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A Tribute to Susan Schechter

The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement

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The battered women's movement lost a great leader and visionary when Susan Schechter died of endrometrial cancer in 2004. Schechter's legacy reminds advocates for battered women of how efforts to develop safe places for battered women began, the context of those times, how far we have come, and how far we still have to go. Her pioneering work in the area of the overlap between child maltreatment and adult domestic violence and services to children who are exposed to domestic violence has left the social work profession with a challenging agenda that must be met to create safety for all women and children.

Keywords: *battered women's movement; children exposed to domestic violence; domestic violence; the Greenbook Initiative*

When Susan Schechter died on February 3, 2004, of endometrial cancer, violence against women activists from all over the country joined her family and friends in mourning her loss and celebrating her contributions. How does one add to the chorus of people and organizations who have already so passionately and eloquently expressed the profound loss of this feminist social work activist? When first asked to write this tribute, I thought about the people who worked directly with Susan and are perhaps more qualified than I to talk about the impact of her life on the battered women's movement and, more important, on hundreds and thousands of abused women and children who have benefited from her work. My experiences with Susan were limited to an exchange of e-mail messages, meetings at conferences, her inscription in my copy of her landmark book, and my insistence that people recognize the second "h" in the spelling of her last name. Despite my limited personal involvement with her, this tribute is not an unbiased study of her body of work. This tribute is from a grateful admirer of her writings and her ability to think critically about the responsibilities of the battered women's movement to listen to the voices of abused women and their children and to be responsive to their needs.

As a member of the vanguard of the battered women's movement, Schechter was both its historian and visionary, documenting the feminist roots of the antiviolence movement in her book, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (1982) and extolling advocates to do more. She helped establish the first domestic violence shelter in Chicago and then created AWAKE (Advocacy for Women and Kids in Emergencies), the nation's first domestic violence program in a children's hospital in Boston. Her experiences in Boston solidified her resolve to bring the child protective and domestic violence systems together to address the co-occurrence of child maltreatment and domestic violence (Ganley & Schechter, 1996; Schechter & Edleson, 1995, 1999). Her

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most recent work investigated the intersections of domestic violence, early childhood education, and poverty (Schechter & Knitzer, 2004).

Along the way, Susan received her MSW from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She was appointed to the National Advisory Council on Violence Against Women by former Attorney General Janet Reno and former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, and she served on the board of the Family Violence Prevention Fund. Schechter was honored with a National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators' Leadership in Public Child Welfare Award. At the time of her death she held the position of clinical professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa.

Susan was particularly good at giving voice to the women, adolescents, and children with whom she worked. It seems fitting to use this tribute as a way to share her voice with the feminist social work community and to start with the story of the first days of the battered women's movement, filled with passion, purpose, and commitment, and ending with a glimpse into her vision for the future.

Before the Battered Women's Movement

It is hard to believe that it was almost 25 years ago that Susan's book was published. It feels like both a short and a long time ago. It is a long time because so much has been accomplished since then. And it seems like a blink of the eye because for those of us who live the movement, it was just yesterday. What was life like for abused women who were seeking help because of abusive partners before the battered women's movement? The police told women that they could not do anything unless their husbands and boyfriends severely injured them. Women who left abusive partners were denied welfare because they were still legally married. Judges asked women, "What did you do to provoke him?" Clergy told women to try harder, pray harder. Clinical social workers considered the masochistic tendencies of women and recommended marriage counseling for relationship problems. Physicians and nurses looked the other way and did not ask women how they got their injuries. Friends and family members told women, "Work it out. Figure out what pleases him and stick with it. After all, children need their fathers."

Although there are still places in this country where women who are abused are given many of the same messages, there is now widespread recognition that violence perpetrated by an intimate partner is unjust and inexcusable and has lasting physical and emotional consequences. The second wave of feminism of the 1960s and 1970s formed the basis for the societal change that would make the founding of shelters and safe houses for battered women a reality. Susan Schechter (1982) believed that it was the fundamental assertion of the feminist movement that "women had a right to control their own bodies and lives" (p. 29). In her reflection on her chapter in *Violence Against Women: Classic Papers*, Susan (2005) stated,

> In deciding to write *Women and Male Violence*, I hoped to tell a story about feminist, grassroots organizing and about the hard work required to build organizations, change law and social policy, and at the same time sustain a social movement. I wanted to brag about and document the accomplishments but also describe the hard, complicated work almost invisible underneath our new buildings and laws. It felt urgent to preserve this untouted knowledge that I could find nowhere. I also wanted to extend a feminist exploration of theories about violence against women and open up debates about strategies, tactics, and future political directions. Even in 1980, I feared that the larger feminist spirit that guided the effort might slip away.

> Through the book, I hoped to create a text, a living feminist reference point for the next generation. During the 1980s and even sometimes today, I still hear that I succeeded. (p. 218)

Susan captured the internal and external struggles that were involved in establishing safe places for battered women. Internally, our struggles included the struggle between creating social services or vehicles for social change. Should our services mimic the mainstream, or should we develop something new and different? We struggled not only with how best to deliver services but also with how best to develop our organizations. Even in 1980, when Susan was writing her book, the struggle between grassroots collectives and hierarchical professionalism had already been lost. Today, few shelter programs in this country are run according to a feminist collective model.

Susan also feared that as shelters became more professionalized, the voices of battered women would not be heard except in specifically defined situations. Sad to say, she was correct about that one as well. Today, the voices of battered women are often confined to one or two seats on a board of directors that are reserved for formerly battered women. Arbitrary rules about when former residents may be eligible for volunteering may be even more common.

Shelters are a place where the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and language all come together. Susan recognized that shelters are unique congregate living situations in which women of diverse backgrounds live together. The internal struggles of shelter staff to help themselves and their residents overcome their own stereotypes of each other continue to be with us. Although there are still shelter workers who may argue the "color-blind, we treat everyone the same" position, the battered women's movement has worked hard to give women of color, lesbians, and women with disabilities meaningful voices and opportunities for leadership. The recent reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act also continues to expand our focus on the needs of immigrant and refugee women.

Although our internal struggles were many, the external struggles of the movement revolved around gaining credibility and legitimacy. Many programs traded their "radical" nature for professionalism and institutional formality. I have actually heard shelters referred to as "traditional" domestic violence programs. The second big issue was the ambivalence of societal institutions, such as the criminal justice system, to get involved. After a few well-chosen court cases, coupled with mandatory law-enforcement training and new criminal laws, law-enforcement agencies now brag about having a "coordinated community approach" to domestic violence. However, in many communities, not all the players come to the table, and in many rural communities, there is still widespread denial that domestic violence exists.

Our Current Struggles

We have added a few services that were not mentioned in Susan's historic book. First, we have recognized that a small fraction of battered women come to shelters for services. Most domestic violence programs help more women at outreach centers and at court and medical advocacy programs than they shelter in their facilities. School-based educational programs and services that are targeted to both children who are exposed to domestic violence and teenagers who are experiencing dating violence form the core prevention work. In recognition of the unwillingness of state, local, and federal governments to address the lack of affordable housing, shelters are building their own transitional housing complexes.

Personnel at mental health clinics no longer ask about the masochistic tendencies of battered women—they now talk about trauma (although they still seem reluctant to acknowledge publicly where most traumas originate)—and we are finally recognizing that to create safety for women, we must create safe men. The role of men in the movement has been expanded from doing repairs around the shelter to repairing the misguided notions of what it means to be a man in our society. We have also become better at recognizing the role of poverty in keeping women in abusive relationships. Domestic violence programs and state coalitions have a better understanding that cuts in child care and welfare programs are direct assaults on the economic survival of women who have been abused.

All these accomplishments are not without their share of unintended consequences. One of the most potentially damaging unintended consequences has been the reaction of some child protection programs to learning about the effects of children's exposure to batterers' violence and oppression. Although advocates for battered women wanted the world to know that homes in which children were exposed to violence were not healthy environments in which to raise children, they did not foresee the difficulty in changing such practices. In some cases, this information was used by institutions to assault women further by calling into question their ability to be good mothers. Some child protection agencies began using the adverse effects of exposure to domestic violence as justification for removing children from their homes even if the children were not the targets of the violence. In situations in which child abuse and adult domestic violence overlapped, some battered women were labeled "passive abusers" and were successfully prosecuted for the abuse of their children even if they did not personally assault the children and felt powerless to stop the abusers from hurting the children. Women often described impossible choices of saving one child at the expense of the lives of their other children and themselves.

Susan, along with Jeff Edleson, had the courage to wade into the contentious relationship between the domestic violence and child abuse systems to help each identify new ways of collaborating to keep both mothers and their children safe while holding abusers accountable for their violence (Schechter & Edleson, 1995). The guiding principles and recommendations of this work, undertaken on behalf of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and referred to as "the Greenbook," is a model for multiagency coordination and represents one of the most important contributions of a social work perspective to the movement (Schechter & Edleson, 1999). Unlike other models that collect dust on a bookshelf, the Greenbook Initiative is tracking the outcomes of the implementation of these recommendations across six county demonstration sites throughout the United States (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Family Violence Department, 2006).

A Vision for the Future of the Movement

At the time of her death at age 57, Susan's vision for the future of the battered women's movement continued to be centered on the needs of children for the emotional and physical support of mothers who are free to keep their children safe and secure. Building on the success of the Greenbook Initiative, she focused on creating collaborations among domestic violence programs and agencies and organizations that address child welfare, early childhood education, and poverty.

> Strengthening the focus on early intervention for young vulnerable children and their families is especially critical because, in the absence of specific attention to early intervention services,

> community providers are more likely to believe that their only alterative, and/or obligation, is to refer a family experiencing domestic violence to Child Protective Services (CPS) or to the police. Such referrals become the default option. CPS certainly has an important role to play for those children at serious risk of harm. If Child Protective Services, however, is the only assistance available, many families will avoid seeking services, fearful that their disclosure of violence will lead to the removal of the children. (Schechter & Knitzer, 2004, p. 9)

> We need a public policy agenda on domestic violence and poverty. Our common public policy agenda must articulate that battered women—whether they stay in their relationships or leave them—should have access to housing, jobs, and economic supports for their families. These benefits and supports will remove barriers that keep many women trapped in abusive relationships. These resources also will help battered women who stay. A job, decent housing, and child care might make a woman's life more bearable. A job for her partner might make him less violent and thereby help her. . . . Housing and economic justice advocacy will be shortsighted if it tries to help only the "good" battered women who leave. All people deserve the relief that good jobs, public benefits, and decent housing bring. (Schechter, 2000, p. 10)

Susan's vision of the future also revolved around helping domestic violence programs build stronger, better collaborations with other organizations. Concerned that the battered women's movement was overly concerned with protecting its own turf, she said, in a speech to domestic violence service providers, the following:

> We want a world in which, wherever a battered woman goes, someone is prepared to help. . . . At the state level, appreciate that there are now professional associations that want to help, that want their members to do something. Work with them. Develop a cadre of doctors, nurses, and social workers who want to educate and develop policy with their peers. Let them speak for us. We have to admit that we don't know their work like they do—let them train their colleagues. We would never let them tell us what to do—what right do we insist that they have to do it our way? . . .
>
> We no longer have to feel like outsiders with enemies at our gates. We have changed the world. That is our great gift and our victory. Now we have to catch up to the world that we have created. (Schechter, 1999, pp. 11-12, 14)

A Challenge to the Social Work Community

Social workers have a particularly important role to play in carrying out Susan's vision of safety and economic security for all families. As a profession, we can and must do more to join with the battered women's movement to develop well-thought-out social and institutional policies and programs that seek to prevent abuse. Social workers in the child- and family-serving fields of practice, such as child abuse and neglect, school social work, and early childhood intervention, must learn about the complexities of domestic violence, its effects on women and children, and strategies for increasing safety, security, and resilience. Social work educators must also prepare future professionals for the cross-cutting issue of domestic violence. One guest lecture is not enough. Social workers need good clinical skills, but they must also be good collaborators, organizers, and advocates. Who better to bring all the different fields together to discuss safety and economic security than professional social workers working as allies with leaders from the battered women's movement?

It is hard to write an ending to this tribute to Susan. Two years after her death, we still mourn her, we still wish we could hear her voice, read her words, and wonder where she

will take us next. I do know this: No doubt, we will discover more visions and more struggles. Like Susan, may we see each vision and each struggle as a way to pursue safety for battered women and their children. Susan's words about the achievements of the battered women's movement say it best.

> Despite the large odds against the battered women's movement, its achievements have been highly significant. Whatever its shortcomings, the battered women's movement has fought to save women's lives in a way that attempts to respect the dignity and strength of all those involved. Activists and battered women have shown their courage, persistence, and ingenuity in multiple ways, and as a result they have changed many lives unalterably, including my own. I am deeply grateful to those women in the struggle. (Schechter, 1982, p. 8)

And we are deeply grateful to her.

There are many ways to honor Susan Schechter's work and to continue the commitment to end violence against women and their children. The Family Violence Prevention Fund in San Francisco and CONNECT in New York City created the Susan Schechter Leadership Development Fellowship. Information about contributions and applications may be found at the Family Violence Prevention Fund Web site (http://www.endabuse.org) or at http://schechterfellowship.org.

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