Bridging Social Change and Systems Reform:
Duluth as a Site of Resistance
or
The Impact of Using the Master's Tools
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The Battered Women's Movement

For over twenty years, the battered women's movement has challenged cultural norms regarding violence against women. Similar to other (counter)institutions created during the early women's movement, crisis lines and shelters originated as sites of resistance to the violence that women experienced in their intimate relationships (Deckard, 1979). Although a variety of feminist theoretical perspectives intersect within the battered women's movement, the primary questions guiding the analysis, goals, and tactics of feminist activists are asked by Ferree and Hess (1985).

> *Is the whole purpose of feminism to produce free and unfettered individuals or to create a new form of community? Is feminism to be realized through individual transformation (and consequent sociopolitical change) or through a sociopolitical struggle that creates the conditions for individual transformation? (p. 41)*

How feminist communities within the battered women's movement (or movement) respond to these questions shape their strategies for change. Each organization creates an approach unique to its own history, structure, ideology, systems reform, and social change perspective (Schechter, 1982).

For feminists adopting the traditions of an equal rights perspective, the primary goal is reforming structures and institutions that serve as barriers to equal access for women (Ferree & Hess, 1985). They believe that as equality and access are achieved, women are free, through their own will, to interact in an equal and autonomous way to achieve their goals. Some feminist communities believe that entering into relationships with the state opens dialogue, promotes incremental change, and holds the long term potential for changing belief systems and value structures. Cultural change will then occur as traditionally closed systems accommodate reforms. These reforms create an awareness and, at some level, acceptance of alternative conceptualizations of professional practices, the separation of the public and private spheres, and appropriate behaviors in family relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Feminists who focus on systems reform share common goals with a broad spectrum of social service agencies, victims rights advocates, government institutions, religious organizations, and community groups.

Others in the feminist community see violence against women as only one representation of systematized oppression. Understanding the limitations of systems reform, there are feminists who understand comprehensive social change as a long term, complex, multilayered process of ending oppression for all people. For these feminists "patriarchy is seen not only as a system that oppresses women, but also as one that structurally and conceptually creates, sustains, and justifies hierarchies, competition, and the unequal distribution of power and resources on an endless variety of levels" (Schechter, 1982, p. 45). Davis (2000) presents two key questions:

Can a state that is thoroughly infused with racism, male dominance, class-bias, and homophobia and that constructs itself in and through violence act to minimize violence in the lives of women? Should we rely on the state as the answer to the problem of violence against women? (p. 3)

Social change frameworks often include strategies that integrate feminist analyses of power and control in alternative work practices and structures such as peer support, nonhierarchical structures, shared decision-making, and equal pay (see Schechter, 1982).

Systems reform and social change frameworks may have been complementary in the early movement but they carry inherent tensions – of theory and of practice. Without consciously attending to these tensions, at least three problems intensify during periods of sweeping reform activities:

    a) The social change frameworks of the feminist community can be subsumed through a process of co-optation,

    b) relationships with women who have been battered can be transformed by institutionalized professional practices, and

    c) feminist communities may bring contradictory theoretic perspectives to collaboration efforts (see Barnsley, 1995).

The impacts of these three issues on the movement over the last twenty years are summarized below.[1]

Co-optation

Movement theory and practice are currently entangled in a process of co-optation that increasingly threatens the feminist foundations of the work to end violence against women (Barnsley, 1995; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Ferraro, 1996; Walker, 1990). Dobash and Dobash (1992) remind us that social change efforts will be met with resistance from those who do not desire a change and want to retain positions of privilege. Activist reforms can impact institutional politics and, at the same time, be absorbed into the systems and practices of the state (Walker, 1990). This absorption overpowers a feminist analysis, neutralizes language, strips context from experience, expands the role of the state, and alters the feminist goals of social justice (see Currie, 1990; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Ferraro, 1996).

"Visions and goals of the movement may become so enmeshed or subsumed under the demands of the justice system that the vision of social change is lost" (Dobash & Dobash, 1992, p. 296; also see Ferraro, 1996).

It was feminists who defined battering as a social issue and sought concessions from the state to restore social justice and opportunities for women who were being battered. However, the concessions offered by those in positions of power leave untouched the very belief systems and social structures which undergird violence against women. The content of state concessions meet the demands of reform activists while significantly expanding the power of

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[1] For a comprehensive review of co-optation, collaboration, and the relationship with women, see Crenshaw (1994), Currie (1990), Dobash & Dobash (1992), Ferraro (1996), Barnsley and Quinby in Timmins (1995), and Walker, G. (1990) all of whom influenced this presentation. For more information on social movements, the reader is referred to Piven and Cloward (1977).

the criminal justice, human services, and mental health systems (Ferraro, 1996). Negotiating relationships with the state has led to a conceptual redefining of violence against women, subordinating analyses of oppression to rights rhetoric, and deflecting radical social change with minimal reform concessions. At the same time, the increased visibility of domestic violence reforms within familiar institutional structures (re)assures the public that systemic responses are available to address violence in the home (Walker, 1990).

The predominance of reform work over the last fifteen years has yielded unintended consequences. In some communities, oppositional elements of the movement have been disassembled as some movement leaders are privileged in relationships with the state, funding mandates redefine services available to women, and the work of practice is renegotiated and relocated into established political structures. Non-cooperative feminist communities and their leaders can be excluded from decision-making roles, isolated through defunding, and distanced from feminist communities building collaborative relationships for reform activities. Reform efforts engage movement organizations in negotiations which, without due vigilance, alter social change goals and even relationships with the women for whom they purport to speak (see Barnsley, 1995; Quinby, 1995; Walker, 1990). The reforms of policy and practice have changed the landscape for women in crisis and their relationship with the battered women's movement.

Relationship to women

The failure to articulate a feminist explanation of violence against women that adequately bridges social theory and women's lived experience makes movement organizations vulnerable to explanations by others: explanations of domestic violence which are too often disconnected and inadequate to address issues of feminist practice. Professionalization of shelter personnel, integration of mental health standards of care, and criminal justice definitions of violence and victimization bring into feminist (counter)institutions non-feminist beliefs about woman battering and women who live with violence (Currie, 1990; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Walker, 1990). The ability to retain women-centered advocacy depends on the availability of a theory of violence against women that speaks accurately to women struggling to understand their own experience (Schechter, 1982).

Massive increases in funding, while supportive of the movement's goals in some states, bureaucratize the shelter system in others, mandate program design, redefine women as clients or service units, and reward programs that meet the political goals of the funder. The emphasis on criminal justice and social service system reforms "establish standards of need that are largely white and middle class" (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 98). The experiences of many women located at intersections of multiple oppressions are rendered invisible by efforts that bracket physical acts and isolate gender as the priorities for reform.[2] Systems change goals that do not address the impact of funding and reform concessions on oppressed groups fail to be transformative – as reforms themselves can (re)produce oppression (Crenshaw, 1994). When feminist communities build uncontested relationships with state-designed systems, and embrace negotiations for social justice from systems many understand to be inherently unjust, they risk absorption of the "grassroots struggle into the machinery of social engineering and

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[2] For discussions of violence against women and communities of color the reader is referred to Crenshaw (1994), Davis (2000), Sen (1999), and Smith (2003).

mass mediation, reinscribing patterns of race, class, and gender domination" (Ferraro, 1996, p. 77).

The power of defining and naming one's own experience has a long history in the movement through traditions of consciousness raising and resistance. Adopting criminal justice or mental health definitions relocates naming outside of women's experience and denies women the power of self-definition (Barnsley, 1995; Crenshaw, 1994). Through negotiations between professionals and the state, women now become clients, victims, perpetrators, codependent or paranoid, helpless or deserving. Credentialed program staff can represent distance from women and movement activists by race, class, formal education, and experience with violence (Currie, 1990). As services built by the movement shift from sites of resistance to institutions of the state, knowledge emerging from the diversity of women's experiences is often invalidated or completely silenced, and movement frameworks disappear in the quest for scientific legitimacy. Removed from a clearly articulated theory and practice, strategies for change become flawed, and the safety of women who live with violence can ultimately be compromised (see Barnsley, 1995).

Collaboration

Funding from the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) mandates collaboration among a broad spectrum of community members charged with developing domestic violence responses at local, state, and national levels. The goal in bringing together a cross section of professions is to build collaborative community responses through policy and protocol development, training, and design of services. This requirement engages multiple actors carrying multiple perspectives and backgrounds in pursuing a unified community approach.[3] These collaborative efforts bring with them tensions embedded in diverse professional training ideologies and social position overlapped with personal histories. The combination of these experiences influences each actor's position at the collaboration table.

To accomplish their task, collaboration teams must overcome the diversity of these multiple perspectives, at least to the extent where common goals and procedures can be designed. Which explanations of domestic violence are adopted by the team may depend on a number of factors including legitimacy of professional credentials, availability of theories that match the everyday experience of team members, and emergence of charismatic leadership. Survivors of domestic or sexual violence are not mandated for inclusion on collaboration teams. Crisis line and shelter advocates can also be marginalized to the extent they do not hold professional degrees, are not members of the professional communities on the team, or are understood to represent a special interest group. The absence of the survivor and advocate communities on a collaboration team silences their voices and marginalizes or excludes their standpoint from the competing explanations of domestic violence explored by that team. While funding mandates keep many at the table despite these tensions, from a movement perspective the success of community collaboration varies widely.

Proactive Feminist Communities
VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) resources prioritize a focus on systems reform rather than social change, on developing policy rather than redefining belief systems that sustain

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[3] This perspective grew out of an informal discussion with Ellen Pence.

structures of oppression. Redefining the role of state institutions to incorporate violence in the family rests on the understanding of violence as a contained physical act. Bracketing domestic violence as a discrete crime fails to recognize battering as a complex process that extends beyond the reach of public agencies. While the work of systems change is important to the physical safety and well-being of many women and children, it has the potential to completely reprioritize the resources, time, and energy of advocates.

There are communities within the movement that engage in a conscious and constant struggle to stay grounded in feminist theory and practice in the face of increasingly complex relationships with the institutions and political structures of the state. The use of strategic and purposeful decision making when interacting with the state is a politics of engagement

> … *based on a belief that long-term social change depends on mobilizing and educating women in their communities by creating autonomous institutions, and on establishing relationships and structures of communication with those who work in and set policy for mainstream institutions. This political approach starts with the insight of radical feminists that autonomous institutions are essential for women in a patriarchal society. At the same time, it views mainstream institutions as absolutely necessary terrains of political struggle. (Reinelt, 1995, p. 85)*

In the U.S., a model emerged from the battered women's movement that represents such a "politics of engagement" for coordinated negotiations across a broad range of institutional interactions (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Shephard, 1991). The programs of the Minnesota Program Development, Inc.[4] and Praxis International, both of Duluth, Minnesota, are recognized as successfully crossing institutional borders and are heavily involved in national training and technical assistance projects. Although there are undoubtedly many factors that contribute to the achievements of these programs, primary to their success is their ability to clearly articulate the causes and nature of domestic violence. This clarity provides a proactive framework for bridging collective action, effective community collaboration, educational programs, and relationships with women (Pence, 1996, 1998).

Bridging Systems Reform and Social Change Strategies in Duluth[5]

Historically, rights and liberation agendas are presented as discrete approaches in feminist communities, approaches that can be full of tensions and resentments. These two agendas converge in the battered women's movement strategies of providing physical safe space for women living with violence **and** seeking to end violence against women. Today, the widespread emphasis on systems reform impacts funding, collaboration efforts, public policy, and development of a professionalized domestic violence field.

The origins of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) lie in the decision to develop a comprehensive model of systems reform, but the history of the Duluth response is more than a story of developing policies and procedures for community intervention. It is also a story that coalesces theory and practice to bridge system reforms and social change. It is a story of how a program can build a practice responsive to women's expression of their

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[4] Minnesota Program Development, Inc. houses four projects: Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP), Duluth Family Visitation Center, Mending the Sacred Hoop, and the National Training Project. (www.duluth-model.org)
[5] This summary is the result of a content analysis of six educational manuals produced by the DAIP (Pence, 1985, 1987, and 1996; Pence & Paymar, 1986, 1990, and 1993) and interviews with five DAIP staff.

experiences. Duluth is one example of a pro-feminist community that uses a continuum of strategies to build successful collaborations while avoiding co-optation of a movement vision. Pence and Shepard (1988) offer the Duluth perspective of systems reform.

> *If our practice is rooted in feminist theory, then the realization that this [community intervention] model will not eradicate battering should neither surprise nor discourage us. Battering is rooted in a culture of domination, a culture that does not celebrate our differences in race, age, sexual preference, physical and mental abilities, and gender, but instead uses these differences to exploit and dehumanize. Surely we cannot expect that sending out the police to pluck batterers from their homes, using the courts to make all sorts of nasty threats of doom, and rounding up counselors and teachers to convince men to stop beating their partners will end violence against women.*

> *It is only when we put this and similar projects into perspective that we can come to an understanding of its place in the women's movement. This work can and does make individual women safer. It can and does save women's lives. It can make it easier for women to be about their real business, the work of transforming the culture that violates every part of their being and spirit. Projects like these are not about changing men, but about creating safe space for women to live in and participating in their communities in order to create a more sane society. (p. 296)*

This perspective implies that feminist social movement organizations can bridge a rights agenda and liberatory practices. The ability to accomplish such a task, however, depends on clarity of vision, awareness of the limitations of system reform, and whether reform goals are driven by a social movement critique of injustice or systems defined concessions.

When social movements choose to enter into relationships with the institutions and structures of a culture of domination, they are not entering an egalitarian relationship. The state is not neutral, but is designed as an instrument of social control. The agenda of the state will not be supportive of a social movement agenda that opposes existing cultural values and institutional practices. The programs of Duluth understand the commonalities between their relationship to systems reform work and a belief system that brackets women who have been battered as **either** victims **or** completely self-directed agents. With this understanding, Pence (1987) reframes the relationship between movement organizations and the state.

> *It is about keeping a vision of our struggle. Like many other programs across the country, we in Duluth are facing intense pressure to become a part of the social fabric of the community, to fall into place with other community institutions. The reward offered is ongoing funding. We are deeply committed to the organizing model and to direct action, to identifying our struggle as a political social struggle. Yet we are caught in the same trap as women who are economically dependent upon their abusers. The tactics used against individual battered women are the same tactics used to control us. (p. 103)*

The ability of the Duluth programs to consciously build bridges between systems reform and liberatory social change opens possibilities for overcoming what others may view as barriers to action.

For feminist communities who believe that systems reform is a necessary location of political struggle, Duluth is an example of Reinelt's "politics of engagement" that is worth examining. Developing an expertise in critical thinking, dialogue, and question posing ensures a process that helps determine successful strategies for mediating boundaries with potential collaborators. Bunch (1981) suggests that feminist activists engaged in this process ask a series of questions.

1) Does this reform materially improve the lives of women, and if so, which women, and how many?
2) Does it build an individual woman's self-respect, strength, and confidence?
3) Does it give women a sense of power, strength, and imagination as a group and help build structures for further change?
4) Does it educate women politically, enhancing their ability to criticize and challenge the system in the future?
5) Does it weaken patriarchal control of society's institutions and help women gain power over them? (p.196)

Social change movements require a process for constant attention to these questions if they are to avoid (d)evolving into chaos, in theory and in practice. The Duluth response to these criteria depends on key beliefs built into the organizational culture in which their reform work occurs.

Beliefs that Guide the Duluth Response

It can be difficult to understand the multiple and complex layers involved in developing what is now an accepted explanatory framework of violence against women. But in the early 1980's, understanding violence against women was largely unformed – how to work with batterers was even more unsettled terrain. The battered women's movement was struggling with concepts of power, control, and women's oppression. Academic theories of violence against women were not matching the experience of women and in the women's liberation groups of Duluth, women raised serious challenges to Walker's (1979) *Cycle of Violence*, a widely accepted model in feminist practice at the time.

While there had been preliminary discussions of how work with batterers fit with feminist theories, those working with batterers disagreed about individual or societal explanations of men's violence. Themes for men's programs ranged from anger management to consciousness raising and batterer's anonymous. Counseling models often used marriage counseling and skills training; other models defined violence against women as an alcohol or couples problem. Knowledge gleaned from listening to women's stories, exchanging information, testing ideas, or seeking input from others in practice was chaotic and fragmented without a clear bridge between practice and theory. In 1983, there was no process or context available to organize very scattered and diverse ideas about the causes and effect of battering – advocates were often operating in conceptual chaos.

In Duluth, what emerged from these early struggles was a process that continues to ground them in social movement activism twenty years later. It is an approach that allows them to develop a model collaboration project and yet retain clarity as a site of resistance. There are several keys to understanding the philosophy that centers the Duluth approach to systems reform and simultaneously guides a vision of social change.

- Depending on the experience of women is a baseline for all their work. They believe that understanding violence against women depends on understanding women's everyday, lived experience. Each woman's life offers another level of understanding and insight into the complexity of how oppression works.
- The staff understands that one's truth is partial and fluid – each of us carries only one part of a larger truth. As we bring together each person's truth, we begin to glimpse a larger explanation for what is happening at this time and in this place.
- Women's collective explanations of violence in their lives are seen as marking moments of clarity in a lifetime of critical thinking, reflection upon action, and reframing their thinking based on that reflection. To support this clarity, the programs of Duluth developed an organizational culture that encourages critical thinking, dialogue, and question posing.
- Resistance to construction of hierarchies and dichotomies that limit or bound the diversity of women's experiences.
- A stance of non-alignment with any one experience lets them integrate multiple feminist theories and acknowledge the multiple meanings women make of their lives.
- Believing that women who have been battered are **both** victims **and** survivors leads them to choose liberatory education, encourage group mobilization through action, and create meaningful avenues for engaging women in constructing and overseeing reform work.
- Those working with the Duluth programs are open to and willing to meaningfully engage in self-critique and self-reflection. They have accepted that to transform society, each individual must change – and our reflections about that change must be used to inform our work.
- Holding a clear vision of the challenges facing social change activists, they understand reform as a means to end women's oppression rather than an end in itself.
- 'The means is the end', and 'the personal is political' are more than mere slogans, but hold meaning as core values in the creation of new strategies for change.

The programs of Duluth are grounded in a belief system that helps them move continuously and consciously toward a feminist vision of social change rather than being absorbed into the practices of the state. The approach used in Duluth is really about integrating that belief system into their daily functions – that process is an important key to their success.

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