

Male Survivors of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive actions intended to alter the behavior of an intimate partner so as to gain control over the partner and decisions in the relationship. Because our society is a patriarchy, male privilege in heterosexual relationships provides momentum and cover for male abuse of women. However, engaging in coercive actions is an individual choice, and so women can also chose to be abusive to intimate partners.

“The laws may be gender neutral, but the reality of domestic violence is not. By every reliable measure, including published United States Department of Justice¹ crime statistics, domestic violence - violence between intimate partners - is overwhelmingly a crime committed by men and against women.”² However, men can be (and are) victims of domestic violence, and women can be (and are) perpetrators of domestic violence. “Domestic violence laws in Colorado are gender-neutral and legal remedies are equally available to men and women.”³

1. Advocacy Considerations and Male Survivors’ Needs

As with all survivors of domestic abuse, male survivors may have faced an array of abusive tactics ranging from name-calling and public humiliation, to physical and sexual assault. Male victims come from every demographic background, and may be abused by a heterosexual or same-gender partner. Because some men requesting advocacy services will be batterers who are attempting to manipulate service providers, it is imperative that advocates feel confident that each individual they serve is in fact a domestic violence victim. Please see the attached tool “*Screening Participants for Perpetrator and Victim*” for more discussion and resources on the topic of screening. **The remainder of this paper presumes the advocacy work is with bona fide male survivors of domestic violence.**

The ways that men present themselves and their experiences may be different from how female survivors do. “Because of the way most men were brought up. it may be difficult for them to experience, express, understand, and cope with their feelings – or even admit having them.”⁴ Advocates should follow a male survivor’s lead in how emotionally or analytically they discuss the abuse, and should underscore seeking support as a sign of strength, not weakness.

Male survivors will often feel a great degree of stigma and confusion related to their victimization, just as female victims do.

¹ Durose, Matthew R. et al., U.S. Dep't of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Family Violence Statistics: Including Statistics on Strangers and Acquaintances* 5 (2005), <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvs.pdf> Between 1998 and 2002:

- Of the almost 3.5 million violent crimes committed against family members, 49% of these were crimes against spouses.
- 84% of spouse abuse victims were females, and 86% of victims of dating partner abuse were female.
- Males were 83% of spouse murderers and 75% of dating partner murderers

² *Colorado DV Benchbook*, publication pending.

³ *Colorado DV Benchbook*, publication pending.

⁴ *Helping Yourself Heal: A Recovering Man's Guide to Coping With the Effects of Childhood Abuse*, U.S. DHHS, SAMHSA Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Available at: www.samhsa.org

Whereas women must struggle against abusive men and against social customs, attitudes and structures that disempower them, men who are abused by their intimate partners struggle with the maintenance of a masculine ideal... Having been abused by a woman, the men felt that they had failed to achieve a culturally defined masculine characteristics, such as independence, strength, toughness, and self-reliance. As a result the men felt emasculated and marginalized, and tended not to express their fears, ask for help, or even discuss details of their violent experiences.⁵

The cultural logic which doubts the masculinity of a male victim may lead to perceptions that the man is weak, cowardly, soft, passive, feminine, or gay, all of which are traits that mainstream society devalues. Furthermore, community members may feel that physical size or strength is the only factor in determining a perpetrator, and on the basis of being larger or stronger than their abusive partner the men may not be believed when they disclose abuse. Even if a male survivor is believed, he may find a lack of community supports as social services are not geared toward men.

Many victims of domestic violence will never contact an advocacy organization to seek services. One difference between male and female victims may be that male victims are more often able to extract themselves from an abusive partner, and thus turn even less frequently to advocacy organizations for assistance.

It is suggested that men have a greater ability to leave an abusive relationship, in terms of financial independence, and they are seldom as fearful of violent reprisal. Another major difference is that men rarely live under a regime of constant fear, which is a very different experience from that of many women in violent relationships.⁶

While many battered individuals do not access community domestic violence support services, the individuals who do contact advocacy organizations, regardless of gender, are typically at the point where their own independent problem-solving skills are becoming exhausted. So, male survivors who are in need of advocacy will often need the same support, resources, and array of options which are extended to female survivors.

Fortunately, the advocacy skills which frontline workers routinely use with female survivors are likewise applicable to working with men, as this recommended practice excerpt shows:

If a man tells you he is in an abusive relationship⁷ -- *Six things you can do:*

1. Listen fully. Listen quietly. Do not interrupt. Tell him you believe him.
2. Tell him the abuse is not his fault and he does not deserve to be abused.
3. Privately express your concern and ask, "How can I help?"
4. Respect his confidentiality.
5. Encourage him to make a safety plan.
6. Help him to find resources (if he wants help).

⁵ *Intimate Partner Abuse Against Men*, National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Ontario Canada. (2004)

⁶ *The Men's Project: Exploring responses to men who are victims or perpetrators of family and domestic violence*, Department for Community Development, Government of Western Australia, Family and Domestic Violence Unit. Available at: <http://www.community.wa.gov.au>

⁷ *Men Abused by Women in Intimate Relationships*, Alberta Children and Youth Services Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying. Available at: www.familyviolence.alberta.ca

If the man does not want to leave his abusive partner, be patient. Understand that changing or leaving an abusive situation is not easy. Let the man know that you will be there no matter what he decides to do.

2. Looking Closer at Core Services

Crisis line

We know anecdotally that advocates often receive hotline calls from men. Just as with calls from women, some of these callers are looking for basic information, are concerned family and friends, or are themselves in need of immediate safety planning or shelter. Being warm and welcoming to victims of abuse is an essential part of building a trusted advocacy relationship, and that imperative certainly extends to male callers.

Most advocates who work crisis lines are also aware that a certain percentage of callers are not calling for legitimate purposes, but rather are taking advantage of an advocate's time. Some of the calls which fall in this category are from perpetrators looking to gather information about their victim/partner who may be in touch with the advocacy organization. Other calls are for gratification of a different sort.

When a man calls a hotline, it is not immediately clear what the purpose of the call is. Upon hearing a male voice on the other end of a hotline call, some advocates have expressed feeling suspicious, nervous, angry, confused, and even at times attracted to the caller. All human emotions are normal and natural; it is how we choose to behave according to those feelings that ultimately decide the appropriateness of our response. Concerns about inappropriate calls need to be balanced against the core advocacy principles of respect, support, and safety. Advocates should rely on their training, instincts, and on supervisors and supervision as necessary.

Shelter

Male survivors will sometimes want shelter services. Whenever possible, it is advised to conduct initial meetings and screenings in locations other than the shelter. Discreetly meeting a new potential client in a public space such as a McDonalds, library, medical center, or police station allows the advocate to safeguard the individual's privacy while preserving the confidentiality of the shelter location until safety and eligibility determinations have been made. Clear organization policies to refer to will help advocates navigate this situation when it arises. If an advocate concludes that a man is a survivor and is in danger, then safe accommodations need to be sought.

Some things to remember here include the centrality of safety considerations (for him and his children, if any, as well as that of the women and children in shelter), the "same or equivalent services" mandate from federal law, and the basic advocacy values of options, safety planning, and respectful honesty between the parties involved. Be straightforward and honest in talking to him about the safety concerns for the women and children in shelter and for him. Solid safety planning which takes into consideration both life-generated risks and batterer-generated risks will help him decide on his best course of action.

Core advocacy values guide us to support the victim as he chooses his own best avenue. Policy and protocol will dictate what you can offer the man on the other end of the phone line or sitting across from you who wants to get out of danger. Some options offered in programs are: hotel stay, safe home stay, advocacy with temporary stays in homeless shelters, or safety planning and relocation to another community. All our clients deserve open and honest discussion around their options, rights, and responsibilities.

Advocacy

Safety planning, social service referrals, court process information, information on the dynamics of domestic violence, and serving as a sounding-board for decision-making are all central aspects of advocacy. If you would offer information or resources to a female survivor, those should also be offered to male survivors. Given the relatively low frequency of male survivors seeking assistance both at the advocacy organization and throughout the community, the advocate may need to do more social service accompaniment or direct referrals on behalf of male clients.

When a man comes to an advocacy office, it can be uncomfortable or scary. However, advocacy organizations have safety strategies for their workers, often including panic buttons, code words and other office procedures. As with any person arriving at the office, listen to your instincts. Use the screening tools and skills to determine how you will respond to the individual asking for advocacy. Leave doors open, let people know that you are meeting with someone, using that person's name. Ask a co-worker to meet with you both if you feel uneasy meeting one-on-one. If you suspect that there is danger it is all right to ask someone to leave, or to call the non-emergency number for the local police and explain the situation. Of course, in a life-threatening emergency, always dial 911.

Support Groups

Making decisions about integrating men into a previously female-only support groups can be tricky. Whether the decision is to attempt to join a group or not, when following the basis of safety, options and respectful honest communication it is more likely than not that all parties involved will be content with the decision.

Note: Services that fall under other professional services are to be considered using those professions guidelines. For example, a therapist can decide how to integrate or not, a man into individual or group therapy

3. Creating Spaces that Welcome Male Survivors

In addition to the steps which organizations can undertake with any specific population or protected class (see *Protected Classes*), here are some "self assessment questions" adapted from the Forge Sexual Violence Project, "to help organizations think through the ways in which they may or may not be putting out the welcome mat to male victims"⁸

⁸ Excerpted from Loree Cook-Daniels, *Seeing Past the 'L': Addressing Anti-Male Bias in Sexual Assault Services for the "LGBT" Community*, Forge Sexual Violence Project, Milwaukee, WI. Available at: <http://www.forge-forward.org>

- Does the name or motto of your organization say it's for women? Is it named after a woman? Just as Caucasians generally won't seek services from the "Asian American Center," men will often not approach an agency for women. This cultural imperative to respect other demographic groups' "space" ends up reinforcing an anti-male bias, because there seems to be no demand for services from male victims.
- Does your website include statistics on male survivors? A surprising number of "FAQ" sections do not admit that abuse or sexual assault of men exists. This omission contributes to male survivors' perceptions that what happened to them is literally unspeakable.
- Are all your pictures – except those clearly labeled 'supporter' or 'perpetrator' – of women? As providers, we long ago learned the importance of welcoming women of many ethnicities by making sure our pictures, brochures, and other materials show women of various colors. Similarly, let's consider the need to literally show the existence of male victims.
- Do your case studies include victims with male names?
- Are your gender-segregated services accurately advertised? Sometimes publicity uses gender-neutral language throughout, but the program is still designed only for women and staffers are shocked and unprepared when men try to attend. Once a male victim approaches a group that looks like it would include him only to find that it doesn't, he is unlikely to ask for services again.
- Do the resources you display include materials clearly labeled for male victims?
- Does language used in written materials and public presentations refer to victims as "she?" The simple addition of four letters – "or he" – when referring to victim/survivors is powerfully effective at changing the myth that all victims are female.
- If you refer clients to outside providers such as therapists, pre-screen those providers for their attitudes toward male victims. If a provider is not prepared to work with male survivors, their response may compound the survivor's feeling that he is irreparably broken or that his assaults have doomed him to a life of isolation.
- Do your outreach materials and publications studiously avoid perpetuating myths by balancing the existence of male victims with the gendered basis of most abuse? This can be a fine line, but it can harm victims if we claim there is gender symmetry in domestic violence or emphasize 'false reporting,' 'failure to protect,' or other victim-discrediting language.

4. Supervision considerations:

When you are in the role of supervising frontline advocates, it is helpful to include the topic of assessment in your discussions. “Advocates from all around the country complain about how little time they get to think. . . . The lack of opportunity to think critically makes advocates fall into traditional and fragmented work patterns, lose their connection to women’s realities, and prioritize their tasks according to bureaucratic expediency.”⁹ Building critical reflection into the structure of advocates’ work is one of the primary ways to strengthen the quality of advocacy provided.

When working with males, it is important for advocates to think about discomfort versus danger. While a person should always adhere to one’s instincts when it comes to danger, and never underestimate what another person is capable of perpetrating, one must also take into consideration the need for challenging new experiences, the discomfort of healthy growth as a person, and the true end for which we all aim: to end domestic violence in all its forms. This does include violence against men.

A long-time question in this work has been ‘Where do men fit and belong in the anti-violence against women movement? What is their role?’ We know that much of the violence sustained by survivors is gender-based. We know that intimate partner violence is actually based in the pattern of behavior designed to gain and maintain power and control and to instill fear. It is not only based in physical violence but in systematic abuse in many areas of life. So, if this violence is gender-based, and if our culture is a rape culture, then where *do* men fit in? And how will we take into consideration that men too are survivors? And how comfortable are advocates working with survivors who are in same-gender relationships?

While we don’t want to exclude male survivors, how do we also take into account what experts such as Katz, Bancroft, Stark, and Pence, caution regarding the ongoing danger of collusion with batterers or with the homophobia of our society? Supervision is a valuable arena in which to look honestly at the feelings that arise when working with men, and at the social structure and conditioning that reinforce the unconscious desire to collude with those in positions of power.

Some questions to pose to the advocates you supervise could include:

- Tell me about your analysis of ____’s relationship dynamics. Tell me about his use of violence, and about his partner’s use of violence.
- How did you reach the determination that he is losing power and control in the relationship due to his partner’s abusive behavior?
- What particular barriers and needs have you identified for him as an individual?
- What has felt different about working with a male versus your typical work with females?
- Can you tell me about any ways in which male privilege may emerge in the advocacy interactions you have with him? How is acting with male privilege similar to or different from using coercive power and control?
- How have you been feeling about your ability to provide support, validation, and reasonable options to him? What might you need to feel more effective?

⁹ Pence, Ellen. *Advocacy on Behalf of Battered Women*, Chapter 17 of “Sourcebook on Violence Against Women,” Sage Publications, Inc, 2001.

Every shelter or domestic violence response organization knows that what we do is controversial. Some people support the work but do not understand it. Others are against the work and blame advocates as angry, anti-men, and many other stereotypes that we have all been told about or called. So, it comes as no surprise that the community will have opinions and input for those serving men as survivors.

5. Policy Considerations

Policy should clearly state that your organization serves victims of domestic violence regardless of gender.

6. Protocol Considerations

Suggestions for an organization to be truly open to victims of any gender:¹⁰

- Observe whether men are being confronted when they visit your agency. Staff may not even be aware that they are intercepting men the moment they step through the door, whereas they're giving female visitors time to gain their composure and control the timing of their request for assistance. If you think staff are treating male and female visitors the same, observe again, paying special attention to the tone of voice, body language, and exact words used.
- See how the agencies or professionals you refer to are ACTUALLY responding to male victims by having male confederates call and request services. Women who work with male survivors often report that their colleagues tell them they do serve men, but their male referrals report that when they actually call and ask for services, staff say those services are not available.
- Speak of victims as “she or he” even when you are addressing a group of survivors who are (by design or accident) all women. This simple reminder that men can also be victims may help counter the tendency of female victims of male abusers to see all men as different and/or dangerous. If you would confront a racially denigrating remark made by a client, then consider developing similar responses for when female victims denigrate all men in group or individual therapy sessions.
- Consider developing group or individual therapy exercises designed to help counter the tendency of abuse survivors to associate danger with demographic categories rather than patterns of behavior. Help them focus on developing discernment skills that will help them avoid getting close to abusers rather than making them fear major segments of their communities and workplaces.
- Acknowledge anti-male bias by screening potential staff and interns for their attitudes about men in general and male victims in particular. Regularly train staff and volunteers specifically on recognizing and countering anti-male statements and assumptions.
- Create a Client Bill of Rights that clients sign at intake (and that is displayed on your office walls and website) that explicitly references the existence and rights of male clients.
- Be careful not to automatically label men associated with your program as “supporters” or “allies.” That language suggests they couldn't possibly be clients.

¹⁰ Excerpted from Loree Cook-Daniels, *Seeing Past the 'L': Addressing Anti-Male Bias in Sexual Assault Services for the "LGBT" Community*, Forge Sexual Violence Project, Milwaukee, WI. Available at: <http://www.forge-forward.org>