

**RESEARCH INTO VIOLENT BEHAVIOR:
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Early in 1976, the American public slowly became aware of a hitherto largely secret crime, woman battering. There was a time span of approximately five years after the establishment of shelters for battered women and their children in Great Britain and Europe before Americans became sensitized to the fact that domestic tranquility is not always a reality behind closed doors. Small groups of concerned citizens had long been involved in efforts to help victims, but their work was primarily a lonely struggle without public recognition or support, such as Haven House in California (originally established in 1965). Then the March, 1976, issue of Do It NOW, the National Association for Women newsletter, announced the establishment of a National Task Force on Woman Battering/Family Violence. The same month, three thousand women from thirty-three countries gathered in Belgium for the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, and woman battering around the world was declared a universal phenomenon. These two simultaneous news events demanded and received attention from the American media.

From that point on, countless articles have appeared in large and small newspapers and magazines across the land, and radio and television joined in the massive educational effort to tell citizens that innumerable women and children were living in helpless terror in violent homes. The media was largely responsible for the recognition of the serious social problem of violence between spouses that ranged from threat of physical attack all the way to homicide. As their English, Scottish, Irish and Dutch sisters before them, American women streamed out of their homes and into residential shelters as soon as they opened, filling them to capacity. Many times they were so desperately in need of safe haven

that refuges were filled beyond capacity, and almost all have a constant waiting list. American citizens became informed of the needs of victims of spousal violence, and as community groups sprung up to address these needs, so did our state and federal legislators respond. At this point in time, proposed legislation would allocate funds from the national budget to provide a wide variety of services for victims, and would seek understanding through an informational clearing house as well as research for the purpose of prevention and control of domestic violence.

In just two years, Americans have certainly traveled a long way toward recognition of this serious social problem, and in determination to establish social policy to deal with it. However, there has recently emerged a divisive and perplexing thrust. Whether it is because of irresponsible media coverage or misinterpretation of the facts is not the issue here. The point is, the record must be set straight and issues must be clarified, so that when legislation is enacted, we can proceed unwaveringly and confidently in the proper direction. Unsupported pseudo-scientific claims must not be permitted to deflect attention from the very real needs of the most helpless and deserving victims of spousal violence: women and their children.

The question that has been raised through massive publicity in the media in recent months is, "Who are the victims?" Before we can address the needs of victims, we must clarify who they are; when we allocate public monies, we need to know who are the people most in need of the social services to be provided. Although our government attempts to help those who need help most, it can not be expected to oversee the personal welfare of each and every citizen. We direct our assistance to people most helpless and unable to help themselves: the poor, the handicapped, the

infirm, the aged--in other words, the socially disadvantaged. It is clear that the time has come to do a needs assessment of victims of spousal violence. This is the purpose of this paper.

It is impossible to determine how many couples in this country have ever engaged in some form of physical violence on the basis of only one national survey. There are serious methodological flaws in the study which its principal investigator is quick to point out (Straus, 1977:7). A representative national sample of intact couples automatically eliminates noncohabitational couples as well as persons who have broken off relationships because of physical violence or any other reason. Principal investigator Straus says, "...since 'excessive' violence is a major cause of divorce, and since our sample is limited to couples living together, these data probably omit many of the high violence cases" (1977:8). In addition, major emphasis in this study was placed on violent incidents occurring within the year previous to the survey, and the use of self-report which leads to underreporting. Straus estimates that true incident rates were double the reported rates (1977:8).

Despite admitted shortcomings, until we have further scientific evidence, we must rely on a combination of this one study, plus evidence extrapolated from other sources, as well as plain and simple logic to determine who are the victims most in need of protection and services.

Beginning with the study conducted by Straus, et. al., the authors devised a "severe violence index" or "wife-beating index." They named it the Conflict Resolution Techniques (CRT) scale, consisting of eight items, including one item P, "beat up the other one." Unfortunately, one sociologist has used only seven of the eight items, and has chosen to eliminate from her data base this very important item about which Straus says:

...for the twelve month period preceding the interview, 3.8% of the respondents reported one or more physical attacks which fall under our operational definition of wife-beating. Applying this incidence rate to the approximately 47 million couples in the USA, means that in any one year, approximately 1.8 million wives are beaten by their husbands (1977:5).

In his efforts to avoid misleading statistics, Straus considered frequency and the general pattern of violence and called for a "more literal interpretation." Straus says,

By a "more literal interpretation" I mean restricting the category of "wife-beating" only to those who used the term "beat up" to describe what happened (item P). This gives a figure of 1.1% during the year, with an average of 5.3 beatings per year among the couples who reported a beating. While this is much lower than the 3.8% figure taking into account all the severe violent acts, it still represents a very large number of families, specifically, over half a million (1977:6).

However, when the focus was expanded beyond the prior year to include acts that "ever happened," Straus then states:

Thus our data for item P, beating up, indicate that such a beating had occurred at some time in 5.3% of the marriages. Of these, I estimate that about two out of three were instances of husbands beating wives, or about 3.5% of American couples. Or in number of couples, over a million and a half. ...this is almost surely a considerable underestimate (1977:7, emphasis added).

Straus points out that numbers of occurrences themselves do not tell the whole story, saying:

There are several reasons why even a single beating is important. ...one such event is intrinsically a debasement of human life. Second, there is the physical danger involved. Third is the fact that many, if not most, of such beatings are part of a family power struggle. It often takes only one such event to fix the balance of power in a family for many years--or perhaps for a lifetime. ...So, given the fact that superior strength and size, gives the advantage to men in such situations, the single beating may be an extremely important factor in maintaining male dominance in the family system (1977:6-7).

An earlier study investigated family violence by a focused sample of forty "violent families" and forty neighbor families (Gelles, 1972). Data were obtained from married couples, interviewed separately. Gelles states that although wives in his sample were far from passive, "The husband is the more violent of marital partners" (1972:50). He also says, "In terms of husband-wife violence, we see violence mainly from the 'victim's' point of view because wives are more likely to be victims of rather than commiters of violence" (1972:58). Gelles provides a table of nine violent acts reported by his sample that includes two categories which are curiously missing from the data of another sociologist associated with the current confusion about the sex of the most frequently victimized spouse. These two types of violent acts are categorized, "push down" and "choke," and all such acts are shown in Gelles' study to be husbands' acts of aggression against wives.

However much we might prefer to neatly categorize acts of violence, total them, and state that one sex or the other commits more acts of violence than the other, thus we have located the "true culprit" and the

"true victim," the answers are not so simple. Troubles begin with the categories themselves. For example, there is a vast conceptual difference within a single category: "hit or tried to hit with something." If the "something" was, for example, a hammer, the severity of damage from trying and actual hitting could easily range from no damage at all to murder. The numerical count of responses to "threw something at the other one" means little unless we know if the "something" actually reached the target, and if so, what damage was done? Again, there is a vast difference between throwing a feather pillow and missing, and throwing an iron skillet and hitting the target. How can we possibly give responses to these questions the same numerical weight?

Unfortunately, at least one researcher seems to be satisfied with such oversimplification, but not Straus, who recognizes that differences in male and female violence are grounded in the practical realities of differentials in size, weight, and muscle development, a subject that will be examined in detail later. Although Straus points out that his sample reflects the stereotypic image of the pot and pan throwing wife, he explains:

For half of the violent acts, however, the rate is higher for the husband and the frequency is higher for the husbands than for the wives for all but two of the items. The biggest discrepancy in favor of wives occurs in the kicking and hitting with objects. Such acts are less dependent on superior physical strength to be effective (1977:9). It is quite clear also that Straus recognizes the importance of non-numerical factors such as victim precipitation when women attack their attackers, the greater potential for serious injury to women by men due to superior physical strength, the special vulnerability of pregnant women, and women's lack of options to escape violence (1977:9-10). He says:

Although these findings show high rates of violence by wives, they should not be allowed to distract attention from the effort to eliminate "wife-beating." ...Finally, women are locked into marriage to a much greater extent than men. Because of a variety of economic and social constraints, they often have no alternative to putting up with beatings by their husband.... In short, wives are victimized by violence in the family to a much greater extent than are husbands and should therefore be the focus of the most immediate remedial steps (1977:9-10).

Nevertheless, one journalist has been credited by the wire services as concluding "that husband-beating possibly is as great a social problem as wife-battering in America today." He was asked to give the characteristics of the kind of marriages that might produce a husband-beater. Examples he gave were: 1) big women married to small men, 2) old men married to stronger middle aged women, and 3) handicapped men with healthy wives. In response to these claims, I now turn to my own research.

For the past two years, I have been investigating woman battering, applying several methodologies, one of which is a self-administered questionnaire. A self-selected sample of one hundred women who had been battered by their spouses provided me with a rich source of data to help in my efforts to understand the problem of domestic violence from the perspective of the victim. While this sample cannot be considered representative of the general population, these women provided demographic and other data about themselves and their spouses from which we can get some idea about women who were battered, and second-person reports about the batterers. Approximately seventy-five percent of these respondents had obtained safe housing at one of the shelters for battered women and their

children in California; the balance had heard about this study and volunteered to join the sample.

Statistics from my study show that physical size of the women and men are consistent with national averages, and at least in that respect may be considered fairly representative of the general population. The mean height of the women was 5'4", as compared to 5'9" for the men. The mean weight of the women was 123.6 pounds, compared to their spouses' weight of 173.8 pounds. This gives the men almost half a foot greater height and slightly over fifty pounds heavier weight than their spouses. The spans for height were from 4'11" to 5'11" for women, and from 5'4" to 6'5" for the men. There were four women who were exactly the same height as their spouses (including the one who measured 5'11"), and only one woman was taller than her spouse--by one inch.

Weights for women ranged from 80 pounds to 250 pounds, whereas the men's ranged from 120 pounds to 220 pounds. As may be noted, there was at least one woman who weighed more than any of the men. It seems appropriate to examine closer five respondents who were almost as heavy or heavier than their spouses. One woman, weighing only two pounds less than her spouse, was a mother of a five month old baby girl who was beaten when she was pregnant. She took refuge in a shelter when her spouse also beat the child. One couple weighed the same, 160 pounds, although the man was ten inches taller. This was a very religious mother of two young children who had not been employed for ten years, the length of the marriage. She responded that she had been threatened with a knife, a gun, and a golf club. The first time she saw him behave violently was shortly after their marriage. She wrote: "I realize now he was drunk--he yelled a lot and shot a gun into the floor. I forget why, but it was directed at me."

Of the three women heavier than their spouses, one was seven months pregnant at the time she entered the shelter, which helps explain the heavier weight. She had with her a 14 month old child, and she wrote that the first violent act was a beating she received two months after their marriage because she "didn't finish the housework." Asked if she thinks she deserved the beatings, the response reads, "No. No one deserved beating, I was pregnant also." From her responses, she indicated she had been beaten during the earlier pregnancy and wrote, "I almost lost the baby." Another woman of 49 who weighed five pounds more than her spouse, left after 24 years of marriage and four children, although the first time she saw him behave violently was one week after their marriage. Both were college graduates, and she was a registered nurse whose only paid employment after marriage was as a school kitchen helper. Her spouse was a retired military officer whose weapons for beatings were ropes and chains. When asked if she ever tried to strike back or defend herself after a beating began, she responded: "He has super-human strength and I knew by experience he'd hurt me worse if I did not go along quietly."

If there is any woman in this sample who fits the journalist's description of a big woman married to a small man, then the 29 year old woman who weighed 250 pounds is the one. Her husband was 44 years old and weighed 140 pounds. Both had been previously married, and she had two children under the age of seven by the first marriage in her custody. According to the respondent, she had been beaten by her former husband, and he had beaten his first wife. When asked what weapon her spouse used, this woman said, "fist." In response to what words best describe her reactions to being beaten, this woman, 110 pounds heavier than her assaulter, chose: "fear, alone, powerlessness."

We may find it incredulous that any person can feel so powerless despite such extreme size differential--yet, if we think for a moment how women are trained from the time they are toddlers to be "good little girls," to avoid rough behavior and physical contact sports--then we may sense this woman's paralyzing fear. The fact remains, she was beaten. As stated earlier, existing shelters cannot accommodate all refugees who wish to enter; entry is based on need, and at this particular shelter, the women must establish need for protection from physical abuse.

When we look for age differentials as suggested by the journalist, this sample again reflects typical marital age differentials in this country. The mean age of the women in this sample was 33.7 and their spouses were 37.2 years old; the men were on the average three and a half years older. Women's ages ranged from 19 to 58; men's ages ranged from 21 to 68. Four women were the same age as their spouses and 14 were older by one year or more. The largest gap in ages was a woman of 36 married to a man of 27, but although she exceeded him in years, he was nine inches taller and his weight was exactly double hers--160 to 80 pounds. Of the older men, one of 68 had a wife of 56, and a 61 year old man was married to a 58 year old woman, hardly "December-June" couples. There are such unions, but they are relatively very rare.

While I will not dispute that it is possible for a healthy wife to abuse a handicapped or very sick man, I have personally known the reverse the happen. Two women I interviewed individually were both battered by parapalegic husbands in wheel chairs, as strange as it seems. Both cases were investigated and verified. In addition, one of them had left her daughter's two year old child alone in the home with her husband for a short while, and that night discovered that her impotent husband had sex-

ually molested her granddaughter. That molestation had occurred was confirmed by hospital examination of the child. On the other hand, one woman in the final stages of a degenerative disease arrived at a shelter bare-foot and on crutches with her three pre-teen aged daughters, and three weeks later was taken to a hospital where she died.

The point to be made is this: any of us who study domestic violence long enough can come up with "sensational" tidbits the media can exploit. Fortunately, few of us choose to do so. More importantly, our focus should not be on the bizarre and unique, although we know that human beings are capable of engaging in almost any kind of behavior. We cannot afford to dwell on the exceptional cases; we must set our priorities in terms of numbers and needs. As concerned as we may be about individuals and their particular circumstances, we must of necessity draw back and look at the groups or categories of people who are most frequently victimized, and then we must determine the kinds of assistance they need to help them put their own lives in order to regain personhood.

An examination of the data from my study reveals a sample that is characteristic in physical attributes of the general population, based on averages. The average woman is younger, shorter, and lighter than her spouse, and even when she isn't "typical," she may still be the victim of domestic violence. Men train from a very early age to engage in competitive, aggressive acts in the school yard, the sports field, and in the military. Today's woman was raised, by and large, exactly the opposite. Even when a couple is of equal size, the woman is not matched in muscle development and power. The vast majority of the women in my sample were not matched in size with their spouses--only 5 percent came close or surpassed their husbands' weight, and only 5 percent were as tall or taller.

In competitive professional sports such as boxing, fighters are categorized by weight, and it would be unthinkable to put a lightweight into the ring with a heavyweight--our sense of sportsmanship would not permit such biased imbalance. In professional golfing, any golfer knows that women's tournaments use a shorter distance between holes. Even top female athletes, the best in the field, are not expected to compete equally against top male athletes. There are undeniable biological differences between the male and female body, which all of us must acknowledge. When we add to the man's biological advantage in muscular power the woman's socialization into "learned helplessness" (Walker, 1977), then we can understand better why women even much bigger than men are likely to feel powerless when under attack. This is why women, in their ultimate, desperate act of self-defense, are likely to use weapons such as guns or knives--they serve as "equalizers" against powerlessness.

But women lack power in many more ways than merely the physical. They lack economic power, not only within spousal relationships, but in American society. This is true at all socioeconomic levels. Regardless of social class, a woman who is battered by her spouse has serious considerations to face before she decides to terminate her association with her batterer. People often ask, "But why doesn't she leave?" The reasons are many, and as will become obvious, they are more specific to victimized wives than to victimized husbands. Robert Terry explains that even the wealthiest women are relatively economically powerless, saying: Some argue that white women possess inordinate power through control of stocks. Half of all stockholders are women. However, men carry out 75 percent of all securities transactions, according to the New York Stock Exchange. Women often control stock in name only to suit

their husbands' tax purposes. In any case, they hold only 42 percent of the dollar value and 38 percent of the total number of shares--mostly in small chunks (1974:71).

When Terry begins his argument to show that power in this country belongs primarily in the hands of white males, he says that women and minorities do not belong to the "club," defined as:

This club is an organization which arbitrarily selects members and bestows appropriate material and psychological benefits. It distributes influence and power among its members and then uses that power to dominate groups unlike itself (consciously or unconsciously). It rigidly regulates behavior and demands conformity as a requirement of admittance...(1974:66).

To explain who has power, Terry provides answers to some questions, including:

Who has access to societal resources?

Are the resources equitably distributed?

...Who can marshal the resources to accomplish a goal?

What are the institutionalized patterns and practices of the club?
(1974:67-68).

Having access to resources, according to Terry, is necessary but not sufficient to possess power; resources must be mobilized to accomplish one's goals before one truly has power (1974:70). In some states, if a woman leaves the home she shared with her spouse, she may lose some of her property rights, or even be charged with abandonment. If she flees without the children, she may endanger her rights to child custody on a charge of desertion. When a woman attempts to establish a residence separate from her spouse, she is faced with the fact that both she and her

children are almost certain to have a reduced standard of living. She may realistically ask herself if her personal pain and suffering are worse than the personal sacrifices in economic security her children will have to make. It is a real and painful dilemma, and some older children adamantly oppose a downward transition. Here are some of the facts and their consequences that a woman, regardless of social class, education, or employability, must consider before she attempts to extricate herself from a battering spouse:

1) DIVORCE: rather than to look at women's disadvantaged position in divorce in many of our other states, I wish to cite the legal status of women in California, often proclaimed the nation's pace setter for progressive social trends. Almost half of all California women 35 years of age or older are widowed or divorced, and in the past ten years, the number of female-headed households has increased by 46 percent (Bersch, 1977:1). Having "no fault" divorce, California is one of only eight community property states in the nation--which is far more advantageous to women than the separate property system. Still, there are shortcomings besides the fact that the spouse with access to funds is easily able to conceal assets from an unsuspecting spouse. Bersch says:

California's law requires that the community property be divided equally. Although this law appears to be equitable in nature, its fairness is illusory in practice. In almost all cases, the most substantial asset of the marriage...is the husband's earning power, and this is never equally divided. The California courts have not yet accepted the theory that a woman who has given up the opportunity to develop her own earning ability in order to help her husband succeed in the business or professional world should have a right to

share in the earnings that result from the husband's success, even after dissolution of the marriage. ...the courts take a paternalistic attitude and view spousal support as something that a wife may receive when she has demonstrated a need, but not something to which she has a right because of direct past contributions (1977:6).

We have all heard how ex-wives take everything a man owns, and movie comedy plots have had us laugh at the struggles of a defendant husband's attempts to retain even a suit of clothing. Now let us examine the facts.

2) SPOUSAL SUPPORT OR ALIMONY: Bersch also supplies pertinent information on this issue, for she writes: "In our society, it is most often the woman who receives spousal support. ...the right to support depends upon need rather than sex. ...A wife who is seeking support must establish that her husband has the ability to pay" (1977:7). And this, Bersch points out, may be extremely difficult for the woman without necessary funds to pay accountants' and/or attorneys' fees, particularly if the man is self employed or is employed by a company he controls. Furthermore:

The recent trend in California has been to award the wife less spousal support, and for a shorter duration, because of an attitude that the wife should obtain employment and add to her own support. ...Nationwide, spousal support is awarded in less than ten percent of all divorces. ...awards of alimony have always been rare. Census statistics indicate that at the turn of the century, alimony was awarded in only 9.3% of all cases. In 1922...the percentage was 4.7. ...An award will seldom be overturned.... The tax ramifications... generally favor the husband. Spousal support payments are deductible to the husband and are considered "income" on which the wife must pay tax (1977:7-9).

During an interview with a California Superior Court Judge recently, I asked which spouse would be awarded higher amounts and longer terms of spousal support in two hypothetical cases: a young mother with two pre-school aged children, or a middle aged housewife with no dependents. The answer was that the older woman would probably be more favorably treated, because there was an assumption that a young mother has more recently developed job skills, but that in either case, spousal support is almost always seen as a temporary assistance until the women, young or middle aged, move into the job market and financial independence. The question of employment (and child care) will be dealt with later. The question now is, can women rely on court awarded spousal support? According to the report of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year: "Only 14 percent of divorced or separated women are awarded alimony. Only 46 percent of these collect it regularly" (1976:338).

3) CHILD SUPPORT: Bersch supplies the answer for California women, saying:

In situations where the wife has custody of the children, child support may be awarded in addition to spousal support. However, child support terminates when the child reaches the age of 18, even if the child has not yet finished high school, is unemployed, and is residing at home with a mother whose sole income is derived from spousal support. Regardless of the number of children or the unemployment of the wife, a court will tend to leave the husband with close to half of his net income (1977:8-9).

According to my interviews with judges who make determinations of child support, they seldom award "close to half of his net income;" they only come close in the most extreme cases. In an interview with a judge,

I asked if he had ever awarded more than half a husband's net income for spousal and child support, such as in a case where there are five nonemancipated children. His answer was "never." When I asked if it seemed unbalanced that one spouse should have 50 percent or more, and the remaining six family members must exist on less than that, he replied, "Divorce is tough on everyone. Everybody loses. If I awarded more than half, the man would resent it, and I would have another nonsupport case on my hands." A New York State Family Court Judge told me: "I don't give a damn how many kids there are! I'd rather put ten people (a wife and nine dependent children) on welfare to pick up the difference at taxpayers' expense before I'd ever take more than half a man's earnings."

How reliable is court awarded child support? One report states, "Only 44 percent of divorced mothers are awarded child support, and only 45 percent of those collect it regularly" (Report of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, 1976:338). Bersch elaborates:

The most significant problem related to spousal or child support awards is that of noncompliance and inadequate enforcement. Many husbands disregard the court's decrees and fail to pay the amounts ordered. It has been estimated that the husband defaults within the first year in almost half of all support cases, and, by the tenth year, more than three-quarters of all husbands are in total noncompliance. ...If the husband says he is unable to make the payments, the court will not hold him in contempt unless the wife can establish his ability to pay (1977:10).

Again, the burden of proof is upon the woman, who often cannot afford the necessary expenses of attorneys, detectives, or accountants, so that most

women, lacking sufficient cash resources for what is ultimately a gamble, decide that it is a no-win situation and attempt to provide for themselves and their children without the father's support.

4) EMPLOYMENT: even though some women are employed at the time of termination of marriage, many had employment interruption for child bearing and child rearing, relocation because of husbands' job mobility, or husbands' opposition to their outside employment. Many others had not held gainful employment since their marriages, while still others, married at a very early age, had never held paid employment. Statistics show the harsh realities of women's earning potential:

<u>MEDIAN EARNINGS YEAR ROUND, 1974</u> <u>(full-time workers age 14 and over)</u>		<u>WAGE AS PERCENT</u> <u>OF WHITE MAN'S WAGE</u>	<u>COMPARABLE PER-</u> <u>CENTAGE IN 1970</u>
White men	\$12,104	100%	100%
Black men	8,524	70	65
White women	6,823	56	58
Black women	6,258	52	43

(U. S. Department of Commerce, 1976)

(U.S. Department
of Commerce, 1971)

As may be noted, while there have been slight shifts that favor both black men and women, white women have lost two percentage points in four years, and women, both black and white, receive only slightly over half the median income of white men.

But what if a woman is not employed, what are the possibilities of obtaining employment? Can a woman move into the job market, even assuming her job skills are recent? Women and minorities, particularly minority women, suffer far higher rates of unemployment than white men and despite anti-discrimination laws, the old truism still applies: "Last hired and first fired."

5) EDUCATION OR CAREER TRAINING: perhaps the answer is to direct newly-emancipated women into education to begin their upward mobility. The facts show that even with increased education, women are hardly likely to close the gap. Here are the differences:

MEDIAN INCOME BY SEX AND EDUCATION, 1970
(full-time, year-round workers)

<u>SCHOOL COMPLETED</u>	<u>WOMEN'S MEDIAN WAGE</u>	<u>MEN'S MEDIAN WAGE</u>	<u>WOMEN'S WAGES AS PER- CENTAGE OF MEN'S WAGES</u>
8 years elementary school	\$4,181	\$ 7,535	55%
4 years high school	5,580	9,567	58
4 years college	8,156	13,264	61
5 or more years college	9,581	14,747	65

(U. S. Department of Labor, 1970)

Even if women disregard discouraging figures like these, they may attempt to re-enter school. If she has to go on welfare in the meantime, a woman soon finds out that she will be offered short-term training in traditional female-type (relatively low pay) clerical skills. She is actually hindered in attempts to gain career, long-term employment through a college degree. If she receives scholarships and grants, they are deducted from her welfare payments (Bersch, 1977:20). The prospects are summarized by Bersch, who says:

A divorced or widowed homemaker often lacks recent work experience, and she may need job training or further education before she is employable. Furthermore, she is often the victim of age and sex discrimination. The newly single women who do obtain employment are likely to find themselves in the lowest paying jobs, without equal pay or advancement opportunities (1977:17).

6) WELFARE/POVERTY: because of the unreliability of support payments,

low income potential, inadequate, expensive or nonexistent child care, many women join the ranks of the poor once they become "head of household." The Staff Report of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights states that of all families in the United States in 1972, 12 percent were headed by women alone, and "Further, 34 percent of all female-headed families are below the poverty level, while 7 percent of all male-headed families are poor" (1974:9). Still, these percentages do not tell the whole story: they have a built-in bias. There is an unexplained difference in dollar cut-off points for male-headed and female-headed families by the U. S. Bureau of Census. The Report states:

There are probably more female heads of families living in poverty than the Census reports, since differential poverty cut-off levels were established for families with female as compared with male heads. For example, the poverty cut-off level for a female-headed family with two dependent children is \$2,931, while for a male-headed family of the same type it is \$3,137. Thus, a woman who heads a family with two dependent children and earns only \$3,137 would not be considered to be living in poverty, although a similar male-headed family would be classified as living in poverty (1974:9).

On top of these disheartening facts, the woman who chooses to leave her battering spouse must also consider:

- 1) Earnings differential between men and women is greatest for those over thirty-five years old.
- 2) Lack of available and reasonably priced good child care services.
- 3) Credit problems. Many married women never carry credit in their own name, and experience great difficulty in establishing it upon separation or divorce.

- 4) Housing. Although it is against the law to discriminate on the basis of sex or marital status in renting or selling houses, it is clearly more difficult to obtain housing for a female-headed family than for the traditional nuclear family or a male-headed family. Landlords can refuse to rent to families with children, and even if a woman has the required capital outlay to purchase, most lending institutions want evidence of long-term credit standing and steady employment.
- 5) Health care. Many women in my sample had chronic health problems, some directly or indirectly due to years of physical abuse. If she was an unemployed homemaker, a woman may find herself suddenly without the family medical health insurance provided by her husband's employer. She may find that she is unable to obtain health insurance for herself except at exorbitant premiums with exclusions for known, pre-existing conditions. Some fathers will even drop the children from their company insurance plans.
- 6) Social Security and other retirement benefits. A divorced wife in almost all cases loses all rights to her husband's social security, and will have no claim on company or other pension plans unless such provision is stipulated by court order during divorce proceedings.

As may be quite clear, there are serious and long-lasting ramifications connected with dissolution of a violent relationship. Many women have no idea how to make their own world; some take a very short step from father's daughter to husband's wife. As Judge Lisa Richette so aptly expressed it, "infantilism" of females has been pervasive in this society. One of my respondents even wrote: "I guess I was even more afraid of the world 'out there' than I was of him!"

These are some of the reasons why shelters are so important to batter-

ed women and their children. They do much more than merely provide physical safety for refugees from violence. They are almost all set up to provide badly needed supportive services for women who have frequently lived years of isolation. In the first place, they give a woman her introductory experience that others are concerned about her and her welfare, which acts to build up her confidence and self-esteem. Residence introduces her to other women who have had similar experiences with the men they loved, and she begins to realize that she is not the only one to have lived a life of fear, pain and humiliation. While in residence, women and their children are put in touch with a wide variety of existing community services, depending on their individual circumstances and needs. These often include: medical services, psychological, legal, and career counseling, and employment and housing assistance. Many must go on welfare at least temporarily, and they are helped through this process, often for the first time.

The positive changes that take place in the women's lives, and in the women themselves, are often astounding. As one shelter director said, "It's almost miraculous. They begin to change, sometimes within a few hours after coming here. It's hard to explain what happens, they just seem to blossom out once they're free of fear." The children are also affected in a remarkably positive way--within a short time they are settled in, playing with new friends, and under the collective supervision of many mothers and child care specialists.

These are just a few of the benefits battered women and their children receive at shelters that have opened up all over this country. They emerged mostly through the dedication and untiring efforts of community groups of caring citizens. Most frequently these people were volunteers

who worked day and night to sensitize and educate their communities, who held fund-raising events and wrote proposals. A few got enough money to open a residential shelter with barely enough to keep operating from month to month, or year to year. Some groups are still sheltering refugees in private homes, a "band-aid" method with potential dangers for the Good Samaritans who take refugees in, and less beneficial for their house guests than communal living at shelters with their supportive networks. But as one woman said to me, "It may not be ideal, but at least the women are in less danger, and who knows? we may even be saving lives!"

There are not nearly enough shelters, and the ones that exist provide bare subsistence, and are not big enough to admit all who need entry. I have been on a shelter's hot line and had to tell an emergency room nurse that there simply was no room for her patient, nor was there any available space anywhere in the entire county or adjacent area. It is not easy to tell a desperate woman with two little girls who is afraid to go home that there is no place where she can go for safety. We must do more, not less, to offer protection to our most powerless citizens. It is unfair that when crimes have been committed inside the domicile, it is the victims who must be evacuated. But under our present legal system, and with institutions that are not equally responsive to the civil rights of all citizens, then this is a necessary first step.

For men who need a place to stay away from home, even without money, there are places for them in every city and town across the land. As Del Martin points out:

...few public agencies offer nighttime and weekend services or are prepared to handle on-the-spot emergencies. The huge discrepancy between the number of shelters open to men and the number open to women is a disgrace. Even worse, so few places across the nation accept women

and children that they may as well not be counted. This imbalance not only reflects discriminatory attitudes, but also shows how out-dated the public assistance agency system is. It is still based on the assumption that only men will be transient or caught without means and a place to stay. Women are supposed to stay at home with their parents or their husbands. They are not expected to need overnight accommodations, particularly if they have their children along (1976:126).

Martin illustrates the lack of both responsiveness and facilities for refugee women and children by a summary of six major cities, and found that in Los Angeles County, for example, there were 4,000 beds for men and only 30 for women and children, but none for mothers with sons over four years old! (1976:124). The realities of unmet needs and the actual utilization of existing resources are sometimes sadly out of balance.

However, one new men's half-way house in Akron was recently converted into a house of shelter for battered women because the operators were able to weigh the obvious unmet needs, and shifted priorities to meet the most pressing needs. In Dade County, Florida, Victims Advocates was established to help victims of crime, and they soon discovered the majority of their clients are female. The Director, Catherine Lynch, says:

Although the Victims Advocates Program was neither designed nor advertised as a program specifically for--or run by--women, 75% of the population we currently serve is female. ...I have looked for explanations for this over-representation of females.... it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to avoid suspecting that we see so many female victims because so many of the people most affected by crime are, in fact, females...(1977:1).

Another non sex-specific agency, Victims Information Bureau of Suffolk

County, has also found that the vast majority of people requiring services are female. Responding to victims of violent crime, VIBS performs a variety of services including hot line, crisis intervention, advocacy and referrals, offering both physical and material assistance to victims. Training Coordinator Nancy Lynn estimates that 96 percent of their clients contact them because of spouse abuse. In the first year they had 6,000 hot line calls and 600 persons used their counseling center; there were only three men who reported being victims of spouse abuse and asked for help (Lynn, 1977). There may well be more male victims who are too embarrassed to ask for help, as Lynn points out, but the fact is: there are thousands of beds for men, there are hot lines, and there are counseling services already available around the country. Even if masculine pride prevents them from admitting their shame, the help is there--all they have to do is use it. The big difference is that men seldom have to flee in fear for their lives in the middle of the night with infants and children, penniless and without resources, as thousands of women have been forced to do. As one formerly battered wife told me, "I thought he'd kill me. But then one day I said to myself, what do you have to lose by leaving? You're already dead now; this is no life. So I left."

Now it is up to us to give her, and the many thousands of women like her, safety and a place to stay and give her a lifeline to the network of social agencies in the community--to help her live, and her children to live--again.

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