

**RESEARCH INTO VIOLENT BEHAVIOR:  
OVERVIEW AND SEXUAL ASSAULTS**

**HEARINGS**

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC  
PLANNING, ANALYSIS AND COOPERATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

JANUARY 10, 11, 12, 1978

[No. 64]

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ON SUPPORTING WOMEN'S  
SUCCESSFUL EFFORTS AGAINST  
VIOLENCE

LOIS ABLIN KRIESBERG

Report submitted to:  
Subcommittee on Domestic  
and International Scientific  
Planning, Analysis, and  
Cooperation

Committee on Science & Technology  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

January, 1978

## ON SUPPORTING WOMEN'S SUCCESSFUL

## EFFORTS AGAINST VIOLENCE

LOIS ABLIN KRIESBERG\*

Pervasive social problems of violence and sexual assault tempt the search for powerful and far reaching solutions and may result in our overlooking modest, effective developments. In the past half dozen years, feminist inspired rape crisis centers and battered wife's shelters in many communities have significantly reduced the harm suffered by victims of these crimes and have initiated important changes in the implementation of existing laws and enforcement practices.<sup>1</sup>

My preliminary research in Syracuse and Onondaga County, New York, included conversations with feminists, local politicians, law enforcement personnel, volunteers, staff members, rape victims, battering victims and family members associated with three such community groups.<sup>2</sup>

Small paid staffs of one or two persons and modest annual budgets around \$50,000, in communities of half a million people, seem sufficient to mobilize large numbers of active volunteers committed to changing distressing patterns of violence against women. When initial federal funding is withdrawn, these unique but limited resources must be expended in the search for funds.<sup>3</sup>

This paper highlights some of my observations which suggest that a sustained, long term, national commitment to modest funding of such groups would have a significant impact on changing the violent patterns of behavior which concern us.

\*J.D. expected, December 1978, Syracuse University College of Law and Associate Professor of Anthropology & Sociology, College of Health Related Professions, State University of New York, Upstate Medical Center Syracuse, New York, (1976-78 Leave of absence).

Law enforcement has failed to deter or control rape and wife battering. Furthermore, legal institutions have re-enforced this violence by their punishing treatment of victims.

Social acceptance and approval of male violence is so pervasive that rapists and batterers are sometimes unaware of the degree of fear and coercion they exert and enforcement personnel tend to "blame the victim" for initiating the situation. Female protest is seen as "teasing"; terrorized compliance as "consent" and casual interaction as "asking for it". Wives who return to husbands who have brutalized them, in order to protect their children or because they lack economic alternatives are assumed to like such treatment. Rather than offer alternatives and protection, courts and police often encourage women back into these situations. In many states battering by a husband is not treated as a crime except at the discretion of a family court judge and in no state is coerced or violent sexual assault by a husband on his wife recognized as rape.

Feminist activists and scholars regard this combination of criminal and institutional violence along with the stigmatization of the victim as a major sanction perpetuating the subordinate social role of women.<sup>4</sup> The resulting internalization of guilt and shame combines with realistic fear of additional degradation by family, police and courts to keep unknown numbers of women and female children silent as to their victimization. This frees the men to commit more such acts without risk of exposure and also eases the work load of law enforcement agencies who never hear of most crimes.

One important feminist response to this problem is the organization of crisis centers and shelters to provide peer support and advocacy for the victims of rape and battering.<sup>5</sup>

These activities include 24 hour telephone crisis intervention, temporary emergency shelter, counseling, advocacy with the legal and medical system, community education on rape prevention, publicity on the incidence of rape and battering among all ages and social classes, development of long term economic alternatives for victims of battering and educational programs with medical and legal personnel to sensitize them, at least, to the most blatant of their inappropriate behaviors towards victims.

The most direct results of these activities are that the advocacy and counseling reduce the isolation of a victim and lessen her vulnerability to abuse by legal and medical institutions, her family and her own fear and guilt. The sharing of the experience and the growing female solidarity among staff and victims heighten expectations that the law must respond and willingness to risk using it. Eliminating the stigma of victimhood literally lessens the harm and violence in the crime and frees the victim to assert her own perspective and demand assistance.

Crisis centers and shelters also provide vital links between the victim and the legal system by providing contact for police and prosecutors with victims who might not otherwise report the crimes. Even if formal charges are not filed, more meaningful statistics on the extent of rape and battering in a community are accumulated and knowledge of the range of ages and social classes affected makes it

more difficult to see a victim as the culprit.

In Onondaga County, the Rape Crisis Center and the District Attorney's office are currently experimenting with a third party reporting system which involves the reporting of details of a rape without revealing a reluctant victim's identity. Such information can often reveal a pattern of conduct by a particular offender, help to solve other assaults and prevent new ones.

An indirect, but potentially far reaching, consequence of strengthening the victim's position is the increased possibility of building a criminal case and using existing law and procedure effectively.

Crisis intervention includes providing a volunteer, if the victim wishes, to accompany her in her interaction with police, hospital and prosecutor. These are the points at which official behavior has dealt most punitively with victims. The consequence of interrupting and reducing some of this blatant abuse has been to increase the professional efficiency of investigative work and the potential of successful prosecution. Officials who are precluded from spending their attention and time blaming a victim are free to turn to the challenge of apprehending and convicting a rapist.

The mere presence of a volunteer accompanying the victim changes interaction and behavior, especially when the volunteer is a woman. Overtly objectionable verbal abuse and "jokes" cease although much that is unwarily insulting may still be said. Police, hospital and prosecutor personnel are presented with a pro-victim, self confident and competent woman whose cooperation facilitates their concentration on doing their professional investigative job.

Such serious investigation encourages victims to cooperate and risk the legal process.

The initial contact between a rape victim and a police officer provides the best illustration of this process.

Men and women in this culture deal with stereotyped versions of one another and in the area of sex and emotion often interact with either uncontrolled or rigidly suppressed feelings and with the aid of drugs or alcohol. One social cost of this pattern shows most clearly at the point of first contact between a victim and a police officer after a rape. Nothing in our culture prepares these two people for a rational interaction under those circumstances.

Terror, hysteria and fury are characteristic victim reactions to rape. With such feelings, a woman faces a conventional, aggressive male police officer. And the two of them are to discuss sex, intercourse, semen, penetration and sodomy.

Intervention by trained volunteers at this point enables the interaction to be productive and rational rather than an exchange of defensive strategies for dealing with overwhelming emotion.

The volunteer presents a model of calm for the officer. Her lack of expressed fear for the victim's hysteria and her sympathy for the difficulties of both parties is reassuring. An officer who can count on the volunteer "handling" the tears and the anger is less likely to react defensively to protect himself and his restraint is reassuring to the victim.

Volunteers have taught the police the importance of a victim's need to express anger. Much of the former brutal police behavior

was a reaction to the "blaming" that angry victims seemed to direct at them. This third party role is probably important but less crucial when the police officer is female. There are too few instances of that variation, as yet, to consider.

All of this is important because the first officer on the scene and the victim are the two major witnesses in most rape cases and what evidence there is must be developed at the time. Failure of an officer to get immediate recitation of details will support a rapist's defense that the victim made the story up after the event. Blaming of the victim was one police strategy for avoiding any need for a cooperative investigative job that demanded both counseling and police skills as well as enormous self-confidence of the part of the officer.

Rape investigation, when done well, involves two officers; one who investigates the physical evidence and one who stays with the victim throughout the medical examination and perhaps beyond and gets her detailed story. This may involve repeated questioning and the officer must know what to ask. He must be able to stay in charge of his feelings of anger or impatience and let the victim spill out as much feeling as necessary to be able to get to the relevant detail. He must be sensitive to the anger and feelings of the victim's family and perceive how these affect her behavior.

Asking a victim to tell her story over and over may seem punishing and if victims react to that, the two may enter into an escalating and non-productive interaction of mutual anger or withdrawal and inattention. In protecting a victim from harassment and interrupting such exchanges, crisis volunteers facilitate the necessary communication between officer and victim.

All of this allows investigation to proceed on the assumption that evidence exists and police cooperation is reinforced by the experience that evidence is found and victim witnesses can be reliable. As real cases get developed, prosecutors become more interested in pursuing them.

Even where no volunteer is present, the police know they have resources to draw upon when faced with a difficult situation. Officers investigating domestic violence can send women to a shelter like Vera House or obtain a referral from INFO to a family who is willing to house them. Having the ability to help the victim this way seems to increase the possibility of the officer understanding the victim's perspective. It is likely that much of the former police anger, which seemed directed at the victim in these situations, was a frustrated reaction to the inability of the police to effectively assist them.

Another promising aspect of the situation in Syracuse is the degree of communication and support which the crisis centers have generated among city and county police, in the District Attorney's office and to a lesser extent with the hospitals. These agencies are now receptive to change and suggestion because they are able to rely on the centers' cooperation and have recognized the positive impact of that cooperation on their ability to do their job.

Mobilizing resources, particularly of women, to intervene on behalf of rape and battering victims was an exciting idea in its conception and is even more exciting in its future possibilities. It is not often that a major change in crime and social distress

has been initiated by the organization of victims and potential victims and that their impact has occurred within the social and legal institutions and had the effect of strengthening them.

It would be tragic to watch these groups exhaust themselves in obtaining subsistence funding when modest support would free them to continue their work and seek new ways to draw on the strength of peer support to articulate and meet the needs of those most severely harmed by contemporary patterns of violent behavior.

## NOTES

1. See: RAPE AND ITS VICTIMS: A REPORT FOR CITIZENS (Law Enforcement Assistance Administration 1975)
2. Three organizations, The Rape Crisis Center of Syracuse, Inc., The Women's Information Center (INFO) and Vera House, Inc., were studied in connection with papers prepared for a seminar on Law and Society conducted by Professor Richard Schwartz, Fall, 1977, Syracuse University College of Law.
3. Rape Crisis was funded as a sub contract agency of the Victim Assistance Project of the District Attorney's Office by the Law Enforcement Assistance Agency with a budget of less than \$50,000 in 1976. That funding was considered seed money and runs out this year. Much effort has been and is devoted to writing grant proposals. The Center will be financed by Onondaga County in 1977-78 for \$3,000. Much more is needed. Vera House is entirely supported by private funds at this time. INFO relies primarily on pledges by active members and tuition from a feminist school it has organized.
4. For a feminist, activist view see: S. Brownmiller, AGAINST OUR WILL: MEN, WOMEN AND RAPE (1975) and D. Martin, BATTERED WIVES (1977). A sociological view: V. McRose, Rape as a Social Problem: A Byproduct of the Feminist Movement, 25 Social Problem 75 (1977) and the publications in preparation on parallels between rape and battering by Mildred D. Pagelow, Department of Sociology, University of California, Riverside, Ca. 92502. A legal view: V. Berger, Man's Trial. Women's Tribulations: Rape Cases in the Courtroom, 77 Columbia Law Review 1 (1977).
5. Other major efforts with respect to this problem include increasing the numbers of women in law, police work and politics. Where feminists are in such positions they write and lobby for change; particularly change in the statutes concerning rape and assault. Recent changes in New York law include elimination of a per se corroboration requirement, restrictions on evidence of the victim's past sexual conduct, reduction of the standard of forcible compulsion, and the choice, for wives, of pressing criminal charges or family court proceedings against husbands who abuse them.

# END