Recovering from Private Wars: Rural Appalachian Women Talk about Their Experiences Dealing With Domestic Violence and the Economy's Role in Their Situations

by

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Dealing With Domestic Violence and the Economy’s Role in Their Situations

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Previous studies of domestic violence generally focus on urban areas while neglecting women in rural locations, such as Central Appalachia. This study explores the problem of domestic violence in a rural West Virginia county undergoing economic restructuring. Four sources of data are used: court records profiling final protection orders; socio-demographic factors related to domestic battery; and interviews with both victims and service workers from the county’s domestic abuse help center. A clear correlation exists between increases in protection orders filed and increases in mining and manufacturing unemployment rates for 1989 through 1996. The interviews corroborate this evidence. This research contributes to knowledge of domestic abuse in rural areas. The special consideration of rurality and economic restructuring pose unique problems for rural Appalachian women suffering from abuse as well as challenges for intervention and prevention efforts.

Introduction

Domestic violence is a serious problem in numerous households across the United States. A woman is battered every 15 seconds in this country (FBI Uniform Crime Reports 1991). Four women are killed every day in America by a husband or boyfriend (Stout 1991:6) and at least 25% of domestic violence victims are pregnant when beaten (Helton, McFarlane, and Anderson 1987:3). These atrocities take on numerous guises. The constant presence of terror and intimidation, verbal degradation, threats, slapping, punching, kicking, and ultimately killing constitute some of the forms of domestic violence. These conditions and actions are all components of abusers’ attempts to control every aspect of their victims’ lives (Martin 1994:2).

Much of the research on domestic violence has been urban based. Research on domestic abuse in rural areas is needed because violence does not occur only in cities. Further, very little research has been done on the problem in Central Appalachia. More is needed because
the rates of abuse are continuing to escalate. The West Virginia Department of Public Safety reports that in the state, a domestic homicide occurs every ten days (West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence 1996). Further, service providers indicate a surge in abuse incidents following announcements of layoffs from major industries like coal mining (Ewen 1989). Studying domestic violence in West Virginia will increase knowledge of the problem in rural areas, including those undergoing economic change.

Original data and publicly available information are combined into a case study (Yin 1994) of domestic violence in a rural, West Virginia county. After consulting with members of the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV) and professors of Sociology and Economics at West Virginia University, a county was chosen in which to conduct an exploratory research project. By examining county records and interviewing women and workers from the county’s domestic violence shelter, economic restructuring and its possible association with domestic violence are explored. Particularly, the research question is: How does domestic violence manifest itself in a rural West Virginia county undergoing economic restructuring?

Literature Review

The research draws from several themes in the literature. Concepts, ideas, variables, and definitions relevant to this project are reviewed. There are two main concepts to be discussed: economic restructuring and accessibility to services and alternatives.

Economic change can bring unemployment and significant poverty to already depressed regions (Oberhauser 1995:51). In Central Appalachia, the predominant household form has been male-headed with a dependent wife and children (Tickamyer 1987). When an economy with this kind of household structure undergoes significant change, the breadwinner is often displaced, losing his job which supported the household and moving to either a lower paying job or out of the labor force all together. Other members of the household may move into the labor market and provide the necessary economic support for the household. In Central Appalachia, men have been falling out of the labor force and women moving into it at higher rates than national rates (Maggard 1995). Research suggests such situations may increase the likelihood of domestic violence (Maggard 1994).

Social structural theories recognize that incidents of domestic battery may be higher in lower-income families (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin 1997). The stresses associated with poverty, such as financial troubles and ill health, creates large amounts of frustration in these families (Farrington 1980; Straus 1980). The stress and frustration build up and may result in aggressive actions toward convenient targets, such as a wife or child. Psychologists have produced a frustration aggression hypothesis to account for aggression that follows the frustration caused by blocked goals (Dollard, Doob, Miller, and Sears 1939). When the person responsible for the frustration is not available as a target, anger might be displaced onto an innocent bystander, or scapegoat. This appears to mean that “frustration and/or strain experienced as a result of structural contingencies can result in aggressive actions towards others, such as a spouse” (Howell and Pugliesi 1988:17). Research does show a significant correlation between stress and episodes of domestic violence.

Oberhauser states that “changes in income generation... often lead to conflict and

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1In order to protect their identities, the names of the county, domestic violence center, employees, and the support group interviewees will not be used.
tension [in a household] as traditional attitudes and roles are challenged" (1995:53). In West Virginia, Ewen (1989) indicates that within two days of an announced coal mine layoff, the number of domestic violence calls received at The Women’s Shelter in Charleston, West Virginia, doubled during the period 1980-1982. Similarly, victims from Tennessee came from economically constrained situations (Fiene 1995:184). This suggests that domestic abuse profiles may vary in counties with different experiences of economic change.

A rural area denotes many places: a backwoods hollow, a remote island, a desert settlement and some farms. All lack easy access to goods and services, and this creates special problems for women who suffer from domestic violence. Diane Reese of the WVCADV says rurality and lack of access to services “forms an ever-present backdrop for efforts to meet the needs of battered women and their children who live in rural regions” (1986:14). Scarcity of services and people who care reinforces the sense of isolation and hopelessness abused West Virginia women often experience (Reese 1986). Davis and Srinivasan report that “a surprising number [of women] stayed in intolerable situations because they were unaware that they had any alternative” (1995:56). Those who are mistreated could be many, many miles from the nearest help center or even worse, they may not know that one exists.

Other rural factors are problematic. Lack of phone service and poor roads isolate women. Many women may not have drivers’ licenses and must depend on others for transportation. Guns and farm tools are often plentiful in rural areas. Men who perform only seasonal work are often present in the home. Finally, police reaction time may be slow or almost nonexistent in rural areas (Reese 1986:14-15). Fiene found that privacy and secrecy permeated the homes of the Tennessee women she interviewed (1995:181). Reese also points out that when economic depression persists, factors which escalate domestic violence increase - stress, boredom, alcohol and drug abuse - and access to self-sufficient alternatives decreases” (1986:15).

THE RESEARCH

MAGISTRATE COURT RECORD SEARCH

Method

The deputy assistant at the county’s Magistrate Court was contacted about information on the number of domestic petitions for protection orders that have been filed in recent years. The assistant suggested that a record search be performed. Unlike domestic battery cases, which are considered criminal, family protection orders (FPOs) are petitioned under civil law and the records of such civil suits are available to the public. Violation of an FPO, however, is a criminal offense.

Records for the years 1989 through 1996 were examined. From 1989 through 1996, the FPO petitions filed rose dramatically; in fact, they increased every year with only a slight

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1989 is the starting point for the court record search because record-keeping procedures were changed that year to the system in present use. In the employment section, the starting year is 1980.
drop from 1994 to 1995.\(^3\)

Since profiling every one of the 2,826 cases was beyond the scope of this research project, a 5% systematic sample was conducted. Starting from case number one of each year, every twentieth domestic petition on file was examined. Gathering a sample provided a total of 139 petitions and outcomes.

**Findings**

Many persons in domestically violent situations, particularly abused women, do file civil suits. Therefore, this record search aided tremendously the efforts to learn about one of the service providers that some of the interviewees have used and about the process a filer must follow.\(^4\)

In an effort to interpret the sampled cases and show some of the needs that petitioners present, a table was created that serves as a summary profile. Besides listing whether the petition was filed by a female or a male and citing the judgments rendered, this summary profile provides a picture of some of the variables that are associated with domestic abuse in rural places. Included among these variables are the number of financial affidavits filed, specific mentions of alcohol, drugs, or weapons, and whether or not sexual assault and/or child abuse took place.


\(^4\)To file a petition in order to receive an FPO (known as Family Protection Order and Final Protective Order), the filer must go to the county’s Magistrate Court. FPOs are not awarded in other service offices. However, police can be asked to intervene if extra protection is deemed necessary for the filer. The filer, also known as the petitioner, must complete a Domestic Violence Petition. This gives the petitioner a chance to state the abuser’s, or respondent’s, name and describe why they are filing to get an FPO. They will then receive a Domestic Violence Temporary Protective Order. This temporary order serves to protect the filer until a hearing date is set which is normally within the next five days. At the hearing, if the petitioner is present and shows proof of abuse or threats of abuse, a Final Protective Order may be awarded. This FPO is usually for 30, 45, 60 or 90 days of protection and also lists special instructions to the petitioner and/or respondent. For instance, instructions sometimes specify visitation rights for the respondent or order the respondent to return the petitioner’s personal property. However, if the petitioner does not show up at the FPO hearing, the case will be dismissed and no protection is awarded. Sometimes petitioners withdraw complaints before their hearing. Withdrawal, too, amounts in dismissal of the petition.
### Summary of Petitioned and Awarded Final Protective Orders, 1989-1996

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<th>in sample</th>
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<th>female</th>
<th>male vs.</th>
<th>female vs.</th>
<th>male vs.</th>
<th>female vs.</th>
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*9 gave no status leading to dismissal

#### Final judgment rendered:

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<th>60 days:</th>
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#### Variables:

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<th>drugs</th>
<th>weapon used or</th>
<th>sexual assault</th>
<th>child abuse</th>
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</table>
Percentages and Trends

By following the chart, it is clear the overwhelming majority of filers during the eight-year period are females who petitioned against males; 119 of 139 cases, or 86%. Males who filed against females make up the second highest group; 12 of 139, or 9%. There are four instances, 3%, of a female petitioning another female; this did not appear until 1992.

Of the final judgments rendered in the 139 hearings, 71 petitioners were awarded Final Protective Orders and 68 cases were dismissed. Dismissal usually occurred due to the complaint being withdrawn - 24 of the 68, or 35% - or to the fact that the petitioner and respondent did not appear for the final hearing - 18 of the 68, or 26%. Unfortunately, complaints from repeat petitioners were not sorted out because case numbers, not names, were used in petition identification. Therefore, distinguishing repeat dismissals and finding if action is ever taken against repeat “no shows” or those who withdraw was not part of this project.

Notice in 1994 the inclusion of a 90-day FPO. This appears to be a positive change for petitioners. Perhaps they are now provided with an extra month in which to make future plans and arrangements regarding their children, homes, or jobs. This also allot them more time in which to speak with their attorneys or counselors about what steps to take next.

The most obvious and most dramatic trend is the increase of petitions filed in the eight-year timeframe. The research records, reported in the table, are a testament to this increase. There were 132 petitions filed in 1989. This number soared to 581 in 1996, more than quadrupling 1989’s figure.

Why the increase? One, education on domestic violence - what it is, what it does, where to get help - has been improved and its outreach has been expanded in communities across the United States. Thus, those being abused are reporting it because they are finding out that it is unlawful and action can be taken against abusers. With the aid of service providers, workers, and women from centers such as those in the case county, it is discussed on television (i.e., the O.J. Simpson trial, after-school specials, Monday night movies, etc.), radio (domestic violence hotline announcements), billboards, in newsletters, and in classrooms. True, it has not gotten everywhere, but it is on its way.

Two, the abused are taking more of a stand and fighting back against their abusers. Perhaps this is due not only to the increased educational services, but also because those affected are getting tired of being victimized.

Sadly, a third reason is that reported domestic violence incidents are increasing. Therefore, the petitions filed are increasing right along with the abuse. Not pinpointing only one answer, but saying the rise is most probably due to a mixture of reasons is the most appropriate summation for the increase. Hopefully, filers will continue to seek out protection orders, not withdraw their complaints, and go to their hearings.
Factors Associated With Battery and Their Appearance in the Court Records

WEAPONS
Factors associated with battery in rural locations emerged throughout the court records search. The literature review lists that in and around homes of rural areas, there is usually an abundance of weapons and farm tools. Additionally, the majority of incidents causing filers to petition occurs in the home. Around the house, weapons are more readily available than if the abuse takes place in public domain.

Of the 139 cases examined, on 30 petitions it is written that a weapon had either been used or threatened against the filer. In eleven instances, "gun" or "rifle" are mentioned specifically. Also, "knife" is stated as the weapon of choice in three files. Others indicate the use of a "club" or similar blunt object.

There are a couple of alternative forms of weaponry represented. One petition lists that the respondent attempted to catch the petitioner's car on fire. Also, one abuser may have been trying to set the filer's house on fire when he tampered with her electricity and furnace. Furthermore, there are several additional "threats of killing" printed in the petitions.

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS
Another interesting finding relates to the use of alcohol and drugs. It is known in rural areas, as well as urban places, that alcohol and/or drug use tends to escalate instances of domestic battery. In 21 of the studied petitions, alcohol (19) and/or drug (2) abuse is detailed. At around one-seventh of the cases recorded, alcohol and drugs may not sound like too large of a problem. However, since more than the 139 files were available, it was observed that alcohol and drugs play a major role in abuse situations. Think about this: when a person who does not domestically abuse consumes alcohol or uses drugs, his or her attitudes and actions may alter dramatically. For those who abuse, consider how alcohol or drugs affects their attitudes and actions. The thought is frightening. Since they already batter when sober, the harm done when under the influence of substance abuse is multiplied.

Additionally, men who only perform seasonal work are often present in the home. This naturally can lead to depression or boredom. As an escape from their troubles, an abuser may potentially turn to alcohol or other drugs. An increase of domestic abuse incidents is a possible result of their substance abuse.

INDIGENCY
A last factor worth noting is whether a financial affidavit (listed in the table as fin. affi.) is filed along with the domestic violence petition. A financial affidavit is a statement signed by the petitioner (affidavits can also be filed by respondents) which serves to show that the petitioner is unable to pay fees and costs associated with their suit. The financial affidavit allows them to follow through with their suit without having to pay the court costs of it. 40, or 29%, of the 139 cases have these affidavits along with the file. Related to this, almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they have encountered financial troubles when trying to leave their abusive situations. This means that many women who are abused not only have to deal with physical and emotional difficulties, but also worry about their finances.
However, after 1991, there is a drop in the number of financial forms on file at the courthouse. An action may have been taken to make the affidavits more difficult to file or some other factors could have played a part in the decrease, such as rising incomes and/or employment rates for the years 1992 through 1996. Conversely, during the first three years of the study, incomes might have been particularly low and unemployment rates high. In search for more details, some employment and industry data for the county was located.

**EMPLOYMENT, INDUSTRIES, AND INCOMES: 1980 TO 1996**

**Method**

State and county employment and industry information was sought from the United States Department of Commerce, United States Department of Labor, the West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs, and the Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association.

**Findings**

The study site's economy experienced many ups and downs during the period of 1980 through 1996. Job losses in coal mines and manufacturing plants during these years have been cited to spark incidents of abuse. These losses play a large role in economic restructuring. The selected county had declines in both of these industries, but gained employment in the service economy. Consequently, as court records show, there has been an increase in domestic violence in this county. Is there a correlation between the loss of better-paying jobs and increases in reports of domestic abuse? Many patterns that were discovered seem to suggest this may be the case.

The entire state of West Virginia has been undergoing major economic restructuring during the last two decades. The area suffered a dramatic decrease in the “goods producing” industries of mining and manufacturing during the years between 1980 and 1996. Specifically, mining employment fell from 65,700 in 1980 to 25,700 in 1996. The number employed in manufacturing dropped from 117,200 in 1980 to 81,900 in 1996 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1997). In contrast, the “service producing” economy soared during the same timeframe. The number of trade, wholesale, and retail jobs went from 129,400 in 1980 to 160,100 in 1996. Additionally, the number of people employed in services almost doubled during the period, from 99,500 to 191,300 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1997). These state-wide trends have also shown up in the project county.

The decrease of mining and manufacturing jobs in the county combined for a loss of almost 4,000 positions. However, employment in the service economy experienced a gain of well over 12,000 jobs. (Specific numbers of each industry are not listed in order to protect identities; information obtained from the West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1997). Although the number of jobs went up, service economies generally pay less than goods economies and smaller paychecks can create stress in the home. This tension may lead to episodes of domestic violence.

Another significant finding indicative of restructuring and possibly increases in domestic abuse is the number of women and men entering and exiting the labor force. The 1990
men’s civilian labor force participation rate was the lowest it has ever been in West Virginia (64.6% in 1990 compared to 74.6% in 1950) according to records kept since 1960 (Maggard 1994:20). Conversely, women’s 1990 civilian labor force participation rate was the highest it has ever been since 1900 (42.6% in 1990 compared to 19.6% in 1950) (Maggard 1994:20). This restructuring of the economy and of the breadwinners (women in labor force versus men losing jobs) creates tremendous strain inside households because traditional gender roles are reversed.

The state’s 1995 average unemployment rate for whites was 7.7, but when men and women are counted separately, the rates were 8.5 and 6.7, respectively (U.S. Department of Labor). The county’s 1996 unemployment rate was a good 5.1, but has not always been this low. In 1983, the rate was a high 10.3 and in 1993, it stood at 8.5 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1997). Additionally, the county’s reliance on social assistance and transfer payments, such as unemployment insurance, income maintenance, and retirement payments, has steadily gone up during the 16-year period from $99,000 to over $340,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce). These figures provide further evidence of economic restructuring.

Two neighboring counties also serviced by the center in the project county show similar economic trends during the studied timeframe. Like the study site, both of these counties have experienced declines in the mining and manufacturing industries. There has been a combined loss of over 1,300 jobs. The service economy, however, demonstrates a gain in jobs for both counties of over 1,100 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1997). Also, the unemployment rates of these two places have been extremely high during the period. In 1996, their average rates were 9.6 and 10.4, but in 1983, one had a 16.1 rate and the other, a 21.2 rate. In 1993, these numbers had lowered slightly to 12.2 and 14.2 (West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs 1997). It is obvious that economic restructuring has hit the entire service area hard and that recovery, although in sight, may take many more years while incidents of domestic violence are continuing to rise.

**CENTER SERVICE WORKER QUESTIONNAIRES**

**Method**

Since support group members who meet at the county’s domestic violence center were going to be interviewed, it was also decided to create a questionnaire for some of the service workers. This would provide another perspective on rural places and domestic violence.

A questionnaire was composed and accompanied by a letter. Eight of these were sent to the center. Since it was nearing the end of the semester, self-addressed stamped envelopes were included with the questionnaires. This gave recipients a couple of weeks to answer the questions and then mail them back to the researcher at home in North Carolina. A total of five questionnaires (5 of 8, or 62.5% response rate) were received. To supplement the questionnaires, questions of employees were asked and field notes were taken each time the researcher visited the center.
Findings
The service workers’ input is valuable because they see and help battered women on a daily basis. These employees know what the abused go through and about problems they encounter day after day. They are there to provide services such as advocacy, education, alternatives, treatment, counseling, referrals (medical, legal, employment, etc.), support groups, and safety to not only victims of battery, but also victims of sexual assault and incest. Below, the workers discuss domestic violence, the center, and other service providers in the area.

Service Workers’ Definitions of Domestic Violence
It is interesting to note how some of the workers define domestic abuse:

When an intimate partner, household, or family member attempts to control or intimidate another person by using some form of violence - verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, or psychological.

Physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse by a family member (related by blood or marriage) or by a significant other.

Violence: verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual by a family member, significant other, or anyone else with whom the victim has or has had an intimate relationship with.

Any word or action which defiles another person’s self-worth.

These definitions encompass many relationships that a person may have. Thus, it is clear that domestic abuse has the potential to grasp nearly every human in society. This is exactly the answer obtained when the workers were asked how widespread is domestic violence. One answer states that it is “extremely widespread - more than statistics show us.” Another writes “50% of couples are affected by violence at least once in their relationship [and] 30% are probably affected by on-going abuse.” Two more workers reply that domestic abuse “transcends economic, geographic, [and] racial boundaries,” and declare it as “global.” These remarks reinforce why it is important to examine domestic violence and that we work to eradicate it because, in some way or another, it affects the entire world.

Worker Views On the Center
Questions pertaining to the center focus on services provided there, particularly the protective shelter.

In addition to the services mentioned earlier, such as the counseling and community education, the center also provides a 24 hours-a-day hotline, volunteer training, legal and medical advocacy, and therapy for children of the abused. Since these options are discussed a bit further in the paper, the focus here is on the center’s shelter.

The protective shelter, located separately from the center, is the only one of its kind in
the area, which includes its home county and several surrounding counties as well. An individual can stay there for up to thirty days. Extended stays can be negotiated under certain circumstances. For instance, problems sometimes arise when an individual is trying to find housing or it may still be too dangerous to leave the shelter; under such conditions, longer shelter stays are acceptable.

Shelter users are not limited to a certain number of stays. If a woman stops in for a few days, goes back to her abuser, and then returns to the shelter, she is still eligible to reside there contingent upon the fact that she followed shelter rules during previous visits. Only when a shelter user disregards shelter policy (i.e., reveals the shelter location to outsiders, brings in alcohol or drugs, or is seriously disruptive), is mentally unstable, or unable to care for herself or her children, does she not get to utilize the service.

Additionally, use of the shelter does not depend on one's income and victims do not have to pay for shelter service. However, if victims are eligible for emergency assistance through the Department of Health and Human Resources, they may apply for it to be paid toward the cost of sheltering. The center also accepts donations from clients to put toward shelter expenses.

There are a few risks involved when using the shelter other than those normally found in households (i.e., fires, accidents). If an abuser discovers the shelter location or if a woman becomes psychotic or is intoxicated, she and her children and other shelter residents may be put in jeopardy. Alternately, shelter regulations are posted to avoid these dangers and it is usually a safe place to stay. There are combination locks, its location is to be kept confidential, and it looks like an average house. Throughout the research period, the shelter residents did not encounter problems of this nature during their visit. Employees and volunteers work to maintain the privacy and protection of the shelter and those staying there.

Although they feel the services already offered at the center are good, some of the workers supplied recommendations they feel would upgrade the center services. One listed that she would like to add "a full-time legal advocate [or] lawyer to represent the victims [and] a part-time health care worker." Another wants more "staff oriented activities, such as meal times together." A third recommendation is for children and men who are connected in some way to the abused women. The worker states she would like to see "men's groups and groups for children." A final comment is to add "adult education and life education skills" classes or discussions. These are all commendable and useful ideas; perhaps in the future these programs will be integrated into the center's offering of services, especially as more and more community members become educated about domestic violence.

**Worker Views On Other Service Providers**

The criminal justice system, mental health services, and medical centers provide some assistance to domestic abuse victims. Center workers furnished a variety of opinions in reference to these other services.

When questioned about the effectiveness of the area criminal justice system, employees of the center yielded that for an abused woman seeking a court case, the burden of proof is always on her. Therefore, "domestic violence is a very difficult crime to prove, especially
with reluctant victims or without visible injuries.” Another conceded that effectiveness of the system “often depends on the cooperation of law enforcement [and] witnesses and victims to testify against the abusers.” Hence, the criminal justice system may not always be very effective. To the contrary, one cited she feels the system is “moderately good.”

When questioned specifically about police and their response to domestic violence, there was consensus among workers. One employee feels that “protocol by department orders is good, but how closely it is followed varies from officer to officer.” Another worker announces that service obtained “depends on the officer and how well he/she follows the protocol to handle domestic violence calls.” One cites that “response is varied - sometimes police do a great job, and other times, they do not. Sometimes, officers have different interpretations of the laws.” It is clear that the response an abused woman receives from a police officer depends on how the officer demonstrates protocol standards and how he or she interprets, then carries out, the laws on abuse.

Each service worker has something different to say about area laws on domestic abuse. One reply is that “laws are satisfactory. The real dilemma is whether or not officials are aware of them and whether [or not] they enforce the laws.” Another worker adds: “laws are fairly effective, except that once an FPO runs out, [a] victim must wait for another incident to get another [FPO]. Enforcement [of laws] varies from magistrate to magistrate.” A third employee disagrees and states, “we need stricter laws and penalties for breaking them.” One places responsibility in the hands of magistrates and concludes that they “need to honor the Final Protection Order code more closely.” The last contributes the “current laws are good, [but] enforcement is not as good as it could be.” This same employee writes that “domestic battery arrests and convictions” are the problem areas.

It is very difficult to make an arrest and conviction without a victim’s testimony. Therefore, laws may be there, but if officers do not know or abide by them or the battered are too traumatized to follow through with a suit, then abusers are allowed to continue their behavior.

The center employees had less to say about mental health and medical services than about law enforcement. However, here are some of their thoughts on these two areas.

One of the workers listed two specific centers where domestic abuse victims can go to for mental health services. At these places, they can get some support and counseling. However, another employee feels the mental health services do not have any programs set up for specifically treating those who have been abused. She stated the “mental health agencies still do not understand the need to address the violence first.” A last worker writes that the center offers counseling to battered victims, so they do not have to search for this help elsewhere.

In regard to medical assistance, there are two area hospitals, a clinic, and a health department. At these places, women may receive treatment in an emergency room or from a private physician. When asked what kind of services they supply, a couple of employees state that it depends on the type of abuse. For instance, a woman may need emergency care to repair broken bones, cuts, or bruises. If a victim has been sexually assaulted, STD (sexually transmitted disease) testing is performed and rape kits are used in order to collect evidence in the case of prosecution. One worker does say that “occasionally women experience pressure to prosecute from medical professionals” because they see the
seriousness of domestic battery injuries. There is listed some disagreement to the
effectiveness of medical personnel. One replies that they are “effective most of the time,”
yet another declares them as “inadequate, cold, [and] impersonal.” The workers feel the
women need “confidential, understanding health care” and most importantly, “respect.”

These workers’ comments on other services are appreciated. Perhaps some changes of
enforcement are in order, such as making sure law officers know the FPO and domestic
abuse laws and stick to them. Law enforcement agencies could hold review sessions on
these laws every few months, especially when a law is changed or added. Mental health
services need to be tailored to fit victim needs and medical professionals should be
supportive and treat the abused with dignity and patience. Additionally, as a society, we
need to stand up for all victims of abuse and encourage them to prosecute perpetrators.
Helping out the abused should not only be in service workers hands, but also in the hands of
every community member.

Worker Views On Abuse and Rurality

In closing the service worker questionnaire, some general questions about abuse were
proposed. These questions include, why do they think there is so much abuse today and
what are some priorities for dealing with abuse in rural areas.

To the first question, there is a range of responses. One writes that domestic violence is
not taken seriously and laws are not strict enough. Another states “because it is still a
man’s world and is acceptable for men to use whatever methods they deem necessary in
order to be in charge of it,” cases of abuse continue to soar. One worker sees society and
its various systems - legal, medical, criminal justice - allowing abusers to repeat their actions
which perpetuates abuse because no steps are taken to force them to stop. A fourth
comments that due to “sexual socialization, gender myths, children growing up in abusive
households, [and the] recent nature of domestic violence as an issue [and] crime,” instances
of battery are high. The last employee blames abuse on the perpetrators and announces that
“the [jerks] have not learned how to behave.” Every one of these answers plays a role in
the continuation of domestic abuse.

As for dealing with the problem, namely in rural areas, here are some suggestions posed
by center workers. The roads and modes of transportation need to be improved. Police
response times should be decreased. Children need to be reached who are exposed to abuse
or being abused. We must teach children about equality and fairness between the sexes and
then, partial disruption in the cycle of violence will result. Also, educate all community
members on violence, inform them on available services in the area, and encourage them to
become advocates for the battered. Domestic violence services should institute on-going
outside-the-family intervention strategies and the criminal justice system should enforce the
laws we do have that call for punishment of offenders. If these recommendations are taken
seriously and utilized, then the ultimate goals of striving for “no tolerance [of] abuse by all
systems” and to “end abuse in rural areas” will be realized.
FOCUS GROUP AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

Method

Focus group interviews are advantageous when used alone or in conjunction with personal interviews because the participants have a chance to talk about and validate their feelings. The most common purpose of a focus group interview is for an in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known (Stewart 1990:102). The interviewees get the opportunity to explore commonalities among and differences between their experiences, in this case, the experience of domestic violence in rural settings. The personal interview is also a sound method when additional topics need to be covered and more depth is desired.

The researcher received permission from the center’s director and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to carry out interviews. IRB must be contacted and approve of interview instruments when humans are going to be involved in research or when the topic is of a highly sensitive nature. After submitting a research proposal, IRB agreed to the interviews. Two focus groups comprised of ten interviewees and one personal interview were conducted. Both focus group interviews took place at the county’s domestic violence help center. The personal interview was held at the interviewee’s home. The ten participants are Caucasian females; their ages range from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. At the time of the interviews, five of the women had not left their abusive partners and the remaining five were out of the relationships.

Findings

The three interview sessions were audio taped and later transcribed. The following material comprises portions of the qualitative data gathered on the experiences of battered women in the county.

Nature of Domestic Battery

Although definitive forms of domestic violence are listed in the Introduction, readers should be presented with more than definitions. To provide some idea of the serious and horrific nature of domestic abuse, the interview section is prefaced with some quotes from the interviewees. These views exemplify the nature of domestic battery for some of the women - the nature of lives completely controlled by another person.

When asked how long one of the women had been involved with her partner before the abuse started, she said:

That is such a curious question because I do not know that I could ever answer that because I do not know if I could identify what was happening as abusive. My family of origin was so abusive - I did not know that it was not the way it should have been.

This is typical for many victims of abuse. Some of the other women also knew of no other lifestyle before coming to the center for help. One was abused by her parents until she left home and is presently being abused by her partner.
On the constant presence of terror and punishment, a group member cites:
I can honestly say that I never . . . spent a day not thinking
about it with him. Even now, I go around my day, my world,
wondering what punitive action would he be taking for anything
from my thoughts and my actions to the way I do things,
whatever, anything from buying tomatoes at too high of a price
at the grocery store . . . somehow there is going to be a punitive
action against me. So when it comes to terror, I think it is just
always there.

This woman went on to describe the terror she experienced as “subtle and constant.” Even
though she is no longer in the abusive relationship, she still feels twinges of terror.
Sometimes, she says it is as though he is still waiting at home to see how he can cause her
more pain.

Sometimes abusers feel it is their place in society to “keep their women in line.” One
interviewee shares:

[In] the situations I hear from other people [who] . . . were
[physically] beaten . . . the man would bring them flowers, or
take them out to dinner, or buy them a new dress and try to
make amends with that. Whereas, this person that I was with
did not feel that what he was doing was wrong. He felt justified
that was his place; that I was his wife and that he had the right
to do that.

The cycle of violence is normally carried out in three stages: (1) rising tension - the abuser
and victim may argue often and no matter what efforts the victim takes to keep the abuser
from becoming angry, he continues to find fault with every word and/or action of his victim;
(2) violence - the tension reaches a peak and there is an explosive battering incident
between the abuser and victim; (3) the honeymoon period - after the incident, the abuser
apologizes and promises never to hurt the victim again. This phase, though terminal, gives
hope to the victim that the battery will stop (Martin 1994:5). While this cycle continuously
repeats itself in many domestically violent relationships, all three components are not
present in every abusive situation. This is evidenced by the previous participant’s
experience and how her partner simply felt it was his place to abuse. He did not feel
remorse was necessary because he viewed the situation as appropriate and acceptable.

In the personal interview, the woman was asked for some reflections on her experience
and how she feels today about what has happened, here is a sample of her concluding
remarks:

Anger

I feel differently now . . . I am angry at the fact that the things
that I held most precious to myself, about myself - my core
beauty - I was robbed of . . . and that I have had to harden in order
to survive in this world and I know that in my purest being as a
child, before this took place, it was full of love and compassion.
Recovery
There is a deeper part of me because of the journey that I have taken . . . I think only because I am recovering from it I feel that way because I think if I held onto the bitterness and the blaming of the victim - of myself - that I would not feel that way. I feel like I can be in the present moment with people in a different way that other people might not understand or have compassion for . . .

Survival
". . . and my last question for that section is, when you think about this experience today, what stands out most in your mind?"
"I SURVIVED."

*Every ten days in West Virginia, one person does not survive domestic battery* (Analysis of data from Uniform Crime Reports, WV Department of Public Safety 1993-1994).

*Situational and Social Indicators Associated with Battery*
The literature review lists several factors that are associated with situations of domestic violence. In addition to mentioning tension building in each of their households, angry verbal abuse from their partner, and veins popping out on his neck and forehead, in this section the group elaborates on some of the reviewed factors. They also provide insight into indicators that are not commonly discussed in public or in print.

**ALCOHOL AND DRUGS**
More than half of the participants state that alcohol and/or drugs have been used during abusive periods. One woman did not realize her husband was smoking marijuana and drinking beer until their daughter was born. Regardless of whether she gets beat up or not, she yells and screams at him in an effort to make him stop using the drugs.

In another powerful account, a group member said that, "there was [alcohol and drugs] . . . my husband is an alcoholic . . . I had a drinking problem, it became our lifestyle, I drank as much as he did. We got into cocaine . . . he made a junkie out of me, that was my dependency, that was his lure, he kept me in with the coke." This woman added (to clapping and cheering) that she soon realized her child is more important than the cocaine, has been "straight and sober for three years," and is no longer with her abuser.

On the reverse side, one interviewee remembered that her partner was never into alcohol and drugs. He became abusive when he felt she was becoming too independent, or was daring enough to disagree with him. He did not need alcohol or drugs to set off his rage.

**UNEMPLOYMENT**
There is consensus in agreement that a partner's unemployment or lack of a job exacerbates the abuse. Consider this statement: "... if I got fired it was a horrible thing, but if he got fired, it was not so horrible, you know, it's crazy."

Another group member cited that the entire time she and her husband were together, he was never employed outside of the home. He liked to think of himself as a househusband. "He thought he was being very cool. He never wanted to work outside the house and it
was my job to bring in the money.” Noting that her situation was different from what is normally presented about abusive partners - that they are typically portrayed as very dominating, not even wanting to allow girlfriends or wives out of the house to grocery shop or even have a job - she countered that “this man . . . just lived in a very strange world . . . he fell short of really seeing the whole picture.” Later, it was discovered she has left him and part of the reason is due to her added independence from having a job and being able to save money for an apartment.

OTHER INDICATORS

It is interesting to find that when asked to name specific actions or behaviors that clue them in to an approaching attack, the group’s emphatic response was “the look.” When the women were probed for elaboration, this answer was given, “. . . it’s that look; after a while it no longer becomes romantic and flattering, it becomes scary and all I’m thinking about is how can I get out of here.” Another described it as, “the eyes, just like they weren’t real eyes anymore. They were glass; it’s just like glass.” “That look, it’s a glare, it’s a glare,” announced a third voice.

Some members of the group said that after a time judging when a partner might have an outburst is difficult. “It [is] at their discretion as to what [is] wrong.” In support of this idea, a newcomer sighed that she “increasingly [can] do absolutely nothing right” or that “what [she] used to do right yesterday, now it’s wrong.” Lastly, what one woman feared the most was no warning at all. She said, “I think for me it was the silence.”

From these responses, it is clear that not every situational and social indicator associated with battery is known or is applicable to all couples. Remember that not all of these women are still with their abusive partners. Although alcohol and drugs can be traced in a number of domestic abuse situations which was discovered in the court record search, these substances are not present in every case. Furthermore, an abusive partner does not have to be unemployed to physically, emotionally, or mentally abuse his mate. In fact, he could be wealthy or hold an extremely high-paying position. No one knows for sure what all the indicators are - a look, a word, an action - but at least these women are aware of them. Discussion with other battered women in a support group serves to increase awareness and increased awareness can lead to getting out and getting help.

Situational and Social Indicators Associated With Isolation and Access to Services

Several elements linked to women’s isolation and the accessibility of services are presented in the literature review. The interview participants related accounts of how the factors have affected their abuse situations.

LOCATION OF THE NEAREST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HELP CENTER

When asked how far they live from the help center they are presently using, most of the group said things such as, “seven miles,” “a couple miles,” and some live twenty or thirty minutes away. However, during the personal interview, the respondent remarked, “in the community that I lived in [before moving to the present community], a rural community, there is no domestic violence shelter. The closest one is two counties away [80 miles] and
most women do not even know about that.” She added that when she resided there, she did not even know shelters existed. It was only a few years ago that she left that area, but the nearest center there is still eighty miles away. She hopes that more education and coherence of circulating materials and articles on domestic violence have found their way into the area.

TELEPHONES IN THEIR HOMES

While discussing if telephones and telephone service have been present or absent in the women’s homes during abusive relationships, some interesting discoveries were made. Two or three of the women still do not have telephone service, but the rest do have it. One of them recalled, “when [my husband and I] first got together and the abuse started, I’d threaten to call the [police] or my dad or somebody and he’d tear [the telephones] off the wall and tear them off the wall, so I’d love to have the money we spent in telephones.” Or, a similar sentiment, “yes, [my husband and I] had a telephone, but [I couldn’t] get to [it].”

DRIVER’S LICENSES AND ACCESSIBILITY TO AUTOMOBILES

Parallel to the situation with the telephones, most of the group has drivers’ licenses. However, a couple of them have only recently obtained a license and even now, an automobile is not always available. Having an available car or truck is usually not a problem in urban areas, but in rural West Virginia, it is a necessity if a person is planning on going somewhere. Thus, some of the participants spoke of “problems” that arise when they try to leave their homes. “I was driving and had my license, but I had to put a lock on the gas cap so he’d stop siphoning the fuel and I had to hide the keys so he would stop taking them away.” Another sympathized that “mine learned how to pull the engine apart.” Still another echoed that, “even if I would of had a car, my husband would of done something to it. He helped his friend just take everything out of his wife’s car so it wouldn’t start when [she] left him.” A final contributor declares that she dealt with a similar situation growing up: “My parents made sure when I was being abused at home as a teenager, that I would be isolated; stay home and work on the farm by not allowing me to get my license . . . . [They said] it was for my own good.”

PROXIMITY TO PUBLIC SERVICES AND NEIGHBORS

When questions were posed concerning physical isolation, the women discussed how far away their homes were from public services (i.e., grocery stores, police station, clinics). Also asked was how close is their nearest neighbor. These questions refer to times of abusive relationships of which half the participants were still involved during the interviews.

Most stated they were “not very far” or are “minutes” from public services. One did say she was “about twenty miles” from schools, police, and grocery stores. But, to make matters worse, it would sometimes take help an hour or more to reach her. A lot of unimaginable things could happen in an hour. So, sometimes it was as if she really could not access the police at all. Additionally, as is the case in many rural areas, one woman’s partner is best friends with the sheriff. So for her, trying to get help from the police is practically impossible. She probably would have to move out of the area in order to get help from authorities.
On a different note, the most astonishing replies are from inquiries about how far away was their nearest neighbor at the time of the abuse. "Two miles," "next door," "we lived in a town house," "yeah, so did I, there was a wall between me and our neighbors."

Conversely, one interviewee did say she was "isolated on a 126 acre farm." But the vast majority of the group has been in close proximity to other people - people who could help them in some way.

Even at her abuser's grandmother's house, with the grandmother present, another said that, "[the grandmother] wouldn't pick up the phone and call the [police] or nothing. I called the [police] one time and she barred me from her house for almost a year." One member offered, "it's just people, people don't get involved." Another person agreed, saying that one time she was abused right in the middle of the grocery store with lots of people around, and nobody even bothered to help.

The entire group has experienced situations like those mentioned above. Each has a label or an adage to explain how onlookers sum up the situation. "She probably deserved it" and "they thought it was none of their business" or "oh, that's his wife." After the discussion, it became clear that women do not have to be physically isolated to be abused. Although physical remoteness is the case sometimes, they are increasingly isolated in other ways. They become isolated because many people who can help them are the ones doing the isolating. Onlookers try to pretend they do not see or hear the abuse, but everyone knows it is there. Therefore, many public service persons and much of the general public decrease accessibility to help and increase isolation without saying a word or even trying to offer a supportive hand.

**Public and Personal Services Used By the Group**

When the topic of public services and personal support systems (other than the center's support group) arose, the group voiced an array of opinions. From good counselors to mediocre clothing help to very poor legal assistance, the respondents have had some good and some bad experiences.

**THE LEGAL SYSTEM**

When using the term "legal system," this is a reference to the courts, magistrates, lawyers, law enforcement, and legal aid. There are several accounts that refer to the legal system, including a story of dismay at a town police officer. The officer was called to one woman's home and she remembered that her husband had driven off in their family car right after the call. When the policeman arrived, instead of going after her abuser, the officer asked if she would mind if he went to fill up his gas tank first. Needless to say, she was extremely upset.

Another member announced that over the course of seven contacts of trying to enlist a police department's help when her ex-husband kidnapped their children, she was continually discounted. "Basically, they said they couldn't do anything, he was the father of the children. I said he's endangering their [lives and the police officers] said you have to prove that."

When the support group facilitator asked for comments on legal aid, one woman interjected, "legal aid is a joke ... they didn't want to help me because I had too much
going on in my life.” However, it was stated that legal aid and other service agencies like them are terribly overloaded. Naturally then the question is, how do we take care of this overload? Later on in the session, some remedies were suggested that will be disclosed further on in the paper.

Long, lengthy court battles and the merit of protective orders were brought up. As far as one participant is concerned, “an FPO [final protective order] is just a piece of paper; you have to hope to God you’re going to get an officer who’s going to care [and] then you have to hope to God that you’re going to have a witness who’s going to come whenever it’s your hearing time.”

It should be said that one woman has been represented by a very caring attorney and another has been given some good advice by a police officer. Thus, not every aspect of the legal system proves negative for the group, but the negatives do outweigh the positives.

FAMILY SERVICES

Included in Family Services are the Family Services Office, Welfare Office, Child Advocacy Office, and charitable organizations that provide clothing or food to those who need it. The Domestic Violence Center is not included in this section because it is discussed in a separate section.

One interviewee shared: “I went to Family Services... while I was getting my divorce and they kept telling me that I... was too calm - that I should be doing all these big emotions and I was just trying to go forward in my life, not go back or sit still.” She continued to say that when they finally saw some “emotion” from her that the counselor she had come to trust misconstrued a statement she made about her husband as a death threat. During the same meeting, she walked out and never returned. This woman added that she only trusts “in support groups like we’re having right here - this is it.”

Another had only recently observed what she spoke of as “callousness” on the faces of employees at the Welfare Office. “They act as if I should just talk... like it was the weather... they don’t know... you don’t know ‘til you’ve been through it.” Another complaint deals with the abundance of paper work to be filled out at these offices. These papers usually require repeat visits in order to answer all of the questions. Moreover, one member commented that the Child Advocacy Office did not even try to understand her situation and told her she had to wait before she received any aid.

Lastly, there was mixed response to organizations that donate clothing and food. Two members of the group were helped by charitable organizations, such as the Salvation Army. But one remarked that she sometimes had trouble finding the right sizes at those places.

COUNSELING

Whether it has been from the center, an outpatient program, or a psychiatrist, almost every member of the group has sought some form of counseling. Overwhelmingly, references to their counseling experiences are positive. Words such as, “support,” “helpful,” and “good” popped up during the conversation on counseling.

When speaking about a marriage counselor she and her abusive husband had gone to, one group member upheld that the counselor was really helpful. They had joined a group, but eventually her husband felt as if it was a beat-up session on him and they stopped
attending.

Of a counselor at a nearby outpatient program one of the women said, "I didn’t even tell him that I was abused and I know he picked up on it... he knew.” She also said he was very supportive and answered a lot of questions.

Others described their counselors' efforts in assisting to "desensitize [them] to the fear" of abuse. Some of the counselors are the first people that they ever told about their abuse.

Alternatively, two women revealed that their abusive partners had encouraged them to go for counseling. “[My partner] felt that I was the one with the problem.” This sentiment was shared by another member whose ex-husband thought she was crazy because she did not share his “world view.”

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

When asked if anyone has ever utilized public or personal sources of support, one participant strongly stated, “my family was my support system.” One woman across the table volunteered, “living in the small community that I did, they supported me... they were just nice people.” Even though she left that community years ago, she still stays in contact with some of the folks who helped her - one woman, in particular, serves as a stronghold in her support system.

Another person’s pastor has given some support, but she sometimes feels that he really does not want her to leave the marriage, but stay in it and try to help her husband find religion. She said she has been trying that for over twenty years and cannot seem to break through.

A last source of support for one interviewee comes from dancing. She is highly involved in square dancing, ethnic dancing, and dance therapy. She used to feel very depressed and angry. “The movement is a way to express and get that anger out.” Now, she teaches dance in her community.

In closing this section, it must be stated that this part was not written to bash the legal system and family service organizations. Most of us try to do the best thing we can with the information we have. Some facets of both systems are positive and work for citizens; sadly, many faculties of each division do not appear to favor battered women. They often feel discounted, but they are the ones who know these systems best and their experiences should be heard and utilized for change.

One woman who has been a group member for several months thoughtfully supplied that:

We get a double dose of the abuse. We get abused by the abuser and then, we get abused by the system, and that’s a double dose... that one feels worse because I can look at [my abuser] and I can understand that he is very sick... I can’t say that for the system and the people that represent it. I can’t say that they’re all very sick; I think we get a double dose of it.

The Domestic Violence Center and Support Group

A few weeks before the county to be examined was chosen, the center director was contacted. After the project was explained to the director, she suggested the interviewees
consist of members from the center's weekly support group. The group participants were then informed of the project and agreed to the focus group and personal interviews. The director's and the group's cooperation helped to finalize the decision on which county to study. The meetings were attended by the researcher for seven weeks.

Every meeting and all the interviews were completely confidential. The following portion focuses on the support group, the women's feelings about it, their assessments of it, and other services provided by the center.

DISCOVERING THE SUPPORT GROUP AND HOW IT WORKS

The interviews were initiated by questions to the women on how they found out about the group. Some of the different mediums include a doctor, a sister-in-law, a police officer, a counselor, a newspaper ad, and some saw or heard about the hotline/telephone number and called for information.

They also explained how the group is set up and how the meetings work. Attending a support group is different from one-on-one counseling in a number of ways. First, a couple of center employees help facilitate these gatherings. Then, everyone must sign an agreement to attend meetings for a set period - either four, six, or eight weeks - and they must agree to keep the members' names and meeting place confidential. After those start-up weeks, they may come indefinitely, but membership is to remain confidential. Some participate three or four years or more; some stay only a couple of months. At the meetings, the women discuss issues and responsibilities in their lives. Sometimes, the opportunity to ask questions of guest speakers arises. These speakers inform the group about certain laws or aspects of their children's behavior and other concerns the women have. Handouts with stories or poems to be read aloud are a favorite part of coming to the meetings.

HOW BEING A MEMBER OF GROUP HELPS

The support group helps in numerous ways. First and foremost, it provides an arena for the abused to talk about problems with those who have had similar experiences. They learn that victims of domestic abuse are not to blame for their abuse. It is an opportunity to "vent" and to be "around people who have been through it [who] know [and] understand what you've been through." Furthermore, not having to apologize for how they feel or not having to justify their emotions and having the chance to come for as long as they like are other assets of coming to group. The support and understanding offered by the group helps members overcome problems which may have resulted from being abused. Consider these accounts:

Forty years of learned behavior - I'm not going to turn it all around in three years. I'm going to give myself another ten years if I need it, if that's what I need.

I came here just wanting to be heard because I didn't feel like I was heard anywhere else in the world. I came here feeling like I was going to die. Here, I feel like if I die, these guys hear me and they'll be my voice.
[My ex-husband] had me convinced there was something wrong with me . . . for me to know that I wasn't the one - it was the abuser - [is] really, really helpful.

It's relieving to know that it's not you; that was my biggest worry. All these years, I thought it was me, thought it was in my head. I thought I deserved all this.

The group facilitator made an apt analogy when she said that turning around a life and changing years of learned behavior "is like peeling an onion." It takes time to get at all those layers and each one has to be worked on one at a time. Coming to group helps loosen and remove those layers of hurt, frustration, and learned behavior.

Another way that the center and the support group help is to notify the women of their rights. One member had this to say, "I never knew what my rights were. Here, the advocates . . . are able to say 'this is your right,' and then assist in that . . . I know I wouldn't be where I'm at legally if it wasn't for [the center]."

The group not only receives help, they give it to each other and to new members. A woman who has been attending for three years confided that she did not even realize until someone pointed it out to her that she is a source of support for other people. She announced that she's "still learning" and that she learns something new every week.

Another component of helping others comes through the formation of friendships in the group and being in a "happy, healthy surrounding." I thought one lady expressed it well: "I never see support groups as a crutch, but as a strength - you know, for yourself."

Part of the way this help, continued support, and happiness are kept alive is through discussion and open exchange of ideas and experiences. Throughout the course of the seven weeks, it was discovered how hard it is to get support from people who do not know what it is like to be abused and with that, there is also a fear. The women are afraid to talk about their abuse with just anybody because often there is no empathy from a person who has not been abused. In group, the women talk about this fear. One said she recognizes the fear so much easier now. So as soon as they recognize it, they talk about it and work on overcoming it since they share the common experience of being abused.

Also encompassed in this fear is that it is hard even to start going to the meetings - a fear of the unknown. Some said they either drove around the parking lot or were so scared they decided not to even show up their first week or two. However, most of them agree that once they actually came and stayed for a meeting, they kept coming back. Soon, meetings felt "real, real safe" to them.

NEWCOMERS WELCOME!

Related to the issue of fear is the subject of newcomers. How does a newcomer acquire that "safe" feeling? One interviewee who has been attending for just a few months admitted, "I felt the difference between people [who have] known each other for a while and then me sitting on the other side." She was quick to add that was her initial observation
and she felt “it wasn’t strong enough . . . to make me feel like I wasn’t coming back. I felt the camaraderie between everybody else. I knew that eventually . . . if I keep on coming I would feel that way too.” The rest of the group has been in her shoes and describe it as “a seclusive feeling for a newcomer” and that “it has to do with trust and safety and all those things that we carry with us.”

Some of the women who have been there several months offered that it usually takes a number of meetings before the seclusiveness begins to dissipate. One remembered it was weeks before she began to talk and laughed that, “now you can’t shut me up.” And that, they all agree, is the key: opening up and beginning to talk about what is on their minds. However, no participant is ever forced to talk or made to feel as though they have to be there. The meetings are self-paced and newcomers are encouraged to talk only when they feel like it - only when they are ready. Because a few of them have been there several months or more, they acknowledged that “it just takes time.”

When most people first come to the group, they do not say more than a couple of words. Usually, they listen and observe for a few meetings. Then sooner or later, newcomers break the ice to talk and begin to exchange a little more easily. A group member put it into perspective: “I sat here tonight listening to us . . . laughing . . . and jesting, yet we’ve got a new person who couldn’t say anything. I did think I didn’t sit here laughing and jesting my first week here and I . . . [think] maybe . . . that’s the piece we need to remember about newcomers.” But they all agree that laughing is part of getting better. One cited, “I learned to laugh here.” For some, that is their approach with newcomers and regular members, too: to laugh, be friendly, and exchange phone numbers in order to encourage communication and reinforce in each other that they are not alone.

In group dynamics, the key here is comfort, especially for regular members. Not to downplay newcomers, they see this comfortableness and most of them soon feel it, too. One participant sums it up like this: “I think group becomes a segment of your life that you don’t have to outgrow - that can always be a part of it.” Another feels that “it is the people that keep coming back that I listen to - who listen to me - that give me the willingness to keep coming back.” The rest of the group shares this way of thinking because for most of them, no one cared until they got into that room. No one listened until then.

It is unrealistic to say that every woman who tries the support group keeps coming back. Many people who have been or are being abused are not ready to make that step. Just as it takes time to become a “regular” group member, it takes time to realize that you need support and are ready to join a support group. A few women do come only one time and never show up again. On the bright side, more try it and keep coming back than try it once and not return.

OTHER SERVICES OFFERED BY THE CENTER

The center also offers other services in addition to the support group. They have a protective temporary shelter where women can stay up to one month when making decisions and arrangements about their futures. Their children can stay there with them. Also, the center offers counseling to those who need or request it. These counseling sessions might be held to advise an abused woman how to start dealing with her emotional, mental, or physical problems. Or, some simple financial advice on how to balance a
checkbook or devise a budget is available.

Another offering of the center is community education services. Classes, posters, handouts, and telephone numbers are administered to inform citizens on what constitutes abuse and what they can do about it for themselves or their loved ones. To further education efforts, center workers also make sure that in public buildings, such as police stations, Magistrate Court, legal aid and welfare offices, information tables are set up. On these tables are calling cards, pamphlets, and brochures designed to help those in need as quickly and discreetly as possible. The center also holds training sessions for officers and employees of those public services, so they will be able to assist more effectively those who have been abused.

Workers and volunteers also act as advocates for the abused and are there to alert them of their rights or accompany them to a court hearing or doctor's office.

**Needs and Recommendations Voiced In the Support Group**

The group cited education as the largest overall need. They also suggested some specific programs that could be created and targeted groups of people that need help, but are not always able to easily obtain it.

**EDUCATION AND MORE**

In education, the group members said they would like for the employees of the services they use to be educated. Being educated means that they know what domestic violence is and how it destroys lives. Also, they want service workers not to be afraid to ask if women are being abused and if so, be able to point them in the right direction for help. For instance, one appealed to "more education for doctors and other people that we go to - you know [of] people that have been physically abused and say they have walked into the wall... sometimes you just want [the people we go to for help] to say, 'are you abused?"" She continued to state that this group includes family physicians, emergency room physicians, nurses, and dentists. Another woman said that employees and members of "the entire system" need to be educated on abuse. Neighbors, family, friends, employers, pastors, police, magistrates, judges, and lawyers are all a part of this system of people.

The group facilitator informed the women that center workers do provide educational trainings for persons in those positions. She indicated that some of the center employees had just attended a nurses’ training program on violence and that they are trying to bring the information into the hospitals. She said "there’s wonderful training for the nurses, doctors, emergency room [workers]" and that they do train police and magistrates on how to handle domestic violence situations. But, the group members feel more is needed - a lot more. Some of the women said they would like to be a part of this education process and go out to talk with these service workers in forums or seminars.

Another suggestion for improvement was that "the system needs... people - women and men... who have been abused - to be in the system. They are the only ones that really are going to have a grasp of how needy other people are in the situation." Several members agreed and said that laws could even be changed if more service workers knew how tough it is to live in abusive situations.
OTHERS WHO ARE BATTERED

It is also important that battered women who have not sought support be made aware of their options. They need to know that help is available and there are services that exist to assist them. This is another good reason why increased education is vital. If services, classes, posters, and advertisements are extended into more rural regions, community members will benefit by learning what abuse is, what can be done about it, and what services are provided in their area.

Additionally, people of both genders, and all races, classes, ages, and education levels can be abused. A common misperception is that battery occurs only to those in lower socioeconomic levels. This is simply not true. Money, status, and professional position do not equate the absence of abuse. One group member thinks this is a significant point to remember when the subject of abuse arises. It does not matter what a person looks like, wears, or owns. She or he could still be a victim of abuse. For example, when asked what advice they would give to their sons or daughters, one member replied that she would tell her sons that “just because they are men does not mean that they can’t get caught in this, too... as far as being victims of abuse.”

One participant adds it is important for women to know that “you do not have to have broken bones” to be abused. She said that she “almost... prayed to have broken bones, black eyes, something visible because that would cause somebody to pay attention.” For her, there was very little physical abuse; instead, she was victim to the ever present terrors of emotional, psychological, mental, and spiritual abuse. She described that the terror she felt, and still feels at times, “just follows [her] around” and makes the world feel very unsafe. In addition to making people feel unsafe, terror is deceiving because it “doesn’t have visible signs except the breaking of a person’s spirit.” Thus, it is essential that people recognize and realize that abuse comes in many forms and in order to recover from all types of abuse, recognition of the problem is the first step. “Recognize it and get out of it.”

More useful advice is that battered women should not try to go through abusive situations alone. Some suggestions include that women enlist the aid and support of a trusted family member or friend. Also, women should not put themselves in the company of others who will minimize the situation and not listen.

Finally, to the question concerning what kinds of help they feel abused women need the most, the following thoughtful answer was given. “To say ‘support’... just does not encompass the depth that I’m feeling... I’d say, listen to all the women’s stories. The one thing I know that women need is to know that they are not crazy and that they did not deserve it.”

AID FOR ABUSERS

Help for their abusive partners is another need. This perhaps is one of the hardest needs to fulfill because batterers are not reaching out for help in large numbers. One of the new members did say that there has been much response to a batterer’s program in another West Virginia town and her husband wants to get some help. However, most of the group and its facilitator were in accord when they said the vast majority of abusers would “have to be ordered by the magistrate” to attend a treatment or reformation program. Another problem would be availability. The rural setting, combined with low demand from abusers, makes it
difficult for many couples to seek that type of aid. The good news is that in some areas, laws are being developed that will force batterers to obtain treatment.

There are toll-free telephone numbers that abusers may call to inquire about getting therapy for their behavior. There are also counselors who are trained to deal with those who abuse. Even more problematic is the fact that many abusers have been the victim of abuse themselves, possibly during childhood or in some of their adult relationships.

Therefore, counseling for abusers may need to serve a dual purpose: help the batterer overcome anxieties concerning personal abuse and address the batterer’s present abusive behaviors. Again though, the abuser would probably have to be made to utilize these services. Just as it is for victims of abuse, perpetrators have to acknowledge there is a problem and decide for themselves whether to deal with it or not. One woman specified, “it’s not that the need’s not there, it’s the want to change.”

THE DISABLED

A last source of need pertains to those with disabilities. One participant wishes that domestic abuse services were more accessible to the disabled. If a disabled person is living in a rural area and is being abused, then the possibility exists that she or he may never receive any help. Perhaps domestic violence centers could construct programs for the disabled if they do not already have them. Hospital and home health care workers could be advised on how to look for and inquire about abuse in the disabled. Also, a transportation service for those affected would have to be installed as a component of programs for the disabled. This program would be costly, but could save lives.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It appears that rurality and economic restructuring are very tangibly correlated with rates of domestic violence in this Appalachian county. Factors range from inaccessibility of services to availability of weapons to lack of telephones to unemployment. However, society increasingly isolates the abused in other ways. To break down isolation of women and for them to connect with others beyond support groups, the recommendation must be made that domestic violence centers gain access to the Internet and World Wide Web. The “information highway” contains sites on which stories of the abused can be located. These stories serve as contributions for those who seek information on and hope to gain knowledge about domestic violence. Also, these stories could be printed, read, and shared with other support group members or other victims of battery. Computerized resources help to provide a picture of the needs abused persons present and could serve to help educate others in the community.

Another component of education is research. We need more research on intervention and prevention programs that work and those that do not and then we can work to implement the necessary changes. We also need more systematic, longitudinal studies on domestic violence in rural places. This might help point out additional risk factors or help to clarify those that already exist. Also, research efforts need to be linked among the variety of disciplines and professionals that deal with domestic battery, such as those involved with social work, shelter workers, counselors, criminal justice workers, physicians,
and more.

Perhaps domestic violence centers could institute programs for women who do not have their driver's license. If cooperation from the proper state authorities was obtained, battered women would then have the opportunity to gain some independence from learning to drive. Along with added independence, being able to drive might help ease the fear and isolation that many abused women experience. Even if there is no vehicle presently available to them, one might become available in the future. Then, they could more readily leave their situations because they are able to drive. It is possible that volunteers could help with a licensing service. They could aid instructors by answering questions from the women, provide transportation for women to get to the classes, or drive with the women who have received their permits. Having a driver's license is one way that abused women could more easily access the resources that are available to them. Other ways to build empowerment, independence, and self-esteem are to refer battered women to job training programs, gun safety courses, or self-defense classes.

Changes in laws - harsher penalties for batterers and requirements of the legal system to carry out those penalties are popular recommendations. However, as was put so well in group, “until . . . the people representing the laws . . . do change, this is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger because we become so helpless that many of us do just stay in it as long as we do.” She is right. Laws do not change themselves, people change them. And until that occurs - until we change the “slap on the wrist” mentality that is prevalent not only in many rural areas, but also in urban areas as well - more and more abused women will perceive no other choice as the group member said but to just stay in it.

. . . it is terror - it [is] curious because I was talking to someone the other day about things I use to deal with my fears and my terror and people that have never experienced abuse tend not to want to listen to those stories, not that I would even want to tell the story. [The person I was talking with] wanted me to focus on some real problems and priorities, like in Bosnia or whatever. I started feeling guilty about focusing on myself so much and then I had never realized that people that have lived in concentration camps and different prison situations, refugee camps and stuff like that, they have to deal with terror all the time. I realized I am recovering from my own little war . . .
REFERENCES


