

# Still a Movement After All These Years?

## Current Tensions in the Domestic Violence Movement

Amy Lehrner

Nicole E. Allen

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

The domestic violence movement began as a social change movement with dual goals of social change and service provision. Despite concerns about a devolution of the movement into apolitical service provision, few studies have investigated the current status of the movement as a social change movement. Through interviews with advocates, the current study explores the degree to which domestic violence work can still be characterized as a social change movement, illuminates some central tensions within the movement, and lays a foundation for debate among those responding to domestic violence. This research also highlights movement leaders' visions for a reenergized movement.

**Keywords:** *battered women's movement; domestic violence movement; social change movement*

[We] need a revolution . . . in this movement. I think that we are not giving ourselves the opportunity to change the way we did things years ago, because we gotta do it different—we are looking at different times. . . . And when, 20 years from now, when somebody writes the history, they'll say, "Oh, those people just let it happen," you know, "'cuz they were not more revolutionary and step out there and did something about it."

*Domestic violence advocate*

The domestic violence movement emerged in the United States during the early 1970s in the context of the civil rights, antiwar, Black liberation, and feminist movements. Suddenly the previously invisible phenomenon of "woman battering" was identified as a social problem (e.g., Del Martin's [1976] groundbreaking

---

**Authors' Note:** The authors would like to thank Julian Rappaport, Peggy Miller, and Cris Sullivan for comments on an earlier draft of this article and the advocates who generously participated in this study. This study was supported in part by a Feminist Scholarship Award from the Gender and Women's Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

*Battered Wives*), and women around the country mobilized to address what was reconceptualized from a private and infrequent problem into a social and pervasive one (e.g., Davis, 1987; Tierney, 1982). Feminist activists generated an analysis of violence against women as a political and social, as well as personal, phenomenon (Bograd, 1988; Schechter, 1982). This sociopolitical analysis of domestic violence motivated dual goals for the nascent social change movement: the pursuit of fundamental social change and the creation of shelter and services to provide immediate safety for victims (Riger, 1984; Schechter, 1982). By the mid-1970s, hundreds of local programs had opened across the country while state and national coalitions rapidly formed (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Schechter, 1982).

In the roughly 30 years since, the domestic violence movement has seen massive shifts in policy, funding, and scope of services (e.g., the passing of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994; also see Fagan, 1990; Shepard, 2005). Considered one of the successes of the women's movement, domestic violence services are funded in every state, and state and federal laws have criminalized domestic violence and made a range of remedies available to victims. However, activists and researchers have long voiced concerns about co-opting forces leading to a shift away from founding goals of widespread social change toward a more constrained, less political emphasis on social service provision (e.g., Davis, 1987; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Schechter, 1982; Tierney, 1982; Walker, 1990). These forces, ironically, are often the very indicators of movement success: government funding, the growth of service provision, widespread collaboration, inclusion in policy arenas. Although a literature on domestic violence has emerged since the origin of the movement, research generally focuses either on victims and/or perpetrators or on evaluations of programs and policies related to domestic violence. Few recent studies have investigated the movement *as* a social change movement (for exceptions, see Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Hammons, 2004; Walker, 1990).

An analysis of the current status of the battered women's movement is warranted for a number of reasons. First, the ongoing vibrancy (indeed, existence) of the domestic violence movement has important consequences for the nature and goals of domestic violence work. By definition, a social change movement aims to effect widespread social change through institutional reform and/or fundamental cultural changes. If the movement is in fact foundering, one likely outcome is a reduction in social change efforts targeting the theorized social and cultural foundations of domestic violence. In addition, movement-based victim services are informed by a sociopolitical analysis of violence against women that led to services emphasizing choice, empowerment, peer support, and advocacy. In the absence of a movement analysis, victim services risk devolving into hierarchical and pathologizing interventions (Sullivan, 2006). Second, although some literature points to the tendency of social change movements toward conservatism (Staggenborg, 1991; Tierney, 1982) and of alternative settings toward the status quo (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000; Wharton, 1987), a close analysis of the ways those shifts occur can shed light on the nuances

of these processes. Third, in the absence of systematic self-assessment, the movement risks evolving in reactive and undirected ways. An analysis of the degree to which a social change orientation continues to exist within domestic violence agencies can help identify unintended consequences of movement actions and illuminate threats to movement vitality. Finally, this research gives voice to movement veterans and leaders, many approaching retirement, by engaging in discussion about the possibilities for new and innovative directions for a reenergized domestic violence movement.

## **Current Study**

The current study engages in a systematic examination of the status of the movement as it enters its fourth decade. Much recent social movement research has taken the existence of a movement as a given and investigated dynamics or processes of movement functioning. In this case, the status of the movement itself is at issue. There are a number of potential approaches to assessing the existence and strength of a social change movement (e.g., Campbell, Baker, and Mazurek [1998] attempt to measure the social change activities of rape crisis organizations). The current study focuses on assessing the movement through in-depth interviews with advocates working for domestic violence policy and direct service organizations. As those presumably most identified with the movement (and expected to represent its position in the community and collaborations), domestic violence advocates were approached as knowledgeable and self-reflective informants. Specifically, this analysis focuses on three critical issues: (a) advocates' reflections on the state of the domestic violence movement, (b) challenges and dilemmas facing the movement, and (c) advocates' visions for the future. By exploring these issues, the current study attempts to evaluate the degree to which domestic violence work can still be characterized as a social change movement, illuminate some central tensions within the movement, and lay a foundation for debate among those responding to domestic violence.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

In 2005, 21 women employed by 16 domestic violence advocacy or service agencies across a large Midwestern state were interviewed (in some cases 2 staff members from the same agency participated). Although others may consider themselves part of the domestic violence movement (e.g., volunteers, formerly battered women, donors), domestic violence agencies are considered the backbone of the movement, and as such their staff are uniquely positioned to reflect on tensions and dilemmas facing

the movement. Participants were recruited through an e-mail sent from the statewide coalition of domestic violence service providers to all member agencies and through purposive sampling of key leaders in the state. Using a process of theoretical sampling, participants were chosen with the goal of identifying the broadest range of perspectives on the movement and their work rather than for statistical generalizability (Eisenhardt, 2002). Participants were thus selected to reflect diversity of region, agency type (shelter based and walk-in, service or policy oriented), job type, and tenure. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), at which point no new information related to the current study was being generated.

Study participants ranged in age from 22 to 64 years old, with a median age of 51. In all, 18 identified themselves as White (including some who are European immigrants), 1 as African American, 1 as Latina, and 1 as Native American. Their length of time working in domestic violence ranged from 2 months to 30 years, with a median of 13 years. The majority (13) worked for shelter-based agencies, 6 worked in nonresidential services, and 2 worked for policy or advocacy agencies. Positions included program coordinator, legal advocate, intake specialist, child advocate, counseling and advocacy, and executive director.

## Procedures and Measures

All participants were interviewed in person using a semistructured protocol at a location of their choice. Interviews were audiotaped with permission and transcribed verbatim. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours and from 11 to 74 pages of transcript.

A semistructured interview protocol was developed to generate discussion about the current status of the domestic violence movement, challenges and tensions within the movement, and advocates' visions for the future of the movement. Questions were framed in terms of "domestic violence work" to avoid priming participants toward a movement orientation. Among other things, questions asked participants about the "larger goals of domestic violence work," whether they think "promoting social change is an important aspect of domestic violence work," if they feel "like a part of a larger domestic violence movement," what is "the best way to end domestic violence," and to what extent they "think of this work more as a professional field of domestic violence services or as part of a domestic violence movement."

The interviews were designed to be flexibly structured and open ended. As themes emerged, questions or clarifications were added to subsequent interviews in an iterative process (Eisenhardt, 2002). For example, given participants' status as advocates within domestic violence agencies, some degree of familiarity with the domestic violence movement was initially assumed. However, as it became clear that many participants did not understand questions about the movement and the importance of social change, additional questions were added asking first whether

they had ever *heard* of the movement. On the other hand, many participants brought a rich history of movement experience, and the interview process invited them to reflect on movement changes and challenges. Furthermore, the interviewer (the first author) frequently shared emergent themes with participants to solicit their thoughts and analyses of these themes, which led to a refinement of research questions and contributed to analysis of the data.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted and analyzed by the first author. Both authors have conducted research on violence against women and have experience in domestic violence work. Transcripts were reviewed in their entirety with close attention to the overall knowledge and awareness of movement history and analysis conveyed throughout the interview. In particular, attention was paid to silences or miscommunication within the interview, as when participants stated they did not know or have an opinion on a question or when the answer indicated a different interpretation of the question than the one intended (Briggs, 1986). Extensive notes were generated for each transcript, identifying key themes and issues and raising questions to be pursued across transcripts.

To understand participants' responses and to contextualize their analysis of the movement, each interview was approached as a holistic text rather than coded thematically by abstracting text from the interviews (Briggs, 1986; Johnson, 1995). Statements or fragments of dialogue were thus analyzed within the larger interview context to preserve the meaning of the data. The final analysis involved multiple reviews of the data in their entirety and resultant characterizations of the different narratives present in participants' interviews. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, the purposive sampling of advocates, and the iterative process used to alter the interview protocol and investigate emergent narratives, analysis focused on identifying and analyzing the issues raised by advocates rather than estimating the prevalence of advocates who reflect these perspectives.

## Results

Study findings illuminate a range of challenges facing the domestic violence movement as well as approaches to addressing these challenges. First, discussions of the status of the movement with advocates revealed that some advocates were simply unaware of the history or existence of the domestic violence movement, conceptualizing their work and identities exclusively in terms of social service provision. Second, these interviews suggested that as the movement has evolved, its successes have paradoxically posed new challenges for its continuing vitality as a social change movement. For example, participants repeatedly indicated that the

expansion of victim services and increased funding base has had profound consequences for the movement, (re)shaping philosophy, promoting professionalization, and potentially curtailing larger social change efforts. These interviews also pointed to the ongoing struggle to address issues of racism, which affect movement membership, service provision, and the movement's social change agenda. Finally, in the face of these challenges, advocates (particularly movement veterans) offered their visions for a reenergized, innovative domestic violence movement.

### **Advocates' Reflections on the State of the Movement: Still a Social Change Movement?**

Participants reflected a range of perspectives on the history and current status of the domestic violence movement. For some the movement had lost its centrality, for others it was still a vital orientation, and for others there was no knowledge of domestic violence work as part of a movement at all. Related to this, participants varied in the degree to which they identified and endorsed a social change agenda as a goal of the domestic violence movement.

Some participants sounded a mournful tone when reflecting on the movement. One advocate said, "I think [the movement] is a shell of what it used to be. . . . I think the movement has lost a lot of its energy and its passion because it has lost some of its vision." In general, these advocates were more experienced and were knowledgeable about movement history. Their comments evoke a deflated movement, lacking urgency and fervor that has become unmoored from initial visions of a changed society. One movement veteran observed that to the extent that a movement still exists, it lives on in individuals rather than in domestic violence institutions:

I do think there are some individuals in the work that do still continue to relate to it as a movement. And, but I think . . . there's not a real good place for them to come together anymore, which is really sad . . . it's bubbling up but only, but it's more lodged in the individual than lodged in the organization.

Others agreed that the movement has changed but were more sanguine about the changes. A long-time advocate believed that the movement lives on, but noted, "I think that the movement has changed a lot over the years and . . . 25 years ago . . . [it] had to be much more of an activist movement." She attributed the changes in the movement in large part to its many successes, pointing to strong laws, increased services, and improved law enforcement: "We've come an awful long way and so there isn't the same . . . actions and passions. I think people still have passion but . . . it's a different movement now." However, regardless of their feelings about the current state of the movement, advocates who endorsed a movement analysis all voiced a continuing need for fundamental social change. Those identifying with a movement analysis were mostly (but not exclusively) movement founders and veterans.

An unexpected finding was a set of participants who had not heard of the domestic violence movement, did not understand questions about social change goals, and framed the goals of domestic violence work exclusively in service-oriented terms. Initial interview questions designed to elicit reflections by advocates about the continued relevance of the movement and their identification with it were changed in response to repeated participant confusion to ask whether the participant had ever *heard* of the domestic violence movement. This question elicited negative responses from a number of advocates, who responded, for example, “No, mm mm,” “No,” “A little but not a lot . . . not so much—no, no.” In the face of these replies, the study shifted in focus from engaging with advocates about their thoughts on the state of the movement to mapping the degree to which advocates were even aware of their location within work that emerged out of a grassroots social change movement.

A few participants had heard the phrase “domestic violence movement,” but their responses indicated confusion about its referent. One young advocate who enthusiastically identified as a feminist had heard of the domestic violence movement but had difficulty describing it: “Something that is mobile, um, that is growing, um, everyday . . . something that that is growing, um, and getting larger.” In fact, the advocate had understood the word *movement* literally and thought *domestic violence movement* refers to the dynamic and expanding nature of the work.

Related to this, a number of advocates did not understand questions about social change:

[Interviewer: So do you think that domestic violence services should be involved in social change efforts?] [pause] Could you explain that? [Do you think that there’s a need to make changes in the society in general—as part of what domestic violence agencies are trying to accomplish? Do you think that that’s an important part of the mission?] To make a change in society as far as what?

This advocate was clearly unfamiliar with the movement analysis of domestic violence as a social problem with roots in cultural and structural factors. She defined her work as “work with victims that have been battered by family members, spouse, child.” Another advocate framed the goals of domestic violence work in terms of raising awareness among women about domestic violence “so they can prevent it.” This is a depoliticized, degendered phenomenon that does not distinguish relationship violence from other types of violence or abuse within the family and is conceptualized entirely at the level of the individual. With no sociopolitical analysis of domestic violence, she had no need for a political agenda that includes fundamental cultural change.

With no foundation in the history of the movement or its analysis, participants framed the work and goals of domestic violence agencies in terms of service provision (for an account of a parallel phenomenon among rape crisis advocates, see Fried, 1994). A number of advocates framed goals exclusively in service terms,



whereas a few others also included raising awareness in the community. For example, when asked to describe the “larger goals of domestic violence work,” one participant stated, “Keep everybody safe. That’s our main priority, confidentiality of course . . . confidentiality and keeping ’em safe is our major one.” Another advocate responded, “Getting people to accept that they are victims. That they didn’t provoke it, that they didn’t ask for it.” In some cases these participants suggested that the ultimate goal is to change the victims to end domestic violence. A representative example described the “larger goals” of the work as follows:

To make women aware of what domestic violence is, to give them independence and power to take control of their own lives . . . not only women but just victims period. Make them aware of the definition . . . so they can prevent it, because a lot of times it is . . . a cycle. And I think that you know once you’re aware, you can break it.

This conceptualization of the work is a far cry from the movement argument that “battered women’s lack of empowerment is *not* due to low self-esteem or masochistic tendencies. It is due primarily to interpersonal and social conditions. Therefore a major component of empowerment includes modifying structural conditions to redistribute power and resources” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 28).

Related to this, participants were asked to “characterize the state of domestic violence work” in their home state. In response to questions about “pressing challenges” and successful accomplishments in their state, many participants spoke of the difficulties (or successes) in getting women to leave their abusers permanently or reducing the number of times they return. This focus on whether women leave their abusers (and on the psychological factors influencing this decision) is indicative of a lack of understanding about the movement’s mission to maximize women’s options and choices (rather than proscribing them) in addition to an exclusive focus on an individual-level solution (expected of the *victim* rather than the abuser). Advocates returned again and again to issues of individual service provision as the entire vision of the work.

Some advocates were familiar with the history and terminology of the movement but sought to distance themselves and their work from it. These advocates had a negative association with what they understood to be the activism and overtly feminist character of the early domestic violence movement. In this sample, they were generally rural or younger advocates. One rural participant acknowledged that she has heard of the movement “at workshops and meetings and things, but not locally of course.” The “of course” here suggests that there is no question of identifying domestic violence work as political for this participant and for this rural community. Her interview was characterized by a passionate commitment to helping women and serving her community. For advocates such as this, domestic violence work involves providing quality services to women and children but does not extend to a social critique or efforts at social change.



Finally, a younger advocate was familiar with the movement but hostile to it. She argued that the movement's history needs to be left behind. From her perspective the overtly political nature of the movement alienates the community and misframes the issue by focusing on gender, which "perpetuates stereotypes" and ignores male victims. She argued,

I wouldn't say like it's like a movement 'cuz I feel like a movement is like feminism or civil rights. It's like an uprising, an outrage you know? [And that's not fitting for you?] No, and I think, I'm part of a group that recognizes the seriousness of domestic violence, that recognizes the consequences of it. . . . Um but it's not an uprising, you know.

In her analysis, domestic violence has come into the mainstream and should be treated like any other social problem requiring social services. She compared herself to the "ones who've been around for a long time" who take a "hardcore perspective": "They still wanna like, you know, 'I'm woman hear me roar' instead of like, 'We're a healthy society, let's raise good kids.'" The reasonable position refocuses the analysis of domestic violence onto a politically neutral path where the issue is one of health (vs., presumably, pathology) and good parenting skills. Although this advocate was extreme in her rejection of the movement as such, her repudiation of a political analysis and her reframing of domestic violence as an individual problem requiring professional services were not unique. In fact, an individualized, pathologized analysis was found across many transcripts (these findings are reported elsewhere; Lehrner & Allen, 2008).

Across participants, many enthusiastically framed domestic violence as a "social problem," leading to an initial impression of a social change orientation. However, this language, promoted by the movement to contrast with popular conceptions of domestic violence as a private, personal problem was frequently used instead to convey a much less politicized analysis of the problem. Participants labeled domestic violence a "social problem" to convey its prevalence in society and the widespread effect it has in the workplace, health care, and other settings. This is a *description* of the violence (i.e., it is a prevalent problem in society) rather than an *analysis* of the causes of the violence (i.e., that it is socially constituted). For example, an advocate agreed that domestic violence work should be embedded in a social change movement ("absolutely") because "you know, everyone knows somebody if it doesn't affect them." In other words, domestic violence is a social problem because it affects all members of society, if not directly as victims then as friends or family. Another advocate responded similarly and continued by pointing out the economic costs of domestic violence such as social programs, absenteeism, insurance, and other social costs such as interrupted schooling of children. In this formulation, domestic violence is a social problem because it has deleterious social and financial costs; in other words, it is a problem for society. These descriptions of how domestic

violence is a “social problem” miss the point of the movement insight that domestic violence is a problem resulting from social structures, values, and norms; it is a “social problem” in that it is socially generated and requires a social-level solution. Without this understanding of the social nature of the problem, there was no felt need for a social change movement to end the violence.

## Challenges and Dilemmas Facing the Movement

These interviews pointed both explicitly and implicitly to a number of challenges and dilemmas for the domestic violence movement. On one hand, changes in the movement have led to tremendous growth in the provision of victim services and the availability of critical support and resources for women and children unimagined 30 years ago. On the other hand, the growth and development of movement agencies have also come with a cost. In multiple ways, participants’ interviews reflected the waning of a social change orientation in favor of an increasingly “professionalized,” therapeutically oriented social service agenda. This shifting orientation was facilitated by misappropriations of movement language initially intended to convey the need for a social change agenda. Finally, participants observed the ongoing challenge of addressing issues of race, which continues to challenge the vitality of the movement.

*Funding and collaboration: Beware what you wish for.* Movement veterans noted that the tremendous expansion of services has resulted from the availability of new sources of funding, which fueled growth but brings its own set of challenges. As activists and scholars have observed, the impact of funding on the movement often functions to expand service provision at the expense of pursuing other social change solutions as well as to soften and modify movement rhetoric (and ultimately, analysis; Reinelt, 1994; Schechter, 1982; Wharton, 1987). In particular, participants spoke about the threat of co-optation raised by accepting funding from and engaging in collaborations with powerful systems:

And particularly as you get larger, how do you get co-opted, and when you get money do you get co-opted, or if you finally get the judge to listen to you, how do you then tell the judge when what they’re doing is not appropriate?

Another movement veteran observed,

When the visionaries were articulating . . . the vision, we didn’t have any money, nobody had any money . . . when the government finally said, okay, you know, the feds, the state, the city, will dedicate “x” number of dollars to shelter services, transportation, prosecution, police protocols, hospital emergency room stuff, then there was a mad scramble who’s gonna’ get the contracts. . . . And you don’t bite the hand that feeds

you. If the state's attorney is signing your paycheck, you're not gonna' stand up in a public meeting and say that prosecutors are failing to do their job.

As a result of movement agencies' dependence on public dollars and of the opportunity to collaborate with powerful system stakeholders, movement veterans argued that leaders and agencies have begun to "pull their punches" to remain viable. Although movement agencies need government funding to survive, some argued that survival has come at a cost to the movement's social change agenda. One participant described the influx of money as "a real detriment, I think, to movement work."

Participants also worried about the risks of co-optation created by collaborating with large and powerful systems. After fighting for years to be invited into policy arenas that affect battered women, advocates are often unwittingly co-opted by the very systems the movement aimed to change. This process was described by one veteran as the rise of "systems work":

We just focus on service, professionalization of services . . . it moves them out of movement work and into systems work. [Systems work?] Lock, stock, and barrel. . . . [So by systems work, tell me what you mean.] I mean a part of a coordinated system. Very cog in this wheel of services. And they're no longer external . . . [gives example of the development of a dedicated domestic violence court]. I mean, it was a *huge* battle, I mean scars are still prevalent. . . . And over time they [referring to domestic violence advocates] have just become a part of that system. And I think it's because they have considered them a part of the service network and not as on-the-scene . . . observers toward an accountability agenda. They lost that whole aspect of their work. It's hard to sustain that, when you don't have a context like we're talking about.

Thus, after fighting to gain entry into systems that affect battered women and their children to advocate on their behalf and to monitor those systems, a creeping professionalization and the absence of a grounding in movement philosophy have led to advocates' incorporation *into* those systems as uncritical members.

*The expansion of victim services.* Participants also observed that the increasing emphasis on direct services within domestic violence agencies has led to a number of dilemmas. The expansion of direct services necessitates more staff hired specifically to provide individual-level services as well as an increased need for bureaucratic structures to manage larger staff. Participants spoke of an increasing emphasis on "professionalization" within domestic violence agencies to ensure quality and consistency of services and credibility in the community and with funders. One result is the hiring of staff with mental health or business administration training and credentials. Although some wholeheartedly embraced "professionalization" and therapeutic services, others voiced concern about the consequences for both service provision and other movement activities.

This tension created by the need for bureaucracy and professionalization in large, multiservice agencies on one hand and movement values of egalitarianism and peer-based, nonprofessional support and advocacy on the other (Riger, 1984; Sullivan, 2006) was expressed by one executive director who struggled to reconcile her thoughts and feelings. Early in the interview she described the movement as having moved away from a grassroots model in favor of more structured organizations (“I’m not saying [it] is even a bad thing”) but then shifted to voicing concern about a loss of movement philosophy among newer advocates. As the conversation continued, she recognized an internal conflict that she ultimately did not know how to reconcile:

Probably there’s a little bit of what I’m talking against in me. ‘Cuz I know that we have had staff that you know were very, very . . . [wanting] to go back to the early days of the movement . . . and, you know, we should be making decisions on a consensual basis and we should not be hierarchal and we should, you know. And you know it makes me want to scream ‘cuz it’s like, “Go live in a commune!” This is an organization, it’s well established, we have to have procedures, we have to have policies, and like—well, will you listen to what I’m saying now? I’m talking about it’s not a movement because we are organized and established and hierarchical, and we need to be in order to get the funding and respond to funders, and you know what I’m saying? And, and so I’m talking out of both sides of my mouth right now. It is a dilemma.

This participant worried about a loss of movement ideology at the same time that she knew “you can’t operate on philosophy and dreams.” Many movement veterans commented on the critical necessity of maintaining a movement agenda and philosophy while at the same time running sophisticated, professional service organizations.

The expansion of direct services has also created a vulnerability in movement agencies to the pervasive influence of what Dobash and Dobash (1992) characterized as the therapeutic approach to social problems endemic in U.S. culture. One movement veteran observed,

In this country we have this thing that kind of goes from activism and kind of morphs into social services and then gets tied back into, “well, it’s that individual’s problem,” as opposed to being a larger issue. . . . And so I think one of the challenges is . . . how do you get co-opted?

Given the strong cultural pull toward an individual level of analysis, it becomes difficult to maintain a macro-level movement analysis of the problem in the face of concrete pressures to intervene (and thus conceptualize) at the individual level. As resources are directed toward individual services for victims, a myopic analysis of the issue as “that individual’s problem” becomes possible, with the potential result an exclusive focus on therapeutic interventions.

Another movement veteran worried that the increased hiring of managers who are not movement-based is contributing to this shift away from an empowerment model

in favor of a traditional service model. She suggested that this research project ought to “take a look at that. What is people’s background? Do they have a social justice background? Do they think this is a movement or are they classically trained as managers?” Although she prioritized direct services for women and children, she argued that a movement analysis of domestic violence is critical to the type and quality of services provided. She worried that “professionalization” entails patronizing, pathologizing services rather than the empowerment, choice-based service philosophy espoused by the movement (for an excellent discussion, see Sullivan, 2006).

*“A White woman’s movement.”* A final tension in the movement emerges from the history of the domestic violence movement as a White women’s movement, which led to exclusive practices and narrow analyses that some argue have never been resolved and continue to fester (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Donnelly, Cook, van Ausdale, & Foley, 2005; Richie, 2000). One advocate of color reflected on the backlash against feminism as partly because of its history of racism: “You know it’s always been a White women’s movement.” One of the consequences of the history of exclusion in the movement is an enduring lack of trust in communities of color, which continues to influence recruiting and hiring as well as outreach to victims. This advocate noted that many agencies have now “got such a reputation, for a long time that [it] was a White institution that it is kinda hard to get people [of color] involved, you know.”

In addition to limiting membership, advocates noted that the movement’s development out of second-wave feminist theory and activism meant that the problems and limitations of that work and analysis were carried into domestic violence work. One participant reflected,

This movement is at a place and should’ve been there sooner where . . . there needs to be more of a broader analysis that includes the way that racism and heterosexism and all these other forms of violence intersect. . . . That’s maybe one of the reasons why this movement hasn’t become stronger and more powerful . . . we haven’t listened to other voices enough.

This participant argued that an exclusive focus on gender has led to multiple blind spots, potentially shutting down alternative analyses and approaches to domestic violence that acknowledge what another movement veteran argues are the larger goals of the movement: “Ending oppression, [of which] violence is just one.” This argument concurs with the assessment of many anti-violence against women theorists and activists, who argue, for example, that the failure to address issues of race and class has “seriously compromised the transgressive and transformative potential of the antiviolence movement’s potentially radical critique of various forms of social domination” (Richie, 2000, p. 1135). In addition, participants suggested that the movement’s feminism has alienated communities that are excluded by or do not

identify with feminist gender politics. These issues pose a dilemma for the movement, as participants worried that an abandonment or soft peddling of a movement analysis can lead to work that quickly comes to mirror mainstream social services. On the other hand, becoming less explicitly feminist has led to more diverse hiring practices and also broader collaborations.

Regardless, despite the increasing diversity among domestic violence agency staff, participants voiced concerns about continuing racism within movement agencies. One participant noted, "I want to focus more on issues of discrimination. I think in the movement, there are a *lot* of issues of that nature, especially now that we have younger women of color coming into the movement." These ongoing difficulties have important implications for the strength of the movement. In addition to the limitations for analysis and outreach noted above, the failure to address issues of racism and other forms of exclusion leads to attenuated forms of membership and participation in the movement. Social movement theory postulates that when movement participants have identities or affinities that are felt to be in conflict, their engagement with movement agendas and goals can be compromised (Young, 1997). For women of color and White women committed to progressive and antiracist agendas, the history of exclusion in the domestic violence movement and the continued experience and perception of racism can function to limit their participation in and commitment to the movement.

### **Visions for the Future: A Reenergized Movement**

Despite these challenges, movement leaders spoke with eloquence about their visions for a reenergized and refocused movement. The crucial challenge, advocates argued, is in creating room for innovative ideas and collaborations without compromising core values and goals. Recommendations include openness to new strategies and approaches, better inclusion of communities of color, a rethinking of community engagement and collaboration, and attention to mentoring the next generation of advocates.

Innovation and collaboration, however, must be built on a foundation that includes a movement analysis of domestic violence and a clear sense of "big picture" goals. As one participant noted, this involves making important distinctions:

What are the things that I absolutely will not change, and what are the things that I'm going to be willing to change? And I don't think, I don't think we have given the next generation the tools for that analysis. It's all a big jumble. Like, "Okay, here are our core values over here, this stuff can never change, never compromise on this stuff. And these are the methodologies and ideas and strategies and you can play with this stuff."

This participant went on to argue that this kind of strategizing requires mentorship, which has been sorely lacking: "I think the supervision—mentoring, teaching—is

appalling. *Appalling*.” The disconnection of many advocates in this study with movement history and ideology provides some support for her observation. It is also notable that of those voicing a movement orientation who were *not* movement veterans, all spoke of the importance of mentoring in shaping their analysis and approach. Other participants also voiced concern about a lack of mentoring. For example, reflecting on the lack of connection to movement ideology among advocates, one participant observed, “People aren’t being trained that way, and their analysis is not being developed that way.” One consequence of the shifting leadership within domestic violence agencies is this challenge of mentoring, as another participant observed: “Administrators don’t have the context, so how can they pass it on?” When asked whether staff meetings or other opportunities exist to discuss larger issues beyond service provision, such as movement goals or priorities, many responded negatively. In response to a question about opportunities to talk about social change issues, one participant responded, “Currently I am more in the service provision. I haven’t yet graduated over to the bigger parts of things.” Yet leaders argued that advocates are hungry for this kind of engagement. One veteran observed, “What I find from younger women is they’re like sponges, they can’t get enough.”

Participants also spoke of the need to expand beyond traditional movement approaches to intervention and prevention. Although core services were held to be indispensable, participants voiced concern that for many victims the current menu of options simply does not meet their needs. As one participant noted, these include victims who want to stay with their partners and some ethnic and cultural minority women:

I do think there is a challenge though, how can we tackle the issue of domestic violence [with] that sociopolitical analysis for women who say, “I will not leave my community but I still wanna’ be safe.” For women who say, “Divorce is not an option in my faith, I—this is the father of my children, okay, can you help me be safe in that context?” And I think the answer of the women’s movement is “No, we don’t know how to do that.” . . . I don’t know . . . I mean, I—I know I’m gonna’ get old trying to figure that stuff out but I know that the answer is in the next generation of DV vision.

Another advocate argued that the future of the movement lies in its ability to develop domestic violence awareness and services within a much broader range of community and organizational systems than current efforts have done. She argued,

Victims of domestic violence aren’t turning just to police and DV providers. You need to infuse and embed our messages and our programming in multiple ways. And people in the domestic service arena are afraid of that, ’cause it’s a loss of control. But I—if asked where I think we need to go—*that’s* where we need to go.

For all these reasons—to better reach victims, to generate innovative new programs and services, and finally to expand the movement—participants identified



collaboration as critical to the future of the movement. One advocate criticized what she called a “fortress mentality” among domestic violence advocates in favor of collaboration and community work:

[The fortress mentality] being the, “we can’t tell anybody, we’re hidden, we, you know, we’re protecting these women—that’s our job, that’s it” . . . we’ve gotta drop that and get out in our community and do the community work. Form the partnerships, do the collaborations, be out there, be seen—I mean, not the victims, obviously—but be in the dialogue of what’s happening in the community.

This participant argued that safety for victims might require hiding them but that advocates who consider this the extent of their work do so at their peril. In addition to protecting victim safety, movement advocates must cultivate collaborations and openness with local communities.

Historically, this has sometimes proven difficult when the values and politics of movement activists and community members were not necessarily in alignment. However, although the challenges of increased collaboration and community engagement are threatening, these advocates argued that a failure to engage with local communities constrains both the nature of interventions with victims and the possibilities for creative new approaches to social change. Participants noted that in some cases innovative ideas and programming may emerge from ethnic and neighborhood communities with a commitment to addressing domestic violence but without a background in domestic violence services or philosophy. In the absence of engagement with domestic violence advocates, participants worried that the knowledge and analysis of the advocacy community will be lost and communities will develop unsafe interventions. Regarding the difficulty for advocates of working in diverse communities, one movement veteran argued,

I think the old warhorses continue to say, “We are the movement and they’re the interlopers.” And I’m saying, “No, it’s all the movement, it’s a very big tent.” And I think that you know, that train’s left the station, you know, and what worked 30 years ago doesn’t work anymore. And I think that there’s a tremendous fear of change. . . . I think the goal is still solid—but [fear of] new methodologies or new partners or new people has excluded some really creative, interesting stuff. . . . So that what has happened, you get all these different groups say, “Okay, well, we’re gonna develop our own thing,” and you’ve got all this stuff percolating which is sort of interesting and sort of exciting, but it’s also I think very fragmented and, you know, who carries the torch, who has the real dogma?

The dilemma posed by these advocates, then, is how to engage with communities and organizations that may have different values and understandings of the problem (e.g., churches, community development organizations, rape crisis centers). On one hand, the movement has worked hard to establish its credibility and expertise on

domestic violence, fighting to ensure that a movement analysis drives policy and practice. On the other hand, this tendency toward insularity risks the consequences advocates voiced here. Complicating matters is the challenge noted earlier of engaging in collaboration without coming to take on the agenda and perspective of one's partners at the expense of one's own.

Although many suggested a pressing need for domestic violence agencies to work in collaborations, in communities, and across social issues, some suggested that nondirect service programs—such as coalitions and advocacy groups—may be best positioned to dedicate the time and energy toward developing and implementing creative social change strategies that go beyond the individual level (e.g., community organizing, media campaigns, prevention programs). For example, one agency director commented on the multiple demands of managing a large direct service agency:

Yes we all have our responsibility to do that [lobbying and other advocacy activities], and I come to coalition meetings and I get all fired up and I think, “Yes! I’m gonna go back [home] and I’m gonna meet with my legislator and do this and . . . be more proactive too,” and then you get back and your desk is piled high . . . and you’re getting buried again and you’ve got a fundraiser in 2 weeks and three staff meetings and all of a sudden you’ve got a grant to write, three people call in sick and . . . that’s it. So thinking that local directors can carry that torch . . . is unreasonable.

The overwhelming pressures and constraints of providing services to women in crisis, in conjunction with funder-driven constraints on how grant money is spent and the increasing distance of agency management and staff from movement history and philosophy, raise questions about where and how the next generation of movement analysis and activities will emerge. Shelters, the traditional hotbed of the movement, may in fact have evolved to a point where they can no longer lead an activist agenda. Although some participants identified individuals and groups who continue to hold a movement agenda, they repeatedly observed that there is no institutional home, or alternative infrastructure, to support them.

## Discussion

This investigation into the current status of the domestic violence movement found a movement facing multiple challenges as well as new opportunities. The most serious measure of the tenuousness of the movement at the local level is the wide range of current advocates who were unable to speak explicitly to questions about the movement at all. Also concerning was the myriad of dilemmas facing the movement, including the pressures of meeting funding requirements, collaborating with a wide variety of community partners (e.g., criminal justice officials), and expanding victim services while maintaining a movement philosophy. However, in

the face of these challenges, movement veterans brought renewed vision about how to reenergize the movement and allow it to take a new form—one that does not reproduce the past but responds to current demands with new strategies.

Generally speaking, advocates were either unaware of the existence of the movement or unable to articulate its central propositions. It is difficult to conceptualize a social change movement whose putative members do not share either a collective identity as members or a collective analysis of the problem at issue. Indeed, to the extent that the formation of a collective identity is understood as a movement goal in and of itself, as Melucci (1995) argued, the absence of a meaningful collective identity across advocates can be seen as a movement failure. The disconnection of advocates from a movement identification both reflects and reinforces a number of additional challenges for the movement, including an increasingly exclusive focus on victim services, the difficulties of engaging in collaboration without co-optation, and the need to be relevant to and engaged with diverse communities without compromising core goals and values.

Ironically, in many ways it is the success of the domestic violence movement that has raised many of these dilemmas (Walker, 1990). In a chicken-and-egg fashion, there has been a dynamic feedback loop continuing to fuel changes that threaten movement coherence. Increased funding led to dramatically increased essential services to victims and families. Agency growth then led to increased needs for skilled management and quality control, resulting in the hiring of professional staff who are often not versed in movement philosophy or history. At the same time, the needs to maintain and generate new funding pressure movement agencies to adopt traditional, apolitical language to be palatable to funders and community supporters. Meanwhile, funding agencies support direct services (and some prevention work), not social change efforts, so that the service component of movement agencies has grown disproportionately. Given the demands of direct services and the expectations of funders, therapeutically trained and oriented staff are increasingly hired to provide these services. The pressures on and within agencies are all toward conventional, therapeutically oriented social service provision and away from larger social change efforts (Hammons, 2004). The end result is a potential devolution of the movement into the exclusive provision of direct services concurrent with a shifting service philosophy that conceptualizes intervention as the provision of mental health services.

The opportunities, and in some cases funder-generated requirements, to engage in collaborations are another arena where the increasing disconnect from a movement orientation has potentially problematic consequences. Since the inception of the movement, advocates have criticized the myriad social systems that affect battered women for pathologizing victims, failing to take domestic violence seriously, and too frequently compromising the safety of women and children. They have argued that those working with battered women understand their needs and should be involved in policy and practice decisions that affect victims. However, as participants in this study observed, it is difficult to engage in collaborations (often with

stakeholders who also have ties to funding) without taking on the perspective of the systems one is supposedly trying to change. Ideally, collaborations are ultimately not intended to help systems run more smoothly but to hold them accountable for their response to battered women (Shepard & Pence, 1999). Movement leaders in this study argued that when advocates are disconnected from movement philosophy, they are more likely to become co-opted in collaborative settings. They argued that the delicate dance of working collaboratively while at the same time maintaining a movement-based advocacy perspective is possible only when advocates are mentored and trained in a movement framework.

The literature on social movements supports this focus on mentoring. Recent research has begun to emphasize the importance of "micromobilization contexts," the local individual and group interactions that help shape members' identities and understandings of the phenomenon of interest (Mueller, 1992; Taylor & Whittier, 1995; Young, 1997). It has been argued that these intimate contexts, rather than the organizational context or larger national movement context, are critical to how members construct meaning. In this study, despite being located within organizations and a national movement that endorse a sociopolitical analysis of domestic violence, individual advocates were frequently unaware of or disconnected from a movement analysis. Furthermore, advocates in the same organizations often voiced quite different positions on the movement, a phenomenon also observed by Schechter (1982) in her interviews with advocates. Those advocates who did endorse a movement orientation often spoke of individual mentors and leaders in their organizations who had affected their thinking and beliefs. Advocates' relationship to movement history and analysis was shaped not by their initial training but by their daily engagement with other advocates and the practices in which they engage.

The challenges identified by advocates in this study point toward the need to build on and expand movement analysis and strategies. Few advocated a return to the early days of the movement, although some did speak with nostalgia about them. One response to the challenges of moving forward can be a siege mentality, with advocates protecting their "turf" and fighting to retain control over domestic violence services and interventions on the grounds of "owning" the only valid analysis and responses. In part, the instinct within the movement to close ranks and work from a bunker mentality comes from historically based efforts to undo status quo interventions and understandings that pathologized and threatened victims. It is also a natural outgrowth of solidarity and a shared political consciousness among movement members. Social movement theorists note that political identity communities lead to a valorization of the group's differences from outsiders, which reinforces solidarity as well as isolation (Taylor & Whittier, 1995). On one hand, then, the lack of identification with (and awareness of) the movement among advocates leads to a breakdown in vision, goals, and strategies, ultimately undermining the movement's coherence. On the other hand, a tightly held identification with the movement can lead to rigid separations between movement members and the rest of the community

and an inflexible ideological position that does not allow for new ideas and approaches.

Movement veterans argued that the other possibility, more frightening but also more promising, is to reach out and open up—to communities, coalitions, and systems that all have a stake in ending domestic violence. This will require vision and courage as well as a new generation of advocates with the mentoring and teaching needed to move forward out of a grounding in movement philosophy and goals. In some places, these efforts are already underway.<sup>1</sup> Closely observed case studies might investigate the processes and outcomes of these innovative efforts to develop new interventions and new partnerships to address domestic violence. If the domestic violence movement is to remain a movement for social change rather than simply devolving into another “tier of the social service industry,” it will require new strategies, partners, and ideas—without compromising on its core values.

Study findings support social movement theory that posits a trajectory of increasing conservatism within social change movements as they focus on maintaining institutions and resources (e.g., Cherniss & Deegan, 2000; Hammons, 2004; Tierney, 1982; Wharton, 1987). However, the domestic violence movement has always had a service delivery component rather than an exclusive agenda of cultural change. In this case, the dilemmas raised by service delivery are not solely distractions from movement work or self-maintenance concerns at the expense of battered women. They are difficult questions of how to integrate the provision and administration of victim services within a larger movement analysis, how to train and socialize new advocates, how to imagine new approaches to intervention and prevention, and how to balance direct service provision with other social change efforts. This raises questions about what a vital domestic violence movement could look like today. What goals and strategies can be envisioned under current conditions, and how can advocates be engaged in a reenergized movement?

Overall, this study paints a picture of a movement akin to Arctic ice floes in spring, splitting, shrinking, and melting into the surrounding water. Vital aspects of the movement remain, as evidenced by veterans who have remained active and who continue to train and mentor newer advocates. However, these findings point to a movement rapidly shifting into the exclusive role of social service provider and moving increasingly away from a larger social change agenda. As a movement analysis is forgotten or rejected, there is the threat of a concurrent shift away from movement-informed, empowerment-based services toward more therapeutically based interventions. Future research might investigate the degree to which the changes identified in this study in fact correlate with shifts in service philosophy, types of services, and other movement activities. A major concern raised by this study is the absence of engaged debate and dialogue within the domestic violence advocacy community on the critical issues raised in these interviews. The lack of knowledge of movement history coupled with often vague understandings of movement ideology left many participants without a position from which to

comment on movement changes and challenges. Although veterans and leaders generally acknowledged and spoke more explicitly about these issues, they also recognized that many advocates are far removed from these conversations. Unless these dilemmas are more actively engaged across the spectrum of the domestic violence advocacy community, the movement risks a continuing creep toward a depoliticized status quo.

## Note

1. One example is the Chicago Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence's community mobilization and engagement efforts.

## References

- Bent-Goodley, T. B. (2005). Culture and domestic violence: Transforming knowledge development. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*, 195-203.
- Bograd, M. (1988). Feminist perspectives on wife abuse: An introduction. In K. Yllo & M. Bograd (Eds.), *Feminist perspectives on wife abuse* (pp. 11-26). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Briggs, C. L. (1986). *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, R., Baker, C. K., & Mazurek, T. L. (1998). Remaining radical? Organizational predictors of rape crisis centers' social change initiatives. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 26*, 457-483.
- Cherniss, C., & Deegan, G. (2000). The creation of alternative settings. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (pp. 359-377). New York: Kluwer.
- Davis, L. V. (1987). Battered women: The transformation of a social problem. *Social Work, 32*, 306-311.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1992). *Women, violence and social change*. London: Routledge.
- Donnelly, D. A., Cook, K. J., van Ausdale, D., & Foley, L. (2005). White privilege, color blindness, and services to battered women. *Violence Against Women, 11*, 6-37.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (2002). Building theories from case study research. In A. M. Huberman & M. B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 5-35). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fagan, J. (1990). Contributions of research to criminal justice policy on wife assault. In D. B. Besharov (Ed.), *Family violence: Research and public policy issues* (pp. 53-81). Washington, DC: AEI Press.
- Fried, A. (1994). "It's hard to change what we want to change": Rape crisis centers as organizations. *Gender & Society, 8*, 562-583.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies of qualitative research*. London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson.
- Hammons, S. A. (2004). "Family violence": The language of legitimacy. *Affilia, 19*, 273-288.
- Johnson, H. (1995). A methodology for frame analysis: From discourse to cognitive schemata. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 217-246). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lehrner, A., & Allen, N. E. (2008). Social change movements and the struggle over meaning-making: A case study of domestic violence narratives. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 42*, 220-234.
- Martin, D. (1976). *Battered wives*. Volcano, CA: Volcano Press.
- Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 41-63). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mueller, C. M. (1992). Building social movement theory. In A. D. Morris & C. M. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 3-26). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Reinelt, C. (1994). Fostering empowerment, building community: The challenge for state-funded feminist organizations. *Human Relations*, 47, 685-706.
- Richie, B. (2000). A Black feminist reflection on the anti-violence movement. *Signs*, 25, 1133-1137.
- Riger, S. (1984). Vehicles for empowerment: The case of feminist movement organizations. *Prevention in Human Services*, 3, 99-117.
- Schechter, S. (1982). *Women and male violence: The visions and struggles of the battered women's movement*. Boston: South End.
- Shepard, M. (2005). Twenty years of progress in addressing domestic violence: An agenda for the next ten. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 436-441.
- Shepard, M. F., & Pence, E. L. (1999). *Coordinating community responses to domestic violence: Lessons from Duluth and beyond*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stagenborg, S. (1991). *The pro-choice movement: Organization and activism in the abortion conflict*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sullivan, C. M. (2006). *Mission-focused management and empowerment practice: A handbook for executive directors of domestic violence programs*. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence.
- Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. (1995). Analytical approaches to social movement culture: The culture of the women's movement. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 163-187). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tierney, K. J. (1982). The battered women movement and the creation of the wife beating problem. *Social Problems*, 29, 207-220.
- Walker, G. A. (1990). *Family violence and the women's movement: The conceptual politics of struggle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wharton, C. S. (1987). Establishing shelters for battered women: Local manifestations of a social movement. *Qualitative Sociology*, 10, 146-163.
- Young, S. (1997). *Changing the wor(l)d: Discourse, politics and the feminist movement*. New York: Routledge.

**Amy Lehrner** is a doctoral student in clinical/community psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has 17 years of experience as an advocate and researcher on domestic violence, including crisis hotline work, conducting prevention and education programs, and working in local and state policy positions. She is currently working on a dissertation, conducting a gendered analysis of women's use of violence in intimate relationships.

**Nicole E. Allen**, PhD, is assistant professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She completed her doctorate in ecological community psychology at Michigan State University. Her research interests include intimate partner violence, community collaboration, and systems and social change. She emphasizes community partnership in both her research and action, has coauthored numerous articles and presentations on intimate partner violence and community collaboration, and has developed a manual to support the self-evaluation efforts of domestic violence coordinating councils published by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. For more than 13 years, she has trained and supervised advocates working with survivors to provide community-based, survivor-driven advocacy.