

## Causes and Theories of Domestic Violence

Running Time: 2 hours

Materials: Flipchart with stand and markers, or chalkboard with chalk; an ample supply of large index cards; tape.  
Handouts: Power and Control Wheel; *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*; Handout: *Causes of Domestic Violence*

Target Audience: Can be used for awareness-raising with various audiences or participants.

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- ❖ *This session is designed to increase participants' knowledge about the causes of domestic violence, the ways in which beliefs about causes affect the community's response to the abuse, and the importance of sharing a common understanding of these issues. This session assumes that participants are either already familiar with, or have attended the training session on the definition of domestic violence. In addition, the final activity of this session assumes that participants will have a general understanding of gender-based violence. This session could be used effectively in conjunction with the session on myths and realities about domestic violence.*

### Introduction

Facilitator: To be effective, intervention strategies for domestic violence must be based on a clearly articulated theory about the cause of domestic violence. The theory of violence on which we rely will dictate our response to the problem. To the extent possible, all parts of the community must share the same understanding of violence to effectively coordinate their responses to the problem. If community members understand violence differently, their responses may be inconsistent and even harmful to victims.

Information regarding the evolution of theories of violence in the United States is useful because various forms of these theories are being discussed in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. In the United States, the reliance on some of these theories has led to responses that were ineffective, or have even endangered women's safety. Understanding the evolution and shortcomings of these theories can help ensure a response that furthers victim safety and batterer accountability. During this session, we will examine various theories about the causes of domestic violence.

### Learning Objectives:

- Facilitator: At the end of this session, participants will be able to:
- Identify and evaluate different theories of domestic violence.
  - Explain how the theory of violence used dictates the response to domestic violence.
  - Identify domestic violence as intentional, learned behavior designed to achieve power and control over another.
  - Explain the relationship between women's subordinate role in society and domestic violence.

## Activity 1: Theories of Domestic Violence

1. Facilitator leads a brainstorming session about common explanations of the cause of domestic violence. Facilitator asks each of the participants to share their ideas randomly or in turn. The ideas are not criticized or discussed; participants may build on ideas voiced by others. The questions for brainstorming are:
  - What common explanations have you heard about why domestic violence occurs?
  - What explanations can you imagine people might give for why domestic violence occurs?

❖ *Write down each answer as they are offered on a flipchart or chalkboard without any comments, notes or questions for 5-7 minutes. After discussing the ideas, post the list on the wall or leave the list on the chalkboard so it is visible throughout the training workshop.*
2. Facilitator summarizes the results of the brainstorming and then concludes by highlighting the following concepts in a mini-lecture format:
  - The first theory that developed in the United States was that men who battered women were mentally ill.
  - ❖ *At this point, the facilitator should ask participants the following question: What conclusion or response naturally follows from the belief that batterers are mentally ill? Answer: Treat the mental illness through medication or therapy.*
  - The theory that batterers were mentally ill proved to be wrong. The number of relationships that involved violence was much greater than original theorists guessed and psychological tests did not support the theory that violence was caused by mental illness. In fact, many batterers and their victims tested “normal” under psychological tests. In addition, the behavior of perpetrators of domestic violence did not correspond to profiles of individuals who were mentally ill. Batterers attack only their intimate partners. People who suffer from mental illnesses such as schizophrenia do not limit their violence to their intimate partners.
  - The next theory described violence as a loss of control. For example, many believed that men are abusive when they drink because the alcohol causes them to lose control. Others explained men’s violence as a result of an inability to control their anger and frustration.
  - ❖ *At this point, the facilitator should ask participants the following question: What conclusion or response naturally follows from the belief that batterers are violent when they lose control? Answer: Substance abuse or anger management treatment.*
  - This “loss of control” theory is contradicted by batterers’ behavior. Batterers’ violence is carefully targeted to specific people at specific times and places. Batterers do not choose to hit their bosses or police officers, regardless of how angry or out of control they are. Batterers may choose to abuse their partners only in private, or take steps to ensure that they do not leave visible evidence of their abuse. In fact, research indicates that many batterers become more controlled and calm as their aggressiveness increases.
  - Another theory was that women suffered from a “learned helplessness” as a result of repeated battering that prevented them from resisting the violence or leaving the relationship.

- ❖ *At this point, the facilitator should ask participants the following question: What conclusion or response naturally follows from the belief that women remain in violent relationships because of “learned helplessness”? Answer: Provide women with counseling.*
- The “learned helplessness” theory, however, did not account for the fact that there are many social, economic and cultural reasons a woman might chose to stay in an abusive relationship. They may fear retaliation against themselves or their children, or they may not be able to financially support themselves or their children. They may be ostracized by their family and community if they leave. This theory is also inconsistent with the fact that women surviving in abusive relationships attempt to leave many times and routinely act in very conscious ways to try to minimize the abuse directed at them and to protect their children.
- The next theory that developed was the “family conflict” model. According to this model, both partners contribute to the violence.
- ❖ *At this point, the facilitator should ask participants the following question: What conclusion or response naturally follows from the belief that violence is caused by family conflict? Answer: Family or couples counseling.*
- The family conflict model, however, assumes that the victim’s actions somehow justify the abusive response by the batterer. Even when women do use violence in an intimate relationship, they generally do so to defend themselves from an assault.
- The family conflict model is closely related to the “cycle of violence” description of domestic abuse. According to this description, batterers follow a “cycle of violence” with intermittent violent and repentant episodes. Advocates in the United States found, however, that this description of the violence was not consistent with women’s experiences. Many women reported that their partners never repented in their violent relationships, and that violence was not cyclical but rather a constant presence in their lives.
- The current understanding of domestic violence is that it is learned behavior that a batterer engages in to establish and maintain power and control over another. Batterers learn this behavior through observation. Boys who witness their fathers beating their mothers are seven times more likely to batter their own spouses. Violence is leaned through exposure to social values and beliefs regarding the appropriate roles of men and women. Violent behavior is reinforced when peers and authorities fail to sanction batterers for using violence.
- ❖ *At this point, the facilitator should ask participants to think about during the remainder of the session—but not to answer—the following question: What conclusion or response naturally follows from the belief that domestic violence is a learned behavior?*
- It is critical that all members of a community share a common understanding about the causes of domestic violence. If the prosecutors believe that domestic violence is caused by one factor, and the judges believe it is caused by another, their responses may conflict. This conflict can undermine efforts to protect victims and hold batterers accountable.
- ❖ *At the end of the mini-lecture, give each group a copy of [Handout: Causes of Domestic Violence](#).*

## **Activity 2: Causes of Domestic Violence**

1. Facilitator divides participants into small groups of four or five participants. Each group should be given a marker and a supply of large index cards. The facilitator explain that the groups will have five minutes

after the following question is read aloud to write down as many responses to the question as they can identify. Each response should be written on an individual sheet of paper. The groups are not to debate the responses, but simply generate as many as possible. The question for brainstorming is:

- What does the batterer gain by abusing his partner?
- ❖ *During this brainstorming session, the participants may be focused on the batterer's immediate gains, such as ending the argument or to get his way. If this is the case, the facilitator should have the participants spend another five minutes brainstorming responses to the following question:*
- What does the batterer gain from the periodic use of violence over time?
- ❖ *The participants will hopefully generate responses such as "he makes sure she does things his way," "he makes sure she obeys him," "he makes sure she does not argue with him in the future."*

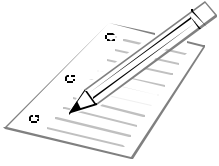
The facilitator then collects the cards, selects a random card, and tapes it to the wall. In selecting second and subsequent cards, the facilitator should ask whether the response is similar to other responses already on the wall. Similar responses should be grouped together.

- ❖ *In particular, the facilitator should try to group together those responses that relate to the batterer's establishment of power and control over his partner, as well as those that relate to men and women's roles in society.*

When all cards have been taped to the wall, distribute a copy of the Power and Control Wheel to each participant (see information on the handout below). The facilitator should then lead a guided discussion with the participants that highlights the following points.

- In many of your responses, you described violence as something that gives the batterer power and control over his partner.
- ❖ *Here, the facilitator can point to statements such as "he gets his way," "he shows her who is boss," or "he ends the argument" to illustrate this point.*
- What is missing from the theories of domestic violence we discussed earlier is the recognition that batterers use violence to gain power and control over their partners' actions, thoughts and feelings. An explanation of violence as simply a loss of control caused by alcohol, for example, misses this element of domestic violence.
- These answers also tell us something about the nature of domestic violence. They tell us that the violence is intentional. A batterer does not lose control and accidentally harm or threaten his partner. He acts in this way because he has learned that these actions bring particular results.
- ❖ *Here, the facilitator can illustrate this point by using the statements generated by the participants. For example, the facilitator might say: "He does it to end the argument, to get his way, or to show her who is boss."*
- This also illustrates why responses based on those other theories of domestic violence will often be ineffective. A response that simply treats the violence as a substance abuse problem or a problem in the couple's relationship, such as substance abuse treatment or couple's counseling, will not address the fact that the purpose of batterer's use of violence is to gain power and control.
- The Power and Control Wheel, developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota, describes the different abusive and threatening behaviors a batterer uses to maintain power and control over his partner. This understanding of how and why men batter was developed

though many years of interviews with victims and batterers. The Power and Control Wheel demonstrates the relationship between physical and sexual violence and the intimidation, coercion, and manipulation of the wife and children that are often used by batterers. A batterer uses these tactics to reinforce the power and control established through physical and sexual violence.

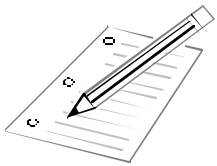


**Handout:** (download and print copies)  
Power and Control Wheel  
In English, available at <http://www.dvc.org.nz/power.htm>.

2. The facilitator directs the participants' attention to those responses that deal with male and female roles in society and provides the participants with a copy of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (see below for information on the handout). The facilitator should then ask each participant to briefly read through Preamble of the Declaration and identify any passages that discuss the relationship between violence and gender. After the participants have had a chance to read through the Preamble, the facilitator should begin the following guided discussion:
  - In a number of your responses, you described the violence as related to the batterer's beliefs about the status of men and women in society.
  - ❖ *Here, the facilitator can point to statements such as "he feels like a man," "he puts her in her place," or "he shows her who is boss."*
  - The relationship between violence and men and women's roles in society is complicated but critical to any understanding of domestic violence. Although there are no simple explanations, research indicates that domestic violence has its roots in the subordinate role women have traditionally held in private and public life in many societies.
  - ❖ *Here, the facilitator should ask participants to read any passages they found in the Preamble that describe the relationship between gender and domestic violence.*
  - The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women describes violence against women as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relationships between men and women." In other words, inequality between men and women significantly contributes to the occurrence of domestic violence.
  - ❖ *Here, the facilitator can ask participants to explain the phrase, "historically unequal power relationships," in terms of the responses that are the focus of this particular exercise. Participants may explain, for example, that the response, "he shows her who is boss," is causally related to a societal belief that men must be the dominant partners in an intimate relationship.*
  - Domestic violence is a manifestation of unequal power relationships in two ways. First, domestic violence continues to exist in large part because men and women do not have equal access to power in most societies.
  - Second, domestic violence—the use of violence to maintain power and control over another—is causally related to beliefs that women occupy a subordinate role in society. Batterers do not just learn domestic violence behaviors. Rather, they learn that these behaviors are acceptable, and, to some extent, expected, because they are men, or because their partners are women. Batterers learn that it is appropriate for a man to control his wife and to enforce this control through violence. They learn this through observing others, from the cultural, from their family, colleagues and peers. What they learn is reinforced when the community fails to sanction them for this behavior.
  - Stated differently, a batterer has internalized two different messages that are transmitted and

reinforced by culture: (1) that he has a right to use violence to get his way, and (2) that he has a right to control his partner. The second of these—that he has a right to control his partner—is expressed in the following statements:

- “She’s mine, isn’t she?”
  - “I have a right to tell her what to do.”
  - “She better listen to me.”
  - “I’m her husband, so she better not argue with me.”
  - “I get to say where she goes and who she talks to.”
  - “I am in charge of this family, so what I say goes.”
  - “She is my wife, and I have the right to discipline her.”
- In some countries, the belief that men have the right to control their wives and girlfriends was even expressed in legal provisions that defined women as the “property” of their husbands and denied them any independent legal status.



**Handout:** (download and print copies)  
*Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*  
In English, available at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/e4devw.htm>.

### Summary and Closing:

Facilitator closes by summing up the previous discussions and adding the following point:

- Just as inequality between men and women contributes to domestic violence, domestic violence, in turn, reinforces gender inequality. In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the United Nations and its member countries denounce domestic violence as one of the “crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into subordinate [positions] compared with men.”

### Questions and Comments:

Facilitator should end the session by asking if there are remaining questions or comments related to this material. Keeping track of feedback will allow the facilitator to make useful changes to future presentations.

It would be helpful to ask participants to generate a list of questions they have about trafficking in women. Facilitator should record these questions and make sure all of them are answered by the end of the training workshop.

Sources:

*Batterer Manipulation and Retaliation in the Courts: A Largely Unrecognized Phenomenon Sometimes Encouraged by Court Practices, Violence Against Women*, Joan Zorza, 2002.

*Prevention of Domestic Violence and Trafficking in Human Beings, Training Manual*, Winrock International, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2001, available at [http://www.winrock.org/GENERAL/Publications/Dos\\_manual.pdf](http://www.winrock.org/GENERAL/Publications/Dos_manual.pdf).

*Some Thoughts on Philosophy, in Coordinating Community Responses to Domestic Violence: Lessons from the Duluth Model*, Ellen L. Pence, 1999.

*Theory-Driven Explanations of Male Violence Against Female Partners: Literature Update and Related Implications for Treatment and Evaluation*, Alison Cunningham et al., 1998.

*Ending Domestic Violence: Changing Public Perceptions/Halting the Epidemic*, Ethel Klein et al., 1997.

*Presentation on Theories of Violence at the Domestic Violence Workshop*, Loretta Frederick, June 2, 1997.

*Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Family Preservation Practitioners*, Anne L. Ganley & Susan Schechter, Family Violence Prevention Fund, 1995.

*Building a Coordinated Community Response to Domestic Violence: An Overview of the Problem*, Michael Paymar, 1994.

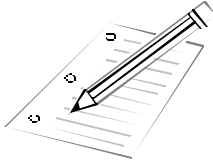
*Introduction, Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model*, Ellen Pence & Michael Paymar, 1993.

*Women, Violence and Social Change*, R. Emerson Dobash & Russel P. Dobash, 1992.

Additional Resources:

*Domestic Violence: Explore the Issue*, available at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/svaw/domestic/explore/1whatis.htm>.

*Issue in Depth: Theories of Violence*, available at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/svaw/domestic/link/theories.htm>.



## HANDOUT

### **Causes of Domestic Violence**

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From: *Domestic Violence: A National Curriculum for Family Preservation Practitioners*, Susan Schechter & Anne L. Ganley, Family Violence Prevention Fund, 1995.

#### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS A LEARNED BEHAVIOR:**

- learned through observation
- learned through experience and reinforcement
- learned in culture
- learned in families
- learned in communities, such as schools, peer groups, workplaces

#### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS NOT CAUSED BY:**

- illness
- genetics
- alcohol or drugs
- loss of control of feelings
- anger
- stress
- behavior of victim
- problems in a relationship