
When 50-50 Is Not Fair: The Case Against Couple Counseling When Men Abuse Women

Phyllis B. Frank and Gail Kadison Golden

Social workers in a variety of settings are frequently called on to counsel couples who seek help with aspects of their lives that range from assistance with child rearing to communication, sexual, and other relationship issues. It is only in recent years, however, that we have begun to recognize that many couples who seek marriage and family counseling do so against a background of the man being abusive towards his partner.

Current estimates suggest that in 50 percent of all marriages there will be at least one physically abusive episode during the course of the marriage (Peachy, 1988). This estimate does not include the untold numbers of women who are systematically abused through nonphysical patterns of coercive and controlling tactics inflicted on them by their partners. The result of this emotional and psychological abuse, often reported by victims to be equally or even more damaging than physical violence, is women who are not free— to speak, to do, or to be.

This reality raises important issues for social workers. We know that both partners are generally reluctant, for different reasons, to disclose information related to his abusive and controlling behavior. To balance this fact, we must raise our own consciousness about all forms of abuse of women in couple relationships and assume responsibility for learning about the climate of control that exists when the couple is not in our office. To accomplish this it is imperative to interview each partner alone and to ask specific questions related to violence and control (Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County, 1993). Failure to gather this information can result in counseling that at best is a waste of time and at worst colludes with and perpetuates his violence, thus further endangering the woman.

Women who are being beaten, intimidated or controlled by their partners are not free to engage in the kind of open dialogue that counseling promotes. In fact, a woman who

does speak openly to a social worker in the presence of an abusive partner may be at risk of his retaliatory tactics when they return home (Jones & Schechter, 1992).

Social workers who counsel couples whose relationships are marked by his unacknowledged violence are conducting sessions in the presence of a powerful censor. Men who abuse their partners control their relationships by instituting serious restrictions and rules (Jones & Schechter, 1992). The women know what those rules are, although often they cannot articulate them. The therapist who knows nothing of these rules may unwittingly encourage a woman to cross a line that she has established for her own safety.

Social workers who are aware of his abuse in a relationship, and who agree to see the couple together, collude in another way with a set of damaging insinuations that further imperil women. Although the very act of working with an abusive man together with his partner implies that the problem is in the relationship, it is not (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Abusive men are solely responsible for their abusive behavior (Thorn-Finch, 1992). Conversely, the victim of assaultive behavior has no part in the attacks against her. No matter how provocative or inappropriate the woman's behavior, it neither justifies nor excuses the man's abuse (Jones & Schechter, 1992).

When working with relationships in which a man abuses his partner, social workers may be tempted to encourage the woman to learn to alter her behavior so as not to provoke her partner to abuse her. The woman cannot do this (Davis & Hagen, 1992). Because her behavior is in no way responsible for her spouse's abusiveness, any changes she makes will not be the deciding factor in his stopping the abuse. Men are abusive to their women partners because of thousands of years of patriarchal culture, institutions, and laws that have permitted, condoned, and even encouraged these

actions (Jones & Schechter, 1992). Counseling an abusive man and his partner together conceals, and therefore perpetuates, these historic and damaging entitlements. It also gives the message that one can improve a relationship without exposing and stopping a man's abusiveness. In fact, the man must end his abusiveness and his sense of entitlement to his partner and her services before couple work can be even considered (Adams, 1988).

Strong, confrontive, counseling with individual men, that defines the spectrum of abuse, and locates the responsibility for his abusiveness solely with him is a good beginning. It is also vital to provide the abuser with all of the information necessary to make personal transformation a reality. This information must include an understanding of patriarchy in the United States and its impact on individuals, couples and families. Such intervention is the best protection for a woman from the therapeutic abuse perpetrated by assuming that she has a part in provoking her partner's behavior.

Arresting domestic violence offenders, and strong judicial monitoring are actually the most effective "therapeutic" interventions yet discovered (Sherman, 1982). Conversely, family systems therapy, which isolates the problem in the relationship, endangers battered

women (Jones & Schechter, 1992). So does mediation, which assumes that the two parties have equal standing in a dispute and the ability to negotiate fairly. In fact, "mediation of an assault" is a conflict in terms (Jones & Schechter, 1992, pg. 239). The power imbalance and the violence preclude equitable negotiations between the two parties.

What social workers do not know about domestic violence can kill our clients. Social workers have been trained in a variety of approaches (for example, behavior modification, family systems, and psychoanalysis) that seem generally useful with other kinds of clients and issues. Imposing these models on our work with couples when a man is abusing his partner, however, not only may prove ineffective but also may actually exacerbate the danger of his assaultiveness. The past decades of groundbreaking work in the field of domestic abuse have yielded clear, usable information. It is incumbent on us to be open to theory and analysis that come out of the work that has been done with thousands of abused women. Social workers in hospitals, courts, schools, mental health clinics, and the like are in a unique position to confront the issue of abuse by asking the right questions and by disallowing treatment interventions that perpetuate the problem.

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Gail K. Golden, EdD, CSW, is clinical director of the Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County, Inc., and Phyllis B. Frank, MA, is director of the VCS Community Change Project and assistant executive director of Volunteer Counseling Service of Rockland County, Inc. 77 South Main Street, New City, NY 10956, 845 634-5729, www.volunteercounselingservice.org

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