

Battered Women Speak Out

Welfare Reform and Their Decisions to Disclose

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Recent attention has been given to the challenges and unintended negative consequences of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 on the economic well-being and safety of battered women and their children. This study focused on battered women's perceptions and experiences of disclosing their abuse histories to welfare-to-work case managers. The study found that women are prepared and expect to disclose, but various factors influence their ability to do so. In addition, battered women themselves have specific suggestions for improving the understanding and skills of case managers.

Battered women, their advocates, and researchers have raised concerns about the challenges and unintended negative consequences of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (PRWORA) on the economic well-being and safety of battered women and their children (Brandwein, 1999c; Davis, 1999; Jons, 1999; Lyon, 1997; Murphy, 1997; Raphael, 1996, 1999; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). The PRWORA requires states to set mandatory lifetime limitations for cash benefits (Title I, § 406[A]), adopt rigid work requirements (Title I, § 406[2][D][d]), and require recipients to cooperate with the collection of child support payments (Title I, § 406[2][A]). At the state level, Temporary

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Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs administer and coordinate the delivery of these provisions and services.

Recent studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between welfare recipients and a history of domestic violence (Allard, Colten, Albelda, & Cosenza, 1997; Kurz, 1998; Lloyd, 1997; Meier, 1997; Murphy, 1997; Raphael, 1997, 1999; Tolman & Raphael, *in press*). Raphael and Tolman (1997) and Tolman (1999) have reported an average of 20% to 30% of welfare recipients are battered women. Earlier studies of welfare-to-work and job training programs indicate even higher prevalence rates, an average of 50% to 60% (Raphael, 1995, 1996). Moreover, Brandwein (1999a) reported that many women seek assistance and support as "a way out" of an abusive relationship (p. 47). Similarly, Raphael and Tolman (1997) suggested that benefit time limits may keep women in abusive relationships for longer periods of time.

Congress established a Family Violence Option (FVO) for adoption by states in acknowledgment of the vulnerable circumstances and special needs of battered women and their children regarding welfare reform (Jons, 1999; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). The FVO allows states to temporarily exempt battered women from some or all of the requirements for receiving assistance and encourages states to offer them specialized services and programs (Brandwein, 1999c; Jons, 1999; Raphael, 1996). As of 1999, 39 states had adopted formal FVO policies (National Organization for Women [NOW] Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1999), and many others were in the process of developing a FVO policy and implementing procedures to meet the specific needs of battered women with regard to welfare reform (Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). However, for battered women to qualify for temporary exemptions from work and other requirements, they are often expected to disclose their histories of violence to their welfare-to-work case managers. The current research suggests that battered women are prepared to disclose but that there are various factors that impact the women's abilities to disclose. Thus far, the development of domestic violence protocols and assessment tools for case managers has received little attention from researchers (Davies, 1998a).

Battered women face several circumstances that make it difficult and risky for them to comply with the PRWORA requirements. First, battered women often experience physical injuries

and psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress, which makes work physically and emotionally challenging (Brandwein, 1999b; Murphy, 1997). Second, children living in homes where abuse exists also suffer from the emotional impact of the violence. When women and children flee their homes and seek safe refuge, they surrender familiar surroundings and personal belongings. Seeking safety involves a tremendous disruption of their normal routines. Therefore, women and children who are in crisis and have fled violent circumstances need time to reestablish stability and equilibrium in their lives. However, work requirements may obligate mothers to leave their children in daycare, often with unfamiliar caregivers, which may further devastate these already aggrieved children (Brandwein, 1999b). Third, battered women who flee to safe refuges may be at risk in their workplaces because of their visibility in the community. This may place them in jeopardy for continued violence by their abusers. Furthermore, abusers often sabotage their work efforts by causing disruptions at places of employment that may result in a woman being fired (Raphael, 1995, 1996, 1999). Finally, cooperating with the state with regard to child support payments may endanger women who have fled an intimate partner's violence. Providing information regarding paternity may give their batterers information about how to locate them (Brandwein, 1999b; Davis, 1999; Roberts, 1999). From fear of these potential consequences, battered women may resist disclosure of their abuse to case managers. In addition, many battered women experience feelings of embarrassment and shame about and responsibility for the violence in their lives and may find it difficult to discuss, particularly following an acute battering incident (Brandwein, 1999c). As some have suggested, battered women may fear disclosing their abuse histories because of possible negative consequences associated with doing so (Davies, 1998a). Further, the emotional difficulty of doing so may pose major barriers for those who would qualify for this exemption. Consequently, battered women may not benefit from the special provision designed to help them achieve self-sufficiency and safety (Jons, 1999; NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1999).

Recently, researchers have begun to explore disclosure of abuse by battered women to TANF case managers. In a multistate study, Pearson, Griswold, and Thoennes (2001) found that rates of

disclosure vary by methods for soliciting information. For example, direct questioning by case managers elicited considerably higher rates of disclosure than more oblique notification and self-identification procedures, and battered women preferred it. Repeated explanations of potential exemptions also increase disclosure rates. Battered women also expressed a desire for specialized case managers located at the public assistance site, although most opted not to use these services. In summary, this study suggests that several agency procedures substantially influence battered women's ability and willingness to disclose their abuse. Given certain procedures, battered women substantially underreport abuse and fail to qualify for appropriate exemptions.

To rectify this situation and ensure that the FVO provision meets the needs of battered women, we must first understand battered women's decision making about self-disclosure of domestic violence. Second, we must seek their expert advice about the circumstances under which women are likely to disclose their abuse histories and how the FVO provision can best be implemented. This project sought to achieve these two goals by talking with battered women about their recent experiences in applying for welfare assistance. It differs from the Pearson, Griswold, and Thoennes (2001) study by focusing in greater depth on the decision-making processes of women residing at domestic violence shelters who were eligible for economic support.

METHOD

This small-scale qualitative study examined battered women's perceptions and experiences of disclosing their abuse histories to TANF case managers. The 10 participants were battered women residing in domestic violence shelters, and all were deemed eligible by Department of Social Services (DSS) for economic support. They came from shelters that served four different county DSS service areas in a southeastern state. Each participant was interviewed privately by the first author and/or a graduate research assistant and paid a nominal fee for her time and expertise. The semistructured interview protocol was designed to elicit information from battered women about how they decided to disclose and what happened when they did. It also explored suggestions they had for making the disclosure process more comfortable.

With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. No identifying or demographic information was collected.

During our interviews, we discovered that several of the research questions were not relevant to these women. The ongoing analysis identified gaps in our understanding about how these women decided to disclose their histories of abuse, their experiences with the welfare system, and suggestions they had for improving support to battered women and their children. During our ongoing analysis meetings, we revised the interview protocol to elicit additional data from subsequent interviewees.

The transcriptions were analyzed using a variation of the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The authors jointly reviewed transcripts, developed codes or words that captured definitions and insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and wrote memos or notes about the dimensions of and relationships between the codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These team meetings typically led to further insights that resulted in additional memos (Strauss, 1987). A few times, as noted above, these discussions also led to minor revisions of the interview protocol for subsequent interviews. While reviewing the set of memos, the first author wrote additional, more abstract memos regarding her understanding of the women's disclosure process (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Here, too, the authors reviewed and discussed the first author's memos and exchanged drafts of a paper summarizing the findings. Eventually, the research findings were organized into several categories.

FINDINGS

Four major categories of findings emerged from our conversations with study participants: (a) situational factors of choice issues about disclosure, (b) experiences applying for support services, (c) expectations of caseworkers and self, and (d) these women's suggestions for improved services. Each is discussed below.

SITUATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING DECISIONS TO DISCLOSE

One of this study's major findings was that these battered women expected to disclose their histories of abuse to their welfare-to-work case managers. When we began, we anticipated identifying factors that influence battered women's decisions about whether to disclose their histories of abuse to their welfare-to-work case managers. What we discovered was that battered women anticipated having little choice about disclosure. They expected to tell their case managers they are survivors of abuse. However, we found these women made deliberate decisions about the extent of their disclosures based on situational factors. Three situational factors that influence the extent of disclosure emerged during our conversations with battered women were (a) diminished perceptions of choice, (b) perceptions about the potential negative consequences of disclosure, and (c) other factors that influenced the extent or degree of disclosure.

Diminished Perceptions of Choice

Women offered several explanations for feeling obligated to disclose their histories of abuse. First, the application process itself reduces a woman's perception of her choice alternatives by requiring welfare recipients to provide a physical address. A woman talked about her experience with disclosing her address:

They asked for my address and I put [the shelter name] and the post office box. In my mind I was saying that she must not know what [the shelter] is. She kept saying, "I need a physical address." I said, "I cannot give you my physical address." I tried to explain. I said, "It is a shelter." She said, "What is the address then?"

Second, it appears that universal domestic violence screening questions may be standard on the application for economic support, at least for this southern state sample. In states that have an FVO, a standard history question may be used as a technique for ensuring that all women applying for economic services receive the special exemptions that they are entitled to under the FVO provision.

Women's perceptions of personal choice about disclosure were further diminished by their beliefs that they should disclose their histories of abuse to justify their eligibility for services. These women felt compelled to tell about their abuse histories to justify their seeking economic support: Victim status helped these women to save face. Such beliefs appear to lessen their choice alternatives and may be viewed as coercive by some advocates. For example, one woman stated,

I think it was better for me to tell her. I think it makes things much easier to let them know where you are instead of making up something. Why not just say, "I'm from [the shelter]?" Everyone knows where the [shelter] is. It made it so much easier to get my paperwork done.

Similarly, another woman stated,

They [other battered women] need to be open and tell the truth, you know just tell the truth . . . they need to tell the caseworker the truth and let them know what is going on.

Considering Potential Negative Consequences of Disclosure

Although perceiving little choice, women had several concerns about disclosing their histories of abuse. Women considered several potential negative consequences of disclosure before even applying for economic support services. One consequence that women considered was the threat of losing the custody of their children for failure to protect. For example, a woman stated,

At first I didn't want to tell her because they might try to do something concerning my son or something. . . . [Interviewer: Take your son away?] . . . I would not want that, I would not want that to happen.

However, women perceived the alternative, to not seek economic support, as a greater risk. Many women recognized that if they did not seek services they would not be able to provide for their children, thus putting themselves and their children at greater risk. For example, a woman stated,

I have to be honest with you. When I first walked in there I said, "I am going home." I looked at my baby and my son was hungry and then the lady said, "We got good food." And that was nice and it dawned on me, if I go back it is going to be worse, he [her abuser] is more mad.

Women were also concerned about being stereotyped or misjudged by their case managers and others at the social service office, particularly if the offices did not offer adequate privacy. For instance, a woman stated, "We were in front of a room full of people. I'm thinking this is the worst day of my life . . . that can be embarrassing."

Other Factors Influencing the Extent of Disclosure

Although these women did not perceive real alternatives to self-disclosure, they did make decisions about the extent to which they disclosed. The degree of disclosure depended on three factors: previous experiences with the welfare department, hearsay and anecdotal evidence, and intuitive feelings about their case managers.

First, women made their decisions based on their previous experiences with the welfare system. If a woman had a good past relationship with her welfare worker, she was more likely to talk about why she was seeking economic services. Conversely, if a woman had previous negative experiences with the welfare office, she was less likely to talk about her history. The following quote illustrates some of the current concerns based on past experiences:

I did not feel they could really help me because the only thing that they were concerned about [in the past] was child custody. . . . I don't feel that they really would have been able to help me, I know the one [case manager] I had, she act so funny, I don't think so [she would not disclose], not unless some of them were real concern or not unless they would ever bring it up. A lot of them are just doing their job. I don't think they were really ready to get down to earth and talk to about, have this ever happen to you or has that ever happened to you?

Second, women made decisions about the extent of disclosure based on hearsay and anecdotal evidence provided by other

shelter women. Women felt a sense of responsibility to tell others about their experiences with county welfare systems and particular case managers. They told about both positive and negative experiences. When the experiences were positive, women often encouraged others to also seek assistance. For instance, a woman stated,

They [other battered women] think that they won't help them because of the situation, but I try to tell them that they will help you because of the situation that you are in. You have problems and you have no control over what has happened to you. It is like you dig a ditch and you are in it. There is no way out of a ditch. You need help. When [another battered woman] told me about this program, I said that them people are not going to give me anything. I was like, "Child, please, those people are not going to give me anything." Somehow they did.

Similarly, a woman stated,

I said it was so easy. We sit here and think, "Ooh I am going to go through a lot of hassles." I said, "Go down there. It is much easier." I said, "All you have to do is explain that you are at the shelter and they can go from there." The woman said, "For real?" A couple of other ladies went and they said it was really easy.

Discussing negative experiences usually included warning other women to avoid certain case managers or county agencies. For instance, a woman said,

I had it good in [a particular] county. When I went to the shelter in [the same] county, I got everything. Here, somebody warned me. They said, "In [another] county you are not going to get all your stuff fast." They sure told the truth.

Similarly, a woman stated,

Well, I went to [a particular] county and it was totally different. I do not know if [a different] county deals with a lot of women from [the shelter]. It was so bad. They give me all this paperwork to fill out.

The third factor that influenced a woman's level of disclosure was her intuitive feelings about her caseworker. If a welfare worker appeared empathetic, understanding, and nonjudg-

mental, women were likely to tell more of their stories. For instance, a woman stated,

She said that she knew about [the shelter] and she had done some volunteer work over there, I remember her face.

The reverse was also true. If the welfare worker appeared nonresponsive, disinterested, or uncaring, women did not tell as much of their stories. For example, one woman stated,

She was more like pushing the paper work and pencil and that's it . . . and got her answers and sent it [her application] off and that's it . . . they either sympathize with you or look at you like oh . . . being in a job dealing with people who come through with different situations you have to have compassion. That is the key thing . . . I would have said okay I'm not the only one. So, if nothing else being a good listener.

Similarly, a woman stated,

If I could have sensed that he [the worker] wanted to help it would not have been a problem [to talk about her abuse].

The degree to which these women disclosed their histories of domestic violence to their case managers was influenced by several factors, including their personal past experiences with welfare offices and what they heard from other women. However, the most influential factor was how women intuitively felt about their case managers during the application process. The case manager's responsive or nonresponsive behavior directly impacted the degree to which a woman talked about her history of domestic violence.

EXPERIENCE APPLYING FOR SUPPORT SERVICES

Women reported a broad range of experiences when applying for economic assistance. Many women had positive experiences talking with their caseworkers about their domestic violence histories. They felt that their workers were sympathetic, empathetic, and compassionate. For instance, a woman stated,

I was just thinking why would they help me. Because a man beat me up, they are going to help me? I mean they help you and they make sure that you get help as far as the domestic violence. You can tell them or you don't have to tell them. They don't pressure you and ask you, "How did he beat you?" Yes, I think they do [understand].

In addition, several battered women had workers who disclosed professional or personal histories with domestic violence. These caseworkers' disclosures often put the woman at ease about disclosing her own history. Positive relationships also developed when the women perceived their workers as a resource link to other services provided by the welfare system and community services. For example, a woman said,

She told me about WIC. They told me about the plan to help me get my identification. They told me about childcare. They told me about getting assistance from the Salvation Army and places like that. They told me that they would help me with the light bill and the deposit and transportation.

When women had negative experiences with the system, they attributed it either to individual workers and their judgmental attitudes or the complex system that seemed unresponsive to immediate and emergency needs. Many workers, although they were informed about the history of abuse, chose not to follow up or express concern for the woman's crisis situation. Women speculated that these workers either did not know what to say or how to say it or were disinterested. Women also reported that workers would not return calls and complete necessary paperwork that undoubtedly delayed support services.

System inflexibility also created problems for battered women. The amount of paperwork and required documentation was particularly overwhelming for women who had fled their homes to seek safe refuge. A woman illustrates what a typical conversation might be: "She said, 'Do you have a picture ID?' I said, 'No.' 'What about a birth certificate?' I said, 'No.' 'Social Security Cards?' I said, 'No.' "

In addition, half of the women we interviewed for this project had relocated to different counties or states for safety reasons. Their unfamiliarity with the different application procedures and

requirements often delayed their services. For instance, a woman recalled,

I had to schedule another appointment. The last time when I was 5 minutes late, I called to make another appointment; I never got in touch with this man [the worker]. I kept calling, I called at least two or three times a day for about 3 days and I never got in touch with him. I got stressed out and that was one of the reasons I went back to my abuser. I could never get them to switch or cancel my case [from or in another county]. I could never get in touch with him.

Another woman stated, "I went and they gave me some papers. She told me that they were all booked up. I had no money because I had to uproot."

Although the experiences with applying for economic support varied, some positive and some negative, it appeared that many women spent considerable time and energy learning about the welfare system itself. They reported that it was a complex system that was often difficult to access because of challenging requirements.

EXPECTATIONS OF CASE MANAGERS AND SELF

Expectation of Case Managers

Women clearly expressed their thoughts about the qualities of effective welfare-to-work case managers. The most frequently occurring responses focused on personal characteristics and attitudes. Battered women expected their workers to be genuine, empathetic, concerned, and nonjudgmental. As one woman said, "I think they can be more understanding, because we are trying to get out of this situation."

They also expected their workers to be knowledgeable about the multiple difficulties of their lives. As battered women, they especially wanted workers to know about domestic violence, trauma, and how that violence impacted their lives. The women also discussed their unique difficulties with transportation and community living that they wanted workers to understand. They expected their workers to be flexible. For example, a woman recalled,

I was late one time, just 5 minutes late and I weren't seen. Then, Tuesday, I was 10 minutes late, which was my fault but I asked the shelter worker and she called and the phone message was so full she couldn't get in touch with her. She also said that since I was late I would have to make another appointment. I have a 1-year-old and [his] weight is about 30 pounds and I am pregnant. It's like I am dragging him on the bus and dragging him to appointments then not being seen, and it's really hard because . . . I should be on time.

Battered women also expected workers to be responsive to their emergency situations and to offer immediate supportive services during their crises. For example, a woman stated,

They helped me because I didn't have any identification. He destroyed my identification. I didn't have anything . . . without information there is no way to get help from anyone.

Closely related to this issue, women expect their workers to understand the continuing risk of violence by their perpetrators. A woman reported explicit threats that interfered with work:

I want to work, but I'm afraid. I have gotten messages from my girlfriends. They said he said if he sees me, he's going to kill me. You had better watch your back and all other kinds of stuff, and believe me he'll do it. Anytime he thinks I am somewhere around he'll drive and see if he'll see me. So he's a psychopath.

Another woman gives an example:

You don't have all the things you might need, like identification. Because you might not bring a pocketbook. When I left I just had clothes on my back. I did not pick up a pocketbook. I didn't pick up anything because if I went back I probably would have gotten chopped up. This man had a machete waiting to cut me up. I just wanted to get out.

In addition, women expected workers to serve as a resource. It would be helpful for workers to inform them of the programs and services within the system and assistance outside the agency.

Many women initially identified themselves as shelter residents or disclosed their abuse histories during the application process. When they did so, they expected their workers to explore

their histories of abuse and offer support. They were often dismayed and distressed when their workers did not ask follow-up questions regarding the abuse. One woman described her experience with a nonresponsive worker:

Yeah, I told them I was from the [shelter] [Interviewer: And it didn't matter?] No. It made me feel really stressed out because you [the welfare worker] already know I was stressed out, I just busted out in tears, [I was] tired. She acted like she didn't understand or care or something.

Women expressed many expectations of their case managers. For the most part, these expectations (e.g., empathy, genuineness, knowledge, and skill) reflect qualities often considered fundamental to all professional helping relationships.

Expectations of Self

Many of the women had expectations of themselves when they applied for services. They expected to be able to provide the necessary documentation for application of services, to be knowledgeable of the system, keep appointments, and work toward self-sufficiency. A woman stated,

The recipient needs to make sure they stay in contact with the case manager 'cause when a recipient does not stay in touch with the case manager that is indicating to the case manager, "Okay, they don't care, let me cut them off."

Women viewed economic support services as a temporary means of survival. Many women wanted to be employed or enrolled in school and to provide for themselves and their children. For example, a woman stated, "It is fine, I am just ready to get my own place." Another woman said, "I am looking forward to it [moving out of the shelter]. It is going to be just me and my son. . . . I know I will [work] because I will be bored out of my mind if I don't."

In sum, besides their expectations of their case managers, women also had expectations of themselves. They expected to be fully engaged in the application process, holding the major responsibility for meeting the agency requirements. They also

anticipated that temporary economic support would lead to their self-sufficiency in the future.

WOMEN'S SUGGESTIONS FOR BETTER SERVICES

The women themselves offered many concrete suggestions for improving services, including some closely related to the expectations women held regarding their case managers. Women believed that workers need specific training on domestic violence and its impact on women and children. They also suggested that workers be trained about and sensitized, more generally, to the impact of trauma on their lives and the lives of their children. For example, workers should be made aware that completing paperwork and getting to appointments may be especially difficult for women who feel overwhelmed, sad, tired, and angry.

Women also made several suggestions about interagency collaboration. For example, they suggested that shelter advocates prime personnel and intervene as a broker when a woman has difficulty accessing services. Women who had positive experiences with the welfare office described well-coordinated efforts between welfare case managers and shelter advocates. Women also suggested domestic violence agencies prepare them for their meetings with their case managers. Specifically, they suggested that domestic violence shelter advocates explain the application process, including what documentation is required. Women also suggested that professionals in the welfare system prime those from other community support services (e.g., employment, housing), so that these professionals respond effectively to the crisis nature of their cases. These collaborative relationships improve the likelihood that women get services necessary to make good decisions about their own and their children's futures.

Closely related to the issue of interagency collaboration, the women also suggested that intraagency cooperation be improved. They suggested a need for streamlined procedures when TANF cases need to be transferred from one county or district to another county or district within the same state. In doing so, the complexity of the application process and procedures can be minimized.

Several women suggested that they be given true emergency response services. Many of the women did not immediately

receive services for which they were eligible (e.g., Medicaid, food stamps) until weeks after their initial application. These delays contributed to their problems.

Finally, most women said that it was therapeutic to tell their stories to a nonjudgmental worker. Battered women and their advocates have long believed in the therapeutic benefits of women having opportunities to tell their stories. Doing so may be particularly therapeutic for women who have just left their abusers and fled to a shelter. Even though welfare-to-work case managers are not trained or intended to provide therapeutic services, the women indicated they would benefit from even minor attentiveness and sensitivity.

CONCLUSION

This study portrays battered women as agents, actively managing the risks and benefits of disclosing their abuse. At least for these battered women, all of whom were residing in shelters, disclosure of abuse was a given. They generally assumed that they must disclose. For them, the bigger issue was how much to disclose.

Despite the small scale of the current study, it suggests that various situational factors heavily influenced battered women's disclosure process, making it either more or less difficult or demeaning. For these women, the extent of their disclosure depended largely on their own personal experience with public assistance in the past, what they learned from other shelter residents, and how they experienced interactions with their case managers. Greater awareness of these situational factors may provide the basis for improving the ways social service professionals respond to battered women. At minimum, it reminds us of the fundamental fact that applying for assistance involves an interpersonal relationship and one fraught with the tensions and complexities of the battered women's lives.

The women exhibited awareness of the problems inherent in large organizations (e.g., system complexity, rigidity, paperwork). But even their comments about these matters highlight interpersonal aspects of their contacts with these organizations. They interpreted many of the bureaucratic problems as a lack of concern by individual case managers; alternately, they explained

positive experiences with reference to empathic and interested case managers. Furthermore, women's expectations for case managers emphasized their relational sensitivities and skills.

Nevertheless, the women in this sample had several ideas for improving agency services. Regarding case managers, they identified the need for training in domestic violence and trauma to prepare them for working with battered women. In the context of their difficult circumstances, the women affirmed their simple need for attentiveness and sensitivity from case managers. They also identified the importance of collaboration between domestic violence programs and welfare departments to streamline application procedures. The women in our sample recognized and appreciated the support of shelter staff and residents when seeking public assistance. With these reminders, case managers and advocates alike can better honor and serve the needs of battered women.

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