

MAKING SOCIAL CHANGE: THE DYNAMICS OF EDUCATION, ACTION AND REFLECTION

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A note from The Project for Children: This discussion paper first appeared in the 1986 NCADV Conference Manual. We provide it as an example of the radical, political thinking that has shaped and propelled the work of the battered women's movement. The Project for Children seeks to extend this kind of political thinking to the work done with and for children.

Social change is the altering of society's social arrangements. It is the restructuring of relationships between and among various groups within a society. Social change does not occur instantaneously nor abruptly in human history. Instead, it occurs over long periods of time; it occurs continuously. There is probably no period of human history in which all aspects of the human experience were not in the process of social change.

To actively seek to direct, hasten or otherwise influence social change in human history is not typically seen as the work of women. Certainly it is not the work of poor women, or women of color, or old women, or lesbian women, or battered women. We are objects of history.

The purpose of structuring a society hierarchically with few at the top, some in the middle and most at the bottom of the order is to allow those at the top to control an inordinate amount of society's power, wealth and resources.

Since the opening of the first battered women's shelter in the early 1970's, activists have recognized that individual men do not hit, beat, spit upon, kick, grab or even kill their wives or lovers because of some kind of individual pathology. At dining room tables in shelters across the country, literally thousands of cups of coffee are consumed daily as small groups of women seek to understand men's violence. While each woman's story will differ and her partner's history have its own peculiarities, these conversations will invariably move to a common theme: at the root of battering claims that "someone has to wear the pants" and that "no ship can have two captains," he is surrounded by community institutions, from the church to the navy, that support his claims.

This arrangement of relationships between and among people is touted as being for the good of all and is mirrored in every facet of our lives, making us believe in its magical powers. It feeds on fear and hatred and lies and a belief in the system's rightness. This social arrangement can tolerate movement, adjustments, and alterations, but not the fundamental questioning of the distribution of power and resources. It is dependent on those at the bottom of the order accepting the notion that their status is due to flaws in their individual characters or group identity. Through its institutions, it teaches that with

hard work and self-improvement, anyone can enjoy the full fruits of our society. It promotes a collective consciousness of tolerance for and acceptance of the structure, leaving us only to debate the best way to help those at the bottom help themselves.

Any fundamental change in the social order requires the changing of society's collective consciousness. While changes in consciousness can and must occur at all levels of this hierarchically structured society, its source of nourishment will come from the oppressed. It will emerge from those least immersed in the thought patterns of domination. While no one in this culture can escape the devastating effects of the patriarchal imagination, those who benefit by it the least are best able to create a new vision.

Yet the culture of patriarchy is continuously usurping our power and resources to maintain itself, it becomes difficult to know how those of us suffocating under the weight of its insatiable demands on our humanity will ever gather enough strength to create basic changes in the social order. A radical transformation of the culture will be accomplished by creating new visions: visions of hope, not despair; visions of strength through unity, not power through domination. Our work in making social change is to create the future now by acting from an entirely new source of power and strength.

As we look about us and examine our creation (the battered women's movement), we will see that we are a mixture of both the new vision of hope and the old vision of fear and despair. We will see women of all races and classes working together, but still we do not see many old women guiding us in our struggle. We will see hundreds of shelters where just a few short years ago there were none, but at the same time we will rarely see our programs encouraging women to take direct political action. We will see organizations struggling with the concepts of shared responsibility and decision making, while others groan under the weight of their bureaucracies. We will see ourselves at times fighting for the right of all to be heard and listened to, and at other times silencing opposition from those whose opinions are unpopular. We see men learning to work with women in the struggle and grappling with other men bringing to our creation the marks of their oppressive class. We are in both places. We are in the patriarchy, and we are in the future. We fear pulling our legs and foot out of the old because, while it is oppressive to us, it is still familiar. The act of moving from the old to the new must begin somewhere.

If our task is to alter the relationships between and among people in our society, then our most fundamental question is "What is our relationship to the woman who walks through the shelter door with a blackened eye, incredible fear, self-hatred, guilt, despair and rage?" is she a client or a sister? Her reluctance to press charges is no different than our fear of publicly confronting our local police department or mental health agency. Her self-hatred and guilt manifest themselves no differently than our obsession to become a part of the social service fabric in our communities, to dress and talk in a way that gains their approval.

To preserve access to resources, wealth and influence, those on the top rungs of society's hierarchy use their control over institutions taught to hate and fear each other.

Our fledging organizations are given tiny bits of money from massive budgets and then forced to purge themselves of so-called “extremists.”

From birth, women are taught to give over our personal power, to accept male authority. Then as we reach adulthood, we are labeled as dependent, addictive, loving too much, suffering from boundary problems; we have “learned helplessness”; we generally lack assertiveness, proper parenting skills and self-esteem. The culture of domination reigns victorious when it engages us in their labeling process. When we label a woman co-dependent, addicted, a victim, a client, we act in the consciousness of domination. We engage in the endless process of fixing ourselves, and gave lip service to social change.

It is understandable that we recreate what we know. Most of our programs are hierarchically structured, most of our work is geared toward individual change, while we have taken great care to soften the dominance of patriarchal structures, our work cannot be truly transforming if it is done within those structures of domination. To make social change, we must act from a different vision. We must create today organizations and environments free of the consciousness of domination.

Our programs and projects must engage all of us in the act of discovery, of learning, of creating rather than perpetuating paternalism by acting of or on behalf of battered women. There is a qualitative difference between a shelter director and one or two workers meeting with the police chief in his office to discuss the enforcement of civil protection orders, and 30 to 40 women meeting with him in the shelter. While each approach may result in the same order being issued by the chief, the first approach empowers the shelter workers while the other empowers us all. The first approach makes the chief accountable to the shelter; the other makes him accountable to battered women. The first has some women working on behalf of other women; the other has women working on their own behalf. The first approach emphasizes the differences between shelter workers and battered women; the other emphasizes our common bonds.

The future vision then must be based on principles of unity. We must find today ways of acting together in which the relationships of domination are absent. The relationships of the shelter worker, the facilitator of women’s groups, the legal advocate, the child advocate and shelter residents must be rooted in our commonality, not our differences.

For women to engage in social action, we must first act in opposition to the process of oppression, which fosters despair and its accompanying passivity. Action against the established order can arise from and symbolize a new perception of reality. It is inextricably tied to education. In order to create such a vision, we need to rethink our whole concept of education, support, and counseling of women. We must guard against letting our models of sharing information, understanding and expertise become a part of perpetuating our consciousness of domination. The teacher imparts knowledge to the learner. The learner comes back for increased knowledge and for more information. Education as we know it and practice it in this culture is not meant to teach people how to learn, how to think critically, how to discover, but what to learn and what to think.

Education, therapy or counseling that leaves women isolated or exploring their personal defects will perhaps satisfy our funders, but it cannot lead to social change.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, was twice imprisoned and exiled from his country for his work in adult literacy, which focused on literacy education as a foundation for social change. In his classic book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he states,

At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as people engaged in the vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become essential. True reflection leads to action but that action will only be a genuine praxis (practical application of learning) if there is critical reflection on its consequences.

To achieve this praxis it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about, or will abandon, dialogue, reflection and communication, will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues and instructions. Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger.

While no one liberates themselves by their own efforts alone, neither are they liberated by others. The leaders must realize that their own conviction of the need for struggle was not given to them by anyone else – if it is authentic. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached by means of a totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders' involvement in a real historical situation leads them to criticize it and to wish to change it.*

Some will argue that we have no right to impose our politics on battered women, and that we have an ethical obligation to be neutral in our work with women in order to serve all women. But in reality, education is never neutral. It either promotes the status quo or challenges it. The role of education and action within the battered women's movement is crucial to the continuous development of a nonviolent world.

*Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Myra Bergman Ramos, Translator. New York: Continuum, 1970.

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