



The Approach Section

Woman abuse occurs because of the pervasive intent and desire of a male to assume power over and control over his partner. This continual control places the woman in a position where she is terrified, uncertain, without choices about her life, and ultimately unable to escape the situation, due to physical and/or sexual danger and emotional trauma. This reality is played out continually in a cycle which repeats itself over and over. (Refer to Approach Section C 2, "The Dynamics of Abuse")

While the combination of danger and lack of choice are difficult dynamics to respond to simultaneously, intervention in wife abuse must be able to respond to the woman's inability to change or leave the situation, the criminal act of assault, and the need to work with the woman to assist her in gaining/re-gaining control of her life and self-esteem

Introduction:

The practical approach to ensuring standardized, quality service to abused women and their families, is to develop guidelines for systems and organizations. While this approach is essential, the effective utilization of guidelines must also encompass a solid understanding of the underpinnings and dynamics of woman abuse.

Woman abuse, by definition, is recognized as a societal problem, which manifests itself as a man's right to have power and control over his female partner. The approach section reflects this awareness, stating that all forms of violence are symptoms of the use of power and control.

The protocol recognizes that the resulting dynamics are complex. Professionals need to know and understand them if guidelines and interventions are to be effective.

The following two sections will provide an overview of the knowledge and skills which will assist professionals in working effectively with abused women and their families.

The goal of intervention is to empower women to be able to make choices about their lives and the lives of their children which are safe and in their best interests. Effective intervention combines an understanding of the dynamics of abuse and the woman's experience of those dynamics with knowledge of practical information and steps.

Section A: Responsibilities of Systems:

The responsibility of the criminal justice system is to enforce the act of assault as a criminal offense, ensure the abuser is accountable for his behaviour, and provide deterrents for the individual and society at large. Attempts to provide safety and protection for abused women and their children is a priority.

This responsibility is premised on the recognition that a woman should not be responsible for her partner's behaviour and may be incapable of making choices or becoming safe when she is living with the threat and reality of constant danger.

The primary responsibility of community and related services is to support the emotional and physical needs of the woman by assisting her to gain/re-gain control of her life and her self-esteem. Community services should recognize the criminal nature of assault by supporting the woman in contacting the police and working co-operatively with the criminal justice system. Community services are also responsible for providing programs for men which maintain men's responsibility for the abuse but also allow them to learn new approaches to dealing with their feelings and their relationships.



These community responsibilities are premised on the recognition that abused women must have easy and timely access to services which support their empowerment and that services which do not bypass criminal consequences must be available for men.

These divisions of responsibility mean that a woman's choice is removed by the criminal justice system. When a woman contacts a community service she will not be mandated to report the offense. This division ensures that a range of responses, which recognize the dynamics and realities of wife abuse, will exist within the community.

Section B: A Philosophical and Theoretical Base for Woman Abuse:

1. The Role of Values and the Impact of Socialization

What we are taught to value as a society has a direct impact on how we view specific groups and logically how we then approach them in providing service.

A simple overview of those societal values which most directly affect the family and relationships:

- The family is a sacred and private place.
- Certain subjects are taboo and should be kept silent and secret.
- The attainment of perfection is a goal.
- Achievement and success are important.
- Cognitive skills and abilities are valued more than feelings.
- Approval from others is more important than inner happiness.
- Being powerful and in control are positive attributes and goals.
- There is always a right and wrong answer.
- Leadership and decision making are important.
- Love must be exciting and immediate.
- Romance is wonderful.
- Marriage vows are forever.
- The man is the head of the household.

The majority of these values promote qualities of achievement, perfection, or attainment of goals with clearly defined rights and wrongs and the promotion of power and control as the means. The values indicate that there is always a goal, however unattainable, which is to be strived for.

A society based on these types of values has overlooked the role and importance of caring and equality. Human needs for intimacy, love, acceptance, and care without competition or control are considered to be of secondary or lesser value.

Generally these values and the qualities associated with them are those which we ascribe to men and for which men are socialized. The result is that men and men's qualities are more highly valued than women and women's qualities and the social structures and value base reflect this attitude.

Asserting individual needs and goals is associated with men, while caring, nurturing and pacifying is associated with women.



Ideally the process of socialization should include all of these qualities for both men and women and should develop them in a manner which promotes equality and equal value. This approach would work towards developing equal, caring and fully functioning human beings. Unfortunately gender roles often develop in a manner which is rigid and encourages men to have and use power and control over women. This polarization and inequality has significant impacts in woman abuse.

The result is that some men who have not developed the caring, emotional and intimate side of the character can become dependent upon the woman in their lives to provide the emotional depth and intimacy. In some situations this results in men who need to control or be in control of their partner's lives and relationships.

Women who are socialized to nurture and take care of people and relationships will often compromise themselves and their needs to gain love and approval from others, particularly the men with whom they are in intimate relationships. They will consistently believe that love and care will effect changes and will cling to this hope and belief. Simultaneously, they do not develop a strong sense of self or individual rights for self to respond effectively to control by men.

(This comment is not intended to suggest that a stronger sense of self would in any way assist women in offsetting the terrors and dangers of physical assault. It is intended to focus on the role of socialization in the underpinnings of control.)

2. A Definition of Woman Abuse

For the purpose of the protocol, woman abuse is defined as "**any form of abuse directed by a man against his female partner in an attempt to control and intimidate her in any way**".

It may include only one episode with physical or emotional damage, but more often involves repeated, escalating incidents which result in physical injury or symptoms, and emotional, psychological, or physical damage which interferes with her well-being and that of her family.

For the purpose of this definition, control is defined as "attempting to force compliance against a woman's will".

3. Forms of Abuse Against Women

Emotional Abuse: Includes any abuse which attacks self-esteem by acts such as name calling, shouting, screaming, any form of degradation, denial of her ideas and feelings, etc.

Psychological Abuse: Includes using fear inducing mind games involving the woman, her family, her children, family members or extended family such as threats of swindle, deportation, control of eating and sleeping habits, use of weapons, etc. Includes all other acts which are designed to manipulate, intimidate or terrorize her into compliance.

Physical Assault: Any act which threatens, injures, or attempts to injure such as slapping, pinching, spitting, pulling hair, biting, choking, burning, clubbing, punching, and slashing.

Sexual Assault: Any sexual act directed towards the woman against her wishes such as physical attacks on breasts or genitals, forced sexual activity accompanied by physical violence, or threats of physical violence.

Isolation: Any act which controls or limits a woman in her environment or limits her access to others and the outside world.

Economic Abuse: Any act which controls her access or right to money, work, etc.



Property Damage: Any act which destroys or threatens to destroy property, a woman's belongings, cherished possessions, pets, etc.

Male Privilege: Any act or action which uses as its foundation the assumed right of the man to have privilege over the woman such as making decisions, acting as the most important person, demanding to be waited on, etc.

4. Assessing the Existence of Control

It is recognized that underlying the abuse towards women lies the abuser's need to control. When abuse is understood from this perspective, specific understanding, knowledge and skill are required from service providers which include:

- knowing and understanding what control is
- knowing and recognizing the indicators of when control is being used
- knowing and recognizing the tactics used to maintain control
- understanding what is learned from living under control
- knowing and recognizing the responses to control

While this information is provided to assist professionals, the only valid and certain way of assessing control is to listen to the experience of the woman which must be explored, understood, and respected in each individual situation.

5. Recognizing and Understanding Control

A man's control over a woman results in:

- the woman being unable to escape, by being kept in a constant state of fear and/or danger, being made responsible for being silent, and keeping the family unit together as the priority
- the man becoming omnipotent, by being the person who is the source of fear and also the source of solace or respite from abuse
- the woman being dependent upon gaining the abuser's indulgence as a means of survival
- the woman giving total compliance to gain the abuser's indulgences
- the woman surviving by continually and vigilantly monitoring and attempting to pacify the abuser's moods and behaviour
- the woman's sense of autonomy and self being destroyed

**6. Tactics of Control****A) Isolating her:**

Result:

- Deprives woman of all support
- Eliminates feedback from other sources about man's behaviour
- Weakens ability to resist
- Makes woman dependent upon abuser

B) Keeping her focused on him:

Result:

- Maintains attention upon predicament
- Develops intense and singular concern with man and situation
- Eliminates information which competes with anything controlled by abuser
- Frustrates all actions not consistent with compliance

C) Creating exhaustion and depleting her inner resources:

Result:

- Weakens mental and physical ability
- Destroys esteem and confidence
- Develops anxiety and despair

D) Occasional Indulgences:

Result:

- Provides incentive for hoping things will change and thus ensures compliance
- Creates feelings of guilt or shame for portraying men as bad

E) Being all powerful:

Result:

- Develops fear and thus belief that resistance is futile

F) Degrading comments:

Result:

- Makes cost of resistance more damaging to self esteem than compliance
- Destroys esteem and confidence
- Develops anxiety and despair

**G) Threats:**

Result:

- Keeps reality of danger as primary focus
- Terrifies her and keeps her energies focused on abuser
- Reinforces power of abuser

H) Enforcing Trivial Demands:

Result:

- Develops habit of compliance
- Keeps focus on abuser and his demands and away from self
- Weakens resources of woman

7. Indicators of Control

Indicators of a woman who is being controlled:

- protective of her partner
- minimizes, denies abuse
- minimizes, denies danger to self and/or children
- hopeful, believing abuse will not happen again
- views abuse as her fault, believes she provoked it
- dependent upon approval from others, particularly men's esteem and sense of self defined by other's views and expectations
- may have witnessed abuse or been abused in childhood
- looks to others and her partner for direction and approval
- focuses on warm, caring aspects of partner; views abusive behaviour as a minor aspect of the relationship
- rationalizes or explains abuse in relation to partner's problems or stresses
- numb, flat affect
- maintains partner's problems and feelings as more important than hers
- responds to small indulgences or minor changes as indicators of abuse stopping
- inaccurately views self as weak, dependent and needy of partner

A man who uses control may exhibit some or all of these characteristics:

- holds sexist or negative attitudes of women
- holds beliefs that within relationships the man is the boss, the decision-maker, and his way is the right and only way
- denies, minimizes abuse
- rationalizes abuse as women asking for it or provoking it
- views abuse as a legitimate response to his anger or her behaviour



- is extremely jealous and possessive of partner
- will often create fantasies regarding her involvement with other men which he convinces himself are true and which can become obsessive
- "stalks" partner, repeatedly following her, monitoring her every move and action
- is unable to resolve or "let go" of past history
- "holds on" to past behaviours, comments, actions, both real and imagined, and uses them to degrade her, taunt her, terrify her, and convince her she has been terrible to him
- views partner's friends and/or family as negative influences and usually isolates her from them
- shows little or no respect or value for partner's opinions, thoughts or feelings; will often interrupt her, cut her off or answer questions posed to her
- is often extremely remorseful of abuse immediately after and makes promises of abuse not recurring in an attempt to manipulate and charm her into staying or returning
- may appear to others as a nice, caring, charming man
- has low self-esteem and poor image of self but masks this and uses it only to pull in partner's sympathy
- has limited range of feelings, is generally "fine" or "angry"
- is very dependent upon his partner, at least emotionally, while simultaneously denying and hating this reality
- in presence of others, uses subtle forms of language and insults to degrade and reduce her to a childlike, dependent status

8. Indicators of Physical Abuse

- Injuries, such as bruising, cuts, burns, hair pulled out, choke marks, black eyes
- Injuries, which may not be visible such as bruising, sprains, pulled muscles, internal bleeding, punctured eardrums
- Injuries which do not match the explanation given by the woman
- Continual and repeated injuries such as those above which are explained as accidents or clumsiness
- Old or untreated injuries
- Patterns of similar injuries
- Drug/alcohol abuse or non-compliance with medication
- Prolonged use of drugs such as tranquilizers, anti-depressants
- The intermittent or continual presence of stress reactions such as tension, hyperactivity, headaches, insomnia, pain in the back, chest or stomach
- The intermittent or continual presence of fear, anxiety, depression, hopelessness
- Lack of support. Isolation
- Indications of suicidal thoughts and/or behaviours
- Presence of any or all of the above indicators with statements that the situation is alright and hopefulness that the situation will improve

This list is neither exhaustive nor accurate for all situations. The only true account of physical abuse is obtained by sensitive and thorough exploration with the woman.



9. The Approach

The approach in work with abused women begins with the professional's awareness that an abused woman is an adult who, when given support, choices, safety and opportunity, can and will work in the safe and responsible interests of herself and her children.

While often frustrating for professionals, the ambivalence, denial, and helplessness which often characterize abused women are in fact learned messages which have allowed her to survive the abuse. By nurturing, giving in, pacifying, and anticipating the moods and needs of the abuser, a woman, while never able to control or stop the abuse, often buys time to leave, call for help, or decreases the severity or duration of the incident.

The approach recognizes that abused women have sometimes been socialized to care for and consider others before themselves and maintain as their primary concern and responsibility the needs and interests of their relationship and family. Intervention in woman abuse asks the abused woman to completely change her socialized instincts and training and place her needs first. The approach recognizes that this is a monumental task for any woman and more difficult for abused women whose confidence, esteem, and identity have been destroyed by the abuse.

Thus, the ambivalence, often characteristic of abused women, is the struggle between caring for herself and the learned messages she has which tell her that:

- no-one would believe her anyway
- leaving him is wrong as partnerships and marriages are for good and bad times
- leaving him is abandoning him when he is sick or has severe problems
- leaving him splits up the family and he is a good provider/good father
- leaving him could be fatal to her, the children, or significant others or to him if he becomes suicidal

The approach recognizes that the natural and expected response when people have difficulty in relationships or marriages is that they work together to address and solve the problems. This concept in woman abuse is neither safe nor workable while abuse exists. However professionals must recognize that expecting women to leave or begin focusing on themselves and their safety and needs is a complete and total deviation from what they have learned. It is not usually what would be suggested regarding any other problem.

This reality is complicated by the fact that many institutions or agencies do not define abuse as grounds for charges or separation. They may fail to state that traditional methods such as couple counselling are not effective.

The approach recognizes that in addition to the internal struggle, men, families, and society place pressure on abused women to remain in the relationship.

In summary, professionals need to understand that for an abused woman to leave an abusive relationship she must:

- immediately give up the denial and helplessness which have been part of her survival
- immediately acknowledge the extent, severity and danger of the abuse although denying the abuse has kept her sane
- begin feeling, thinking and acting in her own interests with clarity, strength and decisiveness even though she has endured abuse and may or may not have been taught these qualities prior to the abuse
- act in spite of the threats of harm to her, to himself, or to the children used by the abuser and simultaneously take action to protect herself and her children



- accept and deal with the reality that he may follow or find her
- accept and deal with the reality that leaving may place her in further danger
- ignore the threats of losing the children through him taking them or going for custody
- overcome the belief that he is all powerful and omnipotent
- listen to and ignore or refuse to answer his constant phone calls where he cries, pleads, tells her he can't live without her, begs her to return or promises anything she wants in return for coming home or letting him come back
- hearing and sorting that his threats of suicide are tactics and his responsibility and his threats of homicide are also tactics but may require further safety action on her part
- ignore the shock and disbelief of friends and colleagues who thought he was a nice guy and cannot believe he would hurt her
- ignore the statements of people or professionals who subtly or blatantly tell her it was her fault, it couldn't have been that bad, she had to be part of the problem
- overcome the cultural, religious, political, and family messages which blame her and suggest she should stay and work it out
- ignore the sadness and insecurity of her children who miss Daddy and plead with her to take them home
- accept that he will not give her money unless she returns
- accept that she may have to request Welfare/Family Benefits
- accept that often, at least temporarily, she has lost her home and security
- cope with all this and remain strong and decisive when she is usually alone as she has lost or has been isolated from her friends and family

As a result, women may leave and return many times during their process of working through these issues.

Section C: Approaches in Work With Abused Women:

1. Intervention

Given the realities outlined in the previous section, professionals will begin to understand the difficulties abused women face. This means that professionals **cannot** push or force abused women to take action but need to work with them in a supportive, ongoing process which assists them in facing the realities, overcoming internalized and socialized messages, and gaining or re-gaining their confidence and esteem.

An abused woman is accustomed to being controlled and directed. The goal and focus of all intervention is to empower her ability to make safe and responsible decisions for herself and her children. This means that the professional must support women in doing as much as they can for themselves. Professionals must **always** allow women to make their own decisions and respect those decisions as correct for the woman at that point in her process without in any way blaming, judging, or abandoning her.

Intervention should:

- not blame her for the abuse, for remaining in the relationship, or for not taking action with counselling, charges, etc.



- maintain the safety of the woman and her children as the top priority
- believe her experience and respect her as the expert on her own experience
- value and help her to value that whatever she has done or felt has allowed her to survive
- build on this value to assist her to begin to utilize those survival strengths towards her own safety and well-being
- recognize that for some women, a focus on self and caring for self is a deviation from socialized messages of caring for and receiving approval from others, and as such is difficult, scary and a new experience. For abused women, this significant shift is complicated by the existence of real danger and the belief that if the abuser is not nurtured and pacified, injury or death will result.

2. Dynamics of Abuse

While earlier research shows that there are defined phases within abuse, more recent knowledge indicates that there are consistent dynamics which appear to exist within abuse which professionals need to recognize. The actual pattern and experience of the dynamics is individual to every situation and can be understood only by carefully and gently exploring them with each woman.

At some point, a woman becomes aware of the man's tension and possibly his anger. Feeling trapped and terrified she will respond with what she has been taught and what she believes and hopes will prevent further abuse. This often is pacifying, nurturing, and/or avoiding the man. All of her time and energy is invested in this effort. Even if a woman wants to leave or change the situation at this point, her entire physical and emotional energy is being used to hyper-vigilantly watch and anticipate the man's needs and moves as a way to avoid abuse.

While objectively these responses appear to be a denial of the reality and danger and more obviously, do not work, a woman is simply doing what she has been taught and understands to be the best and only response to the situation.

The man, sometimes not physically abusive at this point, is using many forms of emotional and verbal abuse to convince the woman she is stupid, useless, etc. and to firmly plant in her mind the belief that what is occurring is her fault. The abuse is usually coupled with control tactics which monitor her actions, ensure her isolation, and may also include threats of abuse to her, her children, or significant others.

These actions on the part of the man would appear to be exactly what should drive the woman away. In fact throughout this phase, his inability to take responsibility for his own feelings, behaviour, and actions and his attitudes to women result in just that.

While objectively, this suggests that the woman should leave, the combination of fear and danger combined with the socialized belief that she should help him and her lack of physical or emotional energy keep her trapped.

However, as much as a woman wants to believe that she can control and prevent further or actual physical abuse, more abuse will follow. At this point, the woman is either physically assaulted or severely abused in other ways. Injured and/or hurt and given that the man has vented his rage, (although the venting and abuse can sometimes go on for days) there may be a brief period when the abuse lessens or stops.

What may continue is the ongoing control of her although many women describe this time as a respite if physical or severe emotional abuse stops or lessens temporarily. **(This respite or lessening of abuse does not occur in all situations. If it does exist, the respite time may lessen as the abuse increases.)**



Sometimes a woman becomes aware at this point that her earlier efforts have not worked and may become angry at how she is being treated. A woman may reach out for help or take action to leave the situation. The pain of physical injuries breaks through denial of the danger and the intensity of anger and betrayal breaks through traditional roles and expectations.

It is at this time that a woman, given protection and support, is most able to begin counselling, take some action, leave, and stay away from the man. If, however, protection and support are not available, it is extremely difficult to do it alone.

The man, having vented his rage, is often terrified that he has really driven her away. In some instances, men are shocked or remorseful about their behaviour for a brief period of time. They may apologize, promise to get help, or do anything to make it up to her. While it may appear that the woman has some power at this point and that leaving the man and the situation is logical, it must be recognized that the man, aware that he has driven her away, now places all his physical and emotional energy in getting her back.

The man may, at least briefly, become the charming and loving person that the woman has hoped will return or there may be a brief respite from abuse. **(This is not true in all situations and must be gently explored with women as in some cases the abuse begins again so quickly that the woman does not have enough time to heal let alone take any action on her own behalf.)**

If the woman is alone and without outside support, her partner is often the only person who provides any respite or security and she will stay or return, hoping that the abuse will not recur.

While often frustrating and confusing for professionals, the dynamics of abuse and the woman's responses are understandable, given the danger she is in and her beliefs.

3. Steps of Intervention

1. Listen to her experience of the abuse
2. Believe her experience
3. Support her for:
 - her courage in disclosing
 - her courage and ability to survive
 - her courage and strength in reaching out
4. Provide understanding of abuse:
 - dynamics
 - that she is not alone
 - that it is not her fault
5. Provide information re:
 - legal rights and options
 - financial options
 - shelter availability
 - supports and counselling
6. Focus on self and safety:
 - safety plans
 - physical/medical needs
 - right to live free from abuse
 - right to support and building a support system



7. Assess children's safety:
effects on children who witness abuse

As may be evident, the focus and steps of intervention are aimed at empowering the woman and breaking down the power and tactics of control used by the abuser. Much of the process is "undoing" the damage created by the abuse.

Throughout the process, the professional is constantly assessing the dangers and discussing these with the woman. While all decisions are left up to the woman, this feedback assists in breaking down the denial and validating for her the danger. This enables her to begin acting in the interests of her safety. While the steps will not unfold in the order listed, it is important to cover, at least briefly, all areas in the first contact with a woman. This may be the only contact.

It is also critical to recognize that if ongoing contact is maintained, that the various issues and themes will be addressed and re-addressed (i.e. a woman who has not blamed herself for many months may begin believing it is her fault). Each time this occurs it is important to remember that it is a signal of the power of the abuser or an indicator of internalized or socialized messages which need to be explored by her.

4. Guidelines for Empowering Women in Intervention

- Be involved and interactive, but don't direct, rescue, or tell her what to do.
- Make suggestions and review options, then ask what she thinks or feels about them, enquiring if she would feel safe doing them.
- Check out her experience and understanding by using questions such as "Help me to understand how that felt for you" or "Could you tell me some more about that so I can understand what it was like for you?".
- Choose questions which help her explore her thoughts, feelings, and needs, not ones that require yes or no or have you doing much of the talking.
- Ask for and encourage her feedback and comments.
- Encourage and applaud her efforts.
- Share with her sensitively your feelings if they are appropriate. (i.e. "That sounds very frightening. I would have been frightened.")
- Be clear and open about realities and what she may need to do but don't force, push or control. (i.e. "It sounds to me as if the only safe option now is to be away from the house for a while. I hear that's not what you want but I'm really concerned about your safety right now.")

THIS SECTION PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW ONLY. MORE DETAILS ARE COVERED IN THE SECTIONS ON DISTRESS CENTRES AND COUNSELLING SERVICES.