

Sharing Our Expertise Through Peer Support

by Teresa Andreychuk

Au "Independent Living Resource Centre" de Winnipeg au Manitoba, les femmes atteintes d'un handicap se prennent en main et revendiquent leurs compétences en matière d'abus. En se basant sur une philosophie qui prône l'indépendance et une méthodologie de partage avec leurs pairs, ces femmes définissent et partagent leurs expériences d'abus afin de se sentir moins seules et moins vulnérables. De plus, elles examinent le caractère unique de leurs expériences en tant que femmes atteintes d'un handicap. L'auteure explique d'abord comment le groupe a commencé et par la suite, elle parle des sentiments que les femmes atteintes d'un handicap ressentent face au processus de soutien entre pairs, plus particulièrement en ce qui concerne les barrières et les différences auxquelles ces femmes sont confrontées.

Women with disabilities at the Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC) in Winnipeg have been meeting weekly as a peer support group to increase awareness, share experiences, and provide mutual support about issues of abuse in their lives.

This article reflects the words and experiences of ten women with disabilities who, with the support of two co-facilitators, had the courage and honesty to come forward and share their collective wisdom. We spent several hours talking about what *they* wanted to say, and I hope that this is an accurate reflection of the discussions. Their thoughts provided the basis for this article and certainly add a great deal to the monologue about how—technically—things got going.

Why peer support?

Peer support is a powerful means of learning through the sharing of experiences. This sharing, among those who share similar backgrounds or disabilities or experiences, can be implemented one-on-one, in small groups, or in larger groups. These peer matches may be around a specific issue, such as support during a pregnancy, or of a more general nature, such as support for people managing their own attendant care. The peer support may be formal, as was the case of this particular group, or informal, which happens a lot over coffee at the centre. Accordingly, the peer support matches last for different, and sometimes indeterminate, periods of time.

Many times, peer support is of mutual benefit to all parties involved. This is very different from the traditional "expert/professional-client" relationship that many of the women were usually engaged in.

Getting started with peer support on abuse

Although the ILRC routinely incorporates peer support into many of its programs, we were a bit concerned about how to safely provide peer support on issues of abuse.

At the time, we seemed to be envisioning more of an abuse "counselling" or "therapy" group, and weren't sure that we had the expertise to lead such a group as we were (and are) not qualified abuse counsellors. Someone pointed out to us that in peer support, no one is really any more qualified or expert than anyone else. Women mentioned things like: "I know it will be difficult, but it's worth the risk," "I like that there isn't an expert here—it's less intimidating," and "Everyone shares an equal risk in keeping things confidential." We were then able to view this as a shared risk-taking opportunity, which seemed to be more manageable. These thoughts reminded us that we were there to facilitate sharing, not to protect people from feeling and being.

We got started by contacting women who had mentioned the need for this kind of peer support. Running the group was viewed as an opportunity to research the best strategies and techniques for doing group peer support on abuse in the future. We offered an eight to ten session "Women's Peer Support Group on Abuse" which was open to any woman with a disability who had experienced any type of abuse in her life. Support was available to those requiring sign interpretation, attendant care, transportation subsidies, etc. Response was significant and quick. In a short period of time, we had the names of ten interested and available women, which we felt was the maximum we could accommodate in one group, so no external advertising of the group was necessary.

Group meetings

The group meets weekly in the evenings at the ILRC. Due to the relatively small size of the community of people with disabilities, we did offer the possibility of alternate space outside of the ILRC, but the ILRC was seen as being safe enough for everyone. The ten women bring a variety of different disabilities, which they have lived with for different amounts of their lives, as well as a variety of experiences with abuse. We felt that this would offer some unique perspectives and education about the influence of different kinds of disabilities or limitations and about different types of abuse.

The group was seen as a chance to increase awareness about abuse, to share experiences about abuse and its effects, to share

coping and healing strategies, and to provide support to each other. Additionally, we (as facilitators) saw it as a chance to learn more about the unique aspects of experiencing abuse related to having a disability.

The women decided on an approach that would combine presentations of educational or awareness raising information (much of it from the general women's community) with the unique insights from the participating women. This set the stage for the opportunity to build an understanding of the social and political context of abuse and violence against women

disability such as extra vulnerability, dependence, learned helplessness, and perceived (by others) lack of sexuality was also a key area. A look at the social, political, and economic position of women, and particularly of women with disabilities, was seen as a foundation and logical starting place.

Initial discussions also included sharing expectations of the group, so that we could identify those which we thought could realistically be met within the parameters of the group. Some of the expectations were specific to abuse such as learning more about different kinds of

for women with disabilities, everyone had something to share, and a number of "themes" or commonalities emerged. The first had to do with the opportunity to participate. One woman began by talking about the fact that there are lots of groups for women, but none in the community for women with disabilities. And, it's pretty rare that notices of these meetings are passed around to women with disabilities, particularly those with psychiatric disabilities.

Also, they pointed out that many of the groups are held in places that are not accessible or are hard to get to. Some-

Inviting a woman with a disability to join in a group without providing supports essential to her participation is like saying your presence is really not important or "you're not welcome here."

with additional issues related specifically to being a woman with a disability. From the very beginning, both aspects, being a woman and being a woman with a disability, were seen as equally powerful factors in feelings of vulnerability and the experience of abuse.

Topics and expectations

The initial meeting was spent setting guidelines for the group, defining topics to cover, talking about expectations, and getting to know each other. The guidelines were basic, and included respecting confidentiality, respecting experiences, not minimizing one's own or someone else's experiences, not feeling pressured to talk, and talking only if you wanted to.

The topics to be covered in the sessions included a chance to discuss each of the different types of abuse, such as physical, psychological, emotional, and verbal abuse, sexual abuse and sexual assault, date rape, neglect, financial abuse or exploitation, and domestic violence. This was viewed as a chance to examine some of the myths and realities of abuse, from a women's perspective and from a disability perspective. Other topics covered how to deal with abuse, self-care, self-protection, and coping strategies. Topics of self-esteem, self-confidence, and trust were also identified as important to touch upon. Looking at some of the unique aspects of

abuse or learning more about people who abuse. Others talked about sharing as a way of knowing that we are not alone, or as seeing what others have had to put up with. Expectations were also related to self-development, such as learning to trust more, and feeling better about oneself. Some women also hoped for a more "political" focus, in terms of empowering oneself and other women, or learning that the personal is political.

Other expectations included the opportunity to talk about sex and the image of the person with a disability, and to search for commonality—knowing that people would understand. Finally, there was the desire for a woman's group where we could get together and talk about experiences. An overall expectation was to get (and hopefully give) support.

It is interesting to note that some of the expectations or needs are not specifically related to the experience of abuse. These are related to areas which are more commonly discussed in generic women's groups, but which are sometimes not viewed as being relevant in the lives of women with disabilities, such as sexuality or relationships.

Why for women with disabilities?

When we asked group members about why they saw a peer support group on abuse as important, and why specifically

times, even when you phone ahead, they say the place is accessible, but when you get there, stairs keep you out, or you can't get into the bathroom. People don't mean to mislead you, they just don't know what to look for. Accommodating special needs, such as inability to attend all meetings due to health limitations, freedom to move around at meetings in order to be more physically comfortable, or adjusting meeting times and lengths to meet energy/exhaustion levels, can present greater opportunities to attend.

The availability of supports is also an important factor. Different women agreed that inviting a woman with a disability to join in a group without providing (or thinking of) supports essential to her participation is like subtly saying your presence is really not important or "you're not welcome here." Even if it's not blatant, the message is the same. Something as simple as whether or not a woman can afford the cost of bus transportation to get to the meetings and home again is often overlooked. A number of women agreed that when you can't afford it, or have to always explain or get medical notes, you feel badly about yourself. And, this sure doesn't help someone whose self-esteem is already low.

Another noted that it is a big step to join in any group, and if you feel and look different, it's that much harder. Everyone agreed that there is lot more sharing (in

the current group) because of common or similar experiences. This led into discussion of how it feels to be one woman with a disability in a group of non-disabled women. The consensus was that you feel out of place. Why? Because you can't relate or can't comprehend. There's a lot that you miss out on by growing up in a really protected or isolated way. In some ways, it's like growing up in a different culture, but how do you explain that? It just wouldn't feel comfortable. You'd feel like you're always having to educate them on your disability and then share or explain about your abuse—this is double exhaustion.

One woman mentioned that it is sometimes harder for non-disabled women to relate. For example, the chair keeps them at a distance. Sometimes, they just see the chair and not the person. It's like you're invisible. Or, other women added, they spend a lot of time worrying about what to say or what to do—to not offend you. For some, it's a lot less trouble to just ignore you or not be involved with you.

Various comments also noted that having an abuse support group for women with disabilities acknowledges their experiences as real. Too often, people believe that people with disabilities are not abused. They end up thinking things like "who would do such a thing?" Other comments were that, because we (women with disabilities) control the group, we do what's important for us, not what someone else sees as important. This lets us pay attention to differences our disabilities make. We're able to talk about feeling more vulnerable to abuse and assault and not feel badly or selfish about saying so. The fact of the matter is that we *are* in a number of situations which place us at higher risk, and there *are* people who will look at us as easy targets.

They also talked about not having to prove their credibility in a group of women with disabilities. Remarks from the women included: some people send a message that when you have a disability, you're "just not right." Or people think that your mind is gone, or assume you're deaf when you're not. Your disability really becomes an issue, as if maybe you're just over-emotional, or psychotic, and don't really know what's happened. One woman also spoke about her frustration of always being accused of being drunk because her

speech impairment makes her voice sound slurred.

The group also provided the opportunity to talk about differences (from non-disabled women) that the women shared growing up and the impact this had on them. For those that acquired disabilities early in life, they talked about often being blamed for hardships in the family. Many were put down because of their disabilities. They mentioned overprotection and isolation as key features of growing up. And, they talked about being treated like incompetent children, even as adults. The lack of positive role models and missed opportunities to talk about things that "ordinary" kids do, such as relationships, were seen as being quite damaging. As one woman said, it's hard to understand what all of this does to you and how it affects you.

Feelings about the group

Perhaps the most direct way of describing what attending the group has meant and why it has been so important is reflected in the following comments from the women:

I've enjoyed it. When I talk about certain experiences, people will understand more—people understand where you've been.

The shared experiences are important. I hope it becomes ongoing. It has become an important part of my life.

You're not alone... Sometimes I wonder why I'm here—it can be really hard—other times there's a real sense of accomplishment.

Learning things. I've learned a lot about the differences between experiences of men and women, disabled and non-disabled—that's helpful.

Why do I keep coming? It's a chance to learn something I've never heard about before; a chance for open discussion without being judged.

Getting together with others—the feeling of togetherness.

Learning from one another, not being counselled or told what to do.

I think it's great. We all take away something personal for ourselves. We can think about everything and use what we need. There's a lot of asking "why?", and this leaves a lot of food for thought.

With regard to openness, we've got nothing else to lose—we've all lost a lot.

Hearing different people's experiences and reactions really helps.

One of the most telling things about the importance of the peer group was that those attending on the first night kept coming back week after week, despite the difficulty of facing some of the topics covered.

Where to go now?

No one is really sure what the future holds. Most would like to stay connected as a "semi-permanent" group, but are not exactly sure what this would look like. Maybe it will continue as a general women's discussion group, maybe as an ongoing personal growth series, or just getting together socially to have fun. In the meantime, more attention needs to be paid to reducing barriers and addressing ways that the women's community can be more inclusive of women with a variety of different disabilities and support needs.

Teresa Andreychuk is a staff person at the Independent Living Resource Centre in Winnipeg who is currently coordinating the Centre's research on Abuse and Disability.

The Independent Living Resource Centre would like to acknowledge the funding support of the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada. Many thanks also to Kay, Marilyn, Carolyn, Donna, Jo-Ann, Diane, Donna, Ellen, Rita and Joyce, and to Sharon who helped facilitate the process described in this article.

THE ROEHER INSTITUTE

The Roeher Institute is a national institute for education, information, and the study of public policy affecting persons with an intellectual impairment and other disabilities. The Institute has initiated two projects in which readers of this journal might be interested:

Research Study on Violence and Disability

The Roeher Institute is currently undertaking a study to examine the forms of violence/abuse experienced by people with disabilities, and the legal provisions, policies, programs, and response systems that are now in place to respond to and prevent violence.

In order to find out how people experience violence, this study will include a number of interviews with people with disabilities, their families and advocates, service providers, and police across Canada. The study will analyze the impact of difference of gender, race, type of disability, etc. on the forms of violence experienced by people with disabilities. People who have been victims of violence, as well as individuals who have reflected on the forms of violence and abuse experienced by persons with disabilities, will be interviewed.

The Roeher Institute will publish the findings of its research. This study will include implications for policy and programmes related to people with disabilities.

If you have any questions about this study or know of people who might wish to be interviewed for it, please contact the Roeher Institute (see below).

Women's Research Network

Many women are involved in or have expressed an interest in the application of feminist theory to the area of disability. At The Roeher Institute we have agreed to initiate an international network and to set up an information exchange.

If you would like to be part of this growing network of women researchers, please let us know by sending us your name, address, affiliation (if any), and areas of interest. Please address enquiries or correspondence to:

Marcia Rioux, Director
The Roeher Institute
Kinsmen Building
York University
4700 Keele Street
North York, Ontario
M3J 1P3

Phone (416) 661-9611
FAX (416) 661-5701

FS FEMINIST STUDIES

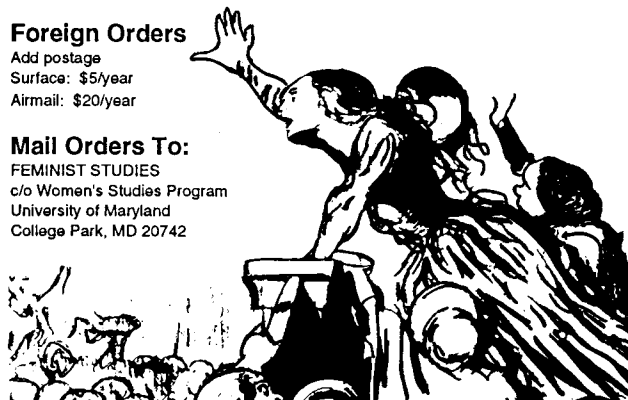
	Three Issues Annually			Back/Single
	1 year	2 years	3 years	Issues
Individuals	\$25.00	\$47.00	\$70.00	\$10.00
Institutions	\$58.00	\$110.00	\$170.00	\$20.00

Foreign Orders

Add postage
Surface: \$5/year
Airmail: \$20/year

Mail Orders To:

FEMINIST STUDIES
c/o Women's Studies Program
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742



Volume 19, 1993

Alice Adams, *The Future of the Uterine Metaphor*. Laura Stacy Alaimo, *Toward an Environmental Feminism*. Janet Bauer, *Personal and Political Transformations of a young Iranian "Feminist."* Linda Blum, *The Shifting Contexts of Feminist Theory*. Mark Breitenberg, *Sexual Jealousy in Early Modern England*. Susan K. Cahm, *Manliness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in US Women's Sport*. Monique Deveaux, *A Critical Reading of Foucault*. Myra Marx Ferree, *Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany*. Susan Fraiman, *Geometries of Race and Gender*. Eve Sedgwick, Spike Lee, Charlayne Hunter-Gault. Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Narcissism, Identity Politics, and Russ's Female Man*. Atina Grossman, *Maternity and Modernity in Weimar and in Exile*. Marina Heung, *Matrilineage in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club*. John Hutton, *Mary Cassatt's Modern Woman, the Woman's Building, and 19th-Century Feminist Theory*. Suad Joseph, *Gender and Rationality among Arab Families in Lebanon*. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature*. Suzanne M. Marilley, *Frances Willard and the Feminism of Fear*. Annelise Orleck, *Militant Housewives during the Great Depression*. Gianna Pomata, *On Reading Some Recent Women's History Textbooks*. Stephanie Rigler, *Stages of Growth in Feminist Organizations*. Nancy E. Rose, *Gender and Race in Government Work Programs from the 1930s to the Present*. Cynthia D. Schrage, *A Reading of Women Who Love too Much*. Rickie Solinger, *Abortion and the Politics of Hospital Abortion Committees, 1950-1970*. Maive von Hasselt, *Issei Women: Stereotypes, Silences, and Fields of Power*. Iris Marlon Young, *Three Approaches to Policy for Pregnant Addicts*. COMMENTARY ON RECENT LESBIAN HISTORY by Alice Echols. CREATIVE WRITING by Patricia Dunker, Faulkner Fox, Amy Gibson, Margaret Hanzimanolis, Rachel E. Harding, Beth Houston, Lyn Lifshin, Judith McCombs, Robin Newman, Armonia Somers (trans. by Beatriz Badikan), Nancy White. REVIEWS by Sally Hastings, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Susan McClary, Janet Sims. ART by Tee Corinne, Helen Glazer, Betty Kano.

TROIS FOIS PASSERA... LA PROCHAINE SE DÉFENDRA!

Enfin, un guide d'animation pédagogique portant sur la discrimination et le harcèlement vécus par les femmes locataires. Ce guide d'animation regorge d'informations claires et précises sur la situation particulière des femmes locataires. Proposant différents programmes d'ateliers, incluant des jeux et des discussions, le guide permet d'offrir des sessions de formation adaptées aux besoins de chaque organisme, ou encore simplement de se former soi-même.

Trois fois passera... la prochaine se défendra! se veut également un outil de vulgarisation de la législation et des recours existants en matière de discrimination et de harcèlement.

Pour 15\$, incluant les frais d'envoi, obtenez votre exemplaire de *Trois fois passera... la prochaine se défendra!* Contactez:

Information-ressources Femmes et logement
1200, rue Laurier Est, local 212
Montréal, H2J 1G9
Tél: (514) 272-9304