

**GUEST EDITORIAL**

**Domestic Violence and Social Work Education: What Do We Know,  
What Do We Need to Know?**

"THE BATTERED WOMEN'S MOVEMENT went downhill when the MSWs took over." Ouch. Why do you say that, I gingerly asked? The state domestic violence advocate stared at me as if to say, "You don't know?," and then listed off a number of complaints. "Most of the social workers I've met only see domestic violence as a mental health problem that individual counseling can solve, and they come out of school not knowing anything about the issue. We thought by now social workers would at least know why women stay and why men hit. That's what we call domestic violence 101. It's exasperating that professional social workers still ask the same victim-blaming questions as the general public. It's been almost 30 years since we began this movement. Where have y'all been?"

Indeed, where have we all been? Why did this generally knowledgeable person expect that social workers would receive information about domestic violence in their academic preparation for professional practice? Perhaps it seemed to her like a logical assumption. After all, she knew about our profession's historic mission to address the needs of vulnerable and oppressed persons. Perhaps she thought that we would recognize that the oppression and vulnerability

that happens behind closed doors is just as compelling as the oppression perpetrated by societal institutions. Perhaps she thought that teaching about domestic violence would give social work educators an opportunity to address a major national and international human rights issue that has public health, economic, and criminal justice consequences? Perhaps her assumption about the fit between social work and domestic violence was correct, but was there any basis for her assertions about our collective lack of attention to this subject?

Let us explore the evidence. What indicators are available to assess our profession's overall capacity to address domestic violence both in and out of the classroom? There are published resources including journal articles, reports, standards, and textbooks. We could learn from how practitioners assess their academic preparation for addressing domestic violence and from how clients view social work assistance. We can also review the extent to which domestic violence is included in both undergraduate and graduate curricula and whether there are persons with expertise in this area on social work faculties.

What is the current capacity of the profession, and in particular social work education, to address this issue? What does the social

work literature say about social work's response to domestic violence? Are there professional standards and competencies for addressing domestic violence in a number of different field settings? Do social workers feel academically prepared to address domestic violence? What articles have been published in the *Journal of Social Work Education*? What discussions have we had regarding how to infuse content on domestic violence into the foundation curriculum or whether this topic should be treated as an elective? Do we know how many social work programs integrate domestic violence content into their curricula? Or how many programs offer electives in this area? Are there published studies on the effectiveness of various teaching methodologies and approaches? What about our textbooks? Is the information about domestic violence in social work textbooks accurate? Do our textbooks provide enough information for students to learn the complexities of this issue? What about expertise within social work faculties? Does every school have at least one faculty member with expertise in domestic violence or violence against women? If not, do social work programs recruit faculty with this expertise like they recruit for expertise in child welfare, substance abuse, or gerontology?

### **What Does the Literature Say About Social Work's Response to Domestic Violence?**

From the late 1970s through the early 1990s, the social work profession earned a reputation as uncaring, uninformed, and unhelpful to battered women. Social workers were faulted for blaming the victim (Bass &

Rice, 1979; Davis & Carlson, 1981), failing to recognize abuse as a problem (Pagelow, 1981; Hansen, Harway, & Cervantes, 1991), and failing to make appropriate interventions and referrals (Bass & Rice, 1979; Davis, 1984; Ross & Glisson, 1991). Recent studies show mixed results including overall client satisfaction (Hamilton & Coates, 1993), lack of motivation to help teenage dating violence victims (Foshee & Linder, 1997), and client disenchantment with social workers for minimizing women's needs and using impartiality as a way to avoid taking a stand against violence (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1996). While social workers are not practicing universal screening, there appears to be improvement in their ability to assess and intervene appropriately (Danis, 2003). Perhaps it is not surprising that, due to our overall history of bias and blame, the relationship between professional social work and the grassroots battered women's movement has been antagonistic and social workers are seen as barriers not allies (Kanuha, 1998). So the allegations of the state domestic violence advocate were actually grounded in the empirical literature.

### **Standards Anyone?**

With regard to the current capacity of the profession to address domestic violence, we know of no professional standards nor identified social work competencies for addressing domestic violence. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) addresses domestic violence as part of their Family Violence Policy Statement (NASW, 2003). However, there is no separate policy statement on this complex issue, nor is there a policy statement on violence against women

that might include domestic violence as a component. While NASW has addressed standards for competent practice in the areas of school social work, cultural competency, and social work with adolescents, no such standards for domestic violence exist. However, there has been one Practice Update on Gender-Based Violence and Health of Adolescent Girls (NASW, 2001). Similarly, there have been no published efforts to identify social work practice competencies.

### **Do Social Workers Feel Academically Prepared to Address Domestic Violence?**

That is a good question. In one recent exploratory study, the majority of respondents felt they had “none to a little” academic preparation (Danis, 2003). We are unaware of any other recently published data on the subject and encourage social work programs to include questions on this topic in their student evaluations and alumni surveys.

### **How Has the *Journal of Social Work Education* Addressed This Issue?**

Two in 20; that is two articles in the past 20 years published in the *Journal of Social Work Education*, and both articles have come in the past decade. One article in the fall of 1991 discussed a teaching model for content on violence against women (Stout, 1991), while the other article addressed a human behavior in the social environment framework for integrating a developmental vulnerability-resilience and risk-safety framework to educate students about intimate partner violence (Begun, 1999). Missing are discussions about integrating content into the rest of the founda-

tion curriculum, including practice, social policy, and research courses, or treating this content separately in an elective. Missing is a dialogue regarding how race, sexual orientation, age, disability, spirituality, and socioeconomic status impact responses to domestic violence, as well as the multitude of ethical issues that working with abused women and their children often raise, such as the question of mandatory reporting of domestic violence, the complexity of supporting the self-determination rights of clients, and how best to address children exposed to violence. There has also been no discussion of the effectiveness of particular teaching methodologies or the relative importance of teaching different skills and knowledge.

### **How Has Social Work Education Responded to This Issue With Regard to Curricula?**

How many programs address this issue through separate electives or through integration in foundation or advanced courses? If content is integrated, what is included, how is it included, and are the teaching methodologies used effective? In a recent National Institute of Medicine report entitled, “Confronting Chronic Neglect,” social work programs as well as other health professions, such as nursing and medicine, are chided for not doing enough to address family violence issues in the curriculum (Cohn, Salmon, & Stobo, 2002). According to a review of accredited social work program websites undertaken by this multidisciplinary committee, 3 out of 258 BSW programs had separate courses on intimate partner violence and 18 had courses covering all as-

pects of family violence (child abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse). Only 5 out of 74 MSW programs offered courses on intimate partner violence and 17 had courses addressing family violence. Of the 407 accredited BSW and 136 accredited MSW programs, only 12 deans and directors responded to a separate written survey regarding family violence education. Several (number not reported) felt that content on family violence, including domestic violence, was covered in foundation HBSE or policy courses (Cohn et al., 2002). The committee concluded "that little systematic education is being offered on family violence in schools of social work" (Cohn et al., 2002, p. 43).

### **What About Faculty Expertise?**

How many social work programs have at least one faculty member that identifies domestic violence or violence against women as her or his research or teaching area of specialization? Do social work educators have sufficient information about this complex problem to discuss it in class? If individual faculty members are not comfortable discussing this issue, do they bring into the classroom representatives from local domestic violence programs? If the old adage is true and you "teach what you know," it becomes doubly important to have faculty with expertise in this area because what educators do not know is not being taught. An assessment of the domestic violence expertise of current social work faculties has also not yet been undertaken. What we do know is that we have yet to see an advertisement for a faculty position that seeks expertise on domestic violence.

### **What About Our Textbooks?**

Is there accurate content about domestic violence in social work textbooks? Textbooks can provide an important opportunity for exposing students to this issue and for sparking classroom discussion. A study of 22 graduate-level, foundation, direct practice texts used in California social work programs found that seven of the methods textbooks (31%) had no information on domestic violence at all. The remaining textbooks were found to either perpetuate or not address common myths about domestic violence (Friend, 2000). So our textbooks either ignore this subject or teach inaccurate information about the subject. How helpful is that?

So what do we know from this exploratory assessment of some possible indicators of our professions' overall capacity to address domestic violence and to prepare competent and effective practitioners? We know we have an established history of bias and blame against domestic violence victims, no practice standards nor published competencies, inadequate and inaccurate direct practice textbooks, two articles published in the *Journal of Social Work Education* in the past 20 years, sketchy information regarding whether content is addressed and how it is addressed in BSW and MSW programs, and uncertainty about the number of domestic violence faculty experts that schools have available to them. So said the domestic violence advocate quoted earlier in this editorial, "Where have y'all been?"

While we respect the advocate's question, we think a more useful inquiry is, "So what's taken us so long?" Is it our discomfort with social movements, particularly those

with feminist roots (Kanuha, 1998; Danis, 2003)? Are we too close to the problem? Any problem that affects this many women will have a profound impact on a profession with a majority of women in its membership. Is there an assumption that we have been there and done that? If so, we are mistaken and have much work to do to identify and remove the barriers to our ability to teach and to take a seat at the multidisciplinary table.

With lifetime prevalence rates estimated at between 20%–30% of women and 7.5% of men, annual incidents of physical assault against women estimated at 5.9 million—with approximately 76% of those incidents perpetrated by current or former husbands, cohabiting partners, or dates (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), and one in five high school girls already reporting violence in their dating relationships (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001), how can we minimize or marginalize the importance of integrating content on domestic violence into the social work curriculum? We believe the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and social work educators have the responsibility to educate future social workers to advocate for social reform in local, national, and international legislation, to intervene, and to engage in proactive grassroots community efforts to eradicate domestic violence against women and their children.

CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS, formerly the Curriculum Policy Statements, CPS), sets forth the purposes of social work education as preparing competent and effective professionals, developing social work knowledge, and providing leadership in the development of

service delivery systems, which are aimed at alleviating oppression and other forms of social and economic injustice that are often experienced by women and their children in violent domestic living situations. The EPAS directs us to design curricula that (1) integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression and that (2) integrate content that relates to the implementation of strategies to combat discrimination, oppression, and economic deprivations and to advocate for greater social and economic justice (CSWE, 2003). Social work students at all levels should be educated on domestic violence issues through coursework and through other learning opportunities, including practica, internships, research opportunities, and independent study.

### **So How Do We Get There?**

Three years ago representatives from CSWE participated in a National Social Worker Summit on Violence Against Women hosted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The summit served as a catalyst for discussion on the role of social workers in addressing domestic violence and on the development of strategies to maximize the contributions of the social work profession to prevent and respond to this major social and health problem. A portion of this meeting was dedicated to identifying the education and training issues associated with preparing knowledgeable and competent social work professionals.

What is the role of social work education in addressing domestic violence? At the most

fundamental level, our responsibility as educators requires us to ensure that we prepare competent and effective professionals with beginning knowledge, skills, and attitudes to address domestic abuse in a safe, culturally competent manner. Hopefully we can all agree on this goal. How we get there is now open for discussion. We offer these suggestions as a beginning for constructive discourse within social work education.

As a starting point for discussion, we must recognize that domestic violence represents much more than a specialty field of practice. It is a cross-cutting issue encountered by social work practitioners in diverse agency settings. Domestic abuse affects persons across the lifespan and is found co-occurring with a wide variety of problems including child maltreatment (Edleson, 1999), poverty (Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Brandwein, 1998), suicide (Roberts, Lawrence, O'Toole, & Raphael, 1997), elder abuse (Harris, 1996), and homelessness (Browne & Bassuk, 1997).

Once we recognize that domestic violence is a cross-cutting issue, then we must identify what all social workers need to know to assist victims of domestic abuse. Preventing intimate partner violence is an important societal goal that requires accurate information about the types of violence women experience throughout their lives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Equally important is information about effective intervention and prevention strategies. It is time to bring together social work educators, practitioners from diverse settings, domestic violence advocates, and survivors of domestic abuse to identify the minimum basic knowl-

edge, skills, and attitudes necessary for safe screening, risk assessments, and basic interventions that all social workers must have to address this issue. After this core set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes have been derived through analyses of theoretical, empirical, and practical wisdom and interventions, then we can more formally incorporate this information into each of the eight CSWE curriculum areas. In the meantime, we can learn from our colleagues who have already completed competency work, such as the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2000) and the American Bar Association (Goelman & Valente, 1997).

To develop social work knowledge in this area, domestic violence must also be on our research agendas. We need more research on the effectiveness of client interventions as well as research on the effectiveness of teaching about domestic violence. Given the competing demands of curriculum content, we need empirical studies that identify the most efficient and effective ways to increase student knowledge and skills. Can students learn to screen safely without first understanding the dynamics of abuse? Does understanding the dynamics of abuse automatically make one a competent screener or risk assessor? Does understanding the myths surrounding domestic abuse provide insight into the help-seeking behavior of battered women? Can an hour-long lecture teach everything that students need to know? And how do the personal experiences of students impact their education on this subject? Based on our personal research and teaching experiences, more than 50% of social work practitioners and students have either witnessed domestic abuse

in their families of origin, are or have been in abusive relationships themselves, or know someone who has been in a violent relationship (Danis, 2003). This should not be surprising. However, we wonder whether there is a relationship between high levels of personal exposure to domestic violence and our profession's collective resistance to addressing this issue? One explanation for social workers' reluctance to get involved is that the subject matter is "too close to home." Too many of us have more healing to do. As educators we need to be sensitive to this possibility by creating a safe atmosphere for students to address this issue and to be referred to appropriate counseling when necessary. We also have to ask, given victim-blaming societal attitudes and the tendency of women to internalize this oppression and blame themselves for the abuse (Levy, 1995), are social work students any less likely to blame the victim than other students?

What about the third goal of social work education, providing leadership in the development of service delivery systems? Universities can bring people together to discuss these issues. We can invite advocates, state agency administrators, frontline workers, elected public officials, community leaders, and researchers to engage in creative problem solving on this complex problem. We can track both the positive outcomes and unintended consequences of policy reform. We can create or enhance community systems of care that bring all the parties together. Given the number of social work programs involved in IV-E child welfare education, it would appear to be a natural fit to discuss recent research and policy recommendations that recognize the

overlap between child maltreatment and domestic violence. While we do not know the extent to which schools are already providing leadership in this area, we do want to acknowledge the University of Minnesota School of Social Work for its statewide and national leadership on a wide variety of domestic violence issues.

In the 3 years since the Social Worker Summit on Violence Against Women, CSWE members have undertaken a number of initiatives to highlight the importance of including content on domestic violence in the social work curriculum. A new CSWE Annual Program Meeting symposium on violence against women and their children was established through a grassroots effort that demonstrated the existence of a nationwide critical mass of members with commitment to this issue. A compendium of domestic violence teaching modules for the foundation curriculum is currently in development and will be published by CSWE in the near future. And now this special section of the *Journal of Social Work Education* ensures another more permanent platform for addressing the nexus of domestic violence and social work education.

Much thanks goes to *Journal of Social Work Education* editor-in-chief Eileen Gambrill, the *Journal's* board of consulting editors, and Michael Monti and the CSWE Publications and Media Commission for agreeing to create and support this special section and for taking leadership on manuscript selection. We appreciate the timeliness of your efforts and look forward to the continuation of these special sections under the direction of the incoming editor-in-chief, Deborah Valentine.

We also look forward to contributing to the introduction of subsequent special sections and more fully exploring the role of social work education in addressing domestic violence.

The first three articles appearing in this section are a salient step for us to engage in a much needed dialogue on preparing future social work professionals to address this very complex and pervasive public health and social problem. As the articles suggest, preparing social work professionals to address domestic violence against women and their children has many transformational advantages for students, is an issue that cuts across lifespan development, and can be easily integrated into all social work curricular areas and courses.

The article, "Domestic Violence and Aging: Teaching About Their Intersection," written by Dina J. Wilke and Linda Vinton, is an excellent illustration that women of all ages, even older women, experience domestic violence. They discuss two distinct strategies (specialized coursework and integrated content in required curriculum areas) for including content on domestic violence against older women. Wilke and Vinton discuss the relationship among topics currently taught in the social work curriculum (e.g., women's issues, domestic violence, aging, and elder abuse) and offer suggestions on how to integrate them by teaching about domestic violence against older women.

In "Domestic Violence and Animal Cruelty: Untangling the Web of Abuse," Catherine A. Faver and Elizabeth B. Strand use an ecological perspective to expand our appreciation of how family pets are used as coercing and controlling means to prevent women

from seeking help or from leaving an abusive relationship. From an ecological perspective, the authors posit that social workers who recognize that animal abuse is more often than not linked to domestic violence are better able to engage in proactive preventive efforts and service delivery through greater collaborative relationships with human and animal welfare organizations. These authors explain why the link between animal abuse and domestic violence merits the attention of the social work profession, suggest relevant knowledge and skills social workers can use to address this link, and offer resources for integrating content on domestic violence and animal cruelty into the social work curriculum.

Hadass Goldblatt and Eli Buchbinder's article, "Challenging Gender Roles: The Impact on Female Social Work Students of Working With Abused Women," presents the findings of a phenomenological study involving 20 Israeli female undergraduate social work practicum students. Their findings suggest that social work students become professionals in partner violence intervention while simultaneously undergoing significant positive transformations in their personal narratives by challenging gender roles and by enhancing their understandings of safety, control, and power issues inherent in domestic violence. The authors offer implications for social work education and research. These three articles demonstrate the breadth of the domestic violence field and its relationship to social work education.

It has been nearly 30 years since domestic violence was declared a social problem and

research undertaken to understand its prevalence; its impact on individuals, families, and communities; and the effectiveness of interventions to assist adult victims, child witnesses, and perpetrators. This initiative by the *Journal of Social Work Education* represents an important step in helping our profession ensure that social workers can effectively and safely address domestic violence in all fields of practice. The agenda put forth in this editorial is designed to spark concern, discussion, and action. To borrow a phrase from the Family Violence Prevention Fund, it's time for social work to "break the silence and end domestic violence."

Fran S. Danis

University of Missouri–Columbia

Lettie Lockhart

University of Georgia

### References

- American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2000). *Competencies necessary for nurses to provide high quality care to victims of domestic violence*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Bass, D., & Rice, J. (1979). Agency responses to the abused wife. *Social Casework, 60*, 338–342.
- Begun, A. (1999). Intimate partner violence: An HBSE perspective. *Journal of Social Work Education, 35*, 239–253.
- Brandwein, R. (Ed.). (1998). *Battered women, children, and welfare reform: The ties that bind*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Browne, A., & Bassuk, S. (1997). Intimate violence in the lives of homeless and poor housed women: Prevalence and patterns in an ethnically diverse sample. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 67*, 261–277.
- Cohn, F., Salmon, M. E., & Stobo, J. D. (Eds.). (2002). *Confronting chronic neglect: The education and training of health professionals on family violence*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Council on Social Work Education. (2003). *Handbook of accreditation standards and procedures* (5th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Danis, F. S. (2003). Social work response to domestic violence: Encouraging news from a new look. *Affilia, 18*, 177–191.
- Davis, L. V. (1984). Beliefs of service providers about abused women and abusing men. *Social Work, 29*, 243–250.
- Davis, L. V., & Carlson, B. E. (1981). Attitudes of service providers toward domestic violence. *Social Work Research and Abstracts, 26*(4), 34–39.
- Edleson, J. L. (1999). The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering. *Violence Against Women, 5*(2), 134–154.
- Eisikovits, Z., & Buchbinder, E. (1996). Pathways to disenchantment: Battered women's views of their social workers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 1*, 425–440.
- Foshee, V., & Linder, G. F. (1997). Factors influencing service provider motivation to help adolescent victims of partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 12*, 648–664.
- Friend, C. (2000, February). *Teaching domestic violence interventions to social work students*. Paper presented at the 46th Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, New York.
- Goelman, D., & Valente, R. (1997). *When will they ever learn? Educating to end domestic violence*. Chicago: American Bar Association.
- Hamilton, B., & Coates, J. (1993). Perceived helpfulness and use of professional services by abused women. *Journal of Family Violence, 8*, 313–324.

- Hansen, M., Harway, M., & Cervantes, N. (1991). Therapists' perception of severity in cases of family violence. *Violence and Victims, 6*, 225–235.
- Harris, S. (1996). For better or for worse: Spouse abuse grown old. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect, 8*(1) 1–33.
- Kanuha, V. (1998). Professional social work and the battered women's movement: Contextualizing the challenges of domestic violence work. *Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 1*(2), 4–18.
- Levy, B. (1995). Violence against women. In N. Van Den Bergh (Ed.), *Feminist practice in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2001). *Practice update on gender-based violence and health of adolescent girls*. Washington, DC: Author.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2003). Family violence policy statement. In *Social Work Speaks*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Pagelow, M. D. (1981) *Woman-battering: Victims and their experiences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Raphael, J., & Tolman, R. M. (1997). *Trapped by poverty, trapped by abuse: New evidence documenting the relationship between domestic violence and welfare*. Chicago: Project for Research on Welfare, Work, and Domestic Violence, Taylor Institute, and University of Michigan Research Development Center on Poverty, Risk, and Mental Health.
- Roberts, G. L, Lawrence, J. M., O'Toole, B. I., & Raphael, B. (1997). Domestic violence in the emergency department: Two case-control studies of victims. *General Hospital Psychiatry, 19*, 5–11.
- Ross, M., & Glisson, C. (1991). Bias in social work intervention with battered women. *Journal of Social Service Research, 14*(3/4), 79–105.
- Silverman, J., Raj, A., Mucci, L., & Hathaway, J. (2001). Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 286*, 572–579.
- Stout, K. D. (1991). A continuum of male controls and violence against women: A teaching model. *Journal of Social Work Education, 27*, 305–320.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (1998). *Prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the national violence against women survey*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Justice.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Healthy People 2010: Understanding and Improving Health* (2nd ed). Retrieved May 7, 2003, from <http://www.healthypeople.gov>

**Fran S. Danis** is assistant professor, School of Social Work, University of Missouri–Columbia. **Lettie Lockhart** is professor, School of Social Work, University of Georgia.

Address correspondence to Fran S. Danis, School of Social Work, University of Missouri–Columbia, 720 Clark, Columbia, MO 65211; email: [danisf@missouri.edu](mailto:danisf@missouri.edu).