CREATING SUSTAINABLE SAFETY FOR BATTERED WOMEN[1]

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The New World Dictionary of the American Language defines safety as the quality or condition of being free of danger, injury, or damage. It implies security, protection, and well-being. For a battered woman, who routinely lives in a state of coercion, threat, and hurt, safety involves both protection from immediate physical risk and a broader notion of preserving psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual (or comprehensive) integrity. For her, safety means reclaiming her wholeness of spirit, mind, and body that violence has shattered. Safety is not monolithic, but is complicated by factors such as a woman's race, class, sexuality, ability, and residency status. Safety for battered women usually expands beyond self to encompass others: children, loved relatives, friends, neighbors, pets, and even the abuser. Safety that is created for battered women (the condition of being free of danger, injury, or damage) must be transformed from immediate protection to long-term and sustainable safety—that is, *independent of others' facilitation* and *under her control.*

INTRODUCTION

Safety planning is a familiar term to almost all advocates of battered women. Traditionally, the focus of a safety plan is to develop strategies to enhance a woman's physical safety, and ultimately, help a woman escape or leave a violent relationship.[2]

Interventions in domestic violence situations are pivoted on the idea of creating safety for battered women and their children. Safety planning is nearly always placed at the center of all advocacy and systems change interventions. New advocates are insistently taught that victim[3] safety must be <u>the most</u> important concern in their work. Yet, we have only begun to recognize that safety cannot be arranged formulaically. What might appear to be definite safety—such as a woman leaving an abuser—may not translate to actual safety for all victims. In fact, we now know that the period around separation from the abuser may be the most hazardous time for some battered women.[4]

A poor woman in India who lived in a shantytown once taught me an important lesson about safety. This woman supported her entire family on a meager maid's income. Her partner was unemployed, contributed little to the family, and beat her up almost every day. She was smart, courageous, and resourceful; yet, chose to stay with her abuser. When I encouraged her to leave the relationship and promised her my support during the process, she remarked that at least in her

[2] J. Davies (1994).
[3] I have deliberately used the terms 'victim' and 'woman' interchangeably to highlight the gendered nature of domestic violence.
[4] D. G. Saunders, & A. Browne (2000).

current relationship she was safe because only <u>one</u> man was abusing her. If she left him and became an unaccompanied woman on the streets, she would become an open target to many. Then, how would she achieve safety for the rest of her life?

This wise woman helped me realize that safety has different meanings, both emotional and practical, for different women, according to the specific position each occupies in society by virtue of her race, class, ability, sexuality, residency status, etc. These factors unavoidably interact with each other to influence the circumstances of safety in a battered woman's life. Just as acts of domestic violence do not occur in a vacuum, safety without a context is a myth.

Understandably, concern for victim safety often leads interveners to focus narrowly on imminent physical danger. In most cases of domestic violence, we urgently want to protect the victim from serious injuries, find her food and shelter, and take care of her essential needs. As a consequence, advocates' and interveners' work becomes confined to <u>crisis intervention</u>. Although many advocates recognize that tending to a victim's immediate needs will not keep her safe over time, the sheer volume of incoming cases hardly permits us to go beyond the here and now. Facilitating a victim's move towards permanent safety requires an extreme amount of time and energy: resources that advocates, who can barely make the jump from crisis to crisis, lack badly. To complicate matters, funders customarily consider numbers to be an indicator of success of our work and, by extension, their funding decisions. The higher the number of victims we work with, the greater our accomplishments. Thus, the institutions of funding also funnel our work towards crisis intervention.

Separating a battered woman from her abuser is frequently considered the key intervention strategy because we believe that separation instantaneously stops the violence she experiences. Naturally, it limits the batterer's access to her. We ask her to call the police, leave, and enter a shelter—often in that order. We sometimes involve the state systems in order to make quick changes in the battered woman's life by removing and/or punishing the batterer, which is generally equated to the woman becoming safe. While the abuse stops immediately and the woman is safer when the police remove a batterer from his home, her safety may be temporary and brief. This woman's action of calling the police may instigate violence from a variety of other forces in her life. For example, her community (that has been experiencing immigration raids and police brutality) may turn on her; she may fall victim to violence from the batterer's family (or even her

own) for compromising family honor; she may face deportation as her undocumented status is revealed; and her clergy may excommunicate her for deciding to separate. Thus, battered women's safety is created not only by ending abuse in the present situation, but also by ending all future victimization.

The objective of this paper is to complicate our notion of safety by exploring various facets of the concept. My goal here is to challenge the traditional idea of safety and move it towards a more multi-dimensional definition. Whether we are assessing risks, advocating for an individual, making policies, or evaluating programs, thinking *critically* and *broadly* about women's safety undoubtedly enhances the effectiveness of our work on behalf of battered women.

LIMITATIONS OF CONVENTIONAL SAFETY PLANNING

The majority of domestic violence interveners are compelled to limit their work to immediate risk management. Ending the threat of immediate physical violence involves protection, which is generated by actions that are defensive and reactive. Protecting a battered woman might save her from being hurt, but it will not encourage an atmosphere in which she can grow freely and have viable choices. A more holistic concept of safety encompasses not only the battered woman, but also her children, family, pets, neighbors, and friends—concentric circles of relationships that surround and nourish her. In contrast to protection, safety in its truest form is not dependent on the actions of other individuals, advocacy agencies, state systems, or sympathetic relatives. It is under the control of the battered woman and allows her autonomy and energy for intellectual, psychological, and spiritual development. Being safe carries a much greater significance than being protected.

Creating an individualized safety plan is crucial to advocacy. "A safety plan is an individualized plan battered women develop to reduce the risks they and their children face."[5] To minimize risks of violence, the battered woman and her advocate develop a plan that may include getting a protection order, moving to a shelter, participating in the prosecution of the batterer, filing a self-petition to secure permanent residency, getting a divorce, seeking supervised visitation for the children, asking friends and neighbors to look out for the abuser coming around, and

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[5] J. Davies (1997).

talking to family members. The majority of these strategies are directed at keeping the *individual* woman and her children safe from *immediate physical harm*.

Although domestic violence practitioners in all fields work toward creating safety for victims, they do not necessarily agree on the best way to keep a battered woman and her children safe. Not only do their points of view diverge from each other but their opinions might also differ sharply from the victim's. Frequently, intervention workers approach women's safety from their own singular perspectives that, not surprisingly, emerge from the organization of their work. For instance, a police officer might view safety as achieved when a battered woman calls 911, an immigration attorney might believe a battered woman's safety lies in securing permanent residency, a prosecutor might see vigorous prosecution of the abuser as yielding the greatest safety, and an advocate might view safety as achieved when the woman decides to leave her abusive partner. Contrary to these options, a battered woman might believe that her safety can only be secured when she learns to drive; gets a job; and her in-laws, religious leaders of her community, and her parents collaborate to make her abusive husband sign a "peace bond."[6] These choices, extremely meaningful to the battered woman, may seem inadequate, if not futile, to other interveners.

WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?

Even though practitioners and advocates might differ on the methods of keeping a battered woman safe, they generally concur on the fundamental goal of their efforts: ensuring the physical safety of battered women and their children. Unquestionably, a battered woman wants to end the violence in her life. However, the cessation of violence is not where her needs end.

> Coomi,[7] a Hmong immigrant, followed her husband to the US with her two young children. However, before her immigration status became permanent, her husband died in a car accident. Assuming that it would be extremely difficult to live alone in a new country, Coomi's parents arranged her marriage with a young Hmong man living in the US with the understanding that she would sponsor him for immigration. Although Coomi had not received her permanent "green card" yet, she was permitted to work. After they started to live together, Coomi's second

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[6] A "peace bond" is a no-violence contract fashioned by the significant people in the lives of the battered woman and the batterer. It is signed by the batterer and is morally binding, if not legally. It obligates the sponsors to monitor transgressions by the batterer and take agreed-upon actions upon violation. Many religious and ethnic communities utilize such bonds to protect battered women.

[7] The story of *Coomi* is a composite of experiences of many immigrant women from visible minority groups.

husband did not allow her to talk to their neighbors, attend ESL classes, or look for a job. He said that as a man, it is his responsibility to provide for his family and that Coomi should stay home to teach her children their traditions and culture. Likewise, he does not want the children to attend school for fear they will learn "nasty American ways."

Her husband shoves, pushes, and slaps Coomi nearly every day and frequently beats her up quite badly. Coomi is not fluent in English and her only solace is a monk of a small Buddhist temple 50 miles away. She does not want to call 911 since one frightening racist and xenophobic experience when the police stopped and questioned her after a robbery in a grocery store in which she was shopping. Nor does she want to break up her family when the children are just getting to be fond of their new father. Coomi believes her Hmong community would not support her decision to leave her husband either, as many women are in similar relationships. Her parents are ready to "do something" to stop him from hurting her, but forbid her to walk out of the marriage. After one severe beating, Coomi called the local shelter and the advocate, who barely understood her, assessed that, her risk of getting seriously hurt is very high. The advocate suggested that she get a protection order, leave her abuser, and move to the shelter with her children. Coomi said that this was not possible. Instead, she asked the advocate to help expedite her "green card"; find her a job, money, and a school for her children; help her develop the support of her community and parents; and gain admission into a community college.

Coomi's story illustrates that to understand safety from a battered woman's perspective, we need to go beyond immediate risk assessment and crisis management. Coomi's needs are complex, seemingly contradictory, and at times, exceed the parameters of the advocate's duties. For example, Coomi does not want to call the police or leave her batterer, two actions that might immediately make her safe. Instead, she wants to finalize her residency status, find financial stability, secure her children's future through education, and ensure familial and community support. These may not directly assure her safety, but have tremendous bearing on Coomi's decision to escape abuse.

Abraham Maslow's theory of needs[8] might shed some light here. Maslow proposed a hierarchical pyramid of needs with five rungs. From the lowest to the highest—or the base of the pyramid to the top—these are: (1) Physiological needs (e.g., freedom from hunger, thirst, physical pain), (2) Safety and security needs (e.g., freedom from persecution, intimidation, threats, fear), (3) Love and belonging needs (e.g., establishing positive affectionate relationships, stability of emotions), (4) Esteem needs (e.g., establishing respect in self and from others, social acceptance

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[8] A. H. Maslow (1968).

and regard), and (5) Self-actualization (e.g., nurturing self-development, creativity, growth). The lower-order needs are associated with the body of the organism and are based on <u>deficits</u>. When deprived, human beings concentrate on satisfying these physical needs and are unable to progress towards the higher-order psychological needs. The psychological needs are also called <u>growth</u> needs that culminate in self-actualization, a level at which an individual thinks beyond fulfilling mere deficits and progresses towards realizing his/her human potential. The deficit needs are immediate, one-dimensional, and short-term while the growth needs are complex, multi-dimensional, and long-term.

Frequently, intervention strategies with battered women at the institutional level are constructed to deal with their deficit needs. As interveners, we may believe that our task is to make sure that a battered woman is physically safe and secure right now. However, in addition to bodily integrity, a battered woman may want to be cherished by her family, respected by the community, become a productive member of society, and have an opportunity to live with dignity and honor. In our endeavors to attain security, meeting the deficit needs of battered women plays a much larger role than fulfilling growth needs. However, we must ask ourselves: Which one brings lasting safety to battered women?

EXPANDING THE PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S SAFETY

Although difficult, establishing truly comprehensive and sustainable safety for women is an attainable ambition. However, it does necessitate a paradigm shift on our part. While we need not reject the notion of immediate physical safety of battered women, we must expand it to include other dimensions that lead to reliable and enduring safety.

It might be helpful for practitioners and advocates to explore and extend the concept of safety along the following dimensions: (1) Temporality, (2) Totality, (3) Collectivity, and (4) Stability. Effective safety planning must incorporate the above dimensions in such a way that a battered woman is able to not only secure immediate safety but also maintain that safety over time and situations.

DIMENSIONS OF SAFETY

1. Temporality: Immediate, Short-, & Long-term

If a woman refuses to leave her abuser, we have had few options to offer her and even fewer resources to mobilize in her aid. Indeed, in terms of safety, what can we really do when a battered woman continues to live with her abusive partner? Clearly, it is important that we reserve resources specifically for women who decide to remain in their abusive relationships, regardless of their reasons. We might use those resources, with the woman's permission, to alert her neighbors, family members, and religious leaders to keep an eye on her; engage community elders in warning the abuser to end violence; and develop a safety plan that might entail something as simple as staying at a sister's home when tension in her home builds; and turning a specific light on or making a telephone call at a pre-arranged time to indicate crisis/safety.

To move from immediate to <u>short-term</u> safety may mean finding income, housing, health-care, and education for a battered woman and her children. It might entail teaching the woman how to drive, speak English, send letters home, and connect her to a group of friends. Each of these opportunities may ultimately empower women to find safety in their own terms.

Beyond immediate and short-term safety is <u>long-term</u> security. Long-term safety can only be ensured through broader social changes in laws, institutional policies and practices, community attitudes and actions, and through the mobilization of caring people.[9] Long-term safety takes into account not just how dangerous an individual batterer is (immediate safety) and the material circumstances of an individual woman's life (short-term safety), it takes into consideration how a woman's social condition affects her vulnerability to men's violence. Examples of such conditions are her immigration status, relationship to her religion, ability, class, and race status in society, etc.

To preserve safety over a length of time, we have to involve a battered woman's community. The community agencies, institutions, and systems that surround a woman either centralize or marginalize her safety. An evaluation of how institutions and agencies are organized and prepared to respond to domestic violence would indicate to us how a battered woman would fare in the long run. Consider, for example, a battered woman who works for a local industry. Our advocacy efforts can facilitate this company deciding to articulate a clear "no tolerance of domestic violence" philosophy, provide strong security for victims inside and outside the workplace, and

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[9] J. Herman (1992).

establish a domestic violence education and resource center on the premises. The company might even go one step further and institute policies to hold accountable employees who batter. Indisputably, such proactive actions would help make all employees safe, but would also stimulate changes in the larger community to make the condition of all women safer.

2. *Totality: Limited & Comprehensive*

Safety could also be considered on the dimension of totality, which may range from limited to comprehensive. The <u>limited</u> view of safety concentrates mainly on bodily integrity. As discussed earlier, although ending physical vulnerability is fundamental to safety, it does not affect the totality of women's experiences of abuse. While it is true that physical mistreatment is the most visible and has the potential of causing disfigurement and death, battered women often speak of psychological, emotional, economic, and spiritual violence as even more insidious and damaging. Abuse shatters a victim's body along with her mind, spirit, and emotions. A focus on <u>comprehensive</u> safety would involve a consideration of physical safety but also the psychological, emotional, economic, and spiritual integrity of women.

> Establishing safety begins by focusing on control of the body and gradually moves outward toward control of the environment. Issues of bodily integrity include attention to basic health needs, regulation of bodily functions such as sleep, eating, and exercise, management of post-traumatic symptoms, and control of self-destructive behaviors. Environmental issues include the establishment of a safe living situation, financial security, mobility, and a plan for self-protection that encompasses the *full range* of the [patient's] daily life (p. 160).[10] (*Italics mine*)

Comprehensive safety may entail acknowledgement of a battered woman's experiences of violence by community, church, family, and friends. A common dynamic of domestic violence is isolation of the victim, a loss of her connections to resources that sustain her emotionally and spiritually, and humiliation of her as a person. To counteract the breakdown of self that battering has triggered, important entities in a victim's life must not only validate her experiences, but also actively come forward to support her. For instance, a battered woman's family may ask her forgiveness for overlooking her recurrent black eyes; her neighbors may express regret that they have ignored noises of abuse coming out of her apartment; and her pastor may apologize that he has silenced her with his lack of knowledge about domestic violence. All may pledge that from now on, they will look out for her and her children and celebrate her as a respected and valuable

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[10] Ibid.

member in their circles. By helping the significant sources of support in a battered woman's life recognize her as a worthy and complex person with varied needs and engaging them in her recovery, advocates shift a limited perspective on safety to a comprehensive one.

3. Collectivity: Individual & Others

Advocates and practitioners make the first commitment of safety to <u>individual</u> battered women, the primary victims of battering. However, battered women themselves are often equally, if not more, concerned about the safety of their children and <u>others</u>. Although safekeeping of children is vital, it is not without controversy. An example is the conflict of goals of child protective services (CPS) and anti-domestic violence agencies.

CPS workers have traditionally asserted that the most helpless victims of domestic violence are the children.[11] Even if children are not physically abused, the scars of witnessing violence can leave profound and devastating effects on them.[12] Thus, at times, CPS has threatened to or actually removed children from battered women's custody by charging the mothers with "failure to protect."[13] Conversely, battered women and their advocates have argued that by their actions, CPS is re-victimizing the victims. Battered mothers routinely make strategic decisions to keep their children safe, one of which may be not to leave the abuser. Actually, children and mothers' safety is integrally related. By removing the children from the only home they know, CPS causes children psychological damage and breaks the bond of mother-child relationship. CPS and battered women's advocates have only recently begun to dialogue on this issue.[14]

Women often consider children to be extensions of their selves and fiercely protect them. Many battered mothers around the world routinely sacrifice their own safety to prevent their children from being hurt. Battered women are also frequently worried about the safety of many others: immediate family members, pets, friends, and neighbors. Many of us know at least one anecdote of a battered woman refusing to take self-protective actions because someone else would be left vulnerable to the abuser's violence. We know or have heard of women who decline to enter a shelter without their pets, or others who seek a protective order in fear that the abuser will take

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[11] This is an example of how the organization of job parameters dictates practitioners' focus on safety.

[12] See, E. Peled (1996); J. R. Kolbo, E. H. Blakely, & D. Engleman (1996); K. Henning, H. Leitenberg, P. Coffey, T. Turner, & R. T. Bennett (1996); J. L. Edleson (1999).

[13] For a comprehensive background, see, L. Y. Aron, & K. K. Olson (1997).

[14] See, J. Carter, & S. Schechter (1997); D. G. Saunders (1998); L. Spears (2000).

revenge on another family member. Thus, when designing a safety plan for a battered woman and her children, it is imperative that advocates and practitioners keep in sight the security of other loved ones.

4. Stability: Transitory & Sustainable

In crisis intervention, often the safety that we achieve is <u>transitory</u>. Since advocates and practitioners facilitate this safety, it may be dependent on them and end up being provisional. The goal of effective intervention must be to transfer the control of this safety to battered women. A battered woman must be independently able to maintain the safety she attains at the time of initial intervention. Safety is <u>sustainable</u> only when it is under the control of the battered woman.

Many battered women perceive their abuse as a personal problem and a private matter. Society also continues to reinforce this notion of privacy of intimate abuse. However, such individualization often leads to paralyzing helplessness and vulnerability; by remaining isolated, each battered woman fails to connect her situation to a larger socio-political condition. When women understand their experiences of battering in terms of history and gender, they become empowered and the possibility of a movement becomes real. Thus, to make safety sustainable, advocates must deconstruct the myth of individual battering and help victims recognize their connections to the local and global community of women. Through such empowerment, a battered woman can take back the control of her safety and life.

Sustainable safety is a complex phenomenon. It makes available to battered women 'social capital':[15] relational, structural, and institutional arrangements that enable individuals and groups to achieve their objectives. In this case, safety that can be maintained by battered women themselves. Safety is sustainable only when it is long-term (the social conditions that lead to women's vulnerability are removed), comprehensive (involving physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual safety), and collective (involving the safety of significant others in a battered woman's life). Ultimately, sustainable safety is contingent upon the strengthening of women's internal capacity through empowerment.

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[15] For a detailed explanation of 'Social Capital', see, D. Narayan (1997).

CONCLUSION

Up to now, the main problem in understanding safety has been that we tend to define it in terms of what we do (i.e., protection) than what battered women need (i.e., sustainable safety). This discussion underscores the importance of broadening our definition of safety. Whether we are advocating for the individual or working on policies and practices, it is important to examine critically our working concept of safety. We need to ask ourselves: Does what we do make a battered woman safe, and for how long? Also, once we reach a semblance of safety through collaborative intervention work, will a battered woman be able to sustain it after interveners withdraw? Does the safety we achieve make her feel dissatisfied because it is narrow and leaves out important others in her life? The four dimensions elaborated above provide a foundation for the response.

Safety is a state of being—of being free from intimidation, danger, risk, and injury. It is being free from a partner's (and others') coercion, threats, and assaults and, at the same time, it is much more than that. It is the ability to sustain this freedom beyond crisis and live with honor and dignity. Safety must not be dependent on someone's judgment of our worthiness or deservingness, nor someone's continued assistance. We must claim it as a right for ourselves as well as of others.

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