

Reflections on An Intimate Partner Violence Social Action Project - Connect and Change

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As Director of Connect and Change, a project for women who have left abusive relationships, I'm glad to consider here my experience in this role, what I've learned from the women participating, and the social workers volunteering with this project. As October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, it is a meaningful time for reflection.

Begun in 2004, first as a social action project of the Women's Therapy Centre Institute, and later as an independent program, Connect and Change offers women survivors of intimate partner violence, who are unable to afford long-term therapy, the opportunity to receive ongoing psychotherapy support. Each social worker provides pro bono therapy with one woman, and is committed to offering connection, support, and a context for healing and moving toward the experience of greater safety and empowerment. Beyond changing a woman's life, this support can also have a powerful and positive impact on the children within a woman's family, who have lived through such violent relationships.

The women who participate in the project are diverse across nationality, ethnic and racial group, class, and immigrant status, and include being gay, lesbian, and trans. Therapists at Connect and Change not only have experience as seasoned clinicians, working with survivors of trauma, more importantly, they also have a



strong social justice commitment, responding to women who feel marginalized, who are dealing with the many social inequities, and are without economic access to long-term support. While social services exist for women in crisis, and who are at shelters and related social services programs, once a woman is on her own, there is no affordable long-term support. I've worked in agencies and have seen the need for therapy able to extend beyond crisis or short-term availability.

At monthly supervision groups, we address the intersection of issues and contexts framing intimate partner violence, considering theoretical and clinical literature, as we discuss our work. We also focus on supporting one another, given the significant impact of such trauma work.

My role includes supervision of therapists, active outreach to engage social service programs and community groups, as well as recruitment and screening of therapists and clients for the program. In addition to the psychodynamic support and psychoeducation offered, we support women in negotiating the numerous medical, housing, legal, and financial realities they face. Having lived through experiences related to a variety of these issues and having grown up in a family and neighborhood with few resources and little or no access to such dignified services early on, I eventually received important support from social work therapists. I have become an advocate, committed to respond to people who are without services, and to provide services which are respectful. Connect and Change is a way to provide this to others.

My political involvement over the years supports this. From this perspective, the project is a way to give back, to help empower the next person, to offer services that are respectful. My faith, in therapy after abuse, is based on the relational connection, and the experience of someone developing confidence in one's capacities to survive. I have learned a great deal from women in the program, living in our society which blames them and asks why they didn't get out of their relationship sooner. As the women develop a deeper understanding of the bigger picture, of what this abuse is about, they can more deeply consider the many reasons why - from having no resources or supports, and such low self-esteem after experiencing years of violence, to feeling alone, the only one, and that everything must be their fault. When given the opportunity and access for

support, the women are ready to engage and open to the experience and its challenges. I have seen so many women grow, become more available to offer nurturing care to their children, to experience remarkable accomplishments in their own lives. I have learned a great deal from the social workers, supporting the authenticity and openness they bring to their work, and experiencing their growing commitment to future work in support of trauma survivors of intimate partner violence. Through the supervision group, given the vicarious trauma experienced, support is shared as someone may feel a hopelessness mirroring the hopelessness of the woman with whom they so closely engage, or they become nearly as afraid as that woman is. In offering support and context that it's not hopeless, that more help, more time, more psycho-education is possible, and that their support and their relationship can have an impact, we are all able to move forward with hope and trust in survival.

Over these 15 years as Director of Connect and Change, I have been motivated and sustained by the resilience and growth of both the women participating and the therapists working at the project. Given the times we live in, with so few resources for survivors of intimate partner violence, Connect and Change can help in this small way. We hope the project can serve as a model and can engage other social workers to develop new initiatives.

Connect and Change welcomes social workers who wish to volunteer:
212.414.9677 / 212.460.8070.

Intimate Partner Violence Resources: New York City Anti-Violence Project, 24/7 bilingual English-Spanish hotline: 212.714.1141 For LGBTQ and HIV-affected survivors of all forms of violence, including Intimate Partner Violence