



# *Working Together*

*Supporting Women Who Have  
Experienced Violence*

## **DISCUSSION GUIDE**



Ontario Association of Inmate & Transition Houses

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**Margaret Alexander – Project Coordinator/Developer**

## ABOUT OAITH

OAITH is a provincial coalition founded by women's shelter advocates in 1977. Membership includes primarily first stage emergency shelters for abused women and their children, as well as some second stage housing programs and community-based women's service organizations. The association works with member agencies to educate and promote change in all areas that abused women and their children identify as important to their freedom from violence.

OAITH operates from an integrated, feminist, anti-racist/anti-oppression perspective on violence against women. We recognize that violence and abuse against women and children occurs as a result of unequal power and status of women and children in society. We also recognize that all racism and oppression of women is a form of violence.

We are committed to:

- Removing barriers to equality for all women and children.
- Ensuring the voices and experiences of all abused women are heard when working for social change.
- Increasing awareness through education, public advocacy and empowerment for OAITH member agencies.
- Assisting shelters in offering support and services to women.
- Offering training of to OAITH member shelters.
- Working with our equity-seeking allies in the community to end all forms of violence and oppression of women



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**Filmmaker Lindsay Angus**

Lindsay Angus' filmmaking career began in 1999 when she started writing novels. During this time, she completed an undergraduate degree (English/Communications) from the University of Ottawa and a post-graduate (Writing/Producing) from Humber College. With two completed novels and numerous film certifications, she took her honed skills to the moving screen.

In 2008, Lindsay became involved with a project on violence against women. Always wanting to create social change through film, she jumped at the opportunity to write, produce and direct. With the help of seven non-profit organizations and a production team guided by a Gemini-award winner, *Survivor's Guide to Freedom from Violence* is currently being shown and distributed across Canada.

Lindsay now lives in Toronto as a filmmaker. Her current projects in development include: *Distilled for Easy Listening and Nate*. She is actively involved with Rogers Television and TIFF.

**Developer/Project Coordinator Margaret Alexander**

Margaret has been an activist and educator in the women's anti-violence movement for over 16 years. She has worked in both women's shelter and rape crisis services, developing programming that provided support and advocacy to women who had experienced violence, as well as delivering anti-oppression training to frontline shelter workers all over the province. She is also a teacher at George Brown College in the Assaulted Women and Children's Counsellor/Advocate Program.

Margaret has authored a number of training publications including: *Intimate Partner Violence and the Workplace*, *Supporting Survivors*, *Supporting Employment: A Workshop for Career Development Practitioners*, *An Integrated Anti-Oppression Framework for Reviewing and Developing Policy: A Toolkit for Community Service Organizations*, *Initiating Support for Female Victims of Human Trafficking in Toronto: Findings & Recommendations Report*, and *Training for Change: An Integrated Anti-Oppression Framework*.

## INTRODUCTION

The stories depicted in this film are not factual and all the characters portrayed are fictitious, however the scenarios in the video represent issues that are areas of struggle as identified by women accessing services and/or frontline workers who have delivered feminist anti-violence services. During my collection of these stories I found it interesting to note that the areas of struggle were often the same for both women accessing service and workers providing service.

Feminist anti-violence organizations are autonomous agencies that have diverse workplace cultures, practices and styles. There are certainly similarities and overlaps in the approach but there is also a lot of variation in how the work gets done and how organizations and workers interpret feminist, anti-oppression principles.

There in fact exists within feminist organizations a superior level of expertise in working through various and complex institutions and systems, managing increasingly conflicting and complex demands for service from an ever-growing number of disenfranchised women and doing it all with insufficient funding. Therefore this material does not presume to tell feminist anti-violence workers how to do their job. This is not a “best practice” trainer, nor does this material offer direction on how to “counsel” women. The purpose of this training is to enable reflective practice.

While the film does not demonstrate “best practices” it does demonstrate some examples of behaviour that would make the situation worse. The dramatizations exaggerate situations and responses in an attempt to raise issues in short three minute scenes. The objective of the scenarios is to demonstrate situations where conflict is present or may arise and give new staff or staff teams an opportunity to watch a situation unfold from a place of observation. This distance creates space for reflection and planning.

The material is primarily developed for use with new or less experienced staff but can also be used to engage in discussion at general team meetings about some of the struggles in our work and share strategies and ideas with each other. It also offers staff teams opportunity to review and reflect on the overall culture and practice of the service and ensure it still meets the principles and aims of the organization.



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## USING THE MATERIAL

The guide is designed using a case study approach. Each dramatization is identified as a “case” for study which can be reviewed by an individual or discussed by a staff team or small group. The cases are dramatized in three minute stories that attempt to highlight a range of issues that are relevant to feminist anti-violence work.

Case studies as training tool are designed to:

- Demonstrate common or typical events that could or do happen
- Contain events or matters on which opinions may differ
- Provide a safe environment for problem-solving opportunities
- Be adaptable for individual learning or group discussion

The objective of this material is to explore:  
perceptions, assumptions, values and beliefs,  
contextual factors that can affect situations,  
the areas of disconnect between feminist anti-oppressive ideology and action,  
the areas where a different outcome may be possible,  
strategies to effect change in practice.

The material can be used in two ways and is organized in this training guide as follows:

### Section 1

#### In-Depth Analysis

Workers can put themselves in the situation and closely examine the nuances and identify how they would apply various skills and techniques in each situation in ways that would support a successful outcome. This approach can be particularly useful in training new or less-experienced staff by allowing them the opportunity to build their skills through example in a safe and supported way.

### Section 2

#### Broader Theme Analysis

Teams can observe each situation from an objective distance and identify problem areas and offer solutions and strategies that may support a better outcome. This approach supports understanding and knowledge building through examining problems and their causes and proposing solutions. It allows staff teams to broaden their perspective through discussion and sharing of ideas and personal experience. Each scenario offers several issues to be explored and related back to similar workplace examples.

## Section 1

# Questions for In-Depth Analysis



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## ASSESSING/DECONSTRUCTING THE SITUATION

What do you think is happening for the woman or women accessing service and/or children, if applicable?

### Examining the situation from the woman's perspective

- What do you think the woman is communicating?
- How do you think she perceives the situation?
- What do you think is her intent?
- How is she taking care of herself in this situation (coping strategies)?
- What are the possible effects of this situation for the woman accessing service?
- What are the possible outcomes?
- What are the possible consequences?

### Examining the situation from the worker's perspective

- What do you think is happening here for the workers?
- What do you think they are communicating? What do you think they are intending to communicate?
- How do you think they perceive the situation?
- What are the possible effects on the workers in this situation?
- What are the workers hoping to accomplish? What are their goals?
- Do you think their goals are the same as the woman accessing service?
- What is their process (ways of doing work, accomplishing goals)?
- Is it the same as the woman accessing service? Does that matter?

## Examining Context

What are the structural and systemic issues that are relevant to consider in this situation? How are they relevant?

This will include:

- agency procedures and practices
- agency purpose and beliefs
- values and belief system of the worker
- value and belief system of the woman accessing service
- the power dynamic between resident and worker – structurally and socially
- internalized beliefs about how women should behave
- other stereotypes, value and belief systems and judgements that may play a role in the situation
- other

What are the feminist, anti-oppressive beliefs and professional expertise that apply in this case?

This will include:

- understanding of how we have internalized ideas of “normal”, “acceptable” behaviour for women, specifically women who have experienced violence
- understanding how external pressures have changed the nature of feminist anti-violence work
- recognizing that workers must acknowledge and take steps to address and mitigate power relations with residents
- understanding of the your “lens” of perception and how that leads to assumptions
- communication and leadership skills
- understanding the difference between working with women and forcing or coercing women into compliance
- understanding how experiences of violence and oppression effect women
- understanding coping strategies and how women survive their experiences
- believing women have a right to choice
- other

How do they apply?

Why are they important?

## Possibilities for Change

- Where are the opportunities for change in the situation?
- What could be different in the interactions?
- What and for whom are the potential benefits and consequences of this situation if communication stays the same?
- What and for whom are the potential benefits and consequences if the interactions and approach change?
- What are the ways to minimize negative consequences – for the woman accessing service, for the workers, for others?

## Strategies and Opportunities for Our Own Feminist Anti-Oppressive Practice

- What are some the ways that workers can align the requirements of their role with the needs of women, as the women perceive them?
- How can processes (the ways we do our work) be aligned with women's processes?
- Is there opportunity to examine the procedures and practices within your agency to determine which align with feminist anti-oppressive values and beliefs and which may actually create barriers in working with women?
- What are the ways the organization can support workers?
- How can the organization better acknowledge the stressors in the work?
- What mechanisms can be incorporated into staff meetings and supervision that support workers to deal with stressors of the job?
- What are the ways that co-workers can support each other to remain grounded in their feminist anti-oppressive practice?
- What are the ways that a worker can support herself to remain grounded in feminist anti-oppressive practice?

## Section 2

# Broader Theme Analysis



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## Case Study #1: Making Difficult Choices

### Characters:

Clara – woman accessing shelter services

Clara's two children: Sarah 9 and Tom 11 (the children are seen in the dramatization)

Frontline worker in the children's program

Frontline worker in the woman's program

Clara a resident in a shelter program in a small town has just been told how much money she can expect to collect from Ontario Works (the provincial income support program). She is visibly upset and feels that she will never be able to afford suitable housing for herself and her children. She wonders how she will manage financially. Later Clara identifies some of the issues that are worrying her. She is primarily concerned about how leaving her partner will affect the children. The children's worker offers some alternative ideas, but they both understand that there are not many resources available in their community. In the end Clara decides to go back to her partner and "try again".

### Objectives:

- developing strategies to support women making difficult choices in their lives
- developing strategies to support workers when women make choices that make us "feel"...

### Areas for Discussion

This scenario offers opportunity to discuss several issues. One is the reality of women's options when women leave their abusive partner. For many women this choice is an agonizing one where they have to weigh the variables that are important to them.

Feminist organizations tend to focus their supports and programs around women leaving their partner. For many women leaving their partner is not a better choice than staying or returning. Their circumstances may become worsened through poverty, lack of housing, lack of community, child protection risks and other circumstances.

As workers this can be difficult for many reasons including:

- our own values and beliefs that may include thinking that the "worse" thing for women and children is experiencing violence in their home – which may or may not align with the woman's beliefs
- we may or may not understand how women are weighing the variables – things that are a priority to her may not align with what we think our own priorities would be if we were in her shoes
- we may experience strong feelings of sadness or fear for her and want to "save" her from negative consequences

- we may be bound by policy in our organizations or depending on the situation, legally bound, to take her choice from her. This may align with our own beliefs about women's right to choose – or it may not

In this particular situation Clara has two children ages 9 and 11. One of them wants to return home and the other does not. This adds additional complexities to her choice to return.

Some of these include:

- worker's fears for the woman and her children
- helping women talk with their children in age/development appropriate ways about experiences of abuse in their home
- assisting women to balance their own needs for safety with their children's need for security – suffering abuse for the sake of their children
- helping women find ways to talk with their children, their family and their friends about their choice to return
- the workers, legal or agency policy obligations of reporting to child protection services. This decision may align with our beliefs – or it may not

### Questions

- How do you feel when women choose to return to their partner?
- Do you feel differently if there are children?
- How does this make you feel about your work?
- If you don't agree with her decisions, how do you ensure that your feelings are not leading your interactions with her?
- How do you align your feminist anti-oppression belief about women's right to autonomy and choice and her decisions that you do not agree with?
- What are some of the ways you can talk to women about their choices in ways that are not blaming or shaming?

Organizations and staff teams can take this opportunity to discuss ways that the workers are supported to discuss their feelings when situations like these arise. An important element in maintaining consistently supportive organizations is to recognize the need for self-care and creating an environment that makes care of self and other team members a priority.

Some areas of focus include:

- agency personnel policies re: sick days, time off and professional development
- shift schedules, use of time as shift change and staff meetings
- peer supervision models that encourage mutual support
- self-reflective practice models

### Questions

- How do you cope with the feelings that arise for you when women make choices you don't understand or agree with?
- What are the ways co-workers in your organization support each other to work through these kinds of issues?
- What practices, policies and procedures support worker's self care?

Organizations and staff teams can take this opportunity to discuss how to support women when they choose to return to their abusive partner and further how to support women in the community when they decide not to leave.

Some areas of focus include:

- examining the ways services are advertised or discussed in the community, looking at language that reiterates “when you leave” or “if you leave”
- examining child protection protocols and legal obligations for reporting women to child protection - for example some people believe that shelter workers are legally obligated to call the police if women return to their abuser – with their children. This isn't true. The real obligation involves exploration and assessment of the ways women will keep their children safe when they return
- being able to talk with women – without being “judgemental”, about realistic safety planning for themselves and their children in the case of returning home, in other words how to keep themselves as safe as they can when they live with their abuser
- looking at the types of programming developed by the organization – is the program primarily for women after they have left, what sorts of things can happen from programming perspective that can connect women to the service without leaving

### Questions

- What is a useful assessment of risk for women and their children when they are returning to an abusive partner or choosing not to leave?
- How can your organization make it plain to the community that women are not required to leave their partner in order to receive services?
- Does your organization plan for women using the shelter for respite and relief? Is this an option for women in your community?



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## Case Study #2: Accessing Service

### Characters:

Meena – woman accessing service in a shelter  
program manager  
2 frontline workers

At a shelter meeting three workers discuss Meena, one of the women residing at the shelter. The workers appear to be frustrated about how Meena is engaging (or not engaging) with the workers and other women in the house. The workers identify that they don't really know what's going on with her or what her needs are. One worker wonders whether Meena needs this service and says there are other women who do need their services. In the end the group resolves to direct Meena to attend a mandatory meeting and decide that they will "contract" her if she does not meet. In the next scenes, the workers meet Meena as she is leaving and coming home. Both workers tell Meena that they expect her to attend mandatory meetings. Meena indicates both non-verbally and verbally that she does not want to go to the meetings.

### Objectives:

- developing strategies to support women to access services in the ways they need and want
- examine work related stressors and pressures for workers and how they can manifest in our practice
- developing strategies to identify and support workers who are struggling with various stressors

### Areas for Discussion

- This scenario offers opportunity to explore the tensions that exist between our organizational processes/practices and women's processes. In every organization there are rules and guidelines that have been created for various reasons. These may include:
  - chores – women are required to help in the maintenance of a clean living space
  - curfews – women are required to return to the residence by a certain time
  - bedtimes – women and/or children are required to be in their rooms by a certain time
  - mandatory meetings – women are required to meet and talk with other residents and/or staff
  - clean and sober – women are not allowed to either use or be under the influence of alcohol and/or street drugs
  - mealtimes – times when women and children are required or expected to eat communal meals

Each rule was created to meet a purpose; generally safety and security related. The rules support the workers to have a sense of what's going on and to meet general needs for each resident. Rules are generally "one size fits all" solutions that on the surface make things easier but upon closer inspection often create numerous problems for those that they are applied to. The reality in women's organizations is that increased demand for services coupled with insufficient funding for staffing and programs has resulted in the perceived need for more rules. For example: having a curfew of eleven o'clock for everyone is much easier to manage than having to ask every woman and keep track of what time she will be back, what her window for late is and what she would like the worker to do if she doesn't get back within the window. However for some women, some of the rules are perceived as punitive and/or infantilizing. For some women living by the rules requires a profound shift in behaviours or ways of being. Consequently these women break the rules consistently and they can be perceived to be the problem rather than the rules being the problem. The rules in essence become service barriers instead of service enablers.

In the case of Meena she seems to prefer to keep to herself and deal with her issues internally or with others outside of the shelter. She requires a safe place to sleep and an occasional place to eat. For her own reasons she doesn't want or seem to need to talk with the shelter workers about what she is doing, thinking or feeling. In the absence of knowing these things the workers are concerned and assuming. They problematize Meena's behaviour and continue to attempt to question her – to find out what's going on. Meena appears to perceive this as prying and in this scenario becomes resistant and resentful of their efforts.

### Questions

- In your organization have you had situations where women have not complied with shelter/service rules?
- Is there a particular rule or rules that seem to be challenging for women?
- What has been your agency practice when non-compliance occurs?
- What have been the consequences/outcomes?
- What kinds of flexibility about the rules can or has occurred?
- Is the flexibility (if any) consistently applied by everyone or is it something that some staff feel empowered to decide – but others don't?

In this scenario the staff discuss Meena's situation and seem to feel uncomfortable and disconcerted because they don't know much about her. One of the staff vents her frustration to the others (one woman is a peer, the other a supervisor). She says "Meena's behaviour leads me to believe that she doesn't need to be here" and "we have a waiting list of women who need us". This moment in the meeting would be a good time to discuss "the pressures of the job" and the frustration that everyone feels at one time or another over some of the ways our work unfolds.

This worker is indicating by her tone of voice and her words that she is frustrated. Frustration is perfectly natural in anti-violence work and talking about it – creating space to discuss it and support each other – should be a priority in our workplaces. It is important to be compassionate and understanding with co-workers as we would be with women accessing services; not to assume or judge but to be open and listen. With this understanding we can hear this worker’s frustration as: “I want to help but I don’t know how” and/or “there are so many women who need assistance and I am angry/sad/afraid because I can’t help them all” and “I feel ineffectual”. This gives us an opportunity to change the interaction in that moment and the interactions with Meena later.

### Questions

- What are some of the ways the co-worker and supervisor could have responded to the frustrated worker?
- Have you heard yourself or co-workers venting frustration about women using the service at staff meetings or shift changes?
- What has been your response?
- How have you supported yourself and others to shift these feelings?



## Case Study #3: Conflict Between Residents

### Characters:

Melanie and Mary – children who live at the second stage residence with their mothers  
Frontline worker in the children’s program  
Frontline worker in the woman’s program

The children’s worker is in the playroom with Mary, a child who lives with her mom in the second stage apartment building. Another child, Melanie comes into the room but will not play with Mary. After Mary leaves, the children’s worker talks with Melanie and discovers that Melanie and Mary’s mothers are having a dispute and the children have been told they are not allowed to play with each other. The children’s worker discusses this issue with her co-worker. They decide they need to do something about this, before the situation gets worse.

### Objectives:

- examining how various power dynamics play out in a residential/communal living setting
- strategizing conflict resolution options that support all the residents and service users

### Areas for Discussion

This scenario deals with a very common issue in communal-living situations; that is conflict between residents. The scenario highlights how conflict between two people can and does affect everyone living and working in the space. In this case the children who are not allowed to play with each other and the children’s worker trying to engage the children in programming. The dialogue in the scene ends with the agreement that the conflict needs to be dealt with, offering opportunity for staff teams to discuss the various ways conflict can be addressed and reflect on the various outcomes. Staff teams can use this example or think of one from your own experience.

The situation in this scenario raises several contextual issues to consider, such as:

- the differences between communal living in second stage and shelter programs
- in second stage programs the residents have their own apartments and the staff is not present 24/7. It makes it more difficult to be aware of conflict in the early stages and intervene before things become serious.
- how to discuss issues of conflict with the peripherally involved players like the neighbours or co-residents and children
- age appropriate ways to deal with conflict
- workers involving themselves in conflict between residents that respects women’s rights to privacy, and autonomy but also meets the worker’s need to maintain a respectful and peaceful shared living or program space

## Questions

- What preventative measures does your organization have in place to deal with resident conflict before they become serious issues of concern?
- Are these measures successful in that they respect women's privacy and autonomy and offer solutions?
- The issues behind conflict can be varied for example communication issues, conflict of interest, different ways of doing things. What is your agency's practice when the issue is one of oppression, such as racism, homophobia, ableism, sexism, etc?
- Are your conflict resolution processes clear to all staff?
- Do all staff have the know-how to carry them out?
- Are the processes clear to the women?
- What are the conflict resolution processes for children? Does your organization have age/development processes?

In this case the children have been told by their mother's not to play or talk with each other.

## Questions

- Do you think the shelter worker's should override their mother's instructions and work on trying to get them to play again? Why or why not?
- If the mothers agree to disagree and decide they will not engage with each other and still maintain that the children should not engage with the other family – how does the children's worker deal with that? Does she create separate programming for each child? Is there a time when the staff would override the mother's wishes? What are the consequences for a yes answer and a no answer?



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## Case Study #4: Dealing with Anger

### Characters:

Sarah – woman accessing services in a shelter  
Frontline worker

Sarah, a resident is visibly upset and thinking about her experiences with her partner, the courts and police. She strides over to a worker, and loudly and with many gestures begins to tell her story. The worker is busy and distracted with other work, asks Sarah to slow down and tell the story from the beginning. Sarah, who is outraged at her treatment is telling her story, her anger is evident. The worker asks several questions which result in Sarah getting angry at her. The worker raises her voice and sternly tells Sarah to calm down and calls her behaviour inappropriate. Sarah swears at the workers and stomps off.

### Objectives:

- examining our own beliefs, assumptions and responses to different types of behaviour that make us personally uncomfortable
- “unpacking” internalized and socialized ideas about anger and women’s expressions of anger and gender norms
- to think about ways that programming can support and validate women’s feelings of anger and engage them in transformative work

### Areas for Discussion

Women’s socialization as “gentle, nurturers” and the caretakers of others requires that women are conditioned not to express anger unless it’s on behalf of others<sup>1</sup>. Women who express anger experience being called: “nag”, “shrew” and “bitch”. A recent study<sup>2</sup> conducted by Victoria Brescoll at Yale University found that “people accept anger in men, but women who lose their temper are seen as less competent”. For women, behaviours associated with sadness such as crying is seen as more socially acceptable and tend to generate feelings of compassion and empathy.

<sup>1</sup> Literature Review on Women’s Anger and other Emotions. Corrections Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/fsw22/toce-eng.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Yale University (2008, April 4). People Accept Anger In Men, But Women Who Lose Their Temper Are Seen As Less Competent, Study Shows. ScienceDaily. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/04/080402152707.htm>

Anger more so than other emotional expressions is seen as something to be “managed”. Yelling and gesturing are often perceived as problematic behaviours and indicators of loss of control rather than release. Sometimes women who express their anger are silenced and shamed. They can be perceived as scary and violent. They are told they need to “manage their anger” which means express it in socially acceptable ways. Women who get so angry they cry are treated differently than women who get so angry they yell. Racialized women in particular Black<sup>3</sup> and First Nations<sup>4</sup> women are perceived as a danger when they express anger, as they as a group are associated with historical and contemporary stereotypes of being animalistic and savage.

Anti-violence workers understand that women’s experiences of violence and oppression often lead to repression of emotion as a survival mechanism. Some of our work focuses on supporting women to connect with and express their emotions. We recognize that anger just like sadness and grief is a valid and justified response to their experiences. At the same time workers are responsible for maintaining a “safe” environment for women accessing the program. We know that anger is often associated with violence and violent behaviour and particularly for women who have experienced violent anger can represent danger and generate feelings of fear for some women. These two responsibilities can work in opposition to each other in the day to day operations, especially in a residential program.

In this scenario Sarah has experienced violence and oppression – she was assaulted by her partner and then re-victimized by the police and the courts. She is justifiably angry. The worker in this case is busy with other work, consequently she is only partly paying attention until Sarah’s tone and gestures escalate which gets her full attention and puts her on the defensive. This dramatization exaggerates responses that can occur in more subtle less obvious ways.

One area of consideration is the ways that rhetoric, questions or phrases get used regularly sometimes without thinking, like: “how does that make you feel”? Obviously this is a valid and useful question in supporting women to connect to their feelings, however in this case it is equally obvious that Sarah is quite clearly connecting to and expressing her feelings. There are some common questions and phrases, like this one, that are used out of context – sometimes by inexperienced workers who have heard it used but do not understand the meaning behind it or sometimes by distracted workers who are not actually present to the conversation.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, T. L. (2004) Anger Privilege: Deconstructing the Controlling Image of the “Angry Black Woman. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA., Retrieved from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p109283\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p109283_index.html)

<sup>4</sup> Carpenter, C.M. (2008). Seeing Red. Ohio State University. Retrieved from <http://www.ohiostatepress.org/books/Book%20PDFs/Carpenter%20Seeing.pdf>

This scenario also presents an opportunity to explore women expressing anger at workers. Anti-violence workers are not perfect, we are human beings who sometimes make mistakes and poor decisions. As this scenario demonstrates, there are times when workers are distracted by other things and do not or cannot give full attention to women. Sometimes we try to take a short cut and end up with women mad at us. Having someone mad at us is never pleasant and can cause feelings of defensiveness and anger. In some cases women's anger at workers is reframed as "transference", where the worker assumes the woman is angry at someone else and is taking it out on the worker. In other cases when women are angry at workers they are judged as ungrateful and rude, their anger is viewed as out of line and unwarranted. This issue highlights issues of power and control. Workers have the power to reframe women's experiences as something else, to: name, judge, punish and reward women's behaviours. This is enormous power bestowed on us by virtue of being "the worker" in a structure that places workers in positions of control over women accessing services. This power requires an equally enormous responsibility of: hearing women and not rendering women's experiences, feelings, thoughts and emotions invisible through renaming, ignoring or silencing.

### Questions

#### Self- Reflection:

- Identify the behaviours you are most comfortable with and the behaviours that create feelings of discomfort for you. Reflect on past experiences and examine how your comfort or discomfort manifests in your practice.
- What are the ways your organization supports women to connect with and express their anger?
- Upon review of your practice and procedures, are there ways of expressing emotion that are more acceptable in your programs? I.e. Shelter/residence, children's program, group, transition, crisis line, etc.
- Discuss the ways your practice aligns and does not align with feminist anti-oppression beliefs.



## Case Study #5: Complex Behaviours

### Characters:

Pamela – woman accessing transition (outreach) support services  
Transition/outreach worker  
Program manager

Pamela a woman in the community is attending a meeting with a transition worker. The worker is asking some opening questions in order to understand how Pamela requires support. The worker is struggling to understand Pamela's responses; they don't make sense to her. She reminds Pamela that she cannot come to meetings under the influence of alcohol or substance. As the meeting goes on Pamela becomes visibly agitated with the worker and abruptly leaves the office. The worker later talks over her meeting with the program manager.

### Objectives:

- identifying and understanding women's coping behaviours
- examining our own beliefs, assumptions and responses and judgements about women's behaviour
- strategizing responses to women such as assessment questions, that maintain safe and inclusive space for women

### Areas for Discussion

This scenario offers opportunity to discuss assessment questions and interview techniques that are helpful when meeting with women. This scenario also highlights some behaviour that may be challenging to respond to.

As workers who provide support and "helping" kinds of service to vulnerable people we understand that it is important to communicate both interest and compassion to women who meet with us; especially in the first meetings. It is of the utmost importance that both verbal and non-verbal language, reflect this commitment. We know that women who have experienced abuse can be especially alert and watchful of their environment and of people in their lives as their safety has relied on being able to recognize dangerous situations. Our services require women to trust us and to trust the space we ask them to enter into. This trust is something we have to earn by being honest and transparent in our dealings with women as well as being compassionate and understanding. It requires us to be present and thoughtful in our conversation and actions and attempt to make meaningful connection.

In this scenario there are a number of elements that may have contributed to this outcome and had they been different may have led to a more successful connection. These include: body language, tone of voice, types and timing of questions, assumptions made and the worker's level of presence and attention in the meeting.

### Questions

- Reflect upon your own experiences of meeting with women for the first time – what were the important messages you were attempting to communicate?
- How did you communicate these? What elements of your communication were most important?
- What strategies do you employ before a meeting to ground yourself to be fully present in the meeting?
- If women are presenting behaviour that makes you uncomfortable or uncertain, what strategies do you use to keep yourself grounded and present during the meeting?
- How do you make time to be thoughtful about your next steps or next question during a meeting? Do your strategies change when you are unclear about her behaviour?
- What are examples of assessment questions that you ask that are exploratory but not judging?

In this scenario the worker is puzzled and somewhat disconcerted by the way Joanne is presenting herself. In her attempts to understand, the worker suspects and makes assumptions that alcohol or drug use is responsible for this behaviour. In watching this scenario you may suspect this or something else as Joanne's behaviour is puzzling because of its ambiguity. There are a variety of reasons why Joanne is behaving in this way.

It is not unusual for workers to make meaning of behaviours women present to us – this is part of our assessment. However our meaning may or may not be accurate. For example, people may laugh when they are amused or when they are confused or uncomfortable. Amusement may be expressed when people are delighted and/or when they are chagrined. We make assumptions and judgements all the time in our interactions with people – our judgements cue us in to what to do next. In the context of our work the consequences of those assumptions become heightened. They can support the development of a relationship or break it down entirely.

This scenario exaggerates the assumption of the worker in order to highlight the issue of assumption, because often the assumption or judgement of a behaviour is made quickly and silently in our heads; our determination then influences both how we frame the interaction as well as our next step or action in the meeting. When we are by chance correct in our assumption our next step likely supports our attempts to build connection, when we are incorrect it has the opposite effect.

## Questions

- As you watched this scenario unfold, did you find yourself making assumptions or judgements about Joanne's behaviour?
- If so, what did you suspect was happening with her?
- Based on what you believed was happening, how would your behaviour have been different from the worker's behaviour? How would it have been the same or similar?
- If you did not make assumptions about Joanne's behaviour, what would you have done differently than the worker in the dramatization? What would you have done the same or similar?
- What strategies or techniques do you use for yourself to be aware and identify when you are making assumptions about women?
- What strategies or techniques do you use with women to check out behaviours or responses you don't understand?



Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses

## Case Study #6: Advocacy

### Characters:

Aja – woman accessing services in a shelter  
2 frontline workers

A shelter worker, Angela and a resident, Aja are meeting about Ontario Works. Aja has been told by her Ontario Works worker that she is not eligible for community start-up. The shelter worker believes she is eligible and encourages her to call back and tell the OW caseworker that she is wrong and that the shelter worker has said she is eligible. In essence Aja has to challenge the caseworker's decision. Throughout the day, Angela keeps checking in with Aja and asking whether she has called yet. Aja has not called and Angela begins to wonder if Aja is deliberately not following through with her responsibilities.

### Objectives:

- examining the intent and practice of “advocacy” and how the need for advocacy manifests in contemporary anti-violence organizations
- opportunity to expand the idea of individual advocacy and re-look at internal practices

### Areas for Discussion

This scenario offers opportunity to explore the meaning and practice of advocacy in feminist anti-violence work. Advocacy can generally be partitioned into two directions, individual and community or broad-based. It can be focused on systemic, social and personal issues. Individual advocacy refers to working with an individual in response to her needs whereas broad-based or community advocacy refers to working with a group or community based on the needs of the community. The difference is between supporting women to navigate the institution of Ontario Works to receive financial assistance and actively challenging the system or institution of Ontario Works to ensure it provides the level of assistance needed and removes the barriers to access.

Feminist advocacy is grounded in a belief that workers are supporting women's empowerment; supporting women to be heard and access their rights. Empowerment is a feeling that is cultivated through practice; it is not something that can be given to someone. It is subjective to each person's individual interpretation. Feminist advocacy entails working with women, to determine what their needs are and the best course of action to access their needs.

Advocacy is differently interpreted by people. If you ask everyone in the room what they think advocacy is and how you provide advocacy you will get a variety of answers. You may agree with the definitions above or have a different interpretation altogether. Even though most feminist anti-violence organizations list advocacy as one of their services it is usually not concretized into specific activities and standards of practice. In other words there is an assumption that everyone knows what it means and how to do it and that everyone has the same meaning.

In this scenario the frontline worker believes Aja was given inaccurate information, she believes she is advocating for Aja by providing her with accurate information<sup>5</sup> and encouraging her to call again. She is supporting her to access something she has a right to; she is providing an advocacy service.

If the worker picked up the phone and called Ontario Works on behalf of Aja and requested the Ontario Works caseworker review the policy directives and in the end Aja received a cheque for start up; this would also be providing an advocacy service.

If the worker sat with Aja and said “why don’t you call now and I will sit with you and provide moral and physical support while you do it”; this would also be providing an advocacy service.

If the agency wrote a letter to Ontario Works that highlighted the fact that women using their service are consistently being told that they don’t qualify for start up, when they are in fact qualified under Ontario Works Policy Directive 7.5 and that the shelter would like Ontario Works to ensure all the caseworkers know that; this would be providing an advocacy service too.

You may have supported Aja in the exact same way or in a completely different way; partly because workers have an individual style and ways of working, but another reason may be because the expectation of how to provide advocacy in your organization may not be a service with clear guidelines and measures of practice.

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Works Policy Directive 7.5 allows for women experiencing domestic violence to receive CSUMB more than once in a 24-month period. Retrieved from [http://www.accesson.ca/en/mcss/programs/social/directives/directives/OWDirectives/7\\_5\\_OW\\_Directives.aspx](http://www.accesson.ca/en/mcss/programs/social/directives/directives/OWDirectives/7_5_OW_Directives.aspx)

## Questions

- How is advocacy defined and practiced in your organization?
- How did you learn this, for example was it a distinct part of your training?
- Does everyone in your organization who has advocacy as part of their job description understand advocacy in the same way?
- How are successful advocacy skills defined and measured?
- Is advocacy a distinct part of your performance review?
- Does your personal understanding of advocacy match your organization's expectation of how advocacy is performed?
- How do you and your organization explain advocacy service to women?

Additionally in this scenario we have the opportunity to observe an example of how a worker can perceive a situation quite differently from a woman accessing service. In this dramatization the worker feels as though she offered support in a kind and helpful way. She feels that she has provided Aja with everything she needs to feel empowered; information, suggestion, advice and care. Through this dramatization we can witness something that the worker does not see and that is Aja trying and failing to make the call. We witness her fear, and see how truly difficult she experienced something to be; something that for some seems fairly simple.

Similar to other scenarios in the film this case highlights how easily assumptions are made and how they influence our work with women. It demonstrates how important it is to be aware of the assumptions we make through reflective practice strategies and to deepen our awareness of other people's perspective and ways of being; thereby strengthening our skill and ability to work with diverse women in ways that reflect our feminist anti-oppression beliefs.