



The Oakland Men's Project

by **Paul Kivel**

WE BEGAN THE WORK OF THE OAKLAND MEN'S PROJECT IN 1979 with a multitude of personal motivations, not the least of which was that the male roles we had been trained to follow didn't work. Even without identifying it as a box, we knew we wanted out.

The women's movement and a 1978 national conference in San Francisco on violence against women were our immediate inspirations. For years, women's groups had been responding to the needs of women survivors of male violence by operating shelters and rape crisis centers. One result of this organizing was to make the public aware of the tremendous need for shelter, counseling, advocacy, and legal intervention. During this period the devastating effects of the violence on women, children, and even on men became more and more visible.

Some men began to see that we could no longer discount sexual harassment, battery, and rape as women's problems. These were clearly part of a nationwide social problem. We could see that the effects of past violence and the threat of future violence was keeping women off the shop floor, out of the corporate office, and out of public office. It was keeping them in dangerous marriages and in poverty.

Some women said, "You're doing the violence. You are men. Take responsibility for your actions and address other men." There was a lot of attention paid to the question, "Why are men violent?" Some people argued that men are unalterably aggressive because of their genes, hormones, chromosomes, or just because all males are "that way." None of these "theories" had any scientific legitimacy, however. Male behavior is immeasurably variable. Most feminists wanted to hold men responsible for their actions and looked to male power and male socialization as sources of male violence. The huge amount of violence promoted in popular culture led them to the conclusion that boys learn male roles, and violent behavior was part of that learning.

Women were hurting from the violence. They were angry at the men who committed violence and the men who condoned it by their silence. We assimilated much of their anger. Partly motivated



by self-hatred, we took the anger directed toward us and directed it at other men for not seeing what was happening to women. We used that anger to encourage other men to acknowledge their complicity in the violence.

A group of us developed a slide show to be shown to men's groups. We took images from pornography, record covers, magazine ads, and comic books. Most of the images we showed were pictures of women being humiliated, bound, beaten, or raped. Our motivation was to convey horror, shock, and outrage at how violent the images were. As part of our presentation we read the poem with no immediate cause* by ntozake shange:

This is a very upsetting poem. You may feel angry, guilty, or ashamed after reading it. When presented with facts about the costs of male violence against women, as we are in this poem, we cannot escape the horror of the reality. I don't spend any time in this book citing statistics because the numbers only mask the reality. We need only open the daily newspaper to read the stories. We need only listen to the women we know talk about their experiences to know the truth.

Men must listen to women's pain and anger. The fact that it is safe enough for women to publicly express that anger is an indication of important change in our society. It means that women are challenging male perceptions of sex, gender, rape, exploitation, and abuse. They are describing parts of our common reality that are tremendously destructive to all of us.

But if we just accept those perceptions without confirming them through our own experience, we will eventually reject and turn against the source of those perceptions—the strong women around us. This happens when we respond to women's anger with guilt, shame, or defensiveness. In many cases these feelings eventually lead to a backlash against women. The defensiveness becomes counterattack; we blame women for the powerlessness of men or try to protect the power that men have.

Instead we need to take the pain and anger in ntozake shange's poem as a probe into a reality we often deny. We need to look at our own lives and experiences. We need to grapple with the issues, not the anger, until we can understand the truth of what shange says—not because she says it, but because we have confirmed that she is right. Then, and only then, do we become committed to making personal and social changes because we know what is at stake for women and for us.



Evoking this kind of response from men called for an entirely different educational approach than reading angry poems and showing slides of women being brutalized. It meant we had to come together and, with absolute honesty, share and compare our experiences growing up and living as men, analyze women's experiences as they described them, and piece through the causes and costs of our violence.

But the old methods of lecture and slide presentation were hard to let go. They made us the "good" men with the "right" ideas and allowed us to feel powerful by attacking and berating other men. We became the best liberated men on the block, and that became another way of winning women's approval and attention. It also allowed us to feel self-righteous toward other men.

We took our presentation with its slides and poem and testimony to many different men's group. Some men were shocked and outraged, others weren't. Shock and outrage did not necessarily lead men to sustained commitment and action to end violence. Nor did it help our audiences understand how the system of male violence worked, or how it affected them personally.

We told men they were powerful, privileged, and responsible for the violence. The men we talked with did not agree. They told us they felt angry, hurt, vulnerable, and powerless. We didn't believe them at first, because we had a lot at stake in being right. After all, we were the teachers and they were the students. We were supposed to have the right answers.

Then we took the workshops to some junior high classes, bringing the message that men were strong and powerful in the world and women weren't. The young men said they were trying to be powerful and weren't. The young women refused the label of victim. Both the men and women thought that women were not as vulnerable as we were saying they were. We couldn't hear them either.

Over the next two years we looked at what wasn't working in our workshops. People loved discussing the slides, but they didn't buy what we were saying. We finally had to acknowledge that teen men are not powerful in our society. They are primarily victims and survivors of family, community, and institutional violence. We had to acknowledge as well that the young women, while vulnerable to violence, were not passive victims but survivors trying to make it in a hostile environment.



We came to see that boys and girls are hurt as children, violated, and rendered powerless. They are recipients of adult, primarily male, violence. Boys are taught to pass on the violence to others. Girls are expected to become victims of this violence.

All men were victims of the system as young people. So the key to doing effective work with men was to understand how we had been trained, the pain we had suffered, and yet still hold ourselves accountable for the violence we perpetuated. We had to create a way to understand the connection between social training and individual responsibility. We learned how to do this through a process of trial and error.

During that period we learned that men who speak out and take actions against sexism contradict the lies that men are inevitably abusive to women, that men will never change, and that they can't be trusted by women. We found that when we made mistakes, said the wrong thing, or acted out our own sexism inadvertently, women got angry at us. Having invited their trust, we ended up hurting them. Sometimes this made us very cautious. We were reluctant to antagonize women or to be incorrect.

To be a true ally to women we had to hear their anger and understand its source in their feelings of hopelessness and experiences of violence. We learned how to listen, take criticism, and make changes while continuing to take risks. We were doing this work to reduce the violence. It was not just another way to wrangle women's support, approval, or gratitude.

We also experienced anger from men as we spoke out. Some of them felt deserted, unfairly blamed, or saw us as hypocritical. To counteract this anger we learned that it was crucial not to fault or attack other men for the lies and training they have received. By caring for and accepting them, while confronting their beliefs and attitudes, we were able to demonstrate the strong and loving alliances against injustice that are possible between men. The next sections show some of the ways that the staff at the Oakland Men's Project have tried to model this kind of approach.

As we developed the role plays, the power chart, and other exercises we use in workshops, we also developed a way of relating to people, of being teachers, that we felt was consistent with the content of our work. The basic educational methods of Oakland Men's Project developed as we grappled with the issues of power and violence, gender roles, and racism. Over time the goals and mission of the project grew into the following statements.



The Oakland Men's Project

Mission Statement

Abuse of power and violence are taken for granted in our society and dominate our lives and relationships. We are trained that the way to get power is to wield it over someone who is, within the social milieu, less powerful. Hurting others through physical and sexual assault, harassment, exploitation and discrimination, or hurting ourselves through suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and other self-destructive behaviors creates a cycle of violence, pain, and hurt.

Social institutions and individual practices maintain this cycle, producing violence, lack of equality, poverty, and physical and mental disability for all of us. As men, we are particularly trained to perpetuate violence, domination, and oppression.

The Oakland Men's Project's mission is to challenge the cycle of violence and the social structures that perpetuate it. All people can learn to be powerful without being abusive. Together, we can develop alternatives to violence. We can change the institutions that perpetuate violence. The Oakland Men's Project provides the information, support, resources, and training necessary to build violence-free, equal, and respectful relationships and communities.

Goals

1. To **CHALLENGE** the cycle of violence through active intervention in people's assumptions of continued abuse and victimization.
2. To **EMPOWER** individuals to come together and reach beyond/out to each other to build community responses to violence and oppression.
3. To **UNDERSTAND** men's unique training to perpetuate violence, and to challenge each of us to unlearn that training.
4. To **SUPPORT** the struggle of each person to overcome pain, hurt, and learned helplessness, to heal and become a more powerful community member.
5. To **PROVIDE** young people with the information, support, resources, and encouragement they need to create violence-free relationships and communities.
6. To **UNDERSTAND** and make connections between all the complicated ways power and abuse are worked out in our lives and in society.



7. To PROMOTE a variety of powerful and effective alternatives to violence in social and personal situations.
8. To CONFRONT the violence of local institutions and social practice.
9. To MODEL, in all of these areas, the powerful role that men can take in breaking the cycle of violence.

We also developed an understanding of how the issues of power, violence, and oppression need to be translated into an approach for working with people that does not further the violence, but instead contributes to people's liberation. The basic ideas are set forth below.

These are dry principles, hard to use without concrete examples. The descriptions of workshops and thoughts about men's lives in my book "Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart" are intended to give a fuller understanding of what we do and why we do it.

Goals and Assumptions

Overall Goal One: Empower each individual present.

Assumptions:

- When a person makes choices—in areas of attitudes, actions, and values—they are made as the best perceived survival strategy at that time.
- Empowering individuals is partly a process of healing previous pain, hurt, and disempowerment.
- Attitudes held with emotional intensity need to be worked through emotionally to be changed. Information alone does not change attitudes.
- Individual growth and empowerment come from an individual's ability to put together information and past and present experiences into a conscious, emotional, and intellectual process of change.
- Empowerment happens best and is maintained most strongly with group support.
- People become empowered through active participation.
- Seeds of change can lie dormant for a long time.



Overall Goal Two: Encourage each person to be more active and involved.

Assumptions:

- An individual's personal empowerment comes through involvement in community activity.
- Individual growth without community activity is inherently limited and is of little value to our community.
- Powerlessness is reflected in inactivity, apathy, and cynicism.
- Community activity breaks down isolation, self blame, guilt, misinformation, and extreme individualism—all of which are factors in powerlessness.
- Community activity helps people learn about the systems of power that personally disempower us.
- Community activity is not necessarily organized, formal, or traditional. Each person can and must define his or her own way to be active.

Overall Goal Three: Creating group solidarity, support networks, and an understanding of connection.

Assumptions:

- We are all connected.
- We are disempowered by believing we are separate individuals and by fearing others and not cooperating.
- Our greatest resources are in our own community.
- In any group of people, there is tremendous power to unleash, and each group already has the information and experience it needs to empower itself and its members.
- Individual empowerment happens most easily and effectively when it is supported and nurtured by group energy and action.
- Group energy snowballs to people outside the group.

The following are guidelines for Oakland Men's Project staff to use in facilitating workshops and trainings:

- Model, encourage, and support strength, openness, respect, growth, trust, love, and cooperation.
- Provide information.



- Respect the intelligence of everyone at all times.
- Help each person identify personal issues and solutions to problems.
- Provide a framework to aid in personal problem solving.
- Provide lots of options and encourage the creation of new options for problem solving.
- Do not try to force change on anyone.
- Prevent people from trashing one another, being rude, lecturing others, having attitudes of disrespect, attitudes of "correct" information, or "correct" politics are each nonempowering.
- Taking small steps toward effectively dealing with issues, and participating in activities pertinent to those issues, are important and need to be encouraged.
- It needs to be acknowledged that people are already doing a lot of work to improve themselves and their communities. •
- outsiders to any particular group, we can focus attention on the issues, facilitate discussions of people's experiences of power, share information, and focus on group self-consciousness.
- Refer the group back to its own resources.
- Emphasize that the group obtain information and services through nonprofessional sources and networks that already exist.
- In most general situations, and in some specific aspects of all situations, emphasize there are some common issues.
- Help to break down the insularity of family and relationship concepts that prevent community intervention.
- Model and practice community intervention: friends and family reaching out to each other.
- Talk from the heart.

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