

Working with batterers: What is women's role?

by **Kathleen Carlin, Founding Executive Director**

Over the 20 years of my work in the battered women's movement, including the years in the shelter, and particularly the past 14 years that I have been with Men Stopping Violence, I have wrestled with this question: What is the role of women in relation to the work with men who batter?

During these years, conducting trainings, talking with other women engaged in working with batterers intervention programs and with friends in the battered women's movement, I have listened to women struggle with many aspects of this issue.

It was my interest in this question that drew me into joining the work that Dick Bathrick and Gus Kaufman were doing to start Men Stopping Violence.

When Dick and Gus came to the Cobb shelter to apply to lead the "abuser group," as we called it then, their proposal was that they co-lead the group. I was caught off-guard. I believed that I would be co-leading the group. It had never occurred to me that there was another possibility. They, on the other hand, had for their model of the work the concept of a men's collective.

My own very limited ideas about how to approach the work were based on what I had learned from two of the only programs in the country at that time: the Domestic Abuse Project in Minneapolis, and the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program in Duluth, MN. What had inspired and excited me about these programs was their premise that the work with batterers was not for men to do alone, but rather should be monitored by women who were themselves leading the work to end battering.

Nevertheless, knowing so little about how to proceed, and feeling very unsure of myself in this new area of work, I agreed to Dick and Gus's proposal; but I established that they would then meet with me and Leigh Ann Peterson, another shelter worker, for supervision. It was only much later, after we had worked in this way, that I appreciated and saw the real value of that structure. Because it was not the usual model - most programs were designed with male and female co-leaders- I was forced to think very carefully what worked in our model and why.

Women Working With Batterers

There is not, in my mind, one right way to conduct batterers groups. But considering the implications of women working directly with batterers is valuable because it informs and empowers our decisions.

In doing so, I am acutely aware that it is beyond the scope of this article and my experience as a white professional woman to talk about the many nuances of this topic raised by issues of race and class. As I examine the implications for a woman to be singly in a room with a group of men who have battered women, the question also is, "What does it mean for a woman of color, in relation either to men of color or white men?" What are the issues raised when a white woman works with batterers who are men of color? What of a middle-class woman working with low-income or poverty level men? All of these are crucial questions present within the ones I raise here that must be asked.

Over the years I have heard women give the reasons why it makes sense to them to work with batterers. At various times the following have been my reasons also:

"Men have to hear what it's like for battered women. Who is going to be able to tell them that but a woman?"

"We can't trust men leaders not to identify with the batterers. I will catch things the men say that a male leader won't catch."

"A woman and a man co-leading a group can model equal relationships between men and women, men looking to women as authorities."

"I want to learn about how men think; I want to try to understand how men can be violent toward women they claim to love."

"I'm as competent as a man. I feel insulted to hear that only men can do this work."

"I care about men as well as about women. Men deserve to have someone help them."

These positions all have behind them a larger question. Women are asking, "How do I use my power - my competence, my passion for justice for women - to stop men from being violent?" Women want men to have to hear what it is for women to be the objects of their violence and abuse, and want men not to be able to ignore and discount that experience. One place where that seems possible is in a group where men are required to listen to women.

Consequences of a Sexist Society

What is the task, ultimately, of a batterers' intervention class? Ultimately, that task is the undoing of sexism. That is, until a man understands that his violence is a systematic effort to keep a woman subordinate, **and** (a very big "and") he recognizes that this is wrong and he wants to change -- until then, his violence will always seem justifiable, will seem logical to him.

The premise that is often stated is that a man learns to be violent from his family - either from abuse that was perpetrated against him or that he observed. While this is true as far as it goes, it misses the more profound basis for his violence: a sexist culture, which is then played out in families.

Our belief is that men learn primarily from other men to be violent, so that's where they have to unlearn it. **Therefore, the batterers' intervention class should simulate the sexist society, not the family.**

A group co-led by a man and a woman tends to suggest the family, with the facilitators subconsciously representing husband and wife or mother and father, further suggesting that the violence is of concern only within the confines of the family - in other words, a private matter.

In fact, what has been made clear by people working to end battering, is that the secrecy and privacy of battering are important components of the batterer's power. It is as the battered woman dares to tell what is happening - to the police, to her pastor or rabbi, to advocates in the shelter and the court -- that she can begin to rely on others for help. De-privatizing the problem of violence against women is a necessary element in making battering a collective problem of the community, or society, rather than something that is the business only of people in their individual relationships.

How does the point stated above make many of us, as women, feel?

We feel left out, and rightly so. The sexist world has been, for women, a realm in which men are talking to men about men, a world from which women are excluded, or are included mostly just as a resource for men (an example is the "trophy wife") in their gaining power and status among men.

In a sexist world, the sphere of men is primary, central. That is, what men do, out in the world, is what counts as activity. This is the sphere of action, where what takes place gets recorded as history, gets named as reality, affects the material circumstances of other peoples' lives. This is a world defined by, inhabited by, and is the domain of, almost exclusively, white men.

Wherever men go in the world, the domain of men is their reference. The teenage boy trying to "score" with the girl in the backseat of the car is not seeing her. Rather, his eye is on his reference group --other boys -- and what kind of status he will gain with them through what he can report.

Can Men Represent Women's Reality?

If a man were to listen to women, to take seriously women's reality -- particularly in order to work as an ally -- he would have to take women's domain as his referent. To imagine a man doing such a thing sets up tremendous anxiety in us as women, as well as in men, because it seems so unnatural, so un-manly. And yet, that is what a man who works with batterers to end their violence has to do. It is his job to represent battered women's reality to the men. To do so means that he must "break rank" with male hegemony.

No wonder we as women find it almost impossible to imagine men who would really confront other men, challenging their male privilege, their everyday contempt for women, their acceptance of the rightness of a world established on the basis of male dominance.

In order for a man raised in a sexist culture to be able to do such a thing, he must listen, carefully, to women describe what it is like for them to be subject to men's abuse and violence. There is no way this can be easy to do. Men, even though they are willing to engage in this process, will feel at times personally attacked, guilty, and as if their own power is being taken away. In fact there are men willing to submit to such difficult learning, to hear women's voices and carry those voices in their heads as they confront batterers. In our 14 years, we've had a number of men who've been drawn to this work by the example set by Dick and Gus. Some have continued, some were not willing.

A maxim in our organization that is repeated over and over to men in the classes is this: You can't change what you can't claim. The essential process for a man wanting to stop his violence is that he must say, directly, what he did. This is very difficult for men to do, as most men feel embarrassed to reveal in front of others what they have done, and therefore want to obfuscate it through minimization and justification. Much of the work in the class is to get men to claim specifically and completely their violent acts. Being able to support a man in such difficult work, while at the same time confronting him about the meaning and effects of his actions, requires the ability to be with him in facing the reality of what he did without joining with him in believing that somehow he was justified or not responsible for what he did.

Now place a woman in the room. What is her location in this scenario - who is she there? Perhaps she is the dispassionate therapist who does not react to the content of what is said, but responds to the feelings behind it, or to the process in the group. What does that mean when the content is vivid descriptions of horrifying violence, degradation, or virulent hatred of women? In order to listen to such descriptions and keep her reactions measured and calm, must she disidentify with that woman in the story? If she does that, then what is communicated to the men? Could he not then continue his belief, unchallenged, that women aren't really affected by his abuse?

On the other hand, if she reacts with rage and horror, then the man will surely go into a defensive posture, which stops the process necessary to claiming and realizing the meaning of his actions.

Objectification of Women

In a sexist world, women are objectified. Sadly, there is nothing we as women can do to prevent it. This distortion and diminishment of who we are is profound and omnipresent. A woman in a roomful of batterers will be objectified. How does this affect the process for the men? The risk is that it allows them

to focus on **her**, whether to sexualize her, to demonize her, or to see her as "exceptional", rather than have to focus on themselves.

A primary consequence of objectification of women is the dividing women into two groups: good women and bad women. As we all have learned, women in the "good" category are mothers, wives, sisters -- that is, the women men have publicly approved relationships with. Women in the "bad" category are, generally speaking, women who are sexually accessible and disposable. While men can do whatever they wish with "bad" women, they are taught to act and speak in a particular way with "good" women. This set of behaviors is sometimes referred to as chivalry, and is what necessitates the existence of men's clubs and other all-male enclaves: places where it is safe to talk about women in the ways that objectify them, that reveal the contempt men are socialized to feel about women.

It seems likely to me that when a woman is in the room with a group of batterers, some version of chivalry will kick in, meaning that men won't "get real." Possibly the batterers will behave in the ways they are supposed to behave with "good" women (in this case, women with authority in their lives). But it's how men talk about women when women aren't in the room that counts. If men don't talk directly about their contempt for woman, get challenged, have to take responsibility for it, they won't change.

A reason often suggested for a man and a woman to co-facilitate batterers' groups is that they can model "equality" or "shared power" in a male-female relationship.

While we won't discuss here whether it is in fact possible to achieve such an objective, I would like to examine its utility. This requires reflecting on the purpose of the batterers' class, which is for the men to identify and claim their own violence and abuse and figure out how to stop it. With a woman in the room, men can instead make her -- what she says, what she does -- the issue. They can focus their rage on her, or they can idealize her, saying to their partners, "Now, if you were like her, if you said it the way she says it, then I wouldn't get enraged with you." Either way, a man can make a woman the focus of his problem, which continues the pattern of thinking that allows him to justify his violence in the first place.

Men and Feelings

Much has been said about the fact that many men are taught from an early age not to show their vulnerable feelings; that to cry is "unmanly", for example. There is, in addition, agreement that for men to stop being violent it is important for them to identify and take responsibility for feelings that are masked by their rage. And yet the obvious connection between the prohibition against showing vulnerable feelings (crying is "sissy", you'd better not be like a woman) and the tacit societal permission to vent his rage on a woman is a crucial one to be made in a batterers' class. It is fundamental to men's violence against women.

Because men confiding in and showing feelings of sadness and fear to other men risk being seen as weak (like a woman) or of becoming emotionally close (homophobic anxieties), men usually talk with women in their lives about their feelings. Therefore, in a society that is highly homophobic, men (and women) will be more comfortable having men talk about their feelings if there is a woman in the room. A woman facilitator who will necessarily respond to men's emotional expression will, unwittingly, ease the (men's and women's) homophobic anxiety in the room, when instead, men must confront their homophobia if they are really going to confront their contempt for women.

Women's Authority

Because we are all deeply embedded in a sexist world, there is, unfortunately, a power in men hearing from other men the truth of what they have done. To hear the victim's experience described by a man, sadly, will give her story a credence it would not otherwise have. However, if we remind ourselves that this is the first step, and only the first step toward his learning how to hear it from her, believe her and take her seriously, then we can understand it as part of the progression toward undoing sexism -- not as reinforcing it.

It is the task of the facilitators, under the direction of the women's advocates, to devise ways to bring the experience of battered women into the room. Some effective means are through tapes, videos, films and readings. When listening to battered women tell their stories through these media, men cannot intimidate or use other abusive means against the story teller.

While one might agree that, ideally, men would do all this work with men, the question inevitably is: But where are the men willing to take these risks, to confront other men in these ways? Often I hear women advocates say, "But there aren't any men in my community who will take leadership from women, who will listen to battered women's reality and take it seriously. Therefore it's better if I do it myself."

But if men working in the community to make change are not willing to be accountable to battered women's reality and change their behavior because of it, then why would batterers themselves do that?

A better structure, in my view, is that men confront batterers in a situation that mirrors men's sphere, but in this case, men's sphere enclosed and surrounded by women's reality. That is, men work with other men, but women "listen in". They observe in some appropriate way, most suitably audiotapes of the classes, then give feedback to the instructors. Women are one step removed, with their intervention and instruction being done with the male instructors. What is being said and done in the class, however, is available for them to know.

Women's authority is present to the men in the class when the instructors announce that they are taping the class because they are being supervised by a woman. They state her name and her position. Women's location is then that of authority, not as helper. This gives the instructors an experience they can pass down to the men in class: the experience of being challenged by and taking women seriously.