

Tri County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes October 11th, 2011

Attendance: Ryan Alonzo (Bridges to Safety), Regina Rosann (ARMS), Amanda Briley (Bridges to Safety), Suzi Evans (Bridges to Safety), Simon Quartly (Allies in Change), Guruseva Mason (Choices), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Phil Broyles (Teras Intervention), Jacquie Pancoast (ChangePoint), Steve Stewart (Allies in Change), Debbie Tomasovic (A Better Way Counseling), Wendy Viola (Portland State University), Cassandra Suess (Allies in Change), Jennifer Hopkinson (Clackamas Women's Services), Susan Cazier (Clackamas Women's Services), Katherine Stansbury (Turning Points), Barry Cadish (Turning Points), Robbie Miller (private practice), Olga Parker (Modus Vivendi), Sarah Voruz (Allies in Change), Stacey Womack (ARMS), Chris Huffine (Allies in Change)

Minutes by Wendy Viola, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic-- female perpetrators: what are we doing with them, what should be done with them?

This topic was last discussed 3 - 4 years ago.

Agencies that work with female perpetrators include:

- Allies in Change
- ARMS
- Turning Points: their program is 14-weeks, and open explicitly to women who have been victims of IPV, but there are also women who have self-identified as perpetrators.
- Bridges to Safety
- A Better Way Counseling

Is there such a thing as a female batterer? The conversation tends to be all or nothing, that women are either batterers or victims.

What do people think about women who are abusive? There tends to be a lot of consensus among those agencies that work with female perpetrators, that most female perpetrators are secondary aggressors. They have actually been abusive, but it's taken place within a context of a pattern of abuse perpetrated by the other person (and therefore is considered the primary abuser). Women's violence is often intended to avoid being overpowered, as opposed to overpowering and controlling others. Most of the women that providers have seen are not primary aggressors. They're more likely to turn to aggression the longer they've been in the abusive relationship. Many of them don't know what a healthy relationship looks like.

When women begin to work on their own healing process, they become aware of their patterns of abuse and ask for help to curb their abuse. They tend to take responsibility more quickly and put the tools they're being taught more quickly than men. ARMS's program combines women's

victim recovery with addressing power and control issues. There's a large range of women, from those who are mostly victims to those who are primary aggressors in terms of power and control that they use in their relationships.

Women tend to bring risk and need issues into the room much more because they tend to be more verbal, so it's easier to see how the coordinated community response is working, as they tend to talk about their situations much more.

Secondary aggressors tend to feel much more guilty and therefore take too much accountability for what they've done. Those who feel the worst and are more forthright about the abuse they've perpetrated are the ones who are sent to longer programs, but they're the ones with the biggest guilty consciences and are the most willing to comply. The female aggressors who deny what they've done wrong and minimize what they've done come off looking like they're mostly victims, when they're actually more likely to re-offend.

When we identify that it's a primary female aggressor, does she batter for the same reason that male batterers do? This may be a social change regarding the normalizing of female violence. There seems to be more of a culture around female perpetration of violence now than there has been in the past. Those women who have more significant histories of being abusive tend to be a lot younger (19-22) and are also violent with more people (towards their kids, others, etc.). In Clark County, the women who get caught in the net are from lower SES, as opposed to Portland where they seem to be more middle-class. The culture of fighting in general seems to vary between socioeconomic strata.

The vast majority of female court-mandated aggressors who turn up in groups are secondary aggressors, because genuine male victims don't want to get the police involved. Most of the primary female aggressors who turn up in groups turn up there through Child Welfare. Their primary victims tend to be their children (whom they more easily have power over), which is how they show up on the radar. We are likely to see fewer of these women in general, because child abusers of either gender are less likely to be considered domestic violence offenders and less likely to be referred to batterer intervention programs.

Ironically, getting arrested can be of help to female secondary aggressors. Many report finding the women's group helpful, even if it is technically a group for perpetrators. Another example is the no contact order that is automatically set in place to "protect" him from her can leave the primary (male) abusers suddenly feel powerless, because they no longer have power and control over the women because they're no longer in contact.

Female perpetration tends to be more situation-specific, and offenders often don't really want to be abusive. They don't have power and control issues, they have pro-social values and when they leave the relationship, the abusive behavior disappears. There's another group of women who have been the victim in their relationships so many times that once they do get into healthier

relationships, they become the primary aggressor to pre-empt being the victim again. If they get pegged as aggressors within the system, they don't have access to the same resources that victims do. The women that hold belief systems that are closer to males tend to be the primary aggressors.

What happens when you treat a secondary aggressor like a primary aggressor and vice versa? Primary aggressors will tend to use the secondary-aggressor label in a controlling way, so it's important to be explicit that neither type of aggression is ok.

Another irony is that helping female secondary aggressors become less abusive may increase their level of danger. They may start using better skills to avoid getting sucked into the cycle of aggression, but this frustrates the primary aggressor, so he ups his abusive behavior.

Are there differences in the way that we treat women who are both primary and secondary aggressors? Yes, and that's what we usually do in these groups. If the group is structured properly, having both primary and secondary female offenders in the same group can be helpful, as they can give each other advice and support from the other perspective. But if the group is not very accountable, a secondary aggressor really won't fit very well if the mindset of the group is pro-abuse. Because of the diversity of the women's group, facilitators may intentionally be harder on some perpetrators than others, asking for differential accountability from group members who they suspect need it. We also try to incorporate this into groups for men. Whether primary aggressing women become more accountable as a result of being in groups with secondary aggressors depends on the group dynamics and the composition of the group.

Mental health impairments are a whole other dynamic. There are a lot of men who don't have psychological issues who have power and control issues. For women, though, abuse is so much less socially sanctioned that there tends to be a higher correlation between abuse and control issues and mental health issues.

We also need to distinguish between physical and psychological/emotional abuse, which is also contextual. If we only look at the physical abuse to determine who the primary and secondary aggressors are, we're not getting a very full picture of the context. Primary aggressors have a range of abusive behaviors, most of which are non-physical. Secondary aggressors have much less abusive behavior, most of it reactive. In addition, there is less of the more subtle psychological and emotional abuse because they don't have the same pro-abuse beliefs.

It's rare that secondary aggressors, even if they don't belong, don't appreciate the group. They tend to make the best of the group and appreciate it far more than men. For women, being sent to a group is court-mandated social support. Some women report enjoying coming to the group, especially if they're currently in abusive relationships in which they are the victim, it can be a very helpful outlet. It can also put them in contact with resources that they may need if they're also victims. A downside, however, is that women with this abuse on their criminal record are disqualified for grants and social programs that they really need. Child welfare also makes

women in the system attend a lot of groups, and having to attend these groups as well are additional burdens, though they do end up appreciating it. In general, DHS has many more requirements than probation. We need to work on the pacing of groups so that women aren't attending more groups than they can handle while trying to balance childcare. By overburdening offenders, we make them high risk by making them pay for groups, lose their groups, leave their children with others, etc.

In some programs, female groups are more educational, and victims and perpetrators can take from it what they want. You can never go wrong with taking an accountability stance-- the secondary aggressors grab onto accountability really quickly anyway, and often are accountable from intake. They also tend to take accountability for the people around them who are abusing them. This is also an issue of personal accountability, because by excusing the people who threaten you, you're not taking responsibility for yourself.

Why not combine parenting and DV classes in one? You can't get into all of the issues that would be necessary. Child Welfare has its own requirements. Sometimes women get very heavy-handed with their kids to keep them out of the line of fire, and they end up in the Child Welfare system. But there are also female aggressors who just do horrific things to their children, so it's not an either-or situation.

How else do groups for women look different? Women tend to enjoy writing and journaling more than men, so that's a larger part of the curriculum. Groups often include some of the victim recovery curriculum, but strive for a good balance between the two. Women's groups engage in more group-process work. These groups also tend to include more emotional outbursts and more emotional expression in general, which can make them more difficult. Most groups don't have mixed-gender co-facilitation, as some have noted that there's some value to having only women in the room. The reasons that we favor co-facilitation with men don't apply to women's groups (e.g. sexism), but many of these women don't know what a healthy relationship looks like, so it could be valuable to model one. Groups for women also allow more conversations about their partners' behavior, while men's groups try to focus more on the men who are in the room in the immediate situation. In men's groups this is occasionally allowed to provide context as opposed to for the sake of justifying behavior. Some have also found these conversations very helpful in men's groups.

It's important to address sexism in general within offender groups-- when you're telling women that they have choices not to be abusive, or to have different kinds of relationships, you're ignoring their histories of being in very hurtful relationships, being broken down by the media, etc. However, choice is based on privilege. This conversation is revisited in women's groups way more often than in men's groups. Women who have lifetimes of violence and abuse may have become secondary aggressors as a coping mechanism. The same defensive, adaptive patterns can and do follow women from relationship to relationship and can lead them to become primary aggressors in later relationships.

Women *do* get sick of being treated like victims and genuinely want services to help change their abusive patterns. On the other hand, women get frustrated by groups that don't allow room for context and nuance. We need to individualize treatment and understand that female perpetrators engage in a range of patterns, more so than men.

Because of the potential diversity of the group, including a mix of primary and secondary aggressors, collusion between female facilitators and group members can occur more frequently than in men's groups. This is something facilitators need to be vigilant about. We can still hold women accountable while still acknowledging the cultural context of oppression. The line between collusion and making exceptions/flexibility isn't very clear. We're more afraid of male facilitators colluding with male group members than female facilitators colluding with female participants.

Exclusionary criteria are used if it's very clear that a person is through and through, not a perpetrator, in which case they can be sent to a group that is solely for victims. It really doesn't take long to identify these people, and then facilitators can get in touch with probation to see what they'd like to do. If they have a criminal charge, then they're required to participate in some group, so it's a matter of finding the right program for them. However, as was mentioned earlier, since most women can and do benefit from the women's abuser group regardless, it's very rare that programs exercise these exclusionary criteria. Group dynamics are crucial though, so sometimes exclusionary criteria can be used when you don't think it's a good match between the individual and the group.

Denial is also common among women, but it tends to be more denial of victimization than of perpetration. They claim not only that they've done limited abuse but that their partners have engaged in limited abuse. What are the pros and cons of going back to the referral source when we become more clear about the dynamics of the relationship? Probation is usually pretty savvy and has a good idea of these dynamics as well, so they can also be helpful in identifying and plugging people into the right resources. Some PO's are more likely to over-identify male primary aggressors and female secondary aggressors. It's a point of advocacy to be able to rely on BIP providers to bring up these nuances to probation (those exceptions that do occasionally show up where she's a primary aggressor or he's a secondary one). If these messages come from BIP providers, they carry a lot of weight. Additionally, if BIP providers advocate for their group members in this way, it increases buy-in from those group members for whom they've advocated.

A note on subtext: the phrase "power and control issues" is vague, as is "pro-abuse belief systems." We've also mentioned "no mental health issues other than this one," which indicates that abusive behavior is a mental health issue. Are we using a mental health framework to understand DV? We have fundamental disagreements on this issue within the group.

Overall, there appears to be consensus that there are more shades of gray and nuance when working with groups of abusive women compared with abusive men.

