Community responsibility for freedom from abuse

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Introduction
Abuse has far-reaching implications for societal health. Our concern here is with refinement of discourse on domestic violence to extend responsibility for prevention, effective interventions and sustainable change from individual women to society as a whole. The responsibility of individual women to take action, and the need for institutional interventions, is acknowledged but communities and families are the fulcrum. The abuse of women is an economic, social, educational, developmental and human rights problem, and solutions must accordingly address these areas (Huda, 2005). This is a complex undertaking, requiring the committed collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders. This is unlikely to happen without a rebalancing of responsibility among individuals, professional and institutional policies and services and the general community.

Violence against women, men and children is socially and economically costly (Snively, 1994; Heise, Pitanguy & Germain, 1994). It contributes to personal and social fragmentation and to debility. This debility is borne personally, in families and by the sectors with a mandate to respond, such as health professionals, police, lawyers, the courts, schools and refuges. Yet the problem of violence has been constructed as an individual problem, in the sense that it takes place between individuals and is therefore amenable to individual and private solution. While there is wide scope for research on abuse, our concern in this paper is with the refinement of discourse on domestic violence – so that responsibility is widened to include society as a whole.

A woman living with abuse is, in fact, part of a wider situation in need of remedy. We view social responsibility as a large umbrella, with the fabric consisting of community knowledge and action. The spokes comprise legislation and the review of legal procedures; the implementation of statutory responsibilities emanating from the law, such as the Domestic Violence Act 1995; public policy and family violence prevention strategies such as those embodied in the
Ministry of Social Development *Te Rito* Report (2001); and public service regulations and procedures. Other spokes, such as institutional commitment to eliminating violence, include: public health, primary care and other health professional sectors; housing policy; the field of psychology and counselling professionals; social work; religious institutions; and the criminal justice system. When all the supporting spokes are in position, the social fabric will be able do its work of safeguarding society from violence.

The concept of responsibility, here identified as community responsibility, is used to enhance awareness of a relational approach to violence, and to value a sense of obligation for each other’s well-being and safety in the public arena. Collective responsibility often has to be encouraged in a context where safety can be perceived as private and individual. Our interest in collective responsibility is an outcome of research that addresses violence against women and is linked to a wider international project to disseminate a Charter for Human Responsibility. In this project, ‘human responsibility’ has been identified as complementary to human rights, because for every right, such as a right to safety, there is a corresponding responsibility for ensuring the implementation of such entitlements (Charter for Human Responsibility, 2004). Shifting the emphasis from rights to responsibilities engages more collaborative undertakings to embed movements for social justice in communities, and in this way contributes to social cohesion and to environmentally sustainable ways of life.

**Dynamics of abuse and escape**

The argument for community responsibility is supported by illustrations from a study of Māori, Pacific Island and Pākehā women, who had become free from abuse, which was carried out in Auckland, New Zealand between 1997 and 2002 (Hand *et al*, 2002). The study drew on the stories of forty-two women. One of the major themes that emerged was a progressive and gradual movement out of abuse, that was achieved in very varied timeframes. Citations here are drawn from the stories of some of these women. All the names cited are pseudonyms. Appropriate responses from people in women's communities were profoundly significant in enabling women to be free from abuse, and the research concluded that a consistent and sustained campaign to promote community responsibility was needed.
to eliminate violence against women, to make restitution and to ensure that women and their children are reconnected to society.

Women in the study embarked on a process out of abuse, a process of accumulating insight, knowledge and information, a gathering of resources. Although the details of leaving an abusive partner varied, the process was characterised by seemingly repetitive and elastic movements away from and towards the abusive partner. Women can be observed as being in a vortex of violence but they are at the same time acquiring resources that eventually enable their release (Hand & Martin, 2005). Responses to violence can be interpreted metaphorically, as part of a complex energy system: a force inwards, that entraps and holds, and another force that pushes a woman outwards – away. The two intertwined forces create trauma and turbulence through which both in or out seem untenable and risky. Understanding this pattern as a process of experience and evaluation by women, which ultimately led to movement away from abuse, and locating responsibility for assisting women in that process with ‘communities’, provided a more complete account of the provisions required for women to move away from violence and of the dynamics of becoming free from abuse.

The power of communities to enhance safety

Community attitudes to violence were key influences on whether women were held in violent situations or shifted outward. ‘Community’ here refers to social circles and networks beyond women’s immediate family. Community includes neighbours, schools, health agencies, housing agencies, social services, WINZ, employers and colleagues. In daily life, these varied faces of community translate into encounters with people with whom women interact as part of their family and working lives. The influence of such people could be in either direction: in support of the woman’s safety or in collusion with violence. Other factors which affected women’s direction were income and housing, the way in which statutory requirements were implemented through the police and the effects of the criminal justice system – they could facilitate safety or be further hurdles in the process.

Attitudes of and actions taken by family, friends, community and professionals were pivotal in supporting women in the assessment of the danger of abuse to themselves and to children, or in implicitly condoning violence. Police, lawyers, therapists and counsellors, health
professionals and those carrying out the responsibilities of the criminal justice system all influenced women’s decisions for their own, and their children’s, safety.

If parents, siblings and friends know that a woman is being pulled back towards abuse, and that she can be assisted towards a movement outward, their response can be informed, unpressured, patient and persistent. Rather than take the common stance of ‘why doesn’t she leave?’, they are able to appreciate the to and fro and spiralling process concurrent with building her resources to act for the safety of herself and her children. Where friends and family and other closely connected people work on the ‘cycle’ principle, they are working with a false ideology of women’s implication in repetitive abuse, and are in ignorance of the psychological damage that accompanies abuse and of the accumulation of resolve and knowledge needed for women to reach safety (Hand et al, 2002).

It was the sensitivity of a friend at work who approached Larissa, and suggested she seek safety at a refuge, that helped her act in hope of change.

She approached me and said ‘Look, things aren’t right.’ I hadn’t told anyone, but she picked it up. And she took me to the women’s refuge that day. I had to tell my boss at work. She was stunned....So I went to a refuge and they sent me along to a lawyer. So I lodged a protection order. And my boss at work offered for me to go to her place to stay. So I packed up what I needed for the baby and myself....I thought, you know, this protection order is going to wake him up, and just turn everything around and it’s got to stop. It’s my only way, it is my cry for help.

Larissa’s husband pleaded with her to return, with promises to ‘work this stuff out’, until he prevailed, but as soon as she returned he went ‘crazy’ at her again, pressuring her to remove the protection orders. He caused a commotion with shouting and when she tried to leave he dragged her back into the house and forced his hand into her mouth to stop her talking. Neighbours rang the police.

For Larissa, being approached by a friend, and being believed by her colleagues, functioned like a pin at the base of a fan enabling the ribs to open and the fabric of support to appear. Support and practical intervention were pivotal for her, opening the way to informal services as well as formal services such as support groups and counsellors, refuges, police, lawyers, doctors and WINZ.
Another woman, Holly, would have been better assisted out of abuse if her family had been supportive, if she had stayed in her home, if she had received medical and psychological help and if her children and been assured of safety. Instead she was forced out of the house and was subjected to further trauma from ongoing court processes and custody disputes, and was at risk from further attacks from a man who was still free in the community. The irony of the family’s increasing poverty, while both she and her husband were receiving State income support, was not lost on this woman who was trained as an accountant. In addition she noted the lack of information and co-ordination of help from services:

There’s not one person you can go to and say ‘What are my options, what can I do?’ … You just need help at this stage. But there isn’t anything. There’s so many things I didn’t realise that I was entitled to … I had to wait three weeks. Um, they said it is just tough.

She received some ACC counselling and help from a school public health nurse, and saw her personal doctor frequently. She described her friends as ‘really nice’ and ‘like a family’. Her mother and her sister were not emotionally supportive and offered no practical help when she was ill and in the process of separation. She said, ‘My mother thinks I made my bed and I should lie in it. My sister lives in a white house with a white picket fence and…she doesn’t understand’.

The sympathy expressed by her family and some individuals for her husband, and his ability to use the courts and counselling services in contrast with her negative experiences with services such as the bank and the real estate agent, reinforced her feeling that ‘it’s a man’s world’. She said, ‘That is so unfair. They look at him as though he is a good guy’.

Holly’s experience demonstrated a mixture of well-exercised community and statutory responsibility, along with failures in support from her community, as well as from her mother and sister, and from some professionals such as the psychologist. There was also a failure of coherence. She was subjected to protracted and aggressive legal processes by her husband and had to leave her house after separation, in contrast with the sympathetic treatment and minimal censure her husband received regarding his violence. Having to leave her home and stop work were both traumas, acting as mechanisms of isolation
and degradation. In a situation of clear community and institutional strategies for safety, these burdens could be avoided.

The significance of communities for safety
Many women described Court processes after separation which protracted their trauma. Ruth, a resourceful, articulate woman who had separated to become free from abuse, was still entangled in her husband’s unrelenting Court processes to change custody agreements.

I’m not helpless and I try and get myself sorted out but it seems like you go one step forward and then two steps back sometimes. You just get something sorted out and then another whopping great bill comes in or something breaks down or something happens ...

The stories of Ruth and Holly illustrate how isolation and disconnection from communities are likely experiences for a woman in the murky processes that require her to keep evaluating her situation, and can drive her into an abyss of inward psychological and emotional disturbance and disassociation (Kirkwood, 1993; Herman, 2001). Isolation acts as a barrier to the information-gathering process necessary to free women from abuse. If left to themselves, women and children are at risk of extended damage from an abusive man.

Breaking the ties in women’s relational life is a strategy to cut women off from support and draw them into the world-view of the violent man: ‘The more frightened a woman is the more she is tempted to cling to the one relationship that is permitted, the relationship with the perpetrator’ (Herman, 2001: 81). Unhealthy identification with a man and psychological withdrawal are symptoms which may be hard to identify, though they are more likely to be recognised by those who know a woman personally. Because of her isolation from the wider community, it is likely that a woman will speak about violence to her family or friends first. Family and friends, therefore, are key contacts for information and feedback that can lead to decisions to bring safety. Liz Kelly (1996) and Judith Herman (2001) both emphasise this aspect of abuse, and illustrate the effects on women where ‘the creation of isolation is a deliberate strategy, intended to separate the woman or child being abused from information, advice and emotional support’ (Kelly, 1996: 79).
Given the strategies of isolation common to abusers, family, friends and community contacts have key responsibilities, both directly and indirectly, to bring women into contact with agencies with formal or statutory responsibilities. Information on help and safety measures is a key to unlocking the doors that lead to safety. Appreciation of the likely effect of isolation is imperative in any strategies for the prevention of and intervention in violence against women. Correspondingly, knowledge of the vital role and responsibility of people in every layer of women’s communities – from family and neighbours to formal agencies – is equally important.

Reconnection with community: Freeing women and society from abuse
Reconnection with community and building healthy relationships is a bridge to restorative measures. Kelly (1996) and Herman (2001) approach rebuilding community generically, in a context of patriarchal violence. However community connection is to be understood as culturally specific, with corresponding language to link women with cultural discourses. The ways to friendships and services needs to be carefully thought through with suggestions that are sensitive to the context of the woman. The Free from Abuse study highlighted that for women of indigenous cultures, community may be primarily formed from genealogical ties, and extended family relationships and responsibilities, which may be damaged by an abusive relationship. A major theme in the Māori research was enabling women to rebuild their lives through reconnection with whakapapa or genealogically-based relationships (Rauwhero, in Hand et al, 2002). Correspondingly, in contemplating separation, women from more collectively-oriented cultures may face not only leaving a man, but leaving their primary networks with extended family.

Every point of contact for a woman who is abused is a potential opportunity either to enhance safety or sanction the use of violence. Knowledge of the ways in which entrapment works is vital information for coming out of the vortex of abuse. People in everyday social settings can effect movement by enlarging the scope of resources for safety. Barbara’s friend took her to refuge. Puriri’s Dad took her to Social Welfare. Puataua’s Dad took her to a lawyer. A receptionist at an anger management agency gave Suzy practical advice. These experiences demonstrate that assistance came from encounters in
women’s everyday communities – from people who responded with care and responsibility, formed an interface between the confusion of abuse and the sanity of freedom and provided pathways to safety through contact with agencies or professionals. Informed individuals are threads in the fabric of communities which, in turn, weave the larger institutional systems of society as a whole.

**Conclusion**

A wide, ecological, co-ordinated approach is imperative to support women in living without abuse. There are numerous ways to assist women and these opportunities need to be grasped wherever they arise, so that ‘attempts to create meaningful change for individuals and broader social change need to embrace all the locations in which toleration persists and where the potential for resistance exists’ (Kelly, 1996: 69).

The forces which hold women back can be the same forces which, when intensified over time, empower women to leave, or flee. So a process of being held in and pivoted out must be taken into account when supporting women. In addition, spreading knowledge of the dynamics of violence widely in the community, and directing action at perpetrators of violence, will improve women’s capacity to interpret their situation in a proactive and woman-affirming light.

The Free From Abuse study similarly found the key mechanisms identified by Kelly (1996), Heise et al (1992) and Mullender (1996) which draw women back into abuse:

- Psychological, emotional and physical injury
- Negative attitudes of family and friends
- Isolation and damage to relational life
- Systems tolerant of and minimizing abuse
- Fear of further danger
- Financial considerations.

Systems and support which enhance community responsibility for safety include:

- Wide understanding of dynamics of abuse
- Sanctions directed at perpetrators of violence
- Safety outweighing financial barriers and housing uncertainties
- Well-being of children
• Public agencies and systems committed to elimination of violence against women and the implementation of effective policies
• Informed community support
• Building supportive community relationships
• Cultural integrity in services
• Appreciation of entrapment and women’s processes
• Public information and education
• Symbolic as well as material enhancement of the rights to life and safety of women and children.

We need to ensure the provision of education programmes that go hand in hand with public health and social policy strategies, to restrain and minimise subjection to abuse. The shift towards community responsibility is necessary, to lift the burden of responsibility from individual women. Actions through a whole-of-government approach, local and regional authorities, NGOs, communities and individuals, professional organisations and government agencies need to be orchestrated as a fully-engaged strategy to free society from the costly effects of violence. Just as communities bear the weight of violence (Snively, 1994), they need to build the capacity to counteract the fragmentation that is an outcome of violence.

The framework of responsibility links in with local and international initiatives for social and environmental health. This shift from rights to responsibilities has the potential to engage collaboration aimed at ensuring that knowledge and social justice are embedded in communities and contribute to social cohesion. The shift towards community responsibility is a strategy of rebalancing, so that both women and men can flourish.

Jennifer Hand (PhD) and Betsan Martin (PhD) worked together on a four-year study of the supports and hindrances to women becoming free from abuse. This study developed a premise of cultural integrity in research, working through cultural issues in research that arose in the project which consisted of a larger general stream and Māori and Pacific Islands streams. In New Zealand a methodology has been developed in which Māori, Pacific Islands and ‘general/western’ researchers work from cultural frameworks and with participants from corresponding cultures where possible. Along with respect for different
cultural world-views, the feminist analysis was the methodology for analysis of data.

Alongside her position with Auckland Regional Public Health, Jennifer teaches in the School of Population Health at the University of Auckland. She has a special interest in health promotion and social policy, and engages in a wide range of research and advisory fields, including evaluation and social impact assessment. At present she is contributing to a research project on gambling in the Tongan community in Auckland.

Betsan held a Claude McCarthy Fellowship in ‘Building Ethical Relations with Indigenous Communities’. She has an enduring pleasure in philosophy, and facilitates adult and community education courses – in particular on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and ecological education. As a member of an international committee for a Charter for Human Responsibility, Betsan is co-ordinating initiatives in New Zealand, the Pacific and Australia.

References
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