Current Controversies: Programs for Women Who Have Used Force in Intimate Relationships

Lisa Young Larance

For more than a decade antiviolence advocates, practitioners, and scholars (Dasgupta, 2002; Gardner, 2007; Larance, 2006; Larance & Dasgupta, 2012; Larance & Miller, 2015; Larance & Rousson, 2016; Miller, 2005; Osthoff, 2002; Renzetti, 1999; Roy, 2012; Worcester, 2002) have addressed the philosophical and practical challenges to providing court-ordered, community-based services to women with domestic violence survivorship histories, who have also been arrested for using force against their intimate male partners. Community-based service provision for battered women identified by the criminal justice system (CJS) as “perpetrators” is complex. Fundamental to this evolving effort has been and continues to be the understanding that such services be implemented and facilitated in a manner that respects the women’s survivorship histories, is nonpunitive, is nonshaming, and encourages personal integrity. Such services must maintain a macrosystems focus on the myriad institutions that perpetuate violence against women and the microsystems focus on the primary perpetrators of intimate partner violence: men who batter women.

Philosophically, antiviolence practitioners acknowledge and consistently revisit the multiple ethical implications inherent in mandated intervention for victim-defendants (Gardner, 2007). With this acknowledgement is agreement that practitioners avoid using a one-size-fits-all approach in work with women (Miller, Gregory, & Iovanni, 2005). Far too often, court-ordered batterer intervention programs designed to address men’s battering tactics become the framework for community-based intervention with arrested women. Not only is this potentially revictimizing and traumatizing, it is ineffective. With this acknowledgement is the growing awareness that voluntary community-based referrals for violence-involved women may be of little value. Anecdotal evidence suggests that voluntary referrals may actually result in additional charges for the women, as they seem to not seek the support and intervention that could address possible trauma while potentially reducing future use of force (Larance & Rousson, 2016). Philosophical implications of programming must also include attention to the culture, ethnicity, economics, and sexual orientation and identity of the women caught within the complexity of this issue (Dasgupta, 2002; Potter, 2008). Cultural competency and humility in programming are essential to effectiveness.

Practically, the evolving solution to this complex issue is grounded in tailored, gender-responsive intervention. However, such intervention is contrary to current established research that uses quantified checklists rather than exploring the motivation, intent, and impact of using force. Such contextual intervention is founded upon the principles of trauma-informed care, as well as nuanced understanding of the structural inequities that contribute to women’s intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Giffis, 1999). In short, the women’s violence, often used to equalize the violence used against them, is but one component of their lives (Larance, 2012). To this end, programming grounded in a healing-philosophy has promising implications (Larance, 2006).
Programming Resources

Four main resources frame promising practices for addressing women's use of force: Domestic Violence Project/SAFE House's advocacy guide (House, n.d.); Vista: A Program for Women Who Use Force (Larance, Hoffman, & Shivas, 2009; Dieten, Jones, & Rondon, 2014); Turning Points: A Nonviolence Curriculum for Women (Pence, Connelly, & Scaia, 2011), and Beyond Anger and Violence (Covington, 2013).

House's work sets the tone for community-based programming that contextually addresses women's use of force. The guidebook outlines the issue by defining terms, overcoming challenges to appropriate services, and suggesting assessment strategies for advocates in shelter settings. It charted the course for Vista, Turning Points, and Beyond Anger and Violence curricula.

Vista provides an extended view for serving this diverse population. In 20 psychoeducational group sessions, women have opportunities to heal from their past experiences while exploring future nonforceful options. With the focus on thorough assessment, education, support, and advocacy, group session participants begin the process of moving beyond shame, identifying appropriate levels of responsibility, and increasing their awareness of viable alternatives to using force.

The goal of the Turning Points curriculum is to facilitate women's understanding of the connections between violence they experience, violence they use, and to end both. The three-part curriculum focuses on domestic violence, as well as its impact on relationships and family; different aspects of violence, such as feelings of guilt, feeling justified, and feeling trapped; and living with anger, talking to children about the violence, and understanding their partner's experiences.

Beyond Anger and Violence focuses on anger and use of force. It utilizes a multimodal approach and a variety of evidence-based therapeutic strategies such as psychoeducation, role-playing, mindfulness activities, and grounding skills for trauma triggers. Throughout the 21 program sessions, Beyond Anger and Violence offers a comprehensive framework for addressing the role past trauma plays in the lives of women who struggle with using force.

Essential Programming Components: Women's Use of Force

Advocates and practitioners largely agree that components necessary for effective, sustainable intervention include women-only support and intervention group sessions; group sessions cofacilitated by those who understand the dynamics of women's use of force and the coercively controlling nature of men's battering tactics; safety and support planning; exploration of the collateral consequences of battered women's arrests; raising awareness of alternatives to force; opportunities to increase social-support networks; education for referring CJS personnel; and extensive community resources. Community resources may include referrals for continued education; employment opportunities; job training; legal services; and counseling for sexual assault, substance abuse, mental health, and/or intimate partner violence survivorship. It must also be emphasized that social connections, particularly those made between women during the intervention process, could be an essential part of sustaining the women long after agency contact has ended.

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**Discussion Questions**

1. How is women’s use of force distinctive from men’s battering behavior in heterosexual relationships?

2. What are essential components of program intervention with women who have used force?

**Resources for Further Study**


Reflectively Embracing Nonviolence through Education for Women (RENEW) program website with audioconferences, bibliography, and additional resources: www.csswshenaw.org/renew

**References**


House, E. (n.d.). *When women use force: An advocacy guide to understanding this issue and conducting an assessment with individuals who have used force to determine their eligibility for services*.
Ostby, S. (2002). But Gertrude, I beg to differ; a hit is not a hit is not a hit. Violence Against Women, 8, 1521–1544.

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Lisa Young Larance, a practitioner-researcher, founded the Vista and RENEW Programs, which provide gender-responsive intervention, advocacy, and support for women who have used force in their relationships. She also co-created Meridians for Incarcerated Women, a prison-based curriculum, in addition to launching and moderating the international W-Catch22 listserv. W-Catch22 provides resource-sharing opportunities for advocates, members of the judiciary, practitioners, probation agents, and researchers. Ms. Larance and Shamita Das Dasgupta co-edited a 2012 Violence Against Women special issue on battered women’s use of nonfatal force, recipient of the 2012 Violence Against Women Best Article Award.