

## **Women Who Use Violence**

by Lois Galgay Reckitt, MA

After nearly 33 years in the movement that we first knew as the battered women's movement, I have learned a lot of things. For one, I have learned to look for questions—always—and especially to seek them from the mouths of victims. Not always are the answers apparent, nor have they always become so, but we continuously learn in this young movement to end violence in "families." And, I fear, there will always be more questions than answers.

To find my way I have always looked to the legends of our movement: the Susan Schechters (author of *Women and Male Violence*), the Kathleen Carlins (of *Men Stopping Violence*, in Atlanta), and the Ellen Pences (of *Praxis*, in Duluth). I also look to the living legends—Rose Garrity of Binghamton, New York, and Phyllis Frank of Rockland County, New York—and to many of you in this room. But it was Ellen Pence who first allowed my mind to approach, without fear, the touchy subject of women who use violence in relationships. Her work was and is seminal (she would hate that word used in conjunction with her thoughts). She first allowed me to think about categories of domestic violence and to clarify the distinctions of “battering,” “resistive/reactive violence,” “situational violence,” pathological violence, and anti-social violence. It was with the help of her thought processes (not to mention her humor) that advocates in Maine first dared to articulate our thoughts and positions.

Around the same time I read and heard and spoke with Evan Stark about his own visionary and groundbreaking work, articulated in his book *Coercive Control*. I became even clearer in my mind that women do assault, but, as Stark notes, there is no counterpart to the entrapment of women by men due to coercive control. And although the Power and Control Wheel developed in Duluth years ago describes many of the facets of coercive control around that hub of violence, coercive control is rarely acknowledged or articulated in policy circles; specific programs or interventions rarely, if ever, address it. Yet we need to develop approaches to understand the ongoing, not episodic, nature of violence in abusive relationships; the cumulative effects, the harms of coercive control and the entrapment involved. The context, not just the incident brought to the attention of law enforcement, is key.

In Maine, we set out to articulate the role that all the players in the "best practice" Coordinated Community Response ought to play to deal with the problem of women who use force or violence in relationships.

### **Law Enforcement**

In Maine, especially in Portland and its surrounding areas, service providers have a long and collegial relationship with law enforcement. We listen to each other, really listen, we seek creative solutions, and we have a good track record to build on as we seek to continue dialogue with law enforcement about strategies employed by abusers to cause arrests of the women in their lives, the questions law enforcement personnel need to explore in the course of identifying the predominant aggressor, and the course of

conduct in the relationship. And we have worked hard on the issues of self-defense and strangulation. (It took us a long time to get past "choking" for instance.) It should be noted that in Maine, arrest is preferred but not mandated except for felony assaults and for violations of orders of protection. We need to encourage police discretion in the matter of women who, at first glance, may seem to be the offender.

### **Bail**

It is also our belief that special considerations about women who use violence should be added to the training curricula of bail commissioners. In addition, a multi-disciplinary team, including advocates, should set appropriate parameters and monitor their implementation by bail commissioners. I confess that Maine has made great strides in the area of bail—but we are not there yet. In particular, pre-trial services for women should be used far more often and aggressively.

### **Advocates**

All battered women, even those who have used violence, need victim services. Whether that is done through support groups, diversion programs after arrest, or services within county jails, women arrested for using force in domestic violence situations need help in both safety planning and consideration of whether or not to try to use the criminal justice system. Victims, using violence or not, need advocates at the time of their arrest and before talking with defense attorneys. It is my personal belief that women confess too readily and quickly without an understanding of the consequences for them and their children. Those who confess or plead guilty—and most women do so in an attempt to return to their children—have no idea that this can and almost surely will be used against them in any custody fight with their children's fathers. All too often, defense counsel fails to warn them of this consequence.

Lois Galgay Reckitt, the Executive Director of Family Crisis Services in Portland, ME, has been on the forefront of Maine's efforts to stop domestic abuse and assist its victims for more than 30 years. In 2002, her program documented that approximately 95% of incarcerated women were currently in an abusive relationship or had been in one in the past. She then began one of the few programs in the country that works with incarcerated women and is committed to improving the government's response to battered women, including when they are accused of using violence against their perpetrators.

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