal with abusers' problems. This resistance has been positive and essential to our survival. It remains a critical part of our self-definition. It has been our way of action out our reason for being, of saying out loud, "We exist for the sake lifting up this woman - victim and radically redefining her from woman-as-victim (equals woman-as-responsible) to woman-whole, primary, central, the one on whom our unqualified energy, attention, and care focuses." To affirm her wholeness as apart from her culturally ascribed function of wife and mother unleashes fear and rage, because it challenges the designated place of women in the social system as subordinate and complementary to men. It threatens that system, because what the battered women's movement lives out is women *defining themselves*. By saying, "this is how we exist for battered women" we live out, ourselves, our new definition as whole, complete persons separate from men.

Without some collective experience and shared history in that new definition we could not withstand the powerful, unconscious assumption that would accompany any program for batterers: that at some level women *are* responsible for the violence against them and that taking care of men's emotional needs is intrinsic to womanhood. By not providing services to batterers we have claimed who we are as women and rejected the patriarchal definition of women which, whatever it is, is limited to being *in relation* to men.

That is not to say that we will never choose to care for and attend to the feeling and emotional needs of individual men whom we care about. It does mean that it can no longer be assumed that we will automatically protect any man from having to understand his emotions or that by so refusing we have become unwomanly.

At the same time, one of the battered women's movement's principles is the abuser's responsibility for his abusive behavior. More than anything else, the battered woman must understand that the violence is *his*, and only he can stop it. To redefine the belief "she provokes it," to "he chooses to hit" remains the essential critical point in her liberation from battering. Most of us also agree by now that men who learn to rely on violence as a means to deal with stress cannot unlearn it by themselves. Therefore, there is a need for services that acknowledge and treat abusers.

Our need to acknowledge a woman's existence as complete in itself and yet to recognize the need for abuser services puts us on a tightrope. There is tension between opposing prevailing culture by putting women forward as centrally, individually important, and having to accept that our position will be seen as "anti-male." There is tension between saying the problem is the abuser's and then being misunderstood when we resist letting what meager resources there are flow, as they would so easily, into programs for men. There is tension between believing that battered women are best helped by other women who support them and offer them space to help themselves, and criticizing attempts to help batterers in the same way. Dealing with such ambivalence and apparent inconsistencies is very complicated and difficult. But I believe it is essential to our movement that we begin.

What approach then, do we take?

Battered women's programs are invariably asked, "Do you work with the entire family?" Wherever that question is asked it is important to examine the questioner and motivation. Sometimes it is not so much a question as an accusation that we are "breaking up the family." This charge suggests that individuals are in service to a system, in this case the family, rather than social systems exist to nurture growth and expression of the human beings in them.

At another level, someone from a traditional social service will pronounce, not without an air of defiance, that "we work the entire family," implying that the battered women's program does not, and is therefore inadequate, inconsequential, and irrelevant.

Of course, not all human service workers who work with families feel anger toward battered women's programs. Rather, some believe it is essential to work with "the whole system." But what system are they talking about? To use their language, the language of family systems theory which speaks of "first-order change" and "second-order change," the battered women's movement is about second-order change. "First-order change" is the phenomenon of persistence, in which there is "changeability in process but invariance in outcome," an apt description of the cycle of violence. First-order change is what battered women have historically had recommended to them: "try harder," "go back and be more what he wants," "be a better wife," "be more submissive." Second-order change, by contrast, is a change of the premises governing the system as a whole. To oversimplify, an example is batterers' age-old shibboleth "she provokes it." The first-order change response is for the woman to figure out she provoked it and stop those behaviors. The second-order change response is the battered women's movement's statement that there is something radically wrong with a system in which one group (in this case, the patriarchal social system personified in the abuser) sets the rules, decides when those rules have been transgressed, and owns the authority to mete out punishment for breaking the rules - all within a system billed as partnership of shared rights and responsibilities, i.e., marriage.

And so we return to the question of what system we are talking about. If abuse within the family system is dealt with from an ahistorical position, where those working with the family have not challenged the system's assumptions, then history's momentum will carry them down the river of first-order change.

To try to describe the implications of choosing a particular type of change I am going to borrow an illustration from the struggle against racism, ever mindful that it is extremely risky and that racism and sexism are not analogous.

In 1970 the YWCA of the USA accepted, within its program for action, one imperative: the elimination of racism wherever it is found and by any means necessary. It was through much hard and painful struggling that the one imperative was adopted. The greatest and near-irresolvable resistance was to the phrase "by any means necessary." White people had such a hard time with that, insisting it could allow for violence. Even though those white people really believed that it was violence they feared, it was not. The real fear was that the phrase signified a radical shift of power from white people to Third World people. It meant that the power to say "this is racism, this is also racism, this is *still* racism" now lay with the people who were its victims. It meant that white people did not maintain ultimate control, often indicated by the phrase "you have gone too far." The "too far" measure no longer existed. It was not within white people's power to determine how far it was necessary/permissible for Third World people to go in saying, "this is racism, and this is what has to happen for it not to be here."

The same must happen with woman abuse. If we are going to change the dominant assumptions that legitimize woman abuse, work with abusers must be done in a context where the men working with them act from a stance that says, "there has not been room in the traditional male-dominated culture for understanding how we maintain a system of oppressing and victimizing women, so we have not learned this. This understanding is not a part of our experience, so we have to learn it from women who are conscious of it. If we are going to change and help bring about change in men who carry out explicitly the male victimizer role we all own, then we must constantly look to women to teach us, to give us the works, to describe the experience. We will accept their perceptions and work from their authority." This represents that radical shift of power to a place where the leadership and authority are not male. Until that shift occurs, as long as men have final authority to define the issues residing with them, then everyone is still acting the same old male dominant/female subordinate theme. Most importantly, until that radical shift occurs, it will not be possible to acknowledge or make apparent that there is anything "wrong".

For white men to copy the model of black separatist groups or women's consciousness-raising groups is itself a demonstration of their failure to understand and face sexism. Black caucuses and women's caucuses have had to form because the culture as it exists is a white male caucus. That is, the dominant

group - in this society, white male - defines the culture. Part of this definition is the legitimization of the culture's unequal relationships. The result is that the philosophy, morality, and social theory that are society's guiding concepts serve to obscure this inequality's very existence and explains events that take place in terms of other premises, such as racial or sexual inferiority. As a means to survival within this structure, subordinate groups tend to appropriate the dominant culture's definition of them. In addition, the only means for exchange, including language, are those allowed by the dominant structure, so that psychic and physical mechanisms for sharing the primary experience of subordinate groups do not exist.

For me, feminism, then, is women talking to each other, creating the language needed to describe and authenticate their experience as individual, separate beings. This creation must occur outside the prevailing social context (as in consciousness raising groups). Otherwise, we immediately return to a world which doesn't allow space for this redefinition.

Once we have new conceptualizations, we must engage the system again. But new ways of conceptualizing, by definition, don't fit the prevailing system. They are quickly discounted as trivial or irrelevant. To try to introduce these changes into a system that cannot acknowledge, much less affirm these different perceptions is phenomenally difficult. Our only option is to model the changes. That means programs for abusers must be connected to battered women's programs and look to them for leadership and direction.

*\* This article originally appeared in Aegis: Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women, 1982 (p6)*