

Assessing Social Risks of Battered Women

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The aim of assessing a battered woman's risks is to centralize her safety in the most comprehensive way possible. At its best, effective evaluation of risks for battered women departs from traditional therapeutic models and illuminates the complex network of needs and problems each woman faces. It allows the practitioner and the battered women to address holistically the complicated realities of the woman's experiences and existence. It recognizes that the apparent risks for a battered woman may be only the tip of an iceberg while significant portions of the dangers she faces remain hidden. Although the concept might seem simple, it is not an easy task. Such assessments begin with the individual woman and the immediate circumstances of her abuse, but may end with her extended family living in a village ten thousand miles away.

Risk Assessment that Centralizes Battered Women's Safety

Effective risk assessment must take into account the diverse social factors of a battered woman's life that impact her choices and decisions, especially regarding her experiences of battering. Quite often, these social factors facilitate her safety. However, just as frequently they act as hindrances to securing the same. It is these factors that are of vital interest to the practitioner conducting risk assessment. We have named these invisible hurdles 'social risks.' They include external conditions, pressures, norms, and practices that exacerbate the dangers to a battered woman. It is important to recognize that whether visible to outside observers or not, social risks are real and significant to the individual battered woman.

A practitioner called in to intervene in a battered woman's life attempts to assess her safety needs and chart interventions that would presumably end her abuse. The practitioner then discusses various options with the woman, including civil and criminal legal procedures, and in many cases, tries to persuade her to follow one of these plans. As an example, let us take the case of an African-American woman who calls the police in a rural town. She tells the dispatcher that her partner is chasing her around the house with threats of harm and needs help. She also says that she has been physically abused for the past fifteen years. The dispatcher directs police to her home and they refer her to the local shelter and proceed to record a case that the prosecutor can pursue. The practitioner listens to her story, attempts to determine whether she is in immediate physical danger, and completes an assessment of her situation and the risks of future harm. As the woman works with practitioners on an ongoing basis, she is assisted through the labyrinth of civil and criminal cases against her abuser, divorce proceedings, child custody issues, property settlement, counseling, etc. All the remedies, which have emerged from the initial risk assessment, are expected to keep this particular woman safe. Unfortunately, this evaluation generally is confined to the harm a battered woman faces from her abuser

while the role that social risks play to obstruct her decision of choosing safety is recurrently ignored.

The evaluation of social risks that impede a battered woman's journey to safety should be included routinely in any assessment of her situation. This means that practitioners must be aware of the variety of key social factors in battered women's lives. This knowledge enhances the practitioner's ability to ask critical and insightful questions during assessment and allows her to explore the personal meanings that each obstacle has for individual battered women. For instance, a battered Latina with limited English-speaking ability suddenly recants her complaints against her abuser and decides that she cannot leave him. The decision is extremely puzzling and frustrating to the practitioner who is quite aware of this woman's lack English proficiency and has gone out of her way to arrange for competent translators to help her through the legal proceedings. She has also supported this woman in many other ways. What has gone wrong?

The practitioner has overlooked the magnitude of the influence that the lack of language skills in conjunction with other social risks exerted on this woman's decision making. Negotiating the current legal case may not be her only concern. She may be afraid to live in the United States without the day-to-day help of an adult with adequate command of English. A practitioner who recognizes this social risk will be able to scrutinize the degree to which her limited English influences her choices and decisions. The practitioner can then locate resources that could help this woman overcome the obstacles to leaving her abuser.

The Nature of Social Risks

Social risks do not arise from isolated incidents or experiences. Rather, they are the results of history and simultaneous occurrences, which interact to provoke complicated emotions, attitudes, and perspectives. A woman integrates the collective consciousness of her society and continuum of her own life events into her identity, which in turn affects every facet of her decision making. An appraisal that is conducted to understand even one part of a woman's experience, such as domestic violence, thus must reflect this network of intricacies.

Social risks carry differential value for each woman according to her social circumstances and status. For example, a Native American woman who lives on the reservation and has been drinking alcohol may make quite different decisions about seeking law enforcement help when she is being beaten than might a white suburban wife in similar circumstances. The Native American woman's experiences with the police and courts tell her that law enforcement would probably overlook her abuse and focus on her and her partner's alcohol usage. She may be firmly opposed to getting various other systems involved in her life based not only on her personal experience with domestic violence policies and practices of non-Native organizations, but also those of her community. The white suburban woman may have fears of using the legal system but is in a stronger position to

negotiate something that would be helpful for her. The ways the police, prosecutor, courts, shelter, and advocates view them limits or enhances each woman's ability to negotiate personal choices and decisions concerning their partners' violence.

Both women certainly need intervention. But what types of interventions will work? A practitioner assessing the needs of each woman must evaluate her situation from all possible angles. In the past, what has worked for or against her? How do those past experiences affect her view of the current situation? What could have been done differently? What are her personal and social barriers? What are the dangers that she faces from the battering? What dangers do social risks pose? What would help her to overcome these risks? The assessment that goes into such detail will examine the social risks in each woman's life and their impact on her choices and decisions. It undoubtedly leads to more competent assistance and advocacy.

Assessment of social risks may help in learning more about a woman's survival skills and strengths and how she has used them so far and in prioritizing the difficult areas in her life so that a practitioner truly understands her responses to abuse. For example, a lesbian who is living with her children and a severely abusive partner may decide that she cannot call the police even when she is in grave danger. She bases her decision on her and her community's experiences with the current negative attitudes and punitive practices of various institutions toward same-sex couples. She may consider her personal safety issues to be of less importance than stopping the child protective agency from gaining entry into her life. She knows that once involved, the agency might investigate her for child endangerment, which could ultimately lead to a successful custody claim by her ex-husband. She may also consider that being safe from her partner's abuse is of lower priority than preserving her self-respect by avoiding open ridicule for being a "dyke" by law enforcement personnel. She has somehow dealt with her lover's violence without outside intervention in the past and believes that she can still do so. In her assessment, the practitioner must uncover both the social risks the woman faces and the coping and resistance skills she has developed.

Systems Generated Social Risks

The practices of institutions as the criminal and civil justices systems, the INS, and welfare programs may be viewed as social risks that create systemic and institutional barriers for some women. Although there are numerous instances of misogyny in the policies and practices forged by systems of social management, there are also many strategies designed to help women escape personal violence. While these protective measures have brought about changes, the over-emphasis on a criminal justice response has created and empowered a multiplex of law enforcement agencies and other connected systems such as child protection services that intervene with impunity in communities and families. In communities besieged by highly visible law enforcement patrol, harassment, and detention, such as the African-American and Latino communities, the domestic violence legal response system has not had the same effect it has had in middle-

class white communities. Rather, it has often made battered women from marginalized communities reluctant to seek law enforcement assistance so as not to further imperil the community's tenuous safety.

Some social risks for battered women have been created by policies and practices of institutions that were created to protect society.

The child welfare and protection system in this country has been erected to provide vulnerable infants and children protection from neglect and abuse. However, the institutional policies and practices to defend children have frequently clashed with the interests of battered women as mothers. This is perhaps most true with immigrant, poor, and non-white women (Bhattacharjee, 2001). Charges of neglect and failure to protect against battered women have increased alarmingly in recent years. Although the foster care and judicial systems have frequently failed to provide adequate care for children, mothers have routinely been separated from their children as the systems perceive battered women to be inadequate care providers (Bhattacharjee, 2001). The underlying reasoning is that battered women who do not leave their abusers are consciously jeopardizing the mental health of their children as they are willfully allowing the children to witness family violence.¹

Women, particularly women of African descent, make up the fastest growing group of inhabitants of the U.S. prison industrial complex. Once they are incarcerated, the prison system suppresses the identity of women as mothers and fails to provide them with adequate rehabilitation (Ptacek, 1999). The punitive drug laws and their stringent enforcement in poor communities and communities of color, have resulted in the incarceration of large numbers of pregnant women who are deprived of the right to make decisions about their unborn children's fate. The coordination of child protection, welfare, and legal systems has resulted in categorizing poor women of color as drug abusers and dealers, child abusers, prostitutes, and criminals. The fact that many of the women are coerced into such actions by their batterers is lost as the systems focus on punishment of all transgressors in their war on crimes (Incite!, 2001).

The welfare system also has a legacy of forcing families apart by insisting that fathers or other adult male family members be excluded from the household in order for the women and children to receive financial assistance.

Welfare policies not only penalize intact families, they criminalize poverty and force fathers to "go underground" in order to participate in their children's lives. The system is steeped in policy patterns that cause family separation, require work for non-sustaining wages, influence reproductive choices, and exacerbate conflicts and social readjustment

¹ Cheves, J. (January 3, 2002). "Judge fines women who return to their alleged abusers." Herald-Leader, Lexington, KY
(www.kentuckyconnect.com/heraldleader/news/010302/localdocs/03domes)

problems in women's lives. Thus rather than a facilitator of safety, the system itself becomes a social risk in many battered women's decision to end abuse.

A Model of Analysis

An effective risk evaluation cannot only analyze the personal violence of the abuser, but must include socio-cultural practices, beliefs, and institutional responses that constitute social risks in a battered woman's life. It is only by understanding the web of social risks in addition to the direct risk of violence which a victim faces that we can provide safety and seek accountability for her. When a practitioner searches in depth for such social risks and looks for ways to mitigate them, the woman in turn can examine the meanings that these risks hold for her as an individual. An example of a South Asian battered woman may illustrate this point.

Saira, a Muslim woman from India, has been battered by her spouse and his family since the day she was married. Saira's husband and his family live in an extended household in a large U.S. metropolitan area. Saira works in a fast-food restaurant but is forced to hand over her paychecks to her mother-in-law. She has been hospitalized twice due to their abuse and is in contact with the local Masjid and South Asian women's organization. Saira is firm in her decision not to call the police or take any other steps to escape the abuse. She says that her in-laws have threatened to ruin her reputation in her village in India if she tries to seek a protective order or leave her marriage.

The practitioner may assess the direct risk of violence that Saira faces at the hands of her abusers, but she also needs to understand how Saira's immigration status, religion, race, class, financial insolvency, language skills, fear of and unfamiliarity with law enforcement, and the concern about living alone are factors that contribute to her vulnerability to violence. In addition to these social risks, the real or perceived repercussions that a tainted reputation would have on Saira and her natal family, as well as the difficulty of securing religious divorce under Islamic law, have to be taken into account. In addition to appraising the violence that Saira endures in the family, the practitioner might ask her a series of questions.

- How do you think these various forces (e.g., immigration, religion, lack of finances, racism, natal family, limited English proficiency, law enforcement, a jeopardized reputation in your village, community where you live, the prospect of living alone in the U.S.) affect your life?
- What do they stop you from doing?
- If leaving your spouse is the only way you can be safe, how have these forces kept you from doing so? What needs to change or be put into place to leave as safely as possible?
- What roles do other family members play in the abuse? In your safety?
- Who in your family is a support system for you?

- What systems or cultural aspects affect you most deeply (e.g., immigration laws, religion, socialization, fear of social ostracism, fear of getting involved with the police and courts)? In what ways do they affect you?
- Has your abuser ever used these factors to intimidate you? In what way?

In addition, the practitioner needs to elicit other information:

- How have the various systems such as immigration, law enforcement, courts, medical services, and shelter responded to Saira in the past? How have these responses affected her?
- How will Saira, a Muslim immigrant woman from the Third World, be treated in the U.S.? How will the racism and xenophobia embedded in society hurt her?
- What needs to change systemically for Saira to feel safe?
- What policies, laws, and enforcement protocols combined with social beliefs could facilitate safety for battered women like Saira?

Each of the social factors above can be mapped to develop a comprehensive understanding of whether these encourage or deter Saira from choosing safety and the magnitude of their impact in her life. These

factors then can be prioritized in terms of personal importance, creating a clear diagram for the practitioner and Saira to work on. In the graphic, the direction of the arrows indicates whether the factor's influence is positive (pulling Saira away from the situation) or negative (pushing her to remain where she is) and the length of the arrow represents the strength of its impact. The

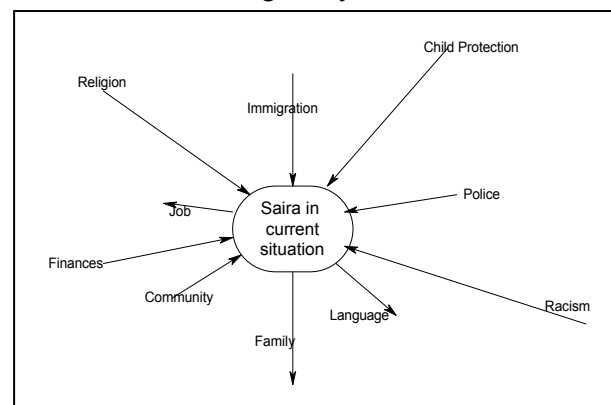


diagram helps create a framework for safety planning or writing a report regarding safety concerns about a case. Although the practitioner might decide to address certain social risks directly (for example, contacting a woman's family members to discuss the situation) she may also strategize to enhance the positive factors to dilute the effects of the negative ones.

Intimate violence is only one part of women's total experience in society. Societal, institutional, and cultural knowledge that women gain individually, communally, and historically intertwine with their experiences of domestic abuse and affect their choices and decisions regarding safety. Cultural, legal, and social norms that are misogynist and exploitative impact battered women's lives in profound ways to create social risks that decidedly thwart their struggles for safety. Especially for women who are marginalized in society, vulnerable to abuse, or in need of long-term care or innovative interventions and advocacy, the systems have more authority to decide the course of actions in their lives than do the women themselves. This is where an assessment can underscore the social risks battered women grapple with on a daily basis.

A Visual Image of Social Risks

Often, it is easier to understand concepts that are presented graphically. We have tried to do so with the concept of social risks. We can conceive of social risks as bricks of concentric walls that encircle the battered woman, keeping her confined in the status quo. The closest wall of social risks may consist of immediate pressures that a woman has to deal with. The second wall is the institutional policies and practices, and the third comprises of cultural issues and social attitudes that are more amorphous than the previous two.

Circle I: Immediate Personal Risks

Homelessness
Financial responsibility for family
Drug addiction
Charge of domestic abuse
Other criminal charges
Poverty
Lack of skills and education
Sexual identity
Age
Abilities
Language

Circle II: Institutional Risks

Child protection service
Criminal justice system
Immigration status
Civil justice system
Law enforcement (e.g., INS, border patrol, local police, prosecution)
Transnational laws
Federal laws impacting tribal laws
Social service (welfare)

Circle III: Cultural Risks

Religion
Nationality
Class
Responsibility for family honor and integrity
Cultural norms and standards
Childhood socialization
Race

Social Risks

Social Risks



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