



Where Do the Batterer Intervention Programs Fit In?

by Paul Kivel

What Do We Do with the Men?

PROGRAMS FOR MEN WHO BATTER THEIR PARTNERS are fairly recent phenomena. Although Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs) were set up in the late 1970s, it was not until the mid-1980s that BIPs became fashionable among mental health and medical providers, and became a primary way that the judicial system “handled” men who batter.

As battered women and their advocates pressured the criminal justice system to take domestic violence more seriously, police made more arrests, district attorneys prosecuted more vigorously, and judges were faced with overcrowded jails and prisons and increasing numbers of batterers in the courtroom. BIPs became a convenient way to keep men out of the corrections system. As more and more men were court ordered to diversion groups, BIPs flourished. Many people came to believe that these programs were the answer to domestic violence. Therapists, mental health institutions, prisons, military bases, hospitals—anyone who wanted to—set up programs for men who were abusive.

Today, such programs are mushrooming, operated by a wide variety of groups and individuals. Their presence seems to answer the question, “What do we do with the men?”

If what we do with the men is send them to batterer programs, we need to ask another question, “Are these programs effective?” And this leads to a larger question, “What must we do to stop domestic violence?” These questions must be addressed if we are to end domestic male violence against women.

Will Batterer Programs Stop Male Violence?

The answer to the first question is that, in general, there is no evidence that such programs are effective. There are clearly some men who benefit from the programs, who learn to communicate



without resorting to physical, sexual, verbal, or psychological control, intimidation and force. But this is a small minority of the men who come through the programs. Even for these men, it is often difficult for program staff to know if they really remain non-violent for extended periods of time.

What actually happens to men referred to BIPs? We know that most men sent to these programs don't actually sign up. Many more go for intakes and don't start a group. Others start and drop out. Some of those who attend continue to batter their partners. Some who attend stop physical abuse, but enhance their ability to verbally and psychologically abuse their partners. In other words, there are many points at which men drop out of the process before achieving violence-free relationships.

We also know that there are ways in which BIPs can be dangerous to women and children, and to the community as a whole. They can be dangerous to women and children when they hold out the false hope that men going through a program are less dangerous than they were before. They offer the woman a false promise that if she stays in the relationship, he may change, or that if she's out of the relationship, he is becoming less dangerous to her. Some programs may inadvertently also provide men with tools for becoming less overtly abusive and more covertly controlling, increasing the danger to women directly.

These programs can be dangerous to the community when they are used as an alternative to incarceration, giving men the message that hitting women is less serious than hitting men. In many areas of the country, batterers are still given pretrial diversion (they are referred to a BIP in lieu of criminal charges) which tells men their violence isn't even serious enough to go to court. But even in states like California, where there is no longer pre-trial diversion, when mandatory arrest policies are not implemented and evidence collection procedures are not thorough, men brought in on felony charges or plea bargain to a misdemeanor are then given a suspended sentence and attendance at a BIP as a condition of probation. This sentencing may be coupled with court-supervised probation without adequate follow through. In all too many cases, batterers face little serious consequence for their violence.

Furthermore, when BIPs become the focus of our attempts to combat domestic violence, the community is relieved of the responsibility to develop other responses that might truly stop the violence. Often, when BIPs are a primary focus, then domestic violence prevention, education, advocacy and organizing are put on the back burner of a community's priorities.



Finally, and realistically, out of the millions of men who hit their partners every year, few will ever go through a program. Even if BIPs were wonderful, and wonderfully effective, they still could not provide a solution for stopping domestic violence.

Batterer programs are here to stay and I am not suggesting that we ignore them or shut them down. I want to look at some of the standards we need to set to make them as effective as possible before I raise questions about the bigger struggle to end domestic violence.

Minimum Standards for Batterer Programs

Accountability to battered women and their advocates

Batterer programs were set up to stop battering—to make it safer for women and children—and their effectiveness must be judged by how well they contribute to that end. Battered women’s programs have been the primary resource for women getting to safety, as well as the primary pressure on the criminal justice system and the general community to take domestic violence seriously. If BIPs compete with, take away funding from, or even contribute to the perception that they are more important than programs for women (because men and their concerns are seen as more important than women and their concerns) they are undermining the one resource we know makes a difference in women’s lives: shelters and advocacy programs. This leaves in place the general social structure of keeping men the center of attention and denying resources for women.

The only way to be accountable to battered women’s safety is to be directly accountable to battered women and their advocates. BIPs that are advised and supervised by shelters and advocates won’t run the risk of increasing the danger to women.

There are several models throughout the country of BIPs that are accountable to local women’s shelters or battered women’s advocacy programs. Some of the better known of these are EMERGE in Boston, DAIP in Minneapolis, DAP in Duluth, Volunteer Counseling Service in New York, and Men Stopping Violence in Atlanta. Some of these programs are actually run by shelters, others by agencies that consult regularly with battered women’s advocates. We need to develop these models and adapt them widely throughout the country.

When the focus is women’s safety, then issues of program accountability become central and only oversight from battered



women's advocates can ensure this. For example, some BIPs maintain contact with partners, but direct contact can endanger the women because many men take out their anger and frustration at being in a program on their partners. This may be exacerbated when a man knows program staff can contact his partner. Whether or not she provides any negative information about him, he may perceive her to be complicit with the system and a source of his problems. "No contact" policies remove her from the double bind of having to report further violence on his part, which might subject her to still further violence from her partner. It is not her responsibility to monitor his violence; that should be the work of the criminal justice system. Battered women's advocates are the best people to monitor BIPs, providing information and resources to battered women while providing status information about the programs their batterers are in.

No false promises of safety to battered women

Women need to be warned explicitly that simply being in the program is no guarantee that their partners will change, that they will be less violent, or that partners will be safe. A battered woman's safety is contingent on the steps she takes to protect herself from further violence. Her direct connection to battered women's advocates and the resources that they can offer are crucial in this respect. Model BIPs give women a paper which explicitly dispels any promise of change in the batterers in their program and refers women to the resources of the local shelter or other battered women's program for their own safety.

No false promises of safety to the community

Just as BIPs cannot claim to a particular woman that her partner will be less dangerous to her because he is attending a group, they cannot claim to the public that any man is, will become, or will remain less of a threat because he is attending their group. There is simply no way to evaluate how safe a man is, or even how much violence he is committing short of monitoring him 24 hours a day. BIP groups report that men who were ideal students, enthusiastic, learned the skills presented, and even confronted other men's violent tendencies in group still abused their partners, sometimes in truly horrific ways. If we cannot determine that men are violence-free when attending group, there is certainly no way to determine if they are violence-free during subsequent time periods. Police reports and even partner reports are inadequate indicators. In fact, there is anecdotal evidence that some men become better at avoiding consequences of their violent behavior having learned



how the system works, and having developed new, more subtle tools for control and intimidation through attendance in a group.

Post-sentencing, mandated attendance

Obviously work must also be done on the process by which men enter BIPs. We know that jurisdictions in which there is pretrial diversion, no matter how good the programs, such diversion gives the clear message that domestic violence is not as serious as other criminal behavior. In addition, when men fail to attend or drop out of such groups, there are no court sanctions to apply: the case is cold and the DA unlikely to prosecute. Post-sentencing, mandated attendance as a condition of probation or parole is a minimum condition for running effective diversion programs. Even with post-sentencing attendance mandated, the underlying system of plea-bargaining, suspended sentences, and lax court-supervised probation can result in men “learning” that domestic violence is not treated seriously. This entire system must be addressed as part of program effectiveness.

Re-education classes, not therapy

Another major community concern is the content of the programs themselves. Because so many groups are run by therapists, psychologists and other mental health professionals, many of whom are inadequately trained in the dynamics of domestic violence, there has been a tendency for most groups to become clinical interventions, offering some form of counseling or therapy to batterers. (This dynamic has also led to the extremely dangerous phenomena of therapists offering mediation, couples or family therapy, or individual counseling where domestic violence is involved.)

Against this tendency, it must be argued that male violence against women is learned, usually premeditated, controlling behavior. Men learn these patterns growing up in a society that condones and encourages violence towards women. Most men who batter their partners do not batter their boss or male friends. They have been taught that women and children are legitimate targets of their power and control. In a society in which a minimum of 4-5 million men a year physically batter their partners, and millions more use verbal, psychological, financial and sexual assault and intimidation to control them, battering women is not deviant behavior. The strongest, most effective model of intervention is much larger than a treatment program. It combines a coordinated community response, strong and clear sanctions against violence, and re-education groups so that men can unlearn male dominance



patterns, and learn how to live in the world without the need for control and violence. A focus on clinical or therapeutic issues is a diversion from this process; it takes away from male responsibility for the violence. Although clearly some men will benefit from therapeutic intervention, running intervention programs on a counseling model does not address the learned male socialization for and societal acceptance of men's violence against women by all men. The focus inevitably shifts away from issues of women's safety, to issues of (a small number of) men's therapeutic process.

One-year minimum programs

We also know that learned violent behavior is deeply ingrained and not undone in 12, 16, or even 32 weeks of classes. California now mandates 52-week, two-hour per week, sessions for certified batterer intervention programs. A one-year course is now considered the minimum time necessary for a man to learn and be able to implement non-violent alternatives into his life with some hope for long term maintenance.

So far, we have been looking at some of the preconditions for an effective intervention program—accountability to battered women and battered women's advocates, no false promises about safety to women or the community, post-sentencing mandated attendance in a program as a condition of probation, a re-educational curriculum, and one-year minimum length for participation. Now let's turn to the larger question of how to end domestic violence.

A Coordinated Community Response

First, a BIP is only as effective as the coordinated community response in the area in which it is located. The important question is not how effective is the program, but how effective is the coordinated community response of which the program is a part? If the police don't arrest batterers, if the district attorney doesn't charge and prosecute vigorously, if the judges don't sentence aggressively, if the hospitals don't provide referrals for battered women, if the shelter and other battered women's programs aren't well funded, well known, and well staffed, men will slip through the system and continue battering their partners. Batterers are smart and manipulative. They will find the weakest link in the community system of response and escape through that part of the fence. If a BIP is isolated and uninvolved in strengthening the other parts of the system it is undermining its own possibility of success.



In fact, it makes little sense to improve BIPs until we have better monitored and strengthened the response of other components of the system, because as long as the primary community message is that men battering women is not serious and will not be responded to seriously, that message will deeply override any message to the contrary that an isolated intervention program can establish.

Making the Connections to Women's Lives

The urgency and importance of stopping domestic violence requires us to take a broader approach than even a coordinated community response. We need to look to the community norms, practices and institutions that perpetuate the inequality and injustice against women that makes them vulnerable to male violence. As long as women make 3/4 of what men make for comparable work, they are vulnerable to violence because they don't have the economic resources to support themselves and their children. As long as there is inadequate childcare and inadequate support for children, women will be dependent upon male control and vulnerable to abuse. As long as women are dependent on men or men-dominated state institutions for safety, survival, financial security, or educational opportunity, they will not be free of male violence. We must continue to make the connections between women's safety and comparable worth, reproductive rights, homelessness, welfare, teen pregnancy, immigration policy, affirmative action, and employment in order to devise more effective programs for enabling women to resist and escape domestic violence.

Developing Broader Strategies

There are several innovative attempts around the country to intervene at this community level to stop the violence. Organizing neighborhood response against domestic violence, developing a national public awareness campaign, conducting prevention education in the schools, organizing direct grassroots action against parts of the system which condone or collude with batterers, and building a network of survivors of domestic violence for political action—these are all being developed as strategies for stopping domestic violence.

To quote Kathleen Carlin, former executive director of Men Stopping Violence in Atlanta, “merely ‘treating’ the tiny minority of batterers that get ‘caught,’ ... and measuring their progress as an indication of success in ending violence against women, is foolish at best. At worst it is a genuine betrayal of the women being



abused and the women who have struggled so hard to force the problem into public view.”

Batterer Intervention Programs are here to stay, but we need to pay careful attention so they don't contribute to further endangering battered women. At the same time we need to see them as a small part of a comprehensive, coordinated community response to male violence. And we must not get so bogged down in developing that community response that we neglect the broader organizing, activism, education and prevention work that will truly stop the violence.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.