

TRANSFORMATION

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Movement Building for the 21st Century

This article was originally a speech delivered to the Southeast Regional Conference for Workers in the Battered Women's Movement. in November, 1987.

For the closing day of this conference, I have been asked to speak about visioning for the future of our movement. I am honored to talk about vision but I want it known clearly that I speak of only one vision among many, for each of us has an important vision for our future and could stand here behind this microphone this Sunday morning. It seems appropriate that we speak of vision on a Sunday morning, that time of the week when many people, particularly Protestants, turn their thoughts to our spiritual life--for I believe there is nothing more grounded in the life of the spirit than the work we do. It is in this work that we come together seeking wholeness and aliveness, and it is here that we make essential connections among human beings. It is here we seek to gain hope and end despair, to make possible the best in each of us.

We have known since day one in the anti-violence movement that if we are to end violence against women, then we must end sexism. We came to recognize early on in our work with survivors of rape and battering that men commit violence against women because they can; that is, because we live in a society that gives permission to men's violence through the power of its institutions. In societies in which the incidence of violence against women is rare, there is also a corresponding equality of role and respect among women and men. Hence, for us to lower the incidence of violence, we must change the very fabric of society to include women's equality.

As the anti-violence movement has developed over the last twenty years, there have been those who strongly held the view that our essential work was to eliminate sexism while providing safety and services to victims, but other strong voices have held that we must focus directly upon victims and their need, putting other issues last. For some, this concentration solely upon victim's needs has led to doing little else for fear of losing one's place in the institutional structure that supports sexism while it gives lip service to the need to providing services to victims. To work against sexism is to challenge our institutions at their

core.

Gradually the anti-violence movement has become more focused on victims and less on social change. The government has supported this focus by providing money only for victims services, with requirements for professionals to deliver these services. Shelter programs have grown increasingly concerned with providing one on one counseling and professional support. Unnecessary conflict has arisen within the movement between the politics of social change and of service delivery, with the latter being supported more than the former by the very institutions that oppress women. And still, after twenty years, just as many assaulted women seek assistance. The central question of our movement today is why are there still hundreds of thousands of battered women?

With the concentration focused solely on the survivors of battering and rape (and in some programs, with concern for empowerment), we have often failed to recognize that every woman living under sexism is a victim or potential victim of violence. We have created a false separation between those who are visible victims and those who are not. When Diana Russell's studies show that 38% of girls under 18 will be sexually assaulted and that 65% of women of all ages will be sexually assaulted, we begin to understand how we all live under the threat of violence--and these numbers do not include battering or marital rape.

This separation is as false as the one that assumes that only such people as Winnie and Nelson Mandela or those killed by police in South Africa are the victims of apartheid--when it is clear that every woman, man, and

"We can provide services forever to those who suffer physical abuse from oppressive systems but this work by itself will not lead to the end of that system and the victims it produces."

child in South Africa is a victim of apartheid. Some are simply the more visible examples of its terrible effect--and that is the case for survivors of battering and sexual assault also: these women are the visible, physical and personal examples of the extremes of sexism.

We can provide services forever to those who suffer

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Building A Movement

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physical abuse from oppressive systems but this work by itself will not lead to the end of that system and the victims it produces. We must work with all who because of gender live under the threat of violence, and we must change the society so that permission is not given to all the methods of sexism which in the end lead to violence.

Simultaneously with the increased focus on victims has come the disappearance of many of the woman-created organizations and institutions that have been in active resistance to sexism. Recently, the only women's bookstore in New York closed, following the pattern of too many other women's bookstores in the last ten years. Some of our women's newspapers have stopped publication, and all over the country, dozens of women's centers have closed. Smaller cities and communities in particular have been hit hard. What remains as a central women's organization in many communities is the battered women's shelter or rape crisis program. Many of these

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are combined into one battered women's program. To end violence against women (that is, by working on the environment that produces it), we must expand our idea of what these battered women's programs do. For some time in the battered women's movement, we have argued that we need to return to our beginnings, our early politics.

I argue that we should not return. We had a good beginning but our vision was not broad enough and not inclusive of enough people. We should honor these roots but instead of trying to force the change backward, we should be intentional in a strategy to create the new or changed movement that we want.

We can begin by eliminating the false separation between battered women and other women by recognizing that battered women crystallize for us the horrors of sexism while highlighting the needs of all women for safety, jobs, transportation, childcare, housing, health care, legal rights, etc. Then we can work to expand our battered women's programs to make them include the needs and work of women throughout the community. The shelter can be the center for organizing activity in the work against sexism. Violence is the symbolic emblem of

sexism, and the movement we make around this symbolic core is not just a battered women's movement but a women's movement with battered women at the heart of it. Our battered women's shelters are the most widespread women's change organizations in the country and consequently are already situated to bring women together as peers to work on behalf of all women. Women hunger for places to be with other women and to work together, and battered women's programs can be the catalyst for women to gather together to work on the behalf of women.

In this process, we must widen our vision to include all women. We must understand how sexism and racism are joined to provide the two groups necessary to provide low or non-paid labor to support white male economic power. And we must understand how homophobia is a major weapon for keeping sexism in place. Our vision differs from our political vision of twenty years ago because we now know there is no single issue: we now see how the economics of sexism and racism touch all our women's issues: education, training, jobs, childcare, health and insurance, transportation, housing, aging, disability, reproductive rights, legal rights, and safety--the issues of every woman.

As organizing, gathering centers for women, battered women's shelters should provide

- A place and opportunity for women as peers to discuss their lives with each other and to decide on the work they want to do together for change;
- Information: books, films, newspapers, records, etc.

From meeting together, women might choose to develop:

- A legal group to monitor women's legal issues and to educate
- Consciousness raising groups and support groups on specific issues
- Groups that do direct action and civil disobedience
- Groups that work on women's economic issues
- Groups that work on related social justice issues such as racism, homophobia, classism, anti-semitism, etc.
- Groups that work to create women's culture.

How does this work? It requires involvement of all kinds of women from the community getting together and looking at

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Visioning a Future for Our Movement

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issues that affect their lives. It requires that community women not think of themselves as "helping" battered women but as working side by side with them. It requires peeriness. It requires that we name our own needs and know that we have the ability to develop our own strategies, to solve our own problems. It requires making the connection between violence and sexism. It requires that women recognize that all women live under the threat of violence. It does not necessarily require more staff. In fact, there will be more women available to do the work of the center. However, when the focus changes, it may require changing the name to be more inclusive of all women. The work with battered

women will still be at the core but will only be one important piece of the larger work, of the overall vision of change.

"Battered women's programs will be recognized as organizing a frontal attack against sexism and consequently there will quite likely be a counterattack."

Finally, we must recognize that this expansion requires courage. Battered women's programs will be recognized as organizing a frontal attack against sexism and consequently there will quite likely be a counterattack. The favorite one, of course, is lesbian baiting or red baiting. We will know we are doing our work well when the counter-resistance comes. (If we are not labeled lesbians or commies, we are no doubt doing our work too safely and without significant risks--we are

"making nice.") But we will survive it. Our strength will be drawn from the gains we receive. There will be renewed hope for women through involvement in real issues that affect our lives: we must remember that movement is created from rising expectations. Genuine empowerment will happen as women state their own concerns, name their own needs, and move forward together to make change. There will be less isolation (which prevents movement building) and more support as women work together. There will be no argument about professionalism because women will be working together as people of equal worth. We will gain hope and end despair. We will see a chance for our many tomorrows in a world that supports our lives.

Suzanne Pharr

Nontraditional Jobs for Women: Breaking out of Stereotypes

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- Advocate to increase nontraditional job opportunities.

The design of the program that we are proposing has been created based on information that we gathered from organizations in other areas of the country that offer nontraditional employment training for women. Programs such as Prep, Inc., in Ohio and Women in Trades, in Memphis, Tennessee share the philosophy that in order for women to be able to seek nontraditional employment and to successfully survive in those jobs, they must receive some information

about what it means to work in a nontraditional job, skills training, physical fitness and ongoing support. In developing the Women in Nontraditional Employment Project

"The nontraditional job market is a viable alternative for women in Arkansas to improve the quality of their lives and enhance their economic status."

we need your help. We are in the process of collecting the names of women who are presently or who have the desire to seek employment in nontraditional jobs. Also we are

looking for women with talents and skills in shop math, blue print reading, financial planning, physical fitness and health issues who would be interested in offering us information or willing to share their skills. Your input is very valuable so, please feel free to call us with questions, comments or resources at (501) 372-5113. Hopefully, in our next newsletter we will be able to report that we have received funding and have started the Women in Nontraditional Employment Project. We truly feel that this program will be beneficial to women in Arkansas.

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