
Screening

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The Network has provided training and consultation to many battered women's programs seeking information on woman-to-woman battering. We've been encouraged to note that in recent years increasing numbers of programs are willing to work with battered lesbians and bisexual women. Unfortunately, though, it's been difficult for many programs to direct that interest into the concrete action of re-examining how they operate in order to make their services safer for women batter by women – particularly where doing so seems to challenge organizational philosophy and values.

Nowhere is this more true than when dealing with the issue of screening – before accepting a woman for services, going through a process to determine that she is in fact the woman who is battered and not the batterer. While we believe that screening is critical to working with battered lesbians/bisexual women, we have found that many battered women's programs find the decision to screen a difficult one to make, for a number of reasons.

First, screening seems to contradict the philosophy held by most battered women's programs of believing a woman when she says she's battered. I need to say that there is much about this philosophy that we support; it is about acknowledging the truth of women's lives, and is the beginning of the end of the long history of societal denial and minimization of battering. On an individual level, the act of believing someone as they describe what their partner has done, believing that it is/was that bad, is often the first step toward their ability to find safety, their empowerment, and their healing from the horror they have experienced. On a societal level, that same belief is the first step in creating the cultural and political change necessary to end battering. The gains made over the last 20 years by the battered women's movement have been possible in large part because communities have begun to believe what they once considered unbelievable, and consequently have gotten involved in efforts to end domestic violence.

The problem we have with this philosophy is that it means that, because they are women, lesbian/bisexual women batterers and their versions of their relationships will automatically be accepted and sympathized with. Batterers, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, usually see themselves as victims and many will present themselves to a program as the battered partner seeking services. Other batterers may try to join a support group or enter a shelter in order to see if their partner is participating in services, especially if they are stalking a partner who has left. Or, in a pre-emptive strike, a batterer may contact the program before her partner does in order to isolate her from a potential source of future safety and support. On the other side of the relationship, many battered partners present themselves as the abusers, having been blamed for the problems in the relationship and/or been called abusive by their batterers; if they have fought back in some way, this accusation may be especially convincing. Thus, without a screening process, a program can put the battered partner at risk in a number of ways. The program's message of safety allows a woman to let her guard down, when in fact they haven't done everything they can to make sure that the batterer will not have continued easy access to her. The program may unwittingly contribute to the battered partner not exploring all her options; for example, believing a shelter to be safe, a woman could decide to stay there rather than consider leaving the area, only to have her batterer find her by also getting into the shelter.

We would suggest to programs who are reluctant to screen that they view the issue in the context of safety. Screening is not about identifying battered women and screening them in, but identifying batterers and screening them out – and battered women's programs do that all the time. It's just that when working with straight women with male batterers, the process is much simpler. By only giving out shelter and support group location to women and being wary of men who call the hotline or show up at the office, support groups, etc., batterers are effectively screened out – men are an easily identifiable group to be cautious around.

Screening out female batterers is not as simple, because they are not easy to distinguish as a group. They look like us, they act like us (at least on the surface), and there's no clear way to automatically tell who they are. Without doing more intensive screening that asks a woman for details of her relationship and her experience of battering, a batterer will have easy access to the program's services. Obviously this is unsafe if the partner of a particular batterer is seeking support from the program in some way. But it's unsafe even if she isn't because, as stated above, by getting into the program, the batterer effectively cuts off the possibility that it could be a safe resource in the future since shelter support group locations and times will no longer be confidential

A common screening-related issue is what to do if both partners in a relationship call the program. Many programs have simply accepted the first woman to call and referred the other to another battered women's program so both could get services separately. While this strategy deals with the immediate crisis, we believe it leads to important questions about how the program views woman-to-woman battering.

One question it raises is whether deep down the program believes that battering between women is "mutual." Accepting a woman because she says she is battered, and then referring her partner to another battered women's program because the program also believes her (or doesn't want to make some kind of judgment as to who is who), what they're saying – and what both partners will hear loud and clear – is that it's possible for two women to batter each other. Otherwise, why should both women receive services *as battered women*? This is a dangerous message to be putting out to the battered woman, to the batterer and to the community at large. It minimizes the seriousness of woman-to-woman battering and denies that one woman can use violence and coercion to control another.

The other question this raises is whether the program really believes that lesbians/bisexual women who batter are as dangerous as heterosexual men who batter. If there is no screening mechanism and the program is willing to work with one partner or the other, then they have to accept that some of the women they work with will be batterers. Yet it is unlikely they would want to talk to straight male batterers on their hotline about being battered, run a support group with any of them in it, or have any of them living in their shelter or safe homes. They would more likely be quite concerned about batterers knowing where and when services take place, expecting them to be at best disruptive and at worst dangerous to the women and children receiving services as well as to staff. If accepting male batterers into a program would put the organization and those receiving services at risk, what makes it any safer to have female batterers around? By not making an effort to determine who is who, especially if both partners call, the program is saying that there is a real difference between straight male battering and same-sex battering. The implication is that lesbian/bisexual women batterers are not so bad, that they're safe to be around, that they may even be indistinguishable from their battered partners. Again, this is a dangerous message to put out, because lesbians/bisexual women who batter do everything that heterosexual male batterers do, from subtle manipulation to murder, and are equally unsafe.

The battered women's movement cannot rely solely on its usual precautions for protecting battered lesbians/bisexual women. To be safe resources, programs need to develop policies and procedures that take into account the differences in access that women batterers have both to their partners and to services. Screening is essential to creating safety, and we encourage battered women's programs to re-examine their core philosophies in this framework.