

THE SOCIAL SANCTIONING OF PARTNER ABUSE: PERPETUATING THE MESSAGE THAT PARTNER ABUSE IS ACCEPTABLE IN NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

The pace of cultural change is slow, and informal social sanctions that support the abuse of women by male partners continue to undermine the effectiveness of legislation and policy. The perceptions of New Zealand women in a grounded theory study identified “blaming the victim” and inadequate enforcement of existing sanctions against abusers as social constraints to victim disclosure and recovery. From very early in the relationship women learn to fear punishment for disclosure when friends, community and social service providers respond by blaming the woman for causing the abuse, or blaming her for staying in the relationship. Women’s recovery from experiencing abuse by a male partner is a slow process and requires clarification of the attribution of blame, and resolution of the unfairness of their experience. Recovery can be impeded by social responses that blame women, or discount women’s experiences of abuse. Processes of personal identity development are relevant to participants’ experience and, despite constraints to maintaining separation, women who recover achieve considerable personal growth.

1 Acknowledgements

This paper arises from a study undertaken for completion of a master’s thesis (Giles 2004). In-depth interviews of 10 participating women provided detail of processes covering the entire duration of the relationship and its aftermath. Grants were received from the Maurice and Phyllis Paykel Trust, administered by Auckland University of Technology, and a private trust, the Mildred Marshall Education Trust.

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INTRODUCTION

The abuse of women by their male partners is a significant social problem affecting New Zealand women of all ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Social and legal sanctions against abuse have not reduced the size of the problem, and abused women and children continue to need assistance in large numbers. This paper discusses a study (Giles 2004) identifying social and cultural factors that undermine policies and legislation designed as formal sanctions against abuse. The existence of well-intentioned policies within people-helping settings does not guarantee policy effectiveness, and service provision may reflect social attitudes that support abuse. Findings suggest a need to refocus on training in social service provision, and the requirement for a sustained public awareness campaign addressing entrenched attitudes that blame women for their experiences of abuse.

THE RESEARCH

The findings of this study were derived from interviews taped in 2003 with a small group of women whose variation in age and life experience reflect a range of circumstances and attitudes within current New Zealand society. Theory was developed using grounded theory methods, where data collection and analysis were alternated in a process of constant comparison, and theory was refined with open-ended theoretical questions (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Participant variation was deliberately sought and data collection was continued until no new properties, or relationships between categories, emerged from new data. Participants were sourced from a tertiary institution, a community support agency, and through counsellor referrals. They lived in the Auckland region at the time of the study.

Participants were 10 New Zealand women who had experienced abuse from a male partner and self-assessed as having made some recovery from their experience. Participant age at interview ranged from 27 to 74 years. Duration of stay within the relationship ranged from two to 21 years, and time since separation ranged from two to 48 years. One participant identified as Māori, one as Samoan, and the other eight participants were Pākehā. Participants were recruited from secular sources, although the majority of participants in this study volunteered that they were Christian, and many had been active churchgoers.² Women who did not self-assess as having made some recovery were not included, and although this study shows the potential for recovery from partner abuse, this does not mean all women recover.

2 Co-author Janice Giles co-facilitates support groups for women Protection Order applicants in both North and South Auckland and notes that women applicants are frequently committed Christians.

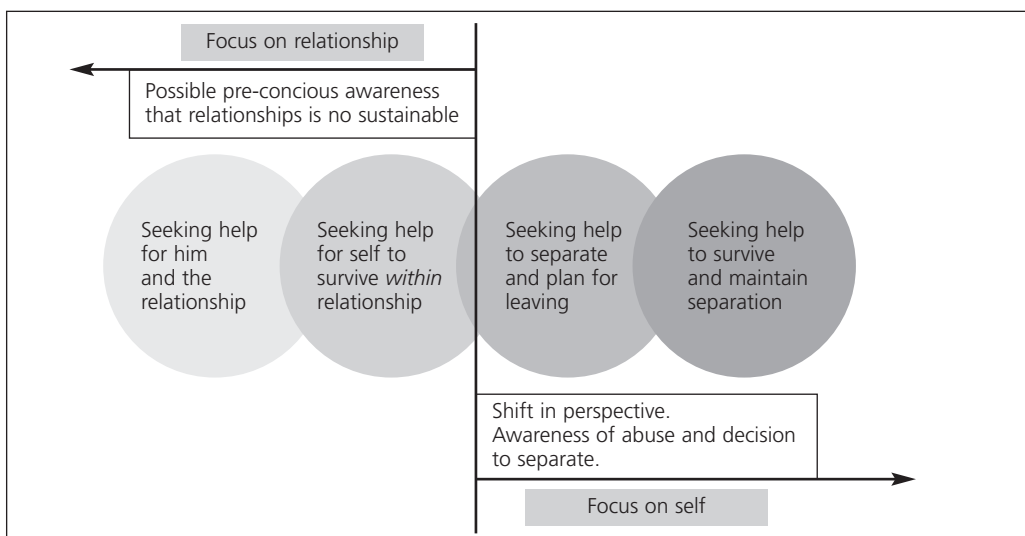
FINDINGS

When a woman seeks help, the responses of others can support disclosure, or blame and punish her for disclosing abuse. Findings discussed here focus on participants' experience of community response and formal contact with agencies. Quotations are from participants in this study. The representativeness of these findings is limited by the small number of participants. However, the findings are consistent with international studies and other New Zealand studies (Glover 1995, Hand et al. 2002, Kearney 2001, Merritt-Gray and Wuest 1995).

Reasons for Seeking Help Changed During the Course of the Relationship

This study found that these 10 women sought help for different reasons over the course of the relationship, and that the response of others influenced subsequent help-seeking, separation, and eventual recovery from abuse. Women in this study, as in others (Lempert 1997, Towns and Adams 2000, Woods 1999), held unexamined beliefs in traditional gendered roles and took full responsibility for making the relationship a success. When women with abusive partners sought help early in the relationship, the initial focus was on trying to find information and support to help their partner (e.g. to manage his stress) or to make the relationship work (e.g. to be a "better" partner). Social interactions created meaning for the victim's experience, and blaming the woman for the "difficulties" inhibited further disclosure. As the situation deteriorated, women sought help to survive emotionally, physically or both, so they could stay in the relationship. Figure 1 shows this shifting focus.

Figure 1 The Changing Purpose of Help-Seeking as Focus Shifts from Sustaining the Relationship to Survival of Self



Traditional gender-role ideals require a woman to persevere with a relationship and solve the problems within it. Without an alternative way to make sense of her situation, this moral imperative remains the only choice. The decision to separate requires both giving up hope of change and a shift in perspective, facilitated by increased awareness of other contexts and priorities, such as the wellbeing of her children. This study showed that when a woman's focus shifted from the survival of the relationship to the survival of herself and her children, *and* she believed that post-separation survival was possible, she sought help to separate. After separation, she sought help to survive, and to maintain safety and resist reconciliation. This post-separation process was usually lengthy and sometimes involved several reconciliations.

Social Responses Influence Women's Experience

Social factors influence the likelihood of a woman remaining in a relationship with an abusive man. Gendered expectations, in combination with a lack of encouragement for women to question idealised beliefs and values prior to commitment to a relationship, may reduce a woman's awareness of other possibilities. This is not problematic in relationships that allow women's continued development, usually after family routines have settled. However, as found by Glover (1995) in New Zealand and others internationally (such as Landenberger 1998), abusive men commonly limit their partners' social contact and exploration outside the relationship, thus constraining opportunities for growth.

Many studies, such as Towns and Adams's (2000) study of New Zealand women and Kearney's (2001) synthesis of 13 qualitative studies, found that women who commit to a relationship based on traditional values tend to take responsibility for the relationship. Campbell et al. (1998) and Eisikovits (1999) are among the many researchers who found that such women try hard to make the relationship work by using coping strategies of compliance and subordination to keep the peace. However, this does not stop abuse (Curnow 1997, Eisikovits et al. 1998).

Almost all the study participants described upsetting and confusing experiences of being blamed for the abuse when they sought help. When others responded with comments such as: "What on earth did you do to cause him to say that?" the perception was that something she was doing justified the abuse. If she resisted abuse, or tried to change her partner's behaviour, conflict escalated and she then felt responsible for "creating" it and was afraid that, if others knew, "I'm going to be blamed". A Samoan participant told of the difficulty exposing abuse within her church community:

"If you have a big black eye like that you don't go to church, you stay home, because they all point the finger at the woman."

Blaming themselves and being ashamed for failing in their role, abused women learn “to keep it quiet”, and social isolation increases (Glover 1995, Kearney 2001). The abusive partners also blame them and, without access to alternative perspectives (Andrews and Brewin 1990), the women increasingly lose confidence in themselves and are ashamed to ask for help for fear of further blame or disbelief (Hand et al. 2002).

Researchers such as Campbell et al. (1998) and Curnow (1997) found that, as the relationships deteriorated, abused women tried to spend time away from their partners to preserve their sanity and avoid conflict, or risked seeking help again. Participants in this study reported that participation in activities outside the relationship escalated abuse and these were frequently kept secret.

Social connections may provide a context or information that creates a change in perspective on the relationship that allows separation to be considered. Separation may be catalysed if escalating conflict results in police intervention. In such situations, sudden exposure as a victim of abuse and acute shame and fear of blame is added to the shock of recent violence or abuse (Eisikovits et al. 1998). Participants said getting a protection order required “humiliating” disclosure, and the future effectiveness of orders was compromised when they feared repeating interview processes. Participants who feared for their sanity or were suicidal became desperate enough to seek help from medical services, but with mixed results. An appropriate response from her doctor enabled one participant to make changes in her situation, while two other participants were naively handed back into the care of abusive husbands.

Realising that separation is necessary is different from believing it is possible (Ulrich 1991) and, while some women leave suddenly (Glover 1995), most seek help or information to plan the separation (Merritt-Gray and Wuest 1995). In the present study group, although the planning process had to be kept secret and could be protracted and dangerous, women commonly had more formal contact with service providers, whose attitudes were crucial to perceptions of what was possible.³

Participants in this study found the post-separation period stressful, particularly when there were problems with children and harassment from the ex-partner. Some still blamed themselves for the abuse, but needed help to survive and consequently had to disclose to social service agencies a situation about which they felt ashamed.

3 “Service providers” included government agencies, Living Without Violence Group providers, counsellors, religious bodies and general practitioners. The only woman interviewed for this study who accessed Women’s Refuge services at this stage withdrew her participation and this service cannot be commented on.

Women coming out of an abusive relationship in New Zealand commonly apply for the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB),⁴ which provides income support for sole mothers. Participants expressed appreciation for this financial support, but found the front-line offices were not constructed for privacy (Baker and Tippin 2004). A public environment makes disclosure intensely difficult for an abused woman, who feels ashamed, anticipates blame and fears recognition by others.

One participant had a particularly difficult experience with the DPB. False reports about this participant resulted in numerous inspections and the participant said, "Straight out of this marriage that was abusive, I'm being abused by people I didn't even know". She sought independence with part-time employment but the benefit system as she experienced it could not accommodate her irregular income and serious debt forced her back on the DPB. When she mentioned that she was considering a relationship she lost the DPB and so the relationship decision was made for her. Fortunately, the new partnership was successful and enabled her return to part-time employment.

Participants' perceptions of the courts commonly reflected feelings of unfairness, and disillusionment was pervasive.⁵ Two participants who experienced counselling with their partner, funded by the Family Court, described "a nightmare" of blame and guilt that resulted in one woman reconciling (again). Another participant, traumatised and desperate, was distrusting of men and did not continue alone with a male Family Court counsellor. These three participants did not complete the available counselling sessions.

Participants in this study compromised on legal settlements because of partners' threats to contest custody:

"I agreed because ... they would not have a good life if they went to live with their father."

Others felt harassed and intimidated when their partners threatened ongoing legal proceedings. The cost of obtaining Protection Orders or contesting access to children is sometimes beyond the means of women who are not eligible for legal aid because they are employed. One self-employed participant was too traumatised and exhausted to work, but "he had legal aid. It cost me \$12,000, all my savings."

4 Work and Income, a service of the Ministry of Social Development, is currently responsible for administering social welfare benefits in general, including the DPB. The experiences of study participants occurred prior to 2002 and thus would not reflect improvements to processes since the 2002 reforms of the DPB (Jones 2004).

5 In October 2003 the Ministry of Justice was established from the former Ministry and the Department for Courts. The Ministry has undertaken a suite of domestic incidence evaluations, research, policy and operational work, and information programmes, available on the Ministry website, www.justice.govt.nz. The impact of this work would post-date the experience of study participants.

Participants frequently found access arrangements unsatisfactory. The one participant in this study who used supervised access changed service providers when she felt herself to be under suspicion. Women without supervised access frequently experienced intrusion and intimidation by the ex-partner who “was using every opportunity to impose himself”. One woman who did not apply for court protection because her child pleaded with her “not to send daddy to jail” after a violent attack, had to contend with break-ins, assaults, stalking and access arrangements that required continued unsafe contact.

Several participants found children’s behaviour deteriorated after access visits, and two mothers could no longer live with older children, who had become abusive and controlling. Other access problems included the ex-partner repeatedly disappointing the children by not showing up, children not wanting to go with their father, the father turning the child against their mother, and the partner’s lack of parenting and childcare skills (particularly problematical if a child was unwell).

Managing access and its effects on the children was distressing for participants and most sought advice or attended parenting courses to manage their children’s distress and behaviour. (None of the ex-partners sought to improve their childcare skills.) The findings suggest to us that all separating parents who dispute access and custody would benefit from attending a parenting-skills group that includes awareness of abuse dynamics and their implications for children. However, given the situations described by participants, this would be particularly relevant for those fathers who lack skills or misuse the loyalties of the parent–child relationship. Extending counselling support to custodial parents and children could be very helpful, too (especially when children have witnessed violence or abuse). Counselling should focus on children’s wellbeing, but should include attention to ongoing systemic issues relevant to the health of the relationship between custodial parent and child.⁶

When an abused woman has succeeded in resisting pressure to reconcile and can maintain safety for herself and her children, she may begin the extended period of exploration that enables her to move on with her life. Making sense and meaning of her experience is essential. The recovery process includes clarifying the attribution of blame and responsibility, and regaining trust in others and the world. Abused women often perceive extreme injustice in their experiences. It is understandable if they express anger toward agencies and organisations such as Victim Support, Work and Income or the Family Court when responses to seeking help were experienced by the women as inadequate or inappropriate.

6 The Ministry of Justice is planning to roll out parenting information programmes in early 2006 (www.justice.govt.nz/family/fcpubs/parent-information-programmes/index.html).

Experiences of abuse and the difficulties of separation commonly leave women traumatised, burdened with responsibility, and seriously financially disadvantaged (e.g. Hagar 2001, Herman 1992, Landenburger 1998). In contrast, the abusive ex-partner may appear unaffected, could be doing well financially, have more free time and minimal childcare responsibilities, and may already have another partner. The woman who leaves an abusive partner may also carry the stigma of being a divorcee, or “just a mother or someone sitting at home on a benefit”.

Abused women must comply with court-ordered access arrangements that may be neglected, misused, or impact badly on the wellbeing of children. If the ex-partner remains abusive or breaches a Protection Order, the repercussions for him are limited.⁷ One participant, who was still frightened and having frequent nightmares three years later, was shocked when her partner received one month of periodic detention for breaching the Protection Order, an equivalent of four days’ supervised community work. She said the courts “don’t really think that much of it”.

Recovery included participants undertaking intense explorations of their beliefs, creating a sense of themselves based on self-chosen values, and making realistic commitments to future goals. The funding of education for DPB recipients emerged as a valued facilitator of identity formation and subsequent recovery for several participants who found a sense of purpose and direction in meaningful future employment. However, this may require careful preparation, as demonstrated by one participant who tried to get her life on track with a degree course. She was an “A” student but unresolved trauma remained and two years after separation she was hospitalised with overwhelming depression and panic attacks. A year later, with ongoing intensive counselling, she is now recovering. Adult and tertiary education providers will find that some women students are in abusive relationships, or in recovery from abuse by male partners, and this will have a significant impact on their learning (Curreen 2003, Horsman 2000).

Participants in this study were usually able to maintain safety for themselves and their children when contact with the ex-partner was minimal. Most, but not all, regained enough trust to try another relationship. Some women still had symptoms of trauma and distress many years later, and a heightened sensitivity to potential abuse remained even for those who considered they had recovered well. Perhaps it should not surprise us that many mature women in the community have been found to carry the burden of depression or anxiety in their older years, sometimes without medical or social recognition of its aetiology in past abuse (Jack 1991). Most participants reported

7 Only 13% of convictions for breach of a Protection Order in 2003 resulted in a custodial sentence (within the average of 10% to 14% for the past decade). However, sentencing length has increased from an average of 1.5 months in 1995 to four months in 2003 (Ministry of Justice 2004).

continued problems with their children, even children who were now adults, as a result of the children's experience of abuse against their mother. As one participating mother said, "I'm always going to have to deal with the aftermath when it comes to the kids."

DISCUSSION

The abuse of women by male partners is a significant, persistent and costly social problem in New Zealand (Fanslow and Robinson 2004, Kazantzis et al. 2000, Koziol-McLain et al. 2004, Snively 1994). We will attempt here to identify contributing causes, explain why the problem is persistent, and suggest possible remedies. The discussion considers the place of traditional gender-role ideals in the context of women's identity development and experiences of abuse by a male partner. New Zealand women's identity development and gendered roles are considered in a historical context that suggests reasons for the slowness of change; cultural values are noted; social sanctions that support and collude with abuse are identified; and implications for policy are suggested.

Identity Formation and New Zealand Social History

A sense of personal identity is achieved after a period of exploration in which personal values are clarified and a sense of self is constructed from personal beliefs and aspirations (Erikson 1950). The process of identity formation is most commonly undertaken in late adolescence and includes exploration of sex-role beliefs (Schiedel and Marcia 1985). Identity achievement is an outcome of the possibilities permitted within cultures and the feedback of significant others (Kroger 2000). Examined beliefs provide a sense of personal authority; without this, perceptions of reality remain defined solely by the authority of others.

Women's identity exploration may occur either prior to relationship commitment or when opportunities arise after family routines are established. Socio-historical conditions influence the opportunity for women's identity exploration and many of today's older women had no socially sanctioned opportunity for exploration prior to marriage. Within traditional marriage, women have been constrained by housework and childcare responsibilities, and wives had few options if the husband did not permit or support their growth.

The women's movement was linked with dissatisfaction in traditional sex roles for some New Zealand women (Kroger and Green 1996). However, that influence varied by cohort group and had most effect on late adolescents during the 1970s, although some revision was possible for older women with reduced family responsibilities

(Stewart 1994, Stewart and Healy 1989). Many New Zealand women did not have the opportunity to review gendered roles during this brief decade of increased awareness and, as today's mothers and grandmothers, have accepted gendered "norms". At the same time, the prevailing masculinity culture (James and Saville-Smith 1990) means that many men remain invested in traditional gendered ideals, and the rhetoric of New Zealand men who are violent toward women continues to include fundamental assumptions of male authority, entitlement to power, and dominance over women (Adams et al. 1995, Leibrich et al. 1995).

Such parental modelling and beliefs continue to create constraints to sons' and daughters' examinations of alternative attitudes. More recently, the period of economic uncertainty in New Zealand during the 1980s and early 1990s significantly reduced identity achievement and exploration in young New Zealand women (Kroger 1993). Without the consciousness raising of the women's movement, many of today's young women have not examined gender-role beliefs and, as lamented by one participant, "Abusive behaviour continues as an acceptable 'norm'".

It could take several generations of increased public awareness before young women "normally" have a sense of their own values prior to relationship commitment and starting a family. The risk of accepting the authoritarian world view of an abusive partner continues. Culture changes slowly.

Ethnicity, Culture and Partner Abuse

American studies show that ethnic identity is significant for minority groups (Archer and Waterman 1994). In New Zealand, the main ethnic minority groups are Māori and Pacific peoples. Both groups are traditionally collective or communal cultures, in which responsibilities to family and cultural norms have more value than individuality or independence from the group (Cross et al. 2000). In Samoan families, where tradition may be idealised (Wurtzburg 2003), women might tend to stay with abusive partners. Help may not be accessible due to fears about disclosing abuse (in the words of one participant) "because of the pressure from outside: from churches, from the extended family ... or just from the community".

For women with collective social identities, the possibility of social exclusion or family estrangement (Hand et al. 2002) for disclosing victimisation is a particularly strong incentive to keep abuse secret. Women from minority groups may also fear negative stereotyping if seeking help outside their own community. As the Samoan participant in this study said, "Who's going to believe me and looking at my ethnic side of things you know, thinking what will they believe me about that?"

International studies find that gender-role ideals and patterns of social sanction influence whether abuse is accepted within communities (Counts et al. 1992). In New Zealand, despite variation in detail across communities, similar patterns are evident (Glover 1995, Hand et al. 2002). Abuse remains secret if disclosure brings shame, victim blaming and social disapproval.

Traditional Gender-Role Ideals Blame Women for the Abuse

The tendency to blame the women victims of male partner abuse remains persistent in New Zealand society. Entrenched social and cultural beliefs hold women solely responsible for relational happiness and presume women's submission to a male partner's authority. This creates a perception that women are at fault when there is relationship conflict. Such attitudes and beliefs are widespread, and it is unlikely that all individuals who work within agencies providing services to abused women are exempt, particularly if lacking specialised training.

An important finding was that the women in this study made a commitment to a relationship based on unexamined gender-role ideals and prior to the achievement of a personal identity. Consequently, when the partner became abusive, they could not make sense of their situation except through a lens that blamed them for any failure in the relationship. Traditional gendered beliefs held by society, parents and others in authority constrain opportunities for exploration and identity development in women, thus creating a vulnerability to staying with a partner who is abusive. Beliefs about how men and women "should" be are passed from generation to generation and, unless examined within community and culture, can trap women in abusive relationships.

Internalised self-blame for failing as women, and the blame of others who hold her responsible for her experience and the distress of its outcome, discourage women from disclosing abuse. It cannot be assumed that individual workers, in both government and non-government organisations providing social services, have examined their own gender-role beliefs, nor are they exempt from abusive relationships as either abusers or victims.

Social Sanctions Supporting Abuse

The prevalence of abuse toward female partners in any society depends upon formal and informal sanctions of abuse (Counts et al. 1992). The experiences of participants in this study suggest that policies and formal sanctions against abuse in New Zealand are undermined by two factors: a lack of awareness of abuse dynamics within the general community, combined with a strong tendency to blame the victim for the abuse; and

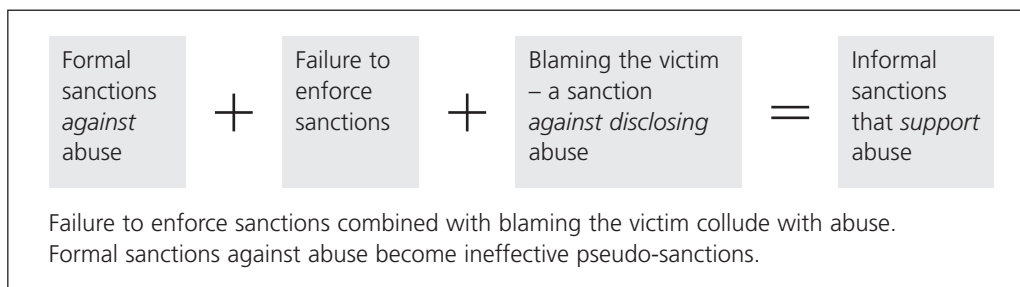
justice system responses toward the perpetrators of abuse that convey perceptions that partner abuse is not a serious matter.

Some of the interviewees found formal legal sanctions against abuse to be ineffective despite creating expectations of justice. Penalties for breaching a Protection Order are not often custodial (Ministry of Justice 2004). This seems to disregard the long-term emotional impact of even non-violent breaches on traumatised victims. Access and childcare arrangements, quite apart from the harm done to children when the father-child relationship is used to punish their mothers, fail to take into account the father's general lack of parenting skills, and leave custodial mothers with daily management of the consequences for their children.

Despite secular recruiting sources, the majority of participants in this study were, or had been, Christian churchgoers. There may be religious sanctions against abuse, but belief in the sanctity of family and marriage may render the church ineffective (Fitzmaurice 1993). In addition, any religious sanctions against abuse are filtered through congregations that may be uncomfortable with acknowledging abuse in their community, resulting in "shooting the messenger" by assuming that women who disclose their victimisation must have deserved the abuse. The role of the church in supporting women to stay or leave an abusive relationship is worthy of research.

Several participants spoke of their distress about approaching service providers for help. Getting help requires justification, which takes the form of exposing victimisation they are sometimes ashamed of and are usually blaming themselves for (Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999). If a woman also perceives service providers as punitive, through blaming her for the abuse, she receives the message that abuse is acceptable but she is not. If victim-blaming attitudes of communities and individual workers (who reflect their communities) remain unchallenged, the effects of abuse are minimised and abuse is perceived as justified. When formal sanctions are not enforced and when victims' actual experience is of sanctions *against disclosing abuse* (via victim blaming), the experienced reality is of informal sanctions *supporting abuse*. Figure 2 illustrates how abuse is informally sanctioned in New Zealand society.

Figure 2 The Social Sanctioning of Abuse



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Partner abuse is a significant public health issue in New Zealand.⁸ Many women and children currently experience abuse from a man they are socialised to love and trust, and many more are in recovery. Some do not fully recover. Men will continue to abuse their women partners when both society and culture sanction their behaviour. Prevention efforts remain ineffective while the problem is constructed as the behaviour of (other) individual men toward (other) individual women. This is a *social* problem: a direct outcome of traditional stereotyped attitudes toward women, social tendencies toward denying the existence of the problem, blaming the victims, and entrenched cultures of abuse and violence within our society.

Public Awareness and Prevention

Te Rito: New Zealand Family Violence Prevention Strategy (Ministry of Social Development 2002) includes a public information and awareness campaign scheduled to be in place by June 2006. Such a campaign is urgently required. Continued social denial of the problem of partner abuse, and punishing victims for disclosure, colludes with partner abuse by keeping it hidden. Attitudes toward partner abuse in New Zealand appear to be entrenched and replicated across generations. The last substantial public education campaign accompanied the introduction of the Domestic Violence Act 1995. This was a very large and far-reaching multi-media campaign, but addressing this generational effect requires a sustained campaign.

Public education could focus on de-stigmatising victims by defining partner abuse as a social problem and responsibility. Broader solutions include promoting options other than gender-stereotyped behaviour and role choice for both men and women, and putting an end to the cultural endorsement of violence and abuse as a means of achieving individual goals or managing difficult emotions.

Women who have experienced partner abuse must clarify issues of blame and responsibility and resolve perceptions of injustice in order to move on. When formal legal sanctions against abuse are not enforced, the attribution of blame may remain unclear and expectations of justice are unmet, adding to the complexity of recovery for victims. When the justice system, through inadequate sentencing, appears to minimise or deny the experience of an abused woman, it replicates the tactics of the abuser. Inadequate sentencing for Protection Order breaches leaves women unprotected and

8 Prevalence figures vary. However, a recent study (Fanslow and Robinson 2004), involving 2,855 participating women aged 18–64 in Auckland and North Waikato, found that 33% and 39% respectively of ever-partnered participants had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse by a partner over their lifetime.

colludes with social perceptions that the abuse of women and the outcomes of abuse are not serious matters. Unfortunately, abusive men already understand the logic of punishment and purely punitive responses from the courts are unlikely to teach abusers alternative responses or healthy interpersonal skills. Creative solutions to this dilemma are required. Meanwhile, if formal legal sanctions against abuse are to have any meaning at all in the eyes of the victims and society in general, court responses must give clear messages that abuse is not acceptable and that victims are not to blame.

Informing and educating young people prior to relationship commitment is essential. It is particularly appropriate that adolescent girls have permission to reject abuse and men who are abusive, without resorting to the tactics of abuse themselves. Both sexes could learn relationship skills – such as skills for regulating strong feelings (including anger), negotiating interpersonal conflict, and recognising abuse – and basic parenting skills, including understanding the effects on children of witnessing abuse. Adolescents could be encouraged to participate in courses that facilitate the exploration of values, beliefs and possible identities. Adolescents may need encouragement and support to explore broader sex-role definitions and possible relationship styles.

Staff Selection, Training and Supervision

Anybody who works in helping settings will encounter people who have experienced partner abuse. Knowing how to respond appropriately to abused women is particularly relevant for caseworkers, social workers, counsellors, staff administering social welfare benefits, police, Ministry of Justice staff, church staff, teachers, doctors and other health professionals. Unfortunately, relationships between service providers and victims can be marred by misunderstanding and mutual distrust. Although a great deal has been done in recent years to improve services to victims of partner abuse, most participants in this study with relatively recent experience expressed disappointment and criticism of service agencies and, with the exception of some specialised services,⁹ found a mismatch between their needs and the services provided.

It is understandable that women who have experienced interpersonal abuse have a heightened sensitivity to issues of trust, blame and injustice. Despite staff training and some excellent agency policy, attention to this sensitivity can sometimes fail to be reflected in practice, thus creating a potential for distrust of service providers that can impede women's help-seeking. We need to beware of organisational cultures that support gender dynamics that are oppressive to women, and the effects of high

9 The four participants who were accessed via North Harbour Living Without Violence Collective Inc. reported positive experiences of that agency (as may be reflected in their willingness to participate). There is variation in such services and their effectiveness (Maxwell 2003). Another participant reported useful help from West Auckland Women's Centre.

staff turnover in diluting the retention of institutional knowledge and training. It may be difficult to change cultures and attitudes within organisations while the wider community continues to sanction the abuse of women by their partners.

One source of misunderstanding and inappropriate response to victims could be a lack of awareness of the different phases of help seeking. Women in abusive relationships often seek help, but the focus of seeking help changes over time. In the early phases, women's focus is on the survival of the relationship, and in the later phases the focus shifts to the survival of themselves and their children. (Some women continue trying to retain the relationship and may reconcile several times before safety and stability are achieved, either within the relationship or, more frequently, separate from it.) Consequently, offering help that can be accepted is a complex matter, and professionals need to accurately assess the phase a woman is in and respond in ways that comfortably allow a request for a different response and that support future contact. This means that training professionals does need to be more thorough and ongoing than has previously been the case in many organisations. Women are frequently critical of agencies that have the mandate to support or help and if, as a society, we really want to address partner abuse then those agencies need much more training. It is encouraging to see new initiatives in training and intervention programmes beginning to be implemented within the Ministry of Social Development (www.familyservices.govt.nz). Police are also trialling a range of promising pilot schemes to improve responses to domestic violence.⁸

Some participants reported feeling blamed by "helping professionals", and while training may assist considerably with the development of better and more helpful attitudes, the process could begin earlier with staff selection. Not everyone is temperamentally or philosophically suited to working routinely with victims of abuse. Employers in helping agencies could apply better recruitment processes that pay attention to staff interpersonal skills, including attributes such as warmth and empathy. Potential workers who have some awareness of how society and community shape and contribute to a problem are less inclined to make moral judgements or assess an individual as solely responsible for their predicament. They are also likely to have a better analysis of what is needed to "fix" the problem, which will generally include a broader and educative response. It would be useful to ask a potential worker, "What do you think causes domestic violence?" This study suggests that staff selection could include an assessment of gendered attitudes toward women, not just knowledge of power and control dynamics. Unfortunately, the effects of trauma and the simple fact that abusers are mainly men mean that many abused women will feel threatened by, and distrusting toward, male staff.

10 Personal communication, Jodine Lee, Office of the Commissioner of Police.

Working with victims of partner abuse can be interpersonally demanding and distressing for individual workers. Partner abuse is common and many staff members will have personal histories of abuse that will influence their attitudes toward women who experience partner abuse, not always positively. Personal experience of abuse not only influences intervention effectiveness, but also affects the wellbeing of individual staff members who work with this group of women. The dynamics of abuse thrive in secrecy, and abuse is perpetuated when safe disclosure is denied. Recognition and acknowledgement of the impact of personal experiences of abuse on staff effectiveness are necessary. It is essential that service providers who work with victims of interpersonal abuse have access to regular external supervision with an appropriately trained professional who can provide a safe opportunity to discuss the inevitable and complex personal responses to working with victims. This allows for the development of strategies to maintain an individual staff member's wellbeing and hence reduce staff turnover and "burnout".

Many human service agencies may believe they have "done" domestic violence. There has usually been some training and there might be some written policy and resource material. Screening for domestic violence is happening more regularly in a variety of settings, and some agencies have had a period of years when domestic violence was a high priority, but then moved on to other issues. Staff turnover is high in the human service industry and institutional knowledge is rapidly lost. Agencies need to find ways to ensure retention of knowledge and training for new staff. An annual cycle of training, including repeat training, that provides several training sessions some months apart, would allow staff opportunities for reflection on the use of their new knowledge or skills. The use of independent monitors or advocates who assist agencies to audit staff effectiveness and monitor training could keep agencies on track.

CONCLUSION

Social change comes about through the matrix of culture interacting with historical events and changes in law and policy. Issues relevant to gendered role ideals and the social sanctioning of abuse are subject to these interactions. Despite the influence of the women's movement in the 1970s, our society continues to incline toward traditional gendered expectations of women. This cultural lag is probably perpetuated by:

- parental modelling
- the reluctance of New Zealand men to review gendered beliefs, which can be reflected in underlying systemic beliefs and actions
- child-rearing responsibilities or other social constraints that limit women's opportunities for exploring alternative viewpoints or the development of personal identities.

Partner abuse persists because our society continues to hold gendered expectations of women's roles and behaviours. When a male partner is abusive, the woman is often blamed, and sanctions against abuse are actually experienced by women as sanctions against *disclosing* abuse that compromise further help-seeking. Social structural systems, particularly the justice system, continue to deny the seriousness of partner abuse by not enforcing available legal sanctions. Consequences for offenders are frequently minimal, giving the message that the abuse of women is acceptable. Significant impediments to women's recovery are created when abusive relationship dynamics are replicated by social systems.

The reduction of abuse by male partners requires a sustained public awareness campaign of significant proportions, combined with responses from the justice system that acknowledge the serious long-term harm of this form of social violence. In addition, social service agencies and government organisations such as Work and Income, the Police and Courts must review staff training on a regular basis and provide routine access to external supervision for workers to increase skill levels and ensure phase-appropriate, non-blaming responses to abused women seeking help.

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