Interventions for Women who use force in a family context

An Australian Practice Framework

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Interventions for women who use force in a family context: an Australian Practice Framework

This practice framework for interventions with women who use force has its foundations in findings from a program of research, including an International Literature Review[1], a National Workforce Survey[2] and an evaluation of the **Positive Shift** program[3], trialled by Baptcare and Berry Street in Victoria. In addition to researchers, the framework is informed by consultation with Positive Shift program staff. The framework is designed as a brief guide for practitioners and program designers to the principles and intervention style deemed essential for working with this population. It is best read in the context of this report or a program curriculum such as the Positive Shift Curriculum (Larance, Andersen & Vicary, 2019).

Programs for women who use force are based on the recognition that domestic and family violence (DFV) in Australia is gender-based. Overwhelmingly, the pattern of DFV is of men abusing and controlling women and children. Research has shown that the typologies used to categorise and understand men's violence are not appropriate for understanding women's use of force (see the definitions below). Women's use of force differs from men's in terms of motivation, intent and impact

There is strong evidence that women who use force have experienced high rates of DFV and childhood abuse victimisation. It is in this context that women's use of force should be understood. Women differ in motivation from men, their actions most often stemming from self-defence, anger or stress. Generally, the intent and impact of women's use of force also differs from men's. A contextualised and trauma informed approach to assessment and intervention is therefore essential.

Definitions

Domestic and Family Violence (DFV)

Domestic violence refers to "an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear, for example by using behaviour which is violent and threatening". This may include physical, verbal, emotional, financial or sexual violence. Family violence refers to a broader range of marital and kinship relationships in which violence may occur. For this reason, it is the most widely used term to identify the experiences of Indigenous people. (Council of Australian Governments, 2010)

Use of Force

Physically, verbally, and emotionally detrimental behaviors used toward an intimate partner…to gain *short term* control of chaotic, or abusive and/or intimidatory situations (Dasgupta, 2002; House, 2001; Larance, 2006; Osthoff, 2002).

Violence

Force used unjustly with the intention of causing injury. (House, 2001)

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[1] Warren, A., Martin, R., Chung, D. (2020) *Women who use force: Final Report. Volume 2 - International Literature Review*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. Available at https://violenceagainstwomenandchildren.com.

[2] Warren, A., Martin, R., Chung, D. (2020) *Women who use force: Final Report. Volume 3 - National Workforce Survey*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. Available at https://violenceagainstwomenandchildren.com.

[3] Kertesz, M., Humphreys, C., Ovenden, G., Spiteri-Staines, A. (2020) *Women who use force: Final Report. Volume 1 - Executive Summary, Positive Shift Program, Evaluation of Positive Shift, and Practice Framework*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. Available at https://violenceagainstwomenandchildren.com.

Underlying theories and frameworks

Ecological systems theory

Developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977), ecological systems theory suggests that individual experience over time is influenced by interactions within a number of nested systems. Similarly, women's use of force does not consist of independent incidents occurring in a vacuum, but often takes place in the context of patriarchal views of women. The use of force must be considered in the context of a person's interactions with each of the four interrelated layers of the Ecological Nested Model (see Figure 20). These are:

i. the individual level - a woman's childhood experiences, including family of origin, socialisation, and role models;
ii. the microsystem level - a woman's current family, situational, friendship, and workplace relationships - and the mesosystem, which recognises the interconnections between a woman's different microsystems (not shown in the figure below);
iii. the exosystem level - the formal and informal structures and institutions with which a woman comes into contact throughout her life, such as social networks, socioeconomic status, and occupation; and
iv. the macro-system level - the societal norms that govern a woman's life experiences, such as her culture, ethnicity or sexual identity. (Larance, 2006)

The framework of the Ecological Nested Model provides a framework in which a discussion of program content and of women's own contributions can take place. This may assist women to develop an awareness of the impact of factors at all four levels on the context of their experiences. Through this contextualised discussion, women may begin to consider behavioural choices they had previously not recognised as possible.

Figure 1: Ecological Nested Model (from Larance, 2006)
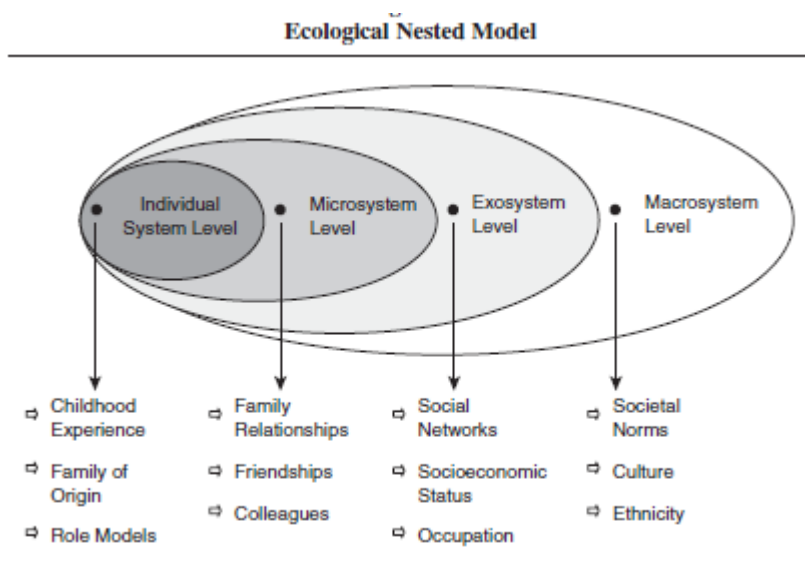
Intersectionality

Intersectionality as a concept recognises the multiple dimensions to identity and seeks to understand how these shape clients' lived experience, including their different experiences of oppression and how these interweave and reinforce each other (Crenshaw, 1991; Mattsson, 2014). These may include the gendered nature of violence, class, ethnicity, immigration status, age, educational level, ability, gender identity or sexual identity. Discrimination or oppression may operate at the level of individuals, social groups, or systems of domination. An intersectional approach focuses on the ways in which societal messages about who they are puts pressure on individual women to conform to particular expectations, and the impact of this on their relationship options and sense of personal power or lack of it.

The Anger Umbrella: A Conceptual Model of Change

This model of change was developed out of the experience of working with groups of women over the course of a year, who had been court- and/or agency-ordered to attend an anti-violence program for their use of force. It hypothesises that women's anger cloaks a complex range of multi-dimensional emotions – shame, guilt, confusion, fear, sadness, grief/loss, betrayal by self and others, and forgiveness of self or others. Helping women explore and experience these emotions may lead to increased acceptance of self. With self-acceptance, women may be able to balance a more realistic level of responsibility for their own past actions with a recognition of primary perpetrator accountability. Through a greater understanding of what prompts their use of force and/or how they have changed, they may be able to take greater control of their feelings and behaviour (Larance & Rousson, 2016).

An all of family approach

All of family approaches to practice focus on the microsystem level in the Ecological Nested Model discussed above, and take into account the impact of violence on other family members, particularly children. These approaches are emerging as promising practice with fathers who use violence (Humphreys & Campo, 2017). The approach involves understanding the context of a women's use of force within a family, helping women understand the impact of violence on family members, including discussions of children and parenting in the group sessions, and case support and referral as appropriate for family members.

Empowerment theory

Empowerment is an approach in which people are assisted to gain control over their decisions and actions and achieve life objectives by helping them surmount personal or social barriers. This helps them develop and thrive (Payne, 2014; Teater, 2014). Empowerment theory is grounded in ecological systems theory, which examines the connections between personal experience and the impact of family, social and institutional environments. People are encouraged to understand their own situation, the context in which their choices have been made and learn about a possible expanded range of choices. They are seen as experts in their own situation (Arnold & Ake, 2013).

Pro-social modelling

It is recognised that programs for women who use force work best on a voluntary basis, as readiness to change is a key factor in program effectiveness. However, many women attending such programs may have been mandated to attend through the corrections or child protection systems, and would not attend otherwise.

Pro-social modelling is an approach for working respectfully with involuntary clients, which involves workers being reliable, honest, punctual, following up on tasks and respecting the feelings of group participants and others. Professionals identify and positively reinforce pro-social expressions and actions, such as when participants take actions that promote healthy and respectful relationships in their lives. They use appropriate confrontation strategies (see practice guideline 6) and work collaboratively with clients to address their needs. The skills involved in pro-social modelling, along with empathy for clients, have been demonstrated to reduce rates of re-offending (Trotter, 2009).

Principles

1. Domestic and Family Violence is a gendered issue. Women's use of force is generally different in nature from men's use of violence in motivation, intent and impact.

2. Women who use force constitute a diverse group with a wide range of experiences and identities. Many have experienced intimate partner violence and/or childhood abuse and victimisation.

3. Women's use of force must be understood in the context of their experience at all levels - individual, familial, institutional, cultural, community, societal – thereby honouring women's life experience rather than condemning their actions.

4. The creation of a safe intervention environment is paramount. Such an environment is one in which women can safely be themselves (see paragraph on intersectionality). This includes establishing an environment of cultural safety for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women, who may also have backgrounds of intergenerational trauma.

5. Women are experts in their own situations and can work to evaluate and develop safe and viable alternatives to their use of force. Professionals listen to women's stories with empathy, advocate and help women navigate their survivorship histories. They facilitate healing rather than take on an advisory role.

6. Women are at different stages of readiness to examine their behaviours and underlying emotions, and to start developing viable alternatives to their use of force. Change will look different for each woman.

Practice Guidelines

1. A contextualised and trauma-informed approach to assessment and intervention is essential. This involves creating a safe environment where women can be vulnerable enough to examine uncomfortable emotions and traumatic experiences. Feeling safe enough to be vulnerable is critical to the change process. Important factors in creating safety include:

    - Consistency of at least one worker / group facilitator throughout the program;

    - Establishment of ground rules to support safety, respect, listening and exploration;

    - A physical environment that is welcoming, comfortable and relaxed (for example, a circle of comfortable chairs rather than sitting round a table);

    - Opening and closing rituals to each session which mark the session time and space as separate from women's everyday lives;

    - Close attention to the use of language to ensure it is not shaming, blaming or judgemental.

2. Program content should include the following themes:

    - Definitions of abuse, the costs and benefits of using force and being violent;

    - The impact of force on children, family, friends and/or pets;

    - Unpacking anger to explore the emotions underneath (what was the intention behind force being used?);

    - Conflict management – assertion versus aggression;

    - Relationship needs and positive relationships;

    - Shame and responsibility;

    - The effect of cultural messages, intersectional identities, and responsibilities;

    - Creating physical and emotional safety through self-acceptance, self-expression, recognition of stress signals safety and support planning.

3. A "check in" early in each session, where women talk about their experiences since the last session and how they are feeling, allows these issues to be picked up in the discussions. In this way, the session may be experienced as participant-led and therefore empowering.

4. An "accountability statement" from each participant at the beginning of each session involves women identifying an action and/or behaviour used in the past week that reflects their personal integrity (Larance & Rousson, 2016). This exercise helps women recognise their own growth and change.

5. Integrating weekly session topics with women's immediate concerns (based on historical trauma or current experience) helps them unpick and understand their multi-dimensional, multi-layered emotions, leading towards a goal of self-acceptance.

6. Compassionate confrontation (Larance, Hoffman, & Shivas, 2009) is a critical co-facilitation tool in assisting women to seek viable alternatives to the use of force in a non-judgemental atmosphere of support and validation.

Intervention Modalities

Both one-to-one work and group work are effective in working with women who use force and have their own advantages and disadvantages. A combination of both is powerful. Where possible within the program framework, it is important to customise program delivery to meet each individual woman's needs.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
GROUP WORK	

Advantages
 	
 • Women realise they are not alone in their experience.
 	
 • Women support and mentor each other, encouraging each other to be "the person they want to be".
 	
 • Resource sharing.
 	
 • Done in a supportive, non-judgmental environment, this collective experience (of being reminded and reminding others to take full credit) reinforces personal empowerment and supports the development of social networks (Larance & Porter, 2004).
	Disadvantages
	
	 • Group programs based on perpetrator-focussed programs developed in relation to men's violence have the potential to be shaming and destructive for women who have been subjected to violence or other abuse.
	
	 • The group environment is not suitable for women in the following circumstances:
	
	   - Current drug/alcohol use at levels which hinder effective program participation;
	
	   - Mental illness that includes psychosis or delusions;
	
	   - Severe cognitive limitations ;
	
	   - Medical conditions constituting the primary cause of violence (e.g. acquired brain injury);
	
	   - Continued lack of commitment by a woman to changing her behaviour or increasing her safety, which causes disruption to the group .

ONE-TO-ONE WORK	

Advantages
 	
 • An opportunity to offer program content to women for whom group participation is unsuitable
 	
 • One-to-one work supplements program content in the following ways:
 	
   - Debriefing about program content;
 	
   - One-to-one time and support for participants outside the group space;
 	
   - Brokerage to assist women in attending, childcare or material aid;
 	
   - Practical or emotional assistance;
 	
   - Advocacy on behalf of women (with their permission) to other services and institutions to ensure that other professionals gain a contextual understanding of a woman's circumstances.
	Disadvantages
	
	 • There is less opportunity for women to learn they are not alone in their own experience.
	
	 • One-to-one work does not provide the group mutual support, validation and mentoring that occurs in a well-managed group process.
	
	 • No opportunity to develop ongoing support networks and resource sharing.

Support for program staff / group facilitators

A trauma-informed program which offers healing and change for women who use force will expose professionals to multiple accounts of traumatic experience, and this can impact on staff well-being and on quality of service provision.

- Weekly clinical supervision for program staff / group facilitators, using critical reflection (Mattson, 2014), is an integral component of providing them with necessary support for this complex work. During supervision, close attention must be paid to professionals' efforts and ability to navigate the women's possible trauma while exercising cultural humility in their intervention approach, as well as address their possible vicarious trauma (Elliott, Bjelajac, Fallot, Markoff, & Reed, 2005; Johnson & Munch, 2009).

- Programming timed to ensure that there is space during each week and between each program cycle for staff to have some respite from the complex aspects of the work, will assist in avoiding burnout.

- The pool of trained staff should be large enough to provide backfill when staff are on leave, while maintaining consistency of staff-client relationships wherever possible.

Record-keeping in relation to women who use force

Women who use force may be involved in the Corrections system, the Family law system or the Child Protection system. In proceedings in any of these arenas, presentation of their actions without an explanation of the context may result in significant adverse outcomes for the women, including imprisonment, loss of their children or ongoing contact between their children and a father who uses violence. Therefore, the following principles about documentation should be adhered to, so as not to put women at risk of unfair judgement.

- Adhere to legal requirements for record-keeping.

- Ensure that any record of women's actions details the context of her relationship history so that information cannot be misinterpreted.

- Ensure that clients are clear about what information is confidential and what may be shared.

- Take care what is documented about clients (eg. document only attendance, housekeeping issues and any safety concerns).

- Always remember that someone other than the writer will read any notes recorded. This may be the client, or other professionals from Corrections, Child Protection, the Family Law court etc. Notes should always be written with a future audience in mind.

Community Engagement and Education Activities

The context and circumstances in which many women use force is variably and often poorly understood by professionals who may come into contact with them or offer them services. Professionals providing interventions for women who use force should see community engagement and education as part of their role, including:

- Information / training to professionals in referring organisations;

- Information / training for professionals and institutions who judge women's actions (criminal justice system, courts, probation officers, child protection etc);

- Information / training for professionals treating women for associated issues – mental health issues, alcohol or drug use, parenting support etc.

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