



Appendix B:

THE BATTERED WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The American suffragette movement encompassed the first modern organized resistance to violence against women. It did not organize services for women as we know them today, nor, in those pre-Freudian days, was the notion of organizing personal change groups for individual batterers even imaginable. In a sense the suffragette movement was a precursor of the contemporary domestic abuse intervention movement. Rather than focusing on the relationship between a man and the woman he batters, it focused on institutional change and on eliminating the legal right of men to abuse their wives. Spokespersons of the suffragette movement, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, supported the temperance movement because of the large number of housewives who were being mobilized to strike back at the saloons which took their husbands' paychecks, filled them with alcohol and sent them home at the end of a long work-week broke, drunk and violent. In fact, it could be argued that those bands of women that smashed the windows of the saloons, pulled out the men and lobbied relentlessly for prohibition, constitute the first organized battered women's groups in this country.

As legislative bodies sought to address the grievances of women without giving them political power through the vote, state after state began criminalizing wife abuse and discontinued the practice of regulating it. In 1871, Alabama and Massachusetts became the first states to criminalize all physical assaults by husbands against their wives. By the end of World War I, all states had outlawed wife beating and the temperance laws were enacted. But police and courts in every state used their new powers of intervention selectively.

For the next sixty years wife beating continued with only isolated acts of organized resistance. Women in Chiswick, England, changed all of that in 1971 by taking over a public building and demanding that the government participate in the protection of women and children from violent husbands and fathers. Activists in the women's movements, particularly in the U.S. anti-rape movement, recognized the social condition of the women in Chiswick and were inspired by their courage. In just one year shelters and hotlines began organizing in cities such as Boston, Portland (Oregon), St. Paul, and Los Angeles, paving the way for what soon would become a national movement.

As battered women across the country crowded into shelters, their stories revealed a horrendous pattern of institutional callousness and hostility towards them. Shelter activists soon learned that a tremendous amount of work needed to be done to change the very institutions obligated to protect citizens. One of the most glaring problems was that the system's response to violence against women in their homes was to remove the women and their children rather than the abusers. Before 1976 only a handful of states provided the legal tools for arresting or removing abusers from their homes. Proposals for legislative changes allowing police to arrest batterers and family court judges to evict them met with harsh resistance. Legislation criminalizing the rape of wives, controlling forced mediation between batterers and their partners and increasing penalties for second and third convictions of violence also met with opposition. In state after state, shelter workers organized groups of women to meet in legislative offices and testify at hearings, bringing their pictures, stories and files for public viewing. Legislation changed and shelters were funded, though minimally. By 1986, over 50 percent of the states had passed laws allowing women to get civil protection orders and allowing police to initiate arrests in domestic assaults.