

Domestic Violence and Social Work from an Anarchist Perspective

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Katie was a physically fit 30yr old mother of two toddlers when she decided to leave her abusive partner of many years. Never having sought help due to the isolation she faced in their rural lakeside cabin, she did not know that the most violent attacks from intimate partners are brought on by the victim's decision to separate (or, curiously, by the announcement of a pregnancy). As she loaded her children into their car, (she had made a secret set of keys the last time she had gone for groceries), her man went for the semi-automatic weapon he had kept and intimidated her with when she spoke of leaving. Katie was stepping into the driver's seat when he unloaded the gun into her. He then sped away in his truck, leaving her for dead. Katie and her children arrived at the women's shelter after several months in various medical facilities. Help had come for Katie, but not in time to save her left leg, which was completely destroyed by the shots sustained.

Katie was lucky to have her life. The statistics read like a war zone. 30% to 80% of women in emergency rooms are there due to domestic violence, or "intimate partner violence" as it's sometimes called. 50% of women homicide victims in NYC are killed by intimate partners. Teenagers comprise almost 10% of those victims. Feminists believe these statistics quite low, stating that many boyfriends and husbands don't get caught or that the crime goes unsolved, or the woman remains "missing" (disappeared). Deaths due to DV (domestic violence) are comparable to those by drunk drivers in some areas. The NYC domestic violence hotline receives about 8,000 calls a month. The NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence project serves over 500 victims of DV a year. Each year about 700,000 people are stalked by intimate partners or ex-partners in the United States. This includes 10% of female college students. These statistics are from the NYC mayor's office and Sanctuary for Families, all available on the Internet.

I've worked as a domestic violence counselor for about six years now. I do this work from an anarcha-feminist perspective. That means that I have a political analysis of DV. This sets me apart from other "social workers", surprisingly because the vast majority of whom don't even identify as liberal feminists. In order to maintain a society as rigidly hierarchical as ours, the threat to women's physical and mental safety must be maintained. Especially if we dare to challenge the authority of patriarchy. Disabling women is a very efficient way to maintain the hierarchy complex since women comprise over half of all people, a "minority" that is actually a majority, the trump card.

The most obvious level of sexism is that which disallows freedom minded women space in the public media or in any political position that promises power, as well as the overtly sexist policies of our government. On a more localized level, there is a gradient of mechanisms used to oppress including denied access to an education that is honest about women, access to health care, to the resources that influence the democratic process, to the validation of rape as a crime, and to abortion as a right.

On a familial level, we see physical, sexual, emotional, financial, and spiritual abuse. All of these mechanisms of oppression are upheld by deep seeded, often undetectable ideas about women as inferior, animalistic, weak, and disposable beings. The most devastating level of sexism is that which culminates as an assault on a woman's body and mind by her most intimate partner. Since women are not by nature masochistic subservients, and will reach out for help, the success of this level of sexism is dependent on the complicity of the community. In my experience, many social workers are at the forefront of that complicity, engaged in a betrayal as they claim to be trying to make the world a better place.

Most social workers, case managers, and other administrators of public benefits hold an inordinate amount of power over women seeking help. At a worker's whim, a woman can receive or be denied public housing or food stamps. If a worker dislikes a client, which is sure to happen if the client even utters question as to the validity of the worker's authority or of the bureaucracy, that client is sure to have to comply to all kinds of mandates before she can receive even the most basic help. She'll be asked to provide extensive and obscure documentation of her identity or her history. She'll have to gather "proof" of her poverty and need and present it as though it's showing her innocence in a crime. Women seeking help are looked upon as cheaters, criminals, and liars. Their word is useless, yet the social worker's word is all-powerful.

In "the system", as poor people generally refer to social service agencies and the webs they create, domestic violence victims are often looked upon with skepticism and disgust. Their children are removed from their custody if they do not leave the abusive partner when an ACS (Administration of Children's Services) worker demands them to. Of course, no child should live in a dangerous home. But where should a woman go who has no access to the household money, who has been alienated from her friends and family due to the isolation she experiences in the relationship, or who has real concerns about her physical safety if she makes an attempt to leave? The ACS worker never suggests that the abusive partner (usually the man in a heterosexual relationship) should get picked up by the police and leave the apartment. Instead, the ACS worker insists that the woman and her children leave the home and enter a shelter while the abuser remains master of the castle.

The ultimate form of control is to hold one's children hostage and give one a list of things she must do in order to get them back. There are between 30 and 40 thousand children in foster care on any given year in NYC. In addition are those moms that are dealing with ACS in a "prevention" stage. This is when the parents are, for one reason or another, deemed potential abusers. A neighbor may have called ACS and when the worker came, there were empty beer bottles about the kitchen. Perhaps the police were called when a woman was beaten by her partner and found the children home from school, the mother unwilling to drop them off with her face black and blue. It is important to note that "the system" views the mother as the one responsible for the children. It is she that must comply to ACS mandates while the children's father often goes about his business unmolested.

Those in prevention stages are also given a list of things they must do or ACS is going to take their children. In the case of something as inane as beer bottles, a parent may have to check into a drug treatment program and complete it, visiting up to 6 hours every day for the next year or two. The parent may or may not be an addict. The important thing is that the ACS worker is not an addictions professional, yet wears the hat of one if he or she pleases. It is my opinion that if the parent wears dread locks, has radical political posters or clothing, is a vegetarian, is a social user of alcohol or marijuana, enjoys punk music or skateboarding, or gets arrested for civil disobedience, she or she can be pretty much certain to have this used against her or him as evidence that he or she may not be a fit parent. The ACS worker will put in the report saying something like, "improper lifestyle that could lead to danger in the home." This is especially likely to happen if the parent is a non-white person or doesn't speak a mainstream dialect of English. I want to make it clear that there is no excuse for child abuse and that we as a community do have an obligation to protect the most vulnerable of oppressed people. The problem is when the aforementioned obligation is used as an excuse to exert all kinds of control over parents. It is a problem when the organization that handles children's well being, like ACS, is in no way accountable to the community it's snatching kids out of.

Currently I work in two locations, with two different populations. The first of these populations is in the South Bronx, at an alcohol and drug treatment program (80% of women in rehab programs are also victims of DV), and the other is in Manhattan, at an immigrant's advocacy non-profit. I previously worked at a DV shelter. Many of my undocumented immigrant clients are participants in what is commonly known as "mail order bride" businesses or victims of an international dating service. All of them were fleeing abhorrent conditions in their homelands. Many of them were in dangerous political situations due to their gender or political points of view.

On a daily basis, I try to practice feminism and anarchism in the social service workplace. In the United States, this where the casualties and injuries of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy are gathered under the umbrella "needy". There's a lot of ways we can assert a radical perspective on a daily basis. Firstly, basic logic can be used to question decisions made by higher-ups that undermine those with little power. For example, social workers have meetings called case conferences where they discuss clients and make decisions about clients' lives. One can be an advocate for clients who will be held back due to difference or if they are trouble makers.

Clinically, a political understanding of the root causes of oppression can be worked into one's counseling approach as a form of empowerment. A client who is court mandated into a drug treatment program for cocaine addiction will surely be bombarded by a plethora of behavioral modification techniques and twelve step meetings. An anti-authoritarian counselor might interview the client regarding who has exercised authority over her throughout her life, and how they have used it. In other words, it is important for survivors of domestic violence and child abuse to truly understand patriarchy. It's equally important for people struggling with poverty to understand capitalism. Only in this way will the client be able to get to the root of the problem and begin to heal consciously. Women in my DV support groups are always excited to learn about radical black women in history, and to learn their stories. There is no reason the therapeutic environment should be void of empowering educational information.

Support groups can be handed over to their members who are usually capable of making their own rules and lists of topics. The conversation will be more energetic and useful. The counselor or group leader can guarantee that the group runs smoothly by serving as a facilitator, using the

same skills she would use to facilitate a spokes counsel or coalition meeting. This also goes for the running of a DV shelter. Gather the shelter residents and tell them to write out the program. Let them say what they need and want. Liberal non-profits often have rallies like Take Back the Night or Walk-A-Thon Against Hunger. While important, these events are often closely monitored. The NYC Domestic Violence March, which takes place every October, unbelievably “requires” marchers to register with the NYPD. The organizers of these marches have lots of money and do pull in a lot of people. I think we should flyer at those events so participants, often survivors of domestic violence and rape who are looking for some place to be active, know there is another level of resistance possible.

Finally, clients and benefits recipients can be given the tools necessary to organize. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Washington D.C. with some my clients to a day of protests, part of which was a demonstration outside of a building where the World Economic Forum was meeting to discuss what to do with the anti-globalization activists post Feb. 2, 2002. Currently, nearly all of my clients are preparing to organize a massive demonstration with Community Voices Heard to oppose cutting welfare and increasing slave-type welfare work programs.

I had a boss once who said that social workers didn’t really want society to get well. That would leave them all out of jobs. There is a particular energy that drives a person to do social service work. Much of the time the person doesn’t want to earn a living in corporations, can see that the world is messed up, and has a desire to somehow fix it in some small way. There is real potential in those convictions. I can only remotely imagine the power inherent in social workers if they were to unite against this system of brutality. It would be truly revolutionary.

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