

Disloyal to Feminism: Abuse of Survivors within the Domestic Violence Shelter System

by Emi Koyama

1.

A telephone rings at a feminist domestic violence shelter, and a worker picks up. First, the caller requests an Arabic-English translator to help her communicate, so the worker calls in a telephone translation service. The caller identifies herself as an immigrant who had come to the U.S. two years ago, who had never left her house by herself in these two years—until just now. Today she is calling from a local clinic, where she had sought emergency medical care for injuries arising from the battering by her husband the night before. She is afraid for her safety, but there is more than just the immediate safety that she is worried about: Where will she go? How will she take care of herself financially? Can she stay in this country, or can she even go back?

The worker proceeds to screen her for services, but before the worker tells the woman that she is welcome to come over and stay at the shelter, her supervisor leaves a note on her desk saying “DON'T TAKE HER.” Puzzled, the worker puts the woman on hold and speaks to the supervisor. “We're seeing all those women of color come in, fail our program, and get kicked out,” says the supervisor, “we can't even get Spanish-speaking women to succeed in our program. I think it's a mistake to accept someone who only speaks Arabic.” Protest ensues, but in the end the worker tells the woman, who has been waiting on hold for several minutes, that she may not come to the shelter. No reasons were given; she is not just “appropriate” for the shelter.

Feminist movements have struggled to confront abuse of power and control within our very movements, even as we critique and resist the abuse of women within the sexist society. On a theoretical level, at least, we now know that not all women's experiences are the same nor necessarily similar, that claiming universality of women's experiences inherently functions to privilege white, middle-class, and otherwise already privileged women by making their participation in these systems of oppression invisible. We now know, for example, that fighting racism requires not only the obliteration of personal prejudices against people of different races, but also the active *disloyalty* to white supremacy and all of the structures that perpetuate systems of oppression and privilege. [1]

In practice, however, these are difficult concepts to implement. The need to address the issue of abusive power and control within our movements are often minimized or de-prioritized as less urgent than addressing men's abuse of power and control. This has been especially true within the movement against violence against women, which, in addition to naming such widespread but previously unspoken practices as *wife battering*, *sexual harassment*, and *date rape*, viewed violence against women as part of the “conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.” (Brownmiller 1975, p.15). By adopting the view that domestic violence is not an act of one abuser against his or her victim, but *all* men against *all* women, we have made it easier to overlook the violence and abuse by women against other women within the anti-DV movement as individual rather than systemic and thus less worthy of our attention.

This article is about the abuse of power and control within the feminist movement against domestic violence. It primarily focuses on the imbalance of power between the workers who provide services and the survivors who receive them, but is informed by the work of women of color, working-class women, and other feminist women who have confronted power imbalances within feminist movements. It also acknowledges that front line direct service workers are not directly to be blamed, as they are frequently themselves dehumanized by the contradiction of having to respond to an extraordinary weight of responsibility and having too little actual institutional power to affect the larger system.

I am a survivor of domestic violence. I am someone who has stayed in a shelter, back in 1994. My experience there was horrendous; I constantly felt the policing gaze of shelter workers across the half-open door, and feared “warnings” and punishments that seemed to be issued arbitrarily. No, to describe the practice as “arbitrary” would be inaccurate; it was clearly selective in terms of who gets them most frequently: the poor Black and Latina women with children, especially if they are in “recovery” from alcohol or drug “abuse.”

Snitching on other residents was actively encouraged: residents were rewarded for reporting rule violations of other residents and their children, even when the allegations were not exactly accurate. I did not know whom to trust, especially after some staff or volunteer slipped the fact that I was a prostitute running away from an abusive live-in relationship. They denied ever breaking confidentiality, but how else would other residents know?

Eventually, the feeling of constant siege by shelter staff and all the “crazy-making” interactions pushed me over the edge, and I cut myself with a knife. Not surprisingly, they put me in a mental hospital, effectively ending my stay at the shelter before I could find a permanent, safer space to live. And the fact that the

shelter staff told the State hospital about my background as a prostitute did not help me receive good care either. After I learned to answer “correctly” to all of the insensitive and dehumanizing questions, including those about my work, they released me back on the streets.

When I began volunteering for a rape crisis center and then for a domestic violence shelter, I believed that if I was working on the other side of the half-open door, if I was the one who was running these shelters, things could be drastically different. I believed that shelter rules can be modified for the better, that shelter workers and volunteers could be trained differently. Like every abused woman, I believed that I can make the shelter system change, that I can help make it stop being abusive and become loving and caring. I was trapped in what Jennifer Baumgardner calls “Battered Women’s Movement Syndrome.” (Stymied 1999, p.15; Baumgardner and Richards 2001, p.xviii). [2]

After working at several domestic violence shelters on various capacities, I realized that my thinking has changed. While I still believe that there can be better rules, better trainings and better volunteer screening procedures for domestic violence shelters than those currently employed, I now feel that these reforms do not fundamentally change the dynamic of power and control within the shelter system. In the absence of more fundamental changes, I fear that these reforms will only make us more benevolent (and thus manipulative) abusers, the kind that buys her flowers and kiss her “I love you.”

The shelter worker I described in the beginning of this article is myself: I am the worker who told the woman, who had no other place to turn to, who would probably be beaten again if she went back, that she may not come to the shelter. This episode marked my last day working at the domestic violence shelter, which is more than two years ago now, but I continue to ache from this experience.

Of course, this was not the first time that I questioned how shelters were being ran. I questioned everything: its “clean and sober” policy regarding substance use, its policy against allowing women to monitor their own medications, its use of threats and intimidations to control survivors, its labeling of ordinary disagreements or legitimate complaints as “disrespectful communication,” its patronizing “life skills” and “parenting” classes, its seemingly random enforcement of rules that somehow always push women of color out of the shelter first. I hated just about everything that went on in a shelter, and I refused to participate in most of these. I never issued formal “warnings” against any of the residents, preferring instead to have dialogs about any problems as casually as possible. I pretended that I did not smell the alcohol in the women’s breaths so long as their behaviors did not cause any problems for other residents. I never ever walked a woman to the bathroom and watched her as

she peed into a little cup for drug tests, as the shelter policy expected of me to do. I did everything I could to sabotage the system I viewed as abusive: I was *disloyal*.

But in many other situations, I failed. To this day, I ask myself why I did not simply ignore my supervisor's order on that day, let the woman come to the shelter and deal with the consequences later. I ask myself how many times I must have misused what little power I had without even realizing it, or failed to use it positively when I could have. But in the end, my greatest failure was not the failure to always be the sane voice in an insane environment, but the fact that I relied on my own feminist conscience to keep me from taking part in the abuse of women within the shelter system, not realizing that institutional structures would force me to play out that role as long as I am part of the shelter system whether or not I liked it. Like white anti-racists who must recognize the impossibility of purifying themselves of their racist white privilege, I came to realize the limitation of feminist conscience. I came to understand that we need structural changes, rather than better rules, staff, trainings or consciousness-raising, in order to make social interventions to domestic violence more accountable to the actual needs and demands of survivors.

The focus of my activism began to shift from domestic violence to the domestic violence industry.

2.

"After I left my second husband, I went back on cocaine," recalls Lulu, a white 40 year old former street prostitute who has survived various forms of violence and abuse throughout her life. [1] "In order to support my cocaine habit, I went on with a big-time drug dealer who was also a gang member. I was his girl: I stayed at home, dressed nice, took care of his daughter and house. I gave him sex; he gave me dope." But at some point he became very violent, culminating to the last time she left him, when he stabbed Lulu with knife and fork and punched her in the face for six to eight hours straight. "The next day I went to stay at the battered women's shelter."

But even at the shelter, Lulu felt under siege. "I couldn't tell them [shelter staff] what was really going on. I didn't tell them about the gang, or about drugs, nothing about that. Nothing about prostitution certainly. I lied about most things" for the fear that she would be judged and mistreated if the shelter staff actually knew what she was going through.

One day, she and another resident drove together to a nearby convenience store. She was sitting on the passenger side when her abusive ex-boyfriend abruptly showed up on that side, angry. Instead of driving, the woman on the driver seat ran out of the car and into the store, and the ex-boyfriend began punching and kicking

her in an attempt to drag her into his van. “No one at the store intervened; no one even called the police, including the woman I was with, as well as the store employees.” Eventually the ex-boyfriend's cousin told him to stop because he was afraid that someone had seen the license plate, and they both ran, leaving Lulu bloody and bruised.

“Police didn't show up, so I called up the police myself to make a report. And when I went back to shelter, covered in blood, bruises, cuts, and bleeding out of my mouth, they accused me of lying. They believed that I willingly went to see him, and told me to stay away from him. They never believed me. I left the shelter when I got money from welfare. I went back to prostituting on the street.”

Akasha is a younger woman from California, who has also been homeless many times in her life. “I am a young trans queer sex worker woman survivor of domestic violence and sexual assault,” she says. Since Akasha came out as a transsexual woman and “transitioned” in her early 20s, she has been not only targeted by abusive partners, but also ostracized by and isolated from her family. “I was homeless on and off for about three years, and during this time I stayed with numerous abusive friends and sugar daddies. I was repeatedly blamed for the poverty and homelessness I felt trapped in. My health deteriorated to the point where I was sick eight months out of the year, had frequent panic attacks, got raped by a ‘trick’ and found myself sleeping outdoors in the middle of winter rains.” [2] Akasha ended up in a domestic violence shelter after one of her sugarmommas became violent to the point she found herself on the run for her life.

“How was your experience of being in a shelter, as a homeless person, as a trans woman, and as a sex worker?” I asked. “Well, for starters, I pretty much knew from the start that I couldn't afford to be out as a sex worker. Being the first trans woman at the shelter was trouble enough.” “The staff demonstrated the complete lack of training” on trans issues, Akasha says. “Apparently [the shelter] only bothered to offer any accommodations because of the local trans civil rights ordinance. They violated my confidentiality and outed me as trans to other residents.”

But transphobia was not the only problem she experienced at the shelter. “Amazingly, the shelter staff showed overwhelming disdain for all the women there, treating us as if we were all 'abuse addicts' looking for our next fix, as if we craved the abuse we received. Like many women at the shelter I was frequently written up for missing my curfew, not doing my chores ‘right,’ and ‘disrespectful communication’ for standing up for myself and refusing to comply with their unreasonable demands. This is how I ended up having panic attacks almost every day towards the end of my stay. These panic attacks in turn were used by staff to justify further write-ups and threats of eviction.”

Akasha continues: “During my stay at the DV shelter I was unable to do sex work at all because of the curfew and other restrictions and fear of staff finding out. And my ‘straight’ job was also threatened by the demands placed on my time due to my weekly chores, which usually added up to about ten hours a week of cleaning and cooking during my regular work hours. This forced me to disclose to my boss that I was living in a shelter and obviously this compromised my job security.”

“Another complaint I have is about what they called ‘support’ groups that we were required to attend at the shelter. These groups encouraged residents to disclose personal information that would often be later used against me by staff and opened us up to judgment from other residents. For instance, the pronoun that I used to describe my batterer distinguished me as the only out queer and made me vulnerable to ridicule by other residents. Also staff played on [the fact I was] given a separate room to incite the envy of other residents who were forced to share rooms sometimes up to 4 women to a room. Nevertheless I felt more supported by other residents than by the staff.”

“I saw widespread abuse of single mothers, especially those who were poor and in recovery from substance abuse. Ones that got the 'favorite' status were the snitches who told staff when other residents broke any of the dozens of house rules by smoking at the patio after curfew, getting back late, not getting all of their mandatory chores done, etc. This was especially hard for single mothers of young children. One single mom was harassed and then kicked out onto the street with her one-month old daughter and three year old son while she and her daughter were detoxing of heroin because the three year old was rambunctious and demanded more time from the mom, so she got in trouble not just for her son's behavior but for missing her chores.”

“When the staff yelled at me, they sometimes claimed that I was staying there ‘just to avoid being homeless’ as a way of minimizing the urgency of my experience. By the seventh week of the eight-week emergency shelter program I had been so traumatized by the staff's ongoing threats, harassment and verbal abuse that I left the shelter in favor of the street. This, of course, disqualified me from ever accessing their transitional housing program that shelter staff dangled as carrots to keep the residents in line. After I had left the shelter I was exposed to even more violence from sugar daddies and tricks, but this time I felt I could not rely on DV shelters or services for support.”

I know that these stories are true. *I know.*

I know that they are true because I saw the same exact pattern when I stayed at the shelter back in 1994. I know that they are true because as a shelter worker I unintentionally participated in it. But even if I did not have the first-hand experiences, I should know that this would happen: these problems are bound to

happen when there is little or no institutional mechanisms to hold service providers accountable to the actual needs and perspectives of people receiving services (beyond internal grievance procedures that lack any teeth).

I am no longer able to delude myself into the self-indulgent fantasy that I can be a different kind of shelter worker, that things would be different if I could be the director of a shelter. In fact, it is this self-indulgent feminist fantasy that we have about ourselves as feminists that often individualize any obvious problems, invisibilize more subtle ones, and minimize the urgent need for institutional rather than individual remedies. We need to not only criticize individual acts of mistreatment of survivors by the shelter system, but also instigate an active disloyalty to feminist utopianism that perpetuate the institutional abuse of survivors and forestall structural changes.

3.

The process of “institutionalization” and “professionalization” of the “battered women’s movement” and its ills have been widely discussed among long-time activists who had created early domestic violence shelters. [1] Patricia Gaddis tells a typical radical-feminist version of how it took place:

“...Only a short time after the Feminists had fallen asleep, mainstream professionalism infiltrated battered women’s programs, bringing forth a new and unpleasant hierarchy within the movement, a hierarchy that undermined the Feminists’ effort to eradicate the root causes of domestic violence. Shared power among employees was quickly discarded and ethical practices that included the voices of battered women, basic training on the dynamics of domestic violence, and the power of shared experience among women was frowned upon... Unqualified executive directors were brought in from the mainstream to tell shelter staff and court advocates that they were not as important to the program as the licensed professionals... Battered women seeking refuge were held captive by the never-ending shelter rules that were put into place by the mainstream professionals who thumbed their noses at the original founders. Many safe houses now seemed more like prisons, or ‘social’ bed and breakfasts, that prevented the disabled and women of all races, ages, classes, and religions and ethnic groups from entering. Victims were referred to as ‘crazy’ and whips were cracked upon the backs of advocates or victims who dared question the professional task master’s authority... Shelter programs were no longer a safe place for all battered women.” (Gaddis 2001, p. 16)

Radical feminists view the institutionalization and professionalization of the movement as a continuous process of “de-politicization,” fueled by the patriarchal

backlash and co-optation. Nancy J. Meyer of the Washington, D.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence defines “de-politicization” as “a reframing process that directs attention away from (and recreates knowledge about) sexism, male dominance, patriarchy, and female subjugation.” “There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to improve the conditions in which battered women live,” Meyer argues, “but when putative efforts to just 'make it better' become the end goal, the political vision and motivation to address the real exegesis of male violence becomes sublimated... The political disappears and domestic violence becomes a naturalized part of what appears to be an unchanging or unchangeable social landscape.” (Meyer 2001, p. 23).

As a result, Meyer continues, the “problem of domestic violence is administered” through institutions of “law, medicine, planning, criminal justice, psychology, and public administration,” which “influence the delivery of services and direction of research for domestic violence,” while “the vastly growing paternalism of the state, its interests, and its impingements on battered women and their children” go unquestioned.

Aided by stronger laws against domestic violence, this “growing paternalism of the state” has resulted in many unintended negative consequence for survivors of domestic violence. For example, a report by the Family Violence Project of the Urban Justice Center on the impacts of the mandatory arrest law in New York City discovered a dangerously high frequency of “victim arrest,” a situation where a victim of domestic violence is arrested either because of a false or exaggerated allegations by the abuser or because the victim fought back to defend herself or her children. “The negative effects of victim arrest were wide-ranging and lasting,” the report states: “many women reported that their physical and mental health and well-being, financial status, educational goals, personal relationships and their family’s physical and mental health and well-being were adversely affected by the arrest.” (Haviland, Frye et al. 2001, p. 6). According to Juley Fulcher, the public policy director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, women are being evicted from their public housing when they report being abused, because the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 calls for an eviction when any resident or visitor is arrested for drug or violent crimes (Schram 2002). A recent ruling by a federal judge in Brooklyn found that child protection services routinely removed children from mothers who were abused by their partners under the premise that the mother failed to protect their children (Friedlin 2002). In Kentucky, a municipal judge was praised in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* for fining two battered women for going back to their abusive partners after they had been granted restraining orders (Levey 2002).

Paternalism and bureaucratic procedures flourished within the shelter systems also. “Lately I’ve begun to wonder exactly who it is that domestic violence programs

do shelter,” writes Patty Neal Dorian. “It seems the list of ‘we don't shelter those women’ just keeps growing: women with substance abuse issues, homeless women, women with mental illnesses, women who are HIV-positive, women who won't attend parenting classes, women with physical disabilities, women who don't want protective orders, women who won't submit to drug tests and searches... Some of the stories I hear today break my heart. Women's basic needs are sometimes ignored so that the all-important intake can be completed. Programs have a ‘Do Not Re-Admit’ list longer than my arm. And just to be completely sure this woman can't ‘use’ the system, these names get shared with every program within a 50-mile radius.” (Dorian 2001, p.24).

In 1999, a jury in South Carolina found Cumbee Center, the local domestic violence shelter, negligent in the murder of a resident by her abusive husband, handing a verdict of more than \$100,000 to the victim's mother. A local newspaper simply reported that the shelter drove Sebrenia Russaw Neal to see her husband “just nine days after she and her three children had left him and moved into the shelter,” but Rita Smith and Gretchen Eckroate of National Coalition Against Domestic Violence point out that the realities were much more complex (*The Augusta Chronicle* 1999; Smith and Eckroate 2001). According to Smith and Eckroate, it was the mother of the woman who relayed her husband's request to meet at an attorney's office, supposedly for some legal purpose. “When Sebrenia arrived at the office, she found out that her husband had lied about having an appointment with the lawyer, but he begged her to talk to him anyway. The advocate that escorted Sebrenia to the office advised her not to do so and told her she did not have to stay.” However she “decided to talk to him anyway” and was shot and killed.

The most disturbing aspect of the Cumbee Center case, aside from the murder of the victim, was the fact that it was the domestic violence “experts” and their rhetoric that aided the verdict against the shelter. Smith and Eckroate write: “The plaintiff's expert witness... testified that all women who come into shelter suffered from battered women's syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder and that they should not be allowed to make decisions for themselves for at least six months.” This episode illustrates how the rhetoric of “battered women's syndrome,” originally invented to explain why some women end up murdering or injuring their abusers rather than simply escaping and to help free or educe sentences for women charged with such crimes, is now being used by domestic violence “experts” to negate survivors' agency and thus justifying paternalistic rules and actions by the legal as well as by the shelter system.

Not surprisingly, poor women, women of color and their communities are among the groups impacted most harshly by the domestic violence movement's over-reliance on the state, as Angela Davis pointed out during her keynote at the historic

Color of Violence conference in 2000. “Because the primary strategies for addressing violence against women rely on the state and on constructing gendered assaults on women as ‘crimes,’ the criminalization process further bolsters the racism of the courts and prisons. Those institutions, in turn, further contribute to violence against women... I suggest that we focus our thinking on this contradiction: 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?” (Davis 2000).

Conference organizer Andrea Smith echoes some of the sentiments expressed by Gaddis, Meyer and Levey: “As the anti-violence movement has gained greater public prominence, domestic violence and rape crisis centers have become increasingly professionalized to receive accreditation and funding from state and federal agencies.” Smith continues, “Rather than develop peer-based services in which large groups of women can participate, they employ individuals with the proper academic degrees or credentials. This practice excludes most women from full participation, particularly women of color and poor women. Professional service has eclipsed political organizing as the main work of domestic violence and sexual assault organizations.” (Smith 2000).

However, unlike those of Gaddis and Meyer, the visions of women who gathered at Color of Violence conference extend beyond re-focusing on men’s dominance over women as the fundamental roots of violence against women. Illustrating mainstream domestic violence activists’ refusal to “address sexual and domestic violence within the larger context of institutional inequality and violence,” Smith criticizes such narrow approaches as problematic because “violence within communities of color cannot be addressed seriously without dealing with the larger structures of violence, such as militarism, attacks on immigrants and Indian treaty rights, police brutality, the proliferation of prisons, economic neo-colonialism, and institutional racism... It makes no sense to say that it is not OK for a man to hit his wife, but it is OK for him to bomb civilians in Iraq.” Thus Smith’s and Davis’ calls for political mobilization within the anti-violence movement are substantially different from those of white radical-feminists.

White radical-feminists such as Gaddis and Levey euphemize the “battered women’s movement” that once was, where things were run collectively rather than hierarchically and all women were welcome and equal. Indeed, their cries of “de-politicization” naturally lead off to the calls for “re-politicization,” to put the critical analysis of the men’s overwhelming dominance over women (and other oppressions as *subsystems* of the patriarchy—rather than separate, interlocking mechanisms).

Mazie Hough and Ann Schonberger of University of Maine have documented a radical-feminist “success” story of Spruce Run, a collectively run domestic violence agency. Founded in 1972 by a group of feminists that included “a handful of women going through marital crises,” Spruce Run initially supported itself through creative fundraisers. But in the late 1970s, it became “clear to Spruce Run that more secure funding sources were needed to help the organization thrive,” and thus it began appealing for funding from the State and from the United Way. Shortly thereafter, the “Steering Committee” of Spruce Run decided to appoint one of the women as the executive director of the staff of four, and “others began to question a structure which gave one staff member more power than the others.” After a lot of discussions, the organization abolished the hierarchal structure, and has since implemented further policies to “eliminate status differences between administrators and service providers” and to reduce the pay gap based on longevity in order to remain true to the ideal of non-hierarchical organization (Hough, Schonberger et al. 1998).

Women involved in Spruce Run apparently believed that in order to make an institution equitable they needed to eliminate differences, be it authority, salary, or roles (administrative versus service provider). But by this token, would it not become necessary to eliminate race in order to end racism? Hough and Schonberger do not explore how Spruce Run deals with any of the actual differences and imbalances that simply cannot be eliminated at the Steering Committee's whim, such as the power imbalances between women of color and white women, U.S. born women and immigrants, paid staff and volunteers, service providers and recipients. Are the radical-feminist euphemisms about the “battered women’s movement” reality, or selective recollections that require active overlooking of power imbalances?

I argue that, far from being an innocent victim of the patriarchal backlash, the flawed assumptions and analyses of the white radical-feminism that shaped the early “battered women’s movement” are partially responsible for the movement’s uncritical collusion with the racist, imperialist state interests, as well as the abuse of women within the shelter system. By focusing excessively on “the power of shared experiences among women” marked by the patriarchy and presuming *difference* as an inherent source of oppression that need to be eliminated, these radical-feminists in effect created a movement that discourages and suppresses discussions about specificities of each women’s experiences within a complex matrix of social inequalities and ways in which some good-intentioned feminist women can and do abuse power over other women.

If we were to truly “re-politicize” the movement against violence against women, it is more helpful to acknowledge that there are many power imbalances among women that are very difficult to eliminate than to hastily move to make them

disappear. That way, we can hope to create structures that would actively counter the power relationships that already exist, that would hold ourselves accountable to each other. We need to resist the anachronistic urge to accept euphemism as history, and instead build a multi-issue movement whose scope includes, but does not necessarily center, men's dominance over women, among many other structures of inequalities and injustices.

4.

In 1992, the Coalition on Homelessness of San Francisco successfully lobbied the Social Services Commission of the City and County of San Francisco to adopt the "universal grievance procedure," which all homeless shelter agencies that receive the city funding are required to comply with when clients appeal the agencies' decision to deny or terminate services. In addition, the Department of Human Services was made to hire two client advocates to represent homeless people in internal and external hearings. This was in response to what the Coalition viewed as a prevalent problem within homeless shelters: unequal and arbitrary enforcement of agency rules that resulted in unfair evictions from housing and denial of services. [1]

Even though some people initially questioned whether or not such a policy is even needed, the increase of grievances filed against service providers following the implementation proved the successfulness of the new grievance policy: at last, clients have the realistic chance of appealing and overturning unfair evictions and denial of services. According to the Coalition on Homelessness:

"In the first year of implementation there were 360 requests for shelter hearings regarding denials of services. At the shelter level, 49% of the denials were overturned or modified, and 51% were upheld or the client failed to appear at the internal hearing. Of the denials upheld at the shelter level, 31 clients requested a hearing with an arbitrator. The arbitrator overturned or modified the shelter's decision in 31% of the cases and upheld the shelter decision in 69% of the cases. Over the next three years the number of clients requesting appeals have steadily increased. During the time period from February 1996 through January of 1997, 690 clients request to appeal a denial of services. Of those 309 (45%) were overturned, 82 (12%) had the penalty modified, 135 (19%) were upheld, and 164 (24%) clients failed to appear at the shelter hearing. There were 43 arbitrations during the same time period with 10 shelter decisions upheld, 15 overturned, 5 with a modified penalty, and 13 clients who failed to appear." (Coalition on Homelessness 2001).

Riding on this success, the Coalition on Homelessness has been working on creating similar grievance procedures for "transitional" housing facilities, which

include substance abuse, youth, mental health, as well as domestic violence facilities, but the adoption of client-centered grievance procedures have been minimal outside of homeless shelters. In addition, while good grievance procedures can make arbitrary application of policies less frequent, they cannot change unfair or paternalistic policies themselves. “We tried to get it to include policy changes too, but most providers here are adamantly opposed to homeless people having rights,” says an activist with the Coalition on Homelessness, also noting that the Coalition’s effort is “seen as us trying to change their program.”

Part of the reluctance on the part of the domestic violence shelters to embrace client-centered grievance procedures and agency policies such as those advocated by the Coalition (and the motivation on the part of the City of San Francisco to exempt domestic violence shelters from the structures it deemed necessary for homeless shelters) comes from, I believe, our pervasive tendency to uncritically accept domestic violence shelters as the organization of “women helping women,” that are wholeheartedly committed to the empowerment of women and therefore cannot possibly mistreat their clients the same way homeless shelters might. Under the stereotypical presumptions about women as naturally compassionate, caring, loving, sympathetic, fair-minded, and peaceful, we underestimate women’s capacity to use power and control over other women. We also underestimate the fact that despite the talks of “sisterhood,” women as a group do not necessarily share the same interests, and that allowing feminist service providers to set agency policies with little or no input from service recipients silences survivors, resulting in an intensified hostility and paternalism toward women accessing services.

The work of the Coalition on Homelessness and its insistence on putting service recipients at the center of program design and implementation fit in the broader context of the harm reduction movement. Harm reduction is a philosophy initially developed and adopted by people organizing around HIV/AIDS crisis and other health issues among injection drug users, but its impact and implication for the rest of progressive social change movement is far-reaching.

Harm Reduction Coalition defines harm reduction as “a set of practical strategies that reduce negative consequences of drug use” that “meet[s] drug users where they are at.” It demands that “interventions and policies designed to serve drug users reflect specific individual and community needs.” “Harm reduction stands in stark contrast to the law enforcement efforts to criminalize and prosecute drug use as well as to the medical community’s efforts to pathologize it.” (Harm Reduction Coalition 2001).

Harm reduction demands that the goals of any social intervention be determined by communities and individuals receiving the intervention, and that any

such intervention need to be evaluated by these goals, rather than that of the government or the service provider. For example, if the goal of the drug user community were to reduce the risk of HIV and Hepatitis C transmission, any intervention must be evaluated on the basis of how successfully it achieves this goal, rather than how successfully it reduces drug use, as government, religious, medical, and other institutions frequently demand.

In 1997, American Medical Association released a position paper on the use of harm reduction strategy. While maintaining abstinence as the ultimate, most desirable goal, AMA acknowledges that harm reduction mechanisms such as needle exchange programs are “effective” in “reducing the spread of HIV and other pathogens,” “as demonstrated by extensive programs in Europe and more limited experience recently in this country.” (American Medical Association 1997). With AMA’s somewhat reluctant admission that harm reduction saves lives, funding for needle exchange and other harm reduction based programs from local Health Departments and mainstream foundations are increasing.

Harm reduction is the opposite of paternalism, which unfortunately is rampant within anti-violence agencies that are based on social service model. Redefined in terms of survivor advocacy, harm reduction could mean a set of practical strategies that reduce negative consequences to survivors’ lives through making available a larger pool of information and options, while honoring each survivor’s own goals and coping strategies. This includes behaviors that have been traditionally labeled as “maladaptive,” or “unhealthy,” such as alcohol and drug use, self-hurting, sex work, irregular eating and sleeping, and staying in contact with the perpetrator—those behaviors that could get a woman evicted from domestic violence shelters today.

In practice, of course, it would require that we acknowledge complex social issues contributing to individual survivors’ unique visions and methods of survival, which in turn forces us to be politicized around a multitude of violence and oppression issues rather than just sexism or even just domestic and sexual violence. It would also require that we institutionalize methods by which survivors are regarded as agents of their own survival, and given the real power in shaping the interventions designed to assist them, including securing them leadership opportunities to fight violence within our communities.

The successful organizing efforts of the Coalition on Homelessness and the harm reduction movement speak volumes about the importance of creating mechanisms that ensure that communities that receive services given realistic power to design, critique, and challenge any services. Social workers, medical professionals, and others who are genuinely committed to “helping” others—homeless people, drug users, or domestic violence survivors—need to be made to stop dis-empowering the

communities they serve through their paternalism. Harm reduction need to be explicitly adopted as one of the core principles for any organization providing social services, including those working with survivors of domestic violence.

Within the movement against domestic violence, however, the pervasive notion of “women’s shared experiences” and other feminist euphemisms hinder our ability to recognize our paternalism and to create structures that are truly survivor-driven. Worse, even when survivors’ voices are centered, we frequently end up creating a similarly faulty notion of “survivors’ shared experiences” which works to invisibilize specificities of each survivor’s experiences within the complex matrix of social identities, roles and oppressions, usually to the detriment of women of color, poor women, immigrant women, and others marginalized and underrepresented within the domestic violence movement. Knowing this, we need to create explicit structures to counter this effect, rather than relying on our feminist consciousness to eventually “address” it.

What if we had an organization, that does not provide any services itself, but organizes survivors and advocates to fight for survivors’ collective as well as individual interests, similar to what the Coalition on Homelessness does for homeless people? What if every woman coming into a domestic violence shelter received a telephone number for this organization, and she could bring in an advocate from this organization to help her appeal decisions and policies of the shelter? What if shelters were made to defend their decisions and policies in front of an independent arbitrator? Only then, survivors will begin to have realistic say in the design and the delivery of services at domestic violence shelters.

To put this strategy one step further: what if exploited and overworked employees of the shelter also organized to defend their collective and individual interests through a union? What if employees were given realistic chance to protest the fact that they are made to take on unreasonable amount of responsibilities with too little actual power and too little pay? If we were truly committed to ending violence against women, we need to begin by refusing to buy into the Battered Women’s Movement Syndrome where we remain silent about abuses we receive in order to protect the agency, hoping that the abusive system would change if we just stayed long enough.

The strategy I am talking about is *hyper-institutionalization*. Whereas radical-feminists argue for reversing the institutionalization of the anti-violence movement in order to return to the utopian “battered women’s movement” that once was (which I view as anachronistic and historical revisionist, not to mention hopelessly unrealistic), I am arguing for the *further* institutionalization to compensate for the negative impacts of the one-sided institutionalization that increased the state and

service provider powers while leaving survivors and front-line workers without institutional backing. By creating structures to advocate for the interests of survivors on one hand, and workers on the other, we can hope to make explicit various interests and values that enter into our discussions about how to operate social service agencies, whose dynamic interactions would ultimately result in the re-distribution of powers and the system of checks and balances for all parties.

Radical-feminists who created and fostered the early domestic violence shelters may view this approach as the ultimate disloyalty to their founding principles of (presumed) women's shared experiences, (presumed) equality of all women, (presumed) consensus decision-makings, and communal power structure. I agree. Those shelters that opposed the initiatives of the Coalition on Homelessness are right: we *are* changing their programs.

5.

The concept of an organization that advocates for survivors so that they can receive better services from domestic violence shelters is not necessarily new. In fact, many organizations set up by and for women of color and immigrant women have historically played this role across the country.

For example, Korean American Women In Need (KAN-WIN) was founded in Chicago in 1990 by seven Korean American women activist because traditional domestic violence shelters did not provide culturally sensitive materials and services, nor did they adequately address the impact of social injustices other than sexism, such as racism and classism, on Korean women's lives. KAN-WIN now provides some direct service such as crisis hotline, serves "as a liaison between battered Korean women and services," participates in "immigrant rights demonstrations and labor rights rallies," and mobilize around issues such as the Korean "comfort women" during the Second World War (Yeung 2000). [1]

But even with outside advocates to push for better services and reforms to change the design and delivery of services, shelter systems remain an expensive band-aid solution to domestic violence, something that is necessary only because we cannot rely on our friends, neighbors, and communities to adequately hold perpetrators accountable and support survivors. Many of us are struggling to develop grassroots community organizing that focus on community accountability, community support, and prevention.

Women's Legal Alternative Collective (WLAC) of Olympia, Washington is one of the groups that have a good grasp of the problems with the existing legal and medical remedies to domestic violence, but seem to be having difficulty articulating a clear,

realistic alternative. Mainly made up of young white women active in the local “radical” and “anarchist” communities, reflecting the “alternative” culture of this town, WLAC believes in building an overwhelming community response against rape and abuse within “radical” communities to hold perpetrators accountable without utilizing the legal system. But if they were to bypass the legal system, how would they establish what actually took place when the allegation of rape or abuse is contested? After internal debates, women of WLAC decided that implementing quasi “community court” would be in contradiction to its original mission to do away with the legal system, and instead chose to not question women’s stories. However, this approach is likely to result in the phenomena of “retaliatory arrest,” the term used by Urban Justice Center to refer to the specific form of “victim arrest” where the perpetrator reports false or exaggerated allegations of abuse in order to silence and punish the real victim (Haviland, Frye, et al. 2001). [2]

Community accountability is a laudable philosophy, but in many cases its application lacks structures to ensure motivation for those being held accountable to respond in good will or to comply. While I have heard about some organizing efforts that have implemented community accountability within specific small communities (South Asian immigrant community, a particular Native nation, etc.) to a varying degrees of success, it is unrealistic as an alternative to the racist criminal justice system if the scheme requires the revival of the romanticized communities, the village that raises a child. Considering the fact that we live in a society where the vast majority of people we meet every day are complete strangers, romantic communitarianism offers no more realistic vision for social justice than the radical-feminist utopianism does.

Northwest Network, a Seattle-based organization working within bisexual, transgendered, lesbian and gay communities, offers both radical analyses of social injustices and concrete strategies to prevent abuse through community organizing without euphemistic idealization of what “community” is supposed to be. For example, whereas mainstream anti-violence organizations view violence as an anomaly, a result of the conscious choice by the perpetrator, Northwest Network director Connie Burke believes that abuse of power is so prevalent in this society that each of us need to make conscious choice not to misuse our individual as well as institutional power and privilege, or lest we would be participating in abuse of some kind *by default*. Unlike the radical-feminist presumption that all women have the shared experiences in relation to the patriarchy, this analysis allows for exploration of specificities of each women’s experiences, and for constructing systems of internal and external accountability within our movements. [3]

“Friends Are Reaching Out” (F.A.R. Out) is a particularly inspiring program model from Northwest Network. Initially designed for communities of queer people of color, this “radical organizing project to strengthen friendships and build accountability in our relationships with each other” focuses on facilitating intentional dialogues about relationship abuse among close friends based on the shared commitment to staying connected to each other in order to build the capacity of the friendship networks to resist isolation and to hold each other accountable (Northwest Network 2002).

The basic assumption for F.A.R. Out program is that even though we may love and care for our friends, we are unreliable to each other in the face of an abuse unless we work in advance on building the capacity to respond. In addition to clarifying our expectations for what roles friends should play when one is in a troubling relationship so as to “take the guesswork out of how to support your friend when they’re in need,” the strategy of staying connected may prevent relationship abuse because “isolation from friends and family is the most common tactic used by abusers in establishing control patterns.”

The work of organizations like Harm Reduction Coalition and Coalition on Homelessness challenge the idea that social service agencies, the people who specialize in “helping” those in need, are capable of designing and implementing services that best match the needs of the people receiving services. I know, based on the stories of many survivors I spoke to as well as my own, that the fact domestic violence shelters are staffed by supposedly feminist women make little difference when it comes to its ability to reflect and meet each survivor’s specific needs. Northwest Network further insists that our communities and friends are unreliable unless we actively work on building the capacity of our communities and friendship networks to prevent and respond to abuse.

The particular challenge to those of us who work within the feminist anti-violence movement is to confront and dispel the myths we have created about ourselves as women and as feminists. We need to challenge the notion of women’s shared experiences and accept specificities of women’s experiences in relation to the complex matrix of social institutions, not just the patriarchy. We need to challenge the notion that women do not have real power in this society, and address how all of us are capable of using our various powers and privileges lovingly or abusively. We need to acknowledge the limitation of our feminist consciousness and ethics, and pursue structural remedies to hold ourselves accountable to each other as women and as fellow human beings.

Once we cease to fear being tagged as disloyal to these feminist myths, once we cease to allow the use of feminism to preserve the status quo, we can begin the true

transformation of our feminist movements against all forms of violence and oppressions, a revolution. When the rebels take down the walls of feminist pretenses and the castle of self-serving feminist make-believe, feminism will survive, more powerful than ever.

Notes

1.

[1] The use of the word “disloyal” in this context is obviously a reference to Adrienne Rich's “Disloyal to Civilization” from her 1979 book, *On lies, secrets and silences*.

[2] Jennifer Baumgardner used the pseudonym “Gloria Stymied” when she wrote the article “Ms.ery,” an expose about *Ms.* magazine, in the spring 1999 issue of *BUST* magazine. Because Baumgardner wrote about the same story under her real name in the book she co-wrote with Amy Richards, and because she has since acknowledged that she was Gloria Stymied who coined the term “battered women’s movement syndrome,” I chose to name her as the person who coined the phrase.

2.

[1] The names of survivors interviewed for this article have been changed to protect their privacy; Lulu and Akasha both picked their own pseudonyms. I plan to expand on these and other interviews I conducted when I write a book-length manuscript on this topic.

[2] Akasha and I agreed that the word “trick” should be put in quotation marks because a rapist is not a “trick” any more than a bank robber is a “customer.”

3.

[1] Nancy J. Meyer and others point out the term “domestic violence” itself is an euphemism designed to dilute feminist critiques of male dominance. I understand and am sympathetic to this concern. However, I am using the term “domestic violence” throughout this article, including in my discussion of radical feminist critiques of “de-politicization,” for the sake of consistency and also because I seek to politicize the concept of “domestic violence” differently than they do.

4.

[1] I would like to thank Allison Lum of the Coalition Against Homelessness and others involved in its Shelter Outreach program for providing me inspiration and detailed information about how the universal grievance procedure worked.

5.

[1] “Comfort women” is an euphemism (hence the quotation marks) used by the Japanese imperial army during the second world war (when Korea was under Japan’s colonial rule) to refer to women who were made to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers in “comfort facilities” set up inside Japanese bases. Many Korean women were routinely lured into the situation by the false promise of “good employment,” but instead they were kept captive and forced to perform sexual acts. In addition, there were some documented instances of forcible abductions of women from Korea and other parts of Asia that Japan controlled at the time. While these “comfort facilities” were technically private brothel businesses that contracted with the government, the Japanese government did little or nothing to discourage or punish these criminal behaviors. While diplomatic treaties between Japan and South Korea in the 1960s officially dissolved any claims for compensation between the two nations, many Korean people as well as Japanese activists are demanding that the Japanese government directly compensate the surviving “comfort women” for their suffering and loss.

[2] This discussion of Women’s Legal Alternative Collective is based on the WLAC’s workshop session at the Gender and Sexuality Conference at Evergreen State College in May 2002.

[3] I would like to thank Connie Burke, Ellie Kimaro, and Jed Lin of Northwest Network for their work and their willingness to make the time to meet with me during the busy Pride weekend.

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