Reflections on Our Work With Battered Women

By Deborah D. Tucker

I was very moved by the experiences of Beth and her children, both by the uniqueness of their particular struggle and the familiarity of so much of what they went through. The experiences relayed by battered women often begin to run together for those of us who have had the opportunity to really hear women describe them. What a gift to have this strong woman share with us who she was and what she felt, all the way from childhood to the aftermath of sixteen years of incredible violence, and to know that she and her children have survived to make lives for themselves.

No words can be better than hers to describe what she felt, and her plain-spoken manner of relaying physical, psychological, and sexual violence powerfully illuminates the all-encompassing nature of woman battering. No one approach satisfied Sam in his need for complete power and control of Beth. All forms of violence were employed, as were the tactics of intimidating, economically abusing, using the children, minimizing, denying, blaming, and threatening, all of which we have come to see as the essential elements of a battering relationship. The domination and degradation that Beth survived is representative of the struggles faced by women throughout America.

Unfortunately, the fact that Beth’s marriage ended through Sam’s death is also too common, and it shows how domestic violence services must be improved and made more responsive to the real needs of the victims. It is my hope that shelter staff, board members, and volunteers, as well as other direct providers of services, will read Beth’s story and reexamine the effectiveness of programs and services.

We derive our real strength as a movement from the philosophy that what women want from us guides our programs. In this essay, I want to address those whom I think will read and benefit most from this book – those working in the battered women’s movement as well as other allied professionals who actually see and talk with more battered women than we who work in the shelters do. Finally, I want to discuss the military policies and belief systems that support rather than confront woman abuse; these are illuminated quite clearly in this book. The starkness of the military callousness to Beth and her children is only a sharper vision of what we see within the civilian world. Much more must be done by military and civilian institutions to intervene effectively in and prevent domestic violence.

Battered Women’s Movement

Beth indicates that she called the domestic violence hot line on Friday, April 8; the incident resulting in Sam’s death occurred on Saturday, April 9. Beth tells us that she was listened to, but not much could be done because the boys were too old to be admitted to the shelter, and she wasn’t willing to leave without them. Programs throughout the country have adopted policies limiting the age of boys who may be admitted with their mothers to emergency shelters. This policy grew from concerns that older boys from violent homes often represented a threat to the safety of others within the shelter, particularly younger children.

Beth’s experience reveals the tension many shelters around the country confront when making a choice between serving a woman and her children’s need for safe shelter and protecting other shelter residents from the very real dangers that young men raised by violent fathers may present. This issue will become more important as shelters increasingly benefit from funds being channeled to the states throughout the Violence Against Women Act and other public funding sources. Federal and state policies prohibit limiting or denying services on the basis of age. Shelters across the country would be well-advised to revisit any policies that discriminate on the basis of age.

Women serving in Texas prisons for offenses against their battering partners have named their group WAVE – Women Against Violent Endings. These women have helped us to understand that they perceived battered women’s shelters in much the same way as the other bureaucracies from which they sought help or information. This is, of course, a real disappointment to us. We must be ever vigilant about that which is clearly within our responsibility and acknowledge our shortcomings. Our
deficiencies can include the way we ourselves choose to describe our programs in the public media and the policies we adopt.

We have learned from the women in WAVE that shelter names are often very off-putting to battered women. If we call ourselves the Family Crisis Center or Family Violence Center, or describe ourselves in our public materials without demonstrating our commitment to helping women, we may inadvertently give the message that we view the problem as that of a dysfunctional family rather than an act of violence being committed by one person against another. Battered women are so often burdened with the belief that if they could just do something differently (or everything differently), the abuse would stop. We need to let them know – before they risk calling our hot lines or arrive at the front door – that we are advocates for them and we do not believe that the abuse they have suffered is due to their failures as wives or mothers. I believe our public education approaches must move beyond the question, Why does she stay? to why does he hit?

I know we worry about the discussion of battering men, and of women being violent, too. We worry that funders will see us as radicals and won’t support us. I often discuss this topic with local shelter directors and boards, as well as with my sister coalitions’ staffers. In reality, if the Federal Bureau of Investigation is correct that 95% of the reported cases of domestic assault are committed by men against women, and the other 5% includes homosexual partnerships as well as defensive assaults committed by women against men, then we get down to a very small number of cases that might in fact represent acts of violence committed by men against men. As Ellen Pence, Michael Paymar, and other incredible folks in Duluth at the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) have shown us, there are very few cases in which a male who is being battered is truly afraid to leave, or where, when he does try to get out of the relationship, he is subject to the same escalation of threats and violence that battered women often experience. We do need to be responsive to these victims and to encourage men to become involved in providing assistance to their brothers in these circumstances. But our organizational names or our advertising and promotion should not lead women to think that we practice couples counseling or other victim-blaming approaches. Can we be confident, as Congress was in passing the Violence Against Women Act? Can we be creative in communicating our mission so as to include same-sex battering victims and battered men (few though they may be), while still reaching the women who have so often asked others for help and may fail to ask us without reassurance of our intent?

Finally, I submit that in this country, success is often equated with financial resources. Do we in the shelter movement not have much greater money, resources, volunteers, and community involvement than ever before? We have been successful, not because we “run with the wolves,” and our mission of ending violence against women is supported by battered women and our communities. When we do what we set out to do, we gather allies who know full well who we are. It is much more dangerous to set aside our passion, to “run with the poodles” and become part of the problem. Without battered women who will help us to advocate for effective public policy, raise funds, and design responsive programs, we will never attract public and private support. And battered women will never join us or will leave our side if they see us as institutions more concerned with ourselves than our ultimate goals. Money is power and more money should no co-opt us; it should encourage us to continue to tell the truth about the dynamics of family violence and its connection to sexism.

Other policies that we all struggle with policies that affected Beth, are limits on length of stay and the reporting of child abuse. Beth indicated that in 1976, she fled to a shelter, taking her youngest son with her and returning later for the older children. Matt had a black eye caused by Sam, and the shelter reported that abuse to the authorities. Beth indicates that she was concerned about the abuse being reported, and the investigator ultimately accepted Sam’s story that his son was injured by a softball. She tells us that she “caught hell when my time at the shelter ran out and I had no place to go except back to Sam” (p. 69).

With regard to the practice of limiting the length of stay within a shelter, certainly we all understand the tremendous need and how frequently we must turn away women and children who are in danger due to lack of space within our facilities. We must repeat in public, to funders and lawmakers, the number of women and children we had to turn away due to lack of space. We must also look at the
other end of our services and provide transitional housing for women who are clear that they must, for themselves and their children, separate permanently from the batterer. These women, as we all know, often need more that the two- to four-week stays our policies permit.

Battered women’s shelters also need to reexamine their own investment in length-of-stay policies. Do we pit battered women against each other by placing strict limits on lengths of stay? Placing guilt on a woman because she and her children may be keeping someone else from getting help is most obvious when we are hung up on our house rules and making sure everyone is complying equally with required chores or our program approach. Whose needs are we meeting when we terminate a woman and force her children to leave the shelter for failing to attend support groups or to do chores?

Beth demonstrated two things to me most strongly. First, that she would work as hard as was necessary to feed, clothe, and house her children. Second, that her dedication to those children kept her motivated to survive, even in her darkest moments of abuse, and even after the threat of the abuse had been removed and the remorse almost swallowed her. She kept going. Beth and women like her are the ones we must put forward in our communities to explain that having a twenty-five or even a fifty-bed shelter is not enough. Long-term stays must be possible until legal measures can be taken or enough money accumulated for her and the children to depart safely. We can’t let ourselves or our communities off the hook by accepting an inadequate response. Only by keeping open minds and hearts will we help women escape violence and raise up a society that abhors it.

Allied Professions

Reform of Child Protective Services (CPS) and the manner in which child abuse complaints are handled by those agencies and law enforcement is central to the work of this movement. We must look at the betrayal of women and children that occurs every day when reports are made. The investigations seem more often to place the victims at greater risk of harm than to result in consequences for the abusers.

I believe that the basic structure of CPS is inherently the problem. CPS staff are perceived as “the people who take your kids away” and not the agency that stops violence against children and holds perpetrators accountable for their behavior. I believe CPS should be redesigned, either to employ only specialized workers to conduct investigations or to use law enforcement units to gather evidence of whether or not a crime has been committed. If no crime has occurred or can be substantiated, then caseworkers trained to provide assistance to the family could be assigned to work with them. These caseworkers would have a “clean slate” with the family and could be considered trustworthy.

When abuse of a child is substantiated, one of the first questions must be, Is the woman also being abused? When investigators, be they CPS or law enforcement, fail to take into account the woman’s vulnerability to abuse and instead treat the parents together as “the parental unit,” they are failing the child. The best way to protect a child from abuse is to protect his or her mother from the abuse. In Texas, the lowest estimate of any studies done of the incidence of both woman and child abuse existing together has been 45%. If we can say that half of the cases currently being investigated by CPS involve abuse of women, and in most of those cases, CPS is doing nothing to assist the women, then this system is failing women and children, and we must advocate for change.

If CPS sees that its mission to stop and prevent abuse of children necessitates a partnership with us, we will have achieved something as remarkable as the establishment of 1,200 shelters for battered women and their children in less than twenty years. To do that, we must get at the underlying beliefs that separate us. Battered women widely distrust CPS. And can you blame them? Why should a battered woman trust a caseworker when the word on the street is not that this person can help you and your children to safety, but “if you can’t keep your kids safe, then we’ll take them away”? This challenge seems insurmountable to us some days, yet think back to how the law enforcement community viewed us and domestic violence ten years ago. Because we focused so much of our energy on training and policy change through legislation and local advocacy, law enforcement has become our strongest ally in many communities. The same commitment must be made to CPS.
We have achieved progress with the criminal justice system. We have also seen a groundswell of interest from professionals in social services, mental health, the medical community, attorneys, clergy, and educators. This is vitally important because battered women usually seek help from these “outside professionals: before approaching shelters or other domestic violence programs. We estimate in Texas that 4% of the women being battered come to the shelter as residents or nonresidents for legal information and support. More than 20% of women call the police or seek legal help, and the vast majority of women talk to a minister, a counselor, nurse or doctor, teacher, or someone they perceive to have information and advice for them.

We must put more resources into preparing all professionals for these encounters. Law enforcement personnel no longer deny that at least 30% of their street time foes to domestic violence. In fact, some think the proportion is greater. Other professionals in emergency rooms or in mental health clinics are starting to notice what an incredible percentage of their cases involve domestic violence. The best thing that happened to move the battered women’s movement ahead during the Reagan years was Surgeon General C. Everett Kiip’s assertion that intentional injury to women through rape and domestic violence represents a significant health problem – an epidemic. This announcement brought requests for training, materials development, policy analysis, and collaboration in combating violence against women.

In conjunction with our efforts to handle the success of being discovered by these professions, we must also ask them to assist us by going back to the colleges, universities, or other settings in which they obtained credentials for the positions they now hold. All of us within and without the battered women’s movement must seek to influence the preparation various professional receive to do their work and to reduce the time it takes for each profession to hear battered women and to examine their profession’s role in decreasing this experience so common in our society.

Beth stated that her minister’s support and reinforcement that no husband has the right to beat his wife was so important to her. This was valuable, but shortly after, he informed her that he would no longer visit their home because Sam was a “heathen.” Something is severely lacking when ministers are not really trained in the dynamics of violence and do not understand that comfort for the victim is only the first step. We must also have their help to confront the behavior of the batterer, to educate their congregation and the community to the lengths that batterers will go to isolate the family.

Beth also mentioned how she and Sam went for marriage counseling after a particularly brutal beating in 1973. Both counselors offered practical suggestions that might have reduced the conflicts in a nonviolent marriage. But neither counselor addressed Sam’s violence and alcoholic behavior. Beth drew some comfort from the counselors, but Sam dismissed them as “outsiders” and “just a bunch of bull” (P. 36). Today, knowledgeable counselors would not see them as a couple until Sam had completed his own programs to eliminate his violence and drinking problems. We must continue to spread the word in the mental health field until all those in practice are knowledgeable about how to work with domestic violence. Only through prevention and early appropriate intervention can we hope to avert such tragic endings.

Beth was very fortunate to have Evelyn, the woman who became her counselor and true friend. Evelyn listened to Beth closely and was able to modify her practice based on Beth’s needs. Evelyn was respectful of Beth in ways both large and small, educating her and accompanying her at difficult moments. Evelyn went beyond what most counselors are willing to do and became an advocate for Beth.

Battered women are very rarely rendered helpless, and many in the domestic violence field have rejected the use of the term learned helplessness to describe battered women’s responses. Usually, like Beth, battered women continually struggle to meet the challenges of violence, medical problems, bills to be paid, and children to parent. Like Beth, they often reach for more education and better work, however long it takes. The forces used against Beth by this one man were joined by so many others. Beth was truly a survivor of this man’s violence, not someone who learned helplessness.

Military Services
We talk about denying how lethal men can be to women; no one does it better than the U.S. military. After growing up in an Air Force family, then having the opportunity to work with people from all branches and to do specialized training on domestic violence for the military, I have come to understand that some of my original assumptions about the military’s response to violence against women were naïve.

I first thought that the military’s hard work to eliminate racism would help them to see that ending sexism is also essential to the future. I also knew that the Family Advocacy Program is federally funded 400% more than the civilian world to combat domestic violence: $40 is spent per military service and family member for every ten cents per civilian in the population. I expected that greater resources would mean greater understanding of the problem and that some of the solutions that are being proven to work would be employed.

Sadly, I found a culture that has not embraced much change. There are still military clubs with belly dancers and stripteases. Even though the new vernacular is spouse, many seem to find it impossible to use that term and refer to a service member’s wife as his dependent. Military personnel still use the sentence Sam used, “If the military had wanted me to have a wife, they would have issued me one” (p. 23). This lets women know that this supposedly family-oriented organization still teaches that they are “surplus baggage.”

All the training given to ameliorate the effects of family violence and other significant problems like alcohol abuse are couched in the need to reduce distractions from the soldiers’ ability to concentrate on performing the mission. Although many large employers have initiated employee assistance programs for much the same reason, few are incorporating them into a culture that has told women and children they are part of the employer’s community as well. When performance awards or other achievements are given out, the military recognizes that the spouse has contributed to the individual’s success, but when that spouse is being battered, this attitude flips around on her to become blaming—somehow, if something is going wrong, it must be her fault.

Until very recently, most within the military were trained to see family violence as a relationship or communication problem. What is she doing that is causing him to behave this way? Many hold the beliefs that we have worked so hard to eradicate, such as “some women like being hit” and “men hit women because they won’t shut up” or “women provoke men to violence.” As policy is changing and men who commit acts of violence are experiencing consequences—including occasional court-martial—Sam’s threat of “you get me kicked out of the military and I’ll kill you” (p.41) is not an uncommon one for battered military wives to hear. It is a difficult shift for the military to make: Official policy states that family violence is wrong, but all the belief systems that seem to make the behavior understandable cannot be challenged.

For example, military men are responsible for the behavior of their wives and children. Any “infraction” committed by a member of the family reflects on the service member. How can a man who can’t control his family control his troops? This attitude underscores quite clearly the support of the military culture for a man’s having undisputed power and control in his family.

Military men who batter are truly surprised when they are arrested or punished for abusive behavior because it has been viewed for so long as an entitlement, even a responsibility. Total control of the money is expected by both the military and civilian batterer, and practices of the military can severely limit a battered woman’s ability to survive. Beth talked of the difficulty she had in receiving the allotment pay while Sam was in Vietnam, and in obtaining medical or base exchange services when her military ID card was taken. It is common practice for batterers to control access to the military ID card as a way to limit their victims contact with family or base command functions, information, or services. Practices like requiring Beth to live away from the base are very common in order to decrease potential contact with others. Soldiers who have training in weapons and commonly keep weapons in their homes are particularly frightening to their partners. Yet, rarely will the weapon of a soldier be confiscated after a domestic violence incident is reported.

Perhaps the most consistent disappointment in the military policy for intervening is the use of couples counseling. Battered women, batterers, counselors, and researchers have all noted the ineffectuality and dangers of couples counseling, but the military, particularly the Army, clings to it.
Most counselors were trained by Dr. Peter Neidig, who has urged that most violence against women is really “mutual violence.” He minimizes the suggestion that women are often acting to defend themselves from abuse when they are violent and stresses that both partners have the problem (Neidig & Friedman, 1984). This works well for the batterer, who wants the victim to believe the violence is about her behavior and not his own.

Women who come to shelters in Texas are often very conflicted. On the one hand, when requesting help form the military, they are often discouraged. Questions such as “Do you really want to do this to his career? He’s a good soldier, he’s under stress, can’t you be patient and help him out more?” let battered women know that their experience doesn’t count for much to the military authorities. On the other hand, if they ask us for help, confidentiality is essential, because these women know what the abuser will do if the military is advised of the true nature of the violence from outsiders. Because shelters that contract for services with the military are required to give the family’s name, civilian shelters provide significant services to military family members without reimbursement.

First sergeants, company commanders, and military leaders, who are often without any training in domestic violence issues, are the ones who make many of the real decisions concerning the intervention. I thought of the military as a true hierarchy, but it is more a collection of individual fiefdoms. In the training I’ve done, counselors, doctors, and social workers have let me know over and over that I’m preaching to the choir. Some feel that they have done everything possible to stop couples counseling from being the Army’s preferred response, and many express jealousy of the training being done for the Marine installations by DAIP in Duluth.

The Duluth model and its training involve everyone who has a role. Because the company or post commanders are like the boss and the judge rolled into one, they are desperately in need of training if any real change is to occur in the military community. Military commanders can choose to follow recommended policy or not, depending on their own evaluation of the circumstances and their won belief systems. Recommendations prepared by multidisciplinary teams for these boss/judges can be readily swept aside if the service member is considered a valuable soldier.

Family Advocacy staff work for the command, and many are frustrated by their limitations. I have reassured them that there are parallels within the civilian world. For example, a well-respected, wealthy batterer often faces fewer consequences for his behavior than an unknown, less affluent individual. Classism and racism are found just as readily within the civilian world. Judges are often untrained in the issues, and employers man not have sanctions for employees who commit family violence. But just because we don’t have it working too well out here does not excuse the military from persisting in outmoded and even dangerous practices in how they intervene. Can we not expect, with the much greater resources that have been invested through our tax dollars, that the military can lead the way, rather than drag behind? Can we not ask the military to help us build a new concept of family life, where each family member is encouraged “to be all he or she can be?”

Conclusion

Women in WAVE in the Texas prisons have also helped us to see a number of commonalities that are important for us to consider. Most of the women who ultimately killed in self-defense were women who experienced horrific sexual violence that no one knew about. Doctors, counselors, and others who seemed to know clearly that the women were being abused usually never asked about the kinds of things Beth described and other battered women have told us about: the stitches torn out after childbirth, the damage to her breasts, the anal intercourse resulting in injury apparent to those who were to care for her. The reluctance of victims to discuss sexual violence with their counselors or other helping professionals is so powerful that we must all find a way to ask about it and draw it out. I don’t know what the relationship is between the women who are forced to defend themselves and sexual violence, and maybe we could understand more clearly if we knew also how many of the women who die at the hands of their batterers were also sexually abused. Could it be that those men who commit sexual violence are on a continuum of batterers who are more likely to create a lethal situation?
The women also talk of the final incident in which they defended their lives in much the same manner as Beth described it: the man’s eyes glaring with hate, the complete lack of concern for the presence of children (which might mean an intent to also kill those children), the continuation of the attack on them even when they had acted defensively and injured their batterer. They also tell similar stories of what followed: being arrested and not being allowed to change out of clothes with urine or blood, receiving no medical care, being manipulated into giving their statements, being kept from their children and having no opportunity to comfort them. All of these issues could be handled differently without compromising an investigation. Women who allege that they have killed in self-defense and who bear the obvious signs of injury, as Beth did, should certainly be allowed to get fresh clothing, to go immediately to the hospital, to have the clothes that are forensically valuable removed as part of a medical exam of their condition, to attend to basic physical needs such as dry underwear before questioning, and to see and comfort their children, even if that is done in the presence of an officer.

Over and over when we talk with women who killed in self-defense, they say, “It didn’t have to be. No one should have died.” We must look at every aspect of our services, the intervention offered by helping professions and reach out to the military. We must continue to strive for a criminal justice system that offers safety for victims and accountability for batterers, regardless of class, race, or performance in their workplace. Rarely is the first act of domestic violence life-threatening. We must come to understand either how to prevent that first act or to intervene so thoroughly that it is never repeated. This challenge is one that will require work by all of us, including battered women like Beth who will help us to continue learning.

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