

Front Line Work in Feminist Service Organizations

Towards Personal and Organizational Coping Strategies

By Marina Helen Morrow

The work I wish to share with you is an investigation of the experiences of women who work with survivors of male violence. The impetus for my research comes directly from my own personal involvement as a front line worker in a rape crisis centre. My work as a counselor and advocate for women who had experienced physical and/or sexual assault consolidated my understanding of male violence within a feminist framework. This awareness developed directly out of my contact with the staff and callers at the rape crisis centre, and allowed me to see for the first time the prevalence of male violence and the impact it had had on my own life. The highly personal nature of front line work, with its attendant shift in thinking, changed how I viewed the world and myself in it.

Until this point I had identified the overwhelming nature of my work with my growing awareness of male violence. I began, however, to see that there were other factors that had contributed to my sense of feeling fatigued and emotionally exhausted.

Working as a support person and advocate for women highlighted for me the inadequacy of services set up to assist

individuals through a crisis in their life. Many women came to the rape crisis centre specifically because they were not receiving support from these services or from the criminal justice system.

Feminist service organizations are often seen as adjuncts to mainstream psychiatric and social services. The popular conception is that feminist service organizations provide alternative services that are not essential. I would argue that these organizations not only provide a large bulk of the service to women who are

survivors of male violence, but fill many of the gaps in the mainstream services by providing support and advocacy for women.

Given the importance of feminist service organizations, I felt it a worthy project to investigate front line work, with the hope that women who work in the area of violence against women would benefit from a project that shares women's strategies for coping both on an individual and organizational level.

I decided to interview front line workers specifically for the purpose of investigating: 1) how front line service work to women survivors of male violence affects the personal and working lives of the women who do the work, and 2) how these women cope with the stresses of their work, both as individuals and as members of a feminist organization.

I spoke with women in Metro Toronto, who represented a number of services: hostels, shelters, a rape crisis centre, a women's clinic and a drop-in centre for women and children.

The Effects of Front Line Work on Women

These women spoke at length about how their work with survivors of male violence affected their lives. Their responses ranged from the ways in which front line work had altered their perspective on the world, to the changes that took place in their interpersonal relationships and day-to-day lives.

An overwhelming majority of the women spoke about how hearing the stories of women and children deeply moved them.



Credit: Mujer/Fempres

...I often think....that I've heard everything or through these women I've witnessed a lot of things. I've been taught by them because they're the experts, and yet I'm continually kind of secondarily assaulted by their experiences.

Accompanying this women indicated concern for their own feelings of powerlessness in helping individual women or in effecting social change.

...what really sort of affect me the most is a feeling of helplessness, I think that's what really affects me. Or realizing that they're (women and children) never going to be safe, and that's when I start to cry. Or realizing that the children have to have access to their fathers, which is really horrible, that's when I start to really feel very much connected to a woman....I think it's this feeling of helplessness that this world is really violent.

Women's contact with the stories of other women and children and their feelings of powerlessness challenged previously held beliefs and allowed them to come to an understanding of male violence within a social and political framework. Facilitating this change in thinking was the process of becoming more aware of the prevalence of male violence.

I guess I see it [male violence] even more as part of the norm, and I'm more aware of its roots in the socialization process than I used to be. It challenges a lot of my beliefs that men are inherently or biologically violent because I see so much in the way that men re-create the patterns when they themselves were abused as children...

This awareness also led women to recognize their own vulnerability.

That's something we all have to fear being on the line. I mean it could be 3:00 am and you get this call, it's very scary, she's just been attacked in her apartment. You live in an apartment, the similarities in your lives come out, and your situations. You get off the phone and you're alone...

For many women their work precipitated a re-framing of their own past experiences, a recognition of them, for the first time, as incidents of male violence.

...when I was married, he started becoming abusive, but I never saw it as abusive... I started realizing [that] what I was saying to the women, I was not listening to myself. So when I talked to a woman it [was] like all of a sudden something sparked, like listen to what you're telling her, you're saying that because he broke down the bathroom door that was abusive and that's what happened to me.

All of the women I spoke with indicated that their work had an impact on their relationships with family, friends and partners. Some women felt they were in constant conflict with friends and family and often felt isolated, having to censor what they said in order not to stir up controversy. The degree of conflict confronted in their relationships was illustrated by a number of women who indicated that their work had precipitated a break up of an intimate relationship.

In particular women spoke about how front line work changed their relationships with men.

I'd say it had an impact...definitely on my male relationships. I only have one man who's sort of lasted through my anger and all that sort of thing and it's been a struggle. Thank goodness all my other relationships have been with women, so it hasn't—it's easier, I think, because they do understand, and they can join in with you in raging and... it's not so personally threatening.

In addition to direct contact with survivors of male violence there were a number of ways that organizational structure affected women and their work. Although women did speak about philosophical splits and conflicts between staff members, most of the stress appeared to come from outside of the organization itself. In particular women stressed problems related to lack of funding and expectations placed on them to work overtime.

...this summer when we were going through a lot of internal stuff, when things aren't stable here it's really difficult because it's hard to find energy to put stuff back out. A lot of uncertainties about our funding, waiting for who was going to get laid off. So the sense of powerlessness that the staff was feeling as a whole was very overwhelming.

Women also expressed frustrations with board members who were often perceived as not understanding the importance of the work, or with outside services and agencies that were seen as inadequate referrals for women and children.

The work had a number of direct effects on women such as: feelings of isolation, lack of energy, loss of idealism, feelings of anger, depression loss of meaning in one's life, loss of self-esteem, a sense of being overwhelmed and an intolerance for other people's ideas. Some women described prolonged periods of physical and emotional exhaustion as leading to a state they called burn-out.

I think burn-out is so personalized... it was so isolating and I felt so guilty for burning-out and even that term burn-out is such an empty term it doesn't mean anything, it doesn't have any credibility really. It's a term I really, really dislike and to use it for myself was just another way of devaluing the seriousness of what I was going through at the time, feeling like a failure. It's just terribly, terribly isolating experience to go through and I don't think even your co-workers can understand it.

Burn-out was a process of grieving all the lost hopes and expectations and failures, recognizing that violence was really rooted in reality, that we couldn't really change the world....

Despite all the difficulties facing the front line workers, however, not all of the effects of this work on women were negative. The personal growth and enrichment women experienced from their work became increasingly evident through the course of the interviews. Women spoke about the significance of their jobs in heralding a new awareness about themselves as women. What was surprising in the face of the marginalization of their work was that women continued to uphold its value and to feel proud of their own contributions to women and to the feminist movement.

Coping Strategies for Front Line Work

Although the women I spoke with were quick to identify what makes their work stressful and how that affected both their personal and working lives they had more difficulty identifying what they did to

deal with front line work. Many of the coping strategies they shared were elicited from indirect questions, suggesting that women often did not have a clear conception of how they coped. However, during our discussions, a number of individual and organizational coping strategies did emerge. Among these strategies support from family, friends and co-workers was seen as an important way of coping with the stress of front line work. In the words of one woman:

...there's a lot of informal stuff [between co-workers] in the morning and at the end of the day. Without that it would be a very isolating job.

Many women talked about associating primarily with individuals who had a feminist awareness and how this served at times to lessen their feelings of isolation and alienation.

...when I first started working in shelters I didn't want to talk to anybody else because I just felt they wouldn't understand what was going on.... A lot of people who are my good friends are people who work in the shelter, or people who are involved in it somehow or some way...

However, not all women felt this way and in fact several mentioned the importance of staying connected to friends who did not do the same kind of work. Some women indicated that, to cope with the isolation and conflict they had changed the ways they communicated in their interpersonal relationships.

When I meet people who don't have a feminist awareness sometimes I can see now, which I could never see before, as a young ardent feminist, I could never see before that they had another analysis that was more important to them.... I have a lot more space for differences now.

In order to cope with the fear generated by the impact of the daily stories of women and children's abuse and assault, five women spoke about taking extra personal precautions.

...I don't really want to be alone in my home. I sleep with the light on ever since I started working at the centre. Probably

after the first nine months I started sleeping with a night light on. I never had before then. So those are things that I noticed have changed, and who knows why I do them, probably I'm scared of stuff and I can't afford to think about it every day.

Several of the women spoke about expressing anger as a way of dealing with stress. This was generally seen as a positive expression of frustration so long as it fueled further action.

I've learnt, I'm learning... how to articulate those feelings... a lot of that expression is through anger, which I think is better than not expressing, but I'm realizing that just the expression of anger in and of itself doesn't really change the situation. It's a good release in the moment but one has to be careful how they express that anger...

For some women changes in the ways they thought about their clients or about male violence reduced their stress. For example, a number of women mentioned the importance of focusing on the small changes their work made. Tangible "success" stories made the work fulfilling.

Very little steps, you know, when it looks like nothing is happening out there, that there's a huge backlash... that I can actually work with a woman... she can start to make some choices in her life that she couldn't make a few months ago, or a few years ago. That feels like a success.

Women were aware of the difficulties presented in balancing the awareness that all women experience male violence, and the need to maintain some sort of separation from the women they saw.

...while I think it's absolutely essential to put myself on that spectrum... it's not like they [women] don't raise issues that related to my life but I recognize that I am in a particular role, she didn't come here to be my friend. Depending on my understanding of where she's at, I'll decide how much to share with her. I see my role as a counselor, struggling with what that means in terms of power.

A few women indicated that they spent time blocking out the larger realities of male violence to cope with their work

while other women indicated the importance of maintaining hope that things could be different.

...and I think I put blinders on sometimes if there's something I don't want to see and I think that I do that to keep my own sanity... Every now and again I will look long enough to see things I don't like in the world and that gives me the stuff to keep going, the motivation to keep going, but I don't dwell on how completely overwhelming it is.

The importance of learning to set limits was central to women's recognition of what they could realistically accomplish as individuals or as an organization.

The more we do the work the more we recognize our own limitations and that's been a hard thing... to accept that those limitations exist both within myself as a counselor and within the organization and the world.

Along with setting limits, women recognized the importance of taking care of themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually and the importance of balancing healing work with political work.

...it's impossible for me to separate out the healing work from the political work.... I think each of them helps to feed the other and that definitely creates a balance for me, whereas only working in one area would be overwhelming.

Although most women spoke of the positive ways in which they coped with stress, a number of women acknowledged that they sometimes used destructive ways of coping either through drinking heavily or abusing their bodies in some way.

...there were periods of time where I drank too much... but it [stress] almost always got flung outwards, whatever was happening I would just do it more. It felt pretty rough.

Among the organizational methods of coping that women listed were: formalized support within the organization, outreach to other organizations, attending workshops, time off, stress benefits and formal conflict resolution strategies to deal with staff conflict. As one woman put it:

There are so many different places of support, some of them are formalized. You do "check-ins" at your work groups and at collective meetings....There is also a place set aside at every meeting to talk about women on the line, which is a place you can talk about your feelings...

Learning how to show mutual support for each other was an on-going process for all of the women I spoke with.

...I think through the process of addressing, or recognizing that our needs — emotional, financial, physical, political needs — change with time and circumstance, and that there has to be a way of accommodating those changes...

Support was important both from within the organization and from without, as indicated by several women who described the isolation of their organizations as stressful. To deal with this women said that their centres did outreach to other organizations and encouraged workers to expand their knowledge of the issues they deal with through networking, workshops and reading.

It became clear to me during the course of my discussions that organizations can facilitate both the sharing and implementation of personal strategies in a number of ways. The most obvious of these would be helping workers set limits and take time off. Many women indicated that this went on informally in their organizations. They made attempts to monitor each other's work and to approach each other when they felt someone was taking on too much. This process could be more effective if it were somehow built into the structure of the organization and if they were actively encouraged to set their own limits through cutting their work load (i.e. being more realistic about what can be done) and encouraging women to take mental health days and regular lunch hours.

Further strategies the organization can implement to assist front line workers include the provision of formalized support through the allotment of time during meetings to share information and address personal concerns. Although many organizations set aside time to deal with worker concerns, for expediency these sessions often highlighted organizational concerns and the sharing of client information — rather than the effect of front line work on the personal lives of women.

The sharing of information both within the organization and outside of it seemed important as a method of reducing the isolation that women sometimes felt in their work. A number of women had opportunities to attend workshops that directly addressed the concerns of front line workers. These workshops can be particularly effective if they provide concrete coping strategies that women can take back to their respective workplaces.

Repeatedly, women spoke of the importance of political work as a concrete way in which they were able to see the importance of their work. This work was seen as critical in terms of the larger goals of the feminist movement.

Conclusion

While feminist service organizations continue to be marginalized and even delegitimized as essential service providers, personal and organizational strategies for coping with stress will remain only bandage solutions. Substantial progress requires an unequivocal refutation of the predominant view that: a) male violence has no social context; that it is perpetrated by a handful of deranged men, and b) the work done by feminist service organizations is ancillary to the existing helping professions.

As the vision of one woman powerfully illustrates, the stress of front line work will continue as long as women and children continue to be the targets of male violence:

...and I just have this very intense and very quick picture in my mind of walking up the steps of the old building where we were, which was very decrepit... and getting to the door and seeing this huge OUT OF BUSINESS sign on the door, and [I] started to cry and realized that... I would never see that in my life... and that if one has the goal of putting oneself out of business I don't know how the work can seem anything else but overwhelming...

Marina Morrow is a doctoral student in the Community Psychology Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.



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