**Social Change to End Violence Against Women (or to Reclaim Women’s Sovereignty)**

**Women’s Sovereignty**

All women possess or have a right to:

1. Their bodies and paths in life: to exist without fear, but with freedom.
2. Self-governance: the ability and authority to make decisions regarding all matters concerning themselves, without others’ approval or agreement.
3. An economic base and resources: the control, use and development of resources, businesses or industries that women choose.
4. A distinct identity, history and culture: each woman defines and describes her history, including the impact of colonization, racism and sexism, women’s culture, worldview and traditions.

(Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women, 2001)

Our relationships with individual women are the fabric of social change. Advocates work side-by-side with their sisters and trust that women know what they need and prioritize their safety, integrity and autonomy. Advocates’ relationships with women who have been battered are the “life force” of the movement to end violence against women. The key elements of this relationship are the guideposts for advocacy and social change: validation of the voice, expertise and leadership of women who are battered; modeling respect, compassion and non-violence; personal accountability for our internalized oppression and behavior; belief in and non-judgmental support of women as whole human beings and their right to sovereignty.

The ability of women to freely walk through the world requires change within the cultural belief system – social change. This change has the potential to end all other forms of oppression, including those based on gender identity, race, class, sexual orientation, ability, age, national origin and religious/spiritual affiliation.

Accurately naming perceptions and experience is the beginning step to social change. Power, for example, is equated with masculinity and in American culture power is defined in terms of potential for violence. We have very gendered notions of power: men are socialized to be violent (powerful) and women’s power, which is rarely talked about, is about finding her voice and the space to express it (limited notions indeed of women’s power). What then do we mean when we talk about empowering women, about personal power? Power needs to be conceptualized as a healthy and important force and right in reshaping economic, social and gender inequities. Power is not violence, it is not the control of others. Power is the ability, knowledge and relationships that give, preserve and nurture life.

**Social Change**

Social change is distinctly different from social service. Social change requires a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of patriarchy, oppression and culture. The social service model requires little analysis outside of individuals’ experiences: the focus is on individual victimization or “dysfunction,” often resulting in victim blaming. The social change perspective requires making connections and understanding relationships between individual experiences, oppression, culture and history. The social service model requires separation and detachment from our relationships, from other institutions and from anything deemed political.

Social change is political: it requires critical analysis of power and control within all levels of society. Social change requires moving pro-actively to create systemic and cultural transformation based on respect. Social service requires maintaining the status quo: it assumes oppression and the current functioning of political, medical and social systems are “natural.” Social service tends to lead individuals to become co-opted by the needs of the political, medical and economic systems.

Social change to end violence against women requires accountability to women who are battered and/or raped. Social service requires accountability to the person who signs the paycheck, i.e., the organization, rather than the women we work with, and adherence to the rules of the funding institution. In attempting to be clear with funders and other agencies, we sometimes talk about providing “direct services” when talking about assisting women and their children in getting to safety, promoting access to resources and providing for basic needs. The language of “direct services” comes from the social service model. It intends to fix individuals during business hours, at the workers’ convenience, on a limited basis and with eligibility requirements.

Educational campaigns for social change – for a violence-free world – begin with, as mentioned earlier, the consideration of language as a powerful and strategic tool. Consciousness-raising and clarifying perceptions are directly related to words, which are energy-laden symbols that describe our understanding and reality. Drawing attention to particular words, their meaning and impact is a powerful way to teach people to do the critical thinking needed for social change and, in particular, undoing oppression and internalized oppression.

Most tribal peoples have a way to express the concept that words carry energy, describe our perception of reality and reflect our belief system. For example, if we describe the on- going beating, sexual assault and emotional abuse of a woman by her batterer as “a violent relationship,” “ they’re fighting again,” or “family dispute,” we deny what is really going on. This minimizes and “equalizes” the violence and takes the focus off of the violent offender. In essence, that kind of language sets the stage for questioning the behavior of the woman who is victimized by violent crime, and fails to hold the batterer accountable for his actions. We must name what is happening accurately if we are to appropriately respond to, and end, violence.

Women who are battered are often referred to as victims, patients, clients, “my ladies” or “my victims.” Using this language denies respect for women as unique, capable human beings with minds, hearts and spirits. Terms like “my ladies” or “my victims” imply ownership and control of women who are battered. Labeling is a tactic used by batterers. Rarely do batterers refer to their partners by their names prior to, during, or following an assault; instead, women are called bitches, whores, hags, old ladies, etc. Labels (clients, patients) dehumanize and objectify women and are permission-givers for violence. Labels deny our relationships as relatives.

Calling women by their given name or relative name shows respect. It mirrors our understanding that though a woman has been battered, she still has many powerful gifts, skills, wisdom, experiences and relationships. Women survive horrendous violence because of these powers. When we treat each other as relatives, we overcome oppression and internalized oppression – we validate each other’s personal sovereignty and reclaim the power and control that had been taken from us.

**Advocates: The Biased Supporters of Women Who Are Battered and Raped**

The mechanism for social change is advocacy. Being an advocate is powerful in the best sense of the word. This work provides an opportunity to reclaim all the connections and relationships devastated by colonization and oppression.

Many advocates begin their work within a social service system. We are all educated and socialized by the larger society that presents the social service model as the appropriate approach to helping others. Advocacy includes all the things domestic violence programs offer individual women: 24-hour crisis line, shelter, food, clothing, transportation and accompaniment to court and other services, general, legal and medical advocacy, consciousness-raising/support groups, information and referrals, assistance with rent and utilities, childcare and crisis intervention, men’s re-education groups, and children’s programming. The list is expanded by what a woman needs to be safe and get her life back.

But often the isolation, ineffectiveness and frustrations of working from that model move us to critically question our role and relationships in both our personal and “professional” lives. This experience is a natural reaction to oppression and the realization of internalized oppression.

Limited access to resources, mounds of paperwork, eligibility requirements, limits on utilization and matronizing/patronizing attitudes all create barriers to women getting what they need and to which they have a right. These barriers can re-victimize women, prevent women from being safe and increase the danger to them. Advocates work to remove barriers: we provide resources like utility and rent deposits, food and gas money directly to women; create partnerships with other agencies and assist them in finding ways to prioritize the needs of women who are battered; and work within our programs to create respectful policy and procedure that ensures the safety of women, minimizes delays and paperwork, and reflects trust that women know what they need.

Advocacy is an opportunity to understand the societal and personal impact of oppression and internalized oppression. Internalized oppression occurs when we take on the beliefs and behaviors of our oppressors. We are operating from internalized oppression when we make assumptions about other women, about their gender identity and expression, culture, race, ethnicity, abilities, mental health, education – basically, any aspect of who

they are in the world. Internalized oppression moves to oppression when we misuse our privilege and make those who are vulnerable and different from us conform to our version of reality. We are operating from internalized oppression and in an oppressive manner when we believe we should behave in ways that are disrespectful or attempt to establish our “superiority” over others, for example, compete instead of cooperate, or label or judge others instead of accepting people as unique individuals.

We act out of our internalized oppression when we diagnose, analyze and/or refer “our clients,” “our victims,” our co-workers (or ourselves) to professionals we believe have more expertise than we do about ourselves. We use descriptors like “low self-esteem,” “co-dependent,” “neurotic,” “manipulative,” “dysfunctional,” and “victim.” These descriptors are the language of the social service/mental health model. They are disempowering, mislabel survival skills as illness, blame the victim, don’t hold the batterer accountable for his violence and excuse us from being responsible and taking action. These terms are used when we fail to acknowledge that women who are battered and/or raped are exhausted, still hurting on all levels, have not been made safe regardless of any actions they or others have taken and know that being direct just makes them a bigger target for escalated violence by their batterers. These terms ignore the reality that women, in addition to being battered and raped, face layers of oppression of all kinds that they cannot surmount.

A key aspect of social change and advocacy is  the responsibility of holding our relatives and  ourselves accountable for internalized  oppression in respectful and compassionate  ways. Internalized oppression can create  feelings of inadequacy, confusion and fear  that immobilize us or burn us out. We can  react by becoming oppressive to those around  us in a misguided attempt to maintain  control. Or we can choose a path of courage  and intellectual and emotional honesty that leads us back to the natural life way. When these “teachable moments” occur, it is important to find a way of talking about it without shaming. Guidance on this path can come from prayer and embracing relationships with sisters whose expertise about this journey comes from personal experience.

As a result of decades of advocacy and social change work, programs for women who are battered and/or raped are now seen as essential in many communities. The nature of shelter work is crisis-oriented, and we are equally challenged to not re-create the oppression of other systems we work so hard to change. But advocates’ leadership as social change agents does not end there – we must send a consistent message that the creation of shelter and other advocacy programs is necessary but cannot work in isolation; shelters alone will never end violence against women.

Advocates, as both biased supporters of women who are battered and/or raped and as social change agents, must develop and validate their abilities to think critically about the expectations, operation, goals and outcomes of relationships, institutions and systems. Critical thinking involves continuous questioning and political analyses, necessary to undo oppression and internalized oppression. This seemingly radical (meaning “grassroots”) approach necessitates a consciousness about the requirement to work in groups, strategize and prepare for backlash. There are very logical reasons why women “never go to the bathroom alone.” It’s about protection. So, too, women should never stand alone in the political arena – there are sanctions, i.e., weapons of oppression used to intimidate, co-opt and silence. Work in groups and strive to maintain and celebrate the vision of nonviolence and women’s sovereignty. Know that the negative attention validates the power and credibility of your work. If everything is comfy and everybody is playing nice, most likely nothing is changing.

Grassroots advocacy is based upon the expertise and credibility that come from direct experience and character (who you are as a human being), versus expertise and credibility based upon artificial indicators such as college degrees, income, etc. Our commitment to create safety and reclaim the integrity and justice for our sisters who are battered is often grounded in our own experience, most acutely, the experience of being battered. Knowing fear and pain, prayers for help and peace, and hopes to be believed provide the expertise. Our strength and courage in the face of violence, and our ability to live compassionately comes from the heart-centered foundation of our work.

Grassroots advocacy is the phenomena of and right to leadership, action and decision- making by those within the group. The expertise of women who have experienced battering is invaluable. We validate the voices and expertise of women by their inclusion in positions of governance and decision-making. Instead of soliciting “input,” which minimizes their knowledge and understanding, ensure that formerly battered/raped women be integral to all aspects of the work to end violence against women. By definition, “sovereignty” requires ensuring not only that the voices of women who are oppressed and have been battered are heard, but also that their expertise and basic rights are honored. This means that organizational structure and decision-making processes reflect leadership and governance by women who are members of the population served (e.g., Native, Latina, etc.) and are survivors of violence, i.e., battering or rape.

Advocates make relationships with other women as relatives and assist them to accurately label their experiences and pro-actively work to end the violence in their lives, within our communities and society. Advocates focus on safety of women, accountability and social change – not the faults of women. Women who are battered may be in our lives for minutes or years. We may like who they are, “approve” of their choices - or not. It’s irrelevant. Women who are battered, whom we have the honor of supporting, are always our sisters, mothers, aunts or grandmothers. They are always our teachers.

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Grassroots advocacy potentially nurtures trust, partnerships and movement between groups based upon our commonalities (in effect, living in an oppressive society). Grassroots advocacy, however, requires proactive recognition and tangible support of differences and autonomy. For all our shared or similar experiences that link us together and must be acknowledged, it’s the distinctions and the honoring of those distinctions that will undo the oppression. Grassroots advocacy provides the potential to work through internalized oppression together, and, perhaps more importantly, take a stand against oppression. If social change is about the vision and the recreation of non-violent, equitable, respectful relationships and societies, then grassroots advocacy is the vehicle: the means is the end.

– Domestic Violence Awareness: Action for Social Change *– 2005***,** by Brenda Hill

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