



Volunteering at WTCS

by Jennifer Sheldon-Sherman

Project Description

**Observations &
Results**

Connections

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Volunteering

As a volunteer for Women's Transitional Care Services, the battered women's shelter in Douglas County, I have come to adopt, support and embrace the idea of working towards ending violence against women, promoting concepts of peace, equality, respect, and open-mindedness in our society, and creating an atmosphere of acceptance for all people. After my completion of forty hours of domestic violence awareness training, I began to volunteer with the women and children at the shelter. Although the information I obtained from training provides invaluable insight into our world and systems operating within it, the women I encountered at the shelter have truly changed my outlook on life forever.

Empowerment

The goal of WTCS is to empower women to make their own choices in life. Overall, we must embrace the idea that people are experts in their own lives, know what is best for them, have the capabilities to choose courses of action necessary for their survival, and have the skills to succeed in their own way. Empowerment is about teaching women that they are autonomous beings that are worthy and capable of making their own choices. Empowerment means respecting other's ability to be themselves, choose for themselves, and take responsibility for themselves. It is a tool that promotes the overall well-being of individuals and society as a whole. We cannot expect to change the world single-handedly, but we can expect to change the lives of individual people through empowering them to change their situations and do the same for others.

Caption for Photo #4 (source: child.cornell.edu/army/fap.html)

"Promoting empowerment means believing that people are capable of making their own choices and decisions. It means not only that human beings possess the strengths and potential to resolve their own difficult life situations, but also that they increase their strength and contribute to society by doing so." (Charles D. Cowger)



We must not ask, "Why doesn't she leave him?" Rather, we must ask, "Why does he abuse her?" The answer: Power and Control.

Mission Statement of WTCS

"To work toward peace in the world by elimination of violence in our communities. Therefore, we are dedicated to the empowerment of women and children; the creation of peaceful, safe space; the promotion of equality and respect for all people; the appreciation of differences; and the social action necessary to achieve these goals."



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Domestic Violence

To see what an integral role violence against women plays in the lives of everyday people, one must look no further than the domestic violence statistics.

- Every fifteen seconds, in the United States, a woman is beaten by an intimate partner. (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 1991)
- Every 24 days, in Kansas, a woman is killed by an intimate partner. (Report of the Attorney General, 2001)
- Domestic violence is the #1 health risk to adult women in the U.S. (Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, 1992)
- Approximately 50% of homeless women and children in the U.S. are on the streets because of violence in their homes. (A Report on the National Surveys of Shelters for the Homeless, 1998)

Through these statistics, I can see how domestic violence is a pervasive and institutionalized aspect of our culture. Like Iris Young's article, "Five Faces of Oppression," I would argue that violence is one of the main forms of oppression in our world and would maintain that enduring domestic violence, including physical, emotional, financial, and psychological abuse is one of the most harmful forms of oppression one can experience.

When considering how domestic violence, as a system of oppression, is situated in the lives of women daily, we must remind ourselves that women do not bring about abuse. Rather, abusers bring about abuse by their desire for power and control. A woman never deserves to be battered. No one deserves to be hit.



Women face and must overcome multiple systems of oppression everyday. Oftentimes these systems combine, compliment, and work with one another to greatly reduce and restrict women's ability to enact change in their lives.

Intersecting Forms of Oppression

The women in shelter represent a myriad of people differing in class, race, religion, disability, and ethnicity. While all share the common experience of facing issues of domestic violence, they differ on multiple other levels. Women accessing services from WTCS vary in all facets of life, however, share one common denominator. All are facing other institutionalized systems of oppression along with domestic violence. Thus, we must not only work to eradicate violence in our society but also to remove the other barriers facing women on a daily basis. At the same time, we must remember that even women who intersect on multiple levels of oppression still have very different experiences. Everyone must be treated as an individual and not merely a member of a group.

Much of our training discussion centered on stereotypes and their detrimental affect on women's lives. Instances of psychological oppression, as discussed in class, are evident in the lives of many women at the shelter. The internalization of stereotypes is a significant form of this oppression and serves to confine women to abusive situations. "In sum, then, to be psychologically oppressed is to be caught in the double bind of a society which both affirms my human status and at the same time bars me from the exercise of many of those typically human functions that bestow this status." (Sandra Bartky) Stereotypes, and their perpetuation through other forms of psychological abuse, can often make people internalize such beliefs within themselves. This, unfortunately, is present in almost all domestic violence situations. Too often, physical abuse is coupled with messages of inferiority. After weeks, months, and oftentimes years of being reminded of their worthlessness and lack of value, women begin to internalize and believe these views within themselves.

All of these systems of oppression confine and immobilize women. "The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction." (Marilyn Frye) This restriction also restricts women's choices. Although the concept of making choices, something that most of us do on a day-to-day basis, seems inherent to human nature, it is actually a novel idea for many people. The women at the shelter certainly demonstrate bell hook's view that oppression results when one is left without choices. The type of oppression experienced through the limiting of choices, not only limits one's ability to make choices in the present context but also hinders and restricts one's ability to ever believe that they are capable or should be allowed to make choices for themselves.



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From this training and volunteer opportunity, I have dedicated myself to the following:

- Cultivate an environment of respect toward all living things
- Model non-violent and productive responses to dealing with conflict
- Examine oppression and violence in my own life
- Appreciate all forms of difference
-
- Promote equality

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”

Cherry Hume
Paris Trichter

Overall, I am constantly learning from the women in the shelter. I am encouraged by their strength, supported by their conviction, and amazed by their courage. Many feel that volunteering at a domestic violence shelter would be a depressing experience. Life is what one makes of it, however. If one allows domestic violence to BE one's life and not merely to be an aspect of one's life, change and empowerment cannot occur. If, however, we all commit ourselves to the charge of refusing to accept violence in any form, we can make the world a better place.