

VCS COMMUNITY CHANGE PROJECT

Domestic Violence Program for Men

A NY Model Batterer Program • www.nymbp.org

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The Politics of Accountability

by Jonathan Cohen

Accountability has become a watchword in the movement to end domestic violence.

It is almost impossible to be involved in any work related to ending domestic violence without hearing the word accountability bandied about. But while some might glaze over at its mention, to battered women, their advocates and allies, it is an essential tenet in the movement for freedom.

Accountability, as it relates to domestic violence work, is a commonly misunderstood term. Conventionally, accountability refers to people with less power and authority being answerable to those who have more power and authority. We see this in the workplace. Employees are accountable to their employers.

But in movements for social justice and freedom, the meaning and practice of accountability is quite different. In fact, it is a turnaround of the traditional meaning and best understood in the context of the politics of oppression theory.

Oppression exists in the world. It has often been constructed into the very development and culture of a nation. It is not just a theoretical concept; it is a reality with tangible basis and conditions. Oppression most often operates as a dynamic between the groups. In sexism, racism, classism, etc., one group, the dominating group, marginalizes and violates the other. Dominating group members are often totally unaware of this dynamic. On the other hand, the marginalized group themselves are hurt, discriminated against and denied their basic human rights and are almost always

aware and clear about the oppression that is occurring.

Another reality about oppression is that whenever people have been oppressed in human history, they have resisted that oppression. It is an intrinsic truth of human nature that we yearn for freedom and fight and struggle to attain it. In every corner of the globe where people are being oppressed, they are resisting their oppression and organizing political and social movements to end it.

The meaning of accountability that we offer, in the context of political and social movements for justice and freedom is as follows: Members of dominating groups, those with greater power, privilege and authority, must be accountable to those who are members of the oppressed or marginalized groups – in the work toward ending all oppressions.

Oppressed or marginalized people being the targets of discrimination, marginalization and violence are the experts face the oppression (racism, sexism, classism, etc) each and every day. The nature of oppression is to make the privileges and advantages that members of dominating groups receive - invisible to them. As such they are not confronted with the realities of the harm they inflict against the oppressed group.

On the other hand, the realities of oppression are evident and visible to the oppressed. Their very survival requires an intimate knowledge of the dynamics of the oppression against them. It is our perspective therefore that, they must be seen as the leaders of the movements to end the oppression. They know best what it

means to be the targets of the oppression and they know best what strategies will be most effective in ending the oppression.

Being accountable, therefore, means that those who are not of the marginalized group must listen to the voices, be answerable to and accept leadership from the oppressed. Those who do are referred to as allies in the struggle for justice.

In the work to end domestic violence, it is critical to listen to the voices of women, particularly to battered women and their advocates. Mistakes, errors in judgment or strategy by allies, regardless of how well intentioned, could have devastating consequences for battered women and their children. Endangering their lives is a very real possibility for those who are not vigilant about this practice of accountability.

Listening to the voices doesn't mean listening to this woman over here or that one over there, or trying to figure out which group of women to listen to. Rather it is figuring out how to hear the collective voice of battered women and the battered women's movement. Done properly, that will provide a body of thought, experience, theory, and analysis from thousands of women over decades of work and struggle. With attention and diligence, it is not that hard to figure out what the collective voices of battered women are saying.

All of us who do domestic violence work should be accountable to battered women and their advocates. That means everyone in every sector of the community - from the criminal justice system to the social service system, faith communities, etc. That means that leadership from battered women and their advocates' is central to all community efforts to end domestic violence. It doesn't mean simply that battered women's advocates get a

seat at the table, but that everyone else follows their direction.

Our definition of accountability is profoundly challenging to a system, in which the conventional model is for those with less power to be answerable to those with more power.

In many community coalition efforts there is a coordinating council working to build and improve a coordinated community response to domestic violence. The council being made up of community organizations and institutions such as, police, probation officers, prosecutors, judges, therapists, nurses, teachers, batterer programs, faith communities, etc. As an example of putting this accountability concept into practice, decision making amongst the various representatives would work as follows:

Every representative gets an equal vote or "say" with one exception: representatives of battered women, battered women's advocates and or their organizations. They alone would have veto power over any and all decisions of the coalition or council.

Implementing and practicing such a policy in every community would be a powerful step forward in the effort to be accountable to battered women, to shift power in our struggle, to lift up and empower battered women, and to build the movement to end domestic violence.

lovingly edited
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