



Where Did the Movement Go?

A glance at the domestic violence field, and a framework for the future

History and Introduction

During the late 1960s, women throughout the United States began gathering in living rooms, community centers, and coffee shops, talking with each other about their shared experiences as women. These “consciousness-raising groups” gave women a forum to discuss many things--from common, daily experiences to complex international affairs. As trust was built among them, some women began to share that their intimate partners sometimes became violent. In response to these chilling testimonies, other women began to develop safe-homes, places where women and children could flee when violence erupted in their own homes.

At first many of these safe-homes--or “shelters,” as they came to be called--were in activists’ homes. The need to provide women refuge was so great that women just responded; they did not wait for formal organizations to be established. As the need continued to grow, though, leaders recognized that organizations had to be formalized to provide short-term, safe shelter to the victims of violence. Out of the consciousness-raising groups, they developed a new type of organization--a collective--to more extensively develop and support domestic violence shelters. From the beginning, their ideal was to operate these collectives differently than the competitive, male-dominated organizations and bureaucracies that prevailed in the social service arena.

By 1979, there were more than 250 shelters in the United States, most operating under a non-hierarchical, egalitarian philosophy. Because of their origins in feminist consciousness-raising groups, the shelters also shared an analysis of the cause of domestic violence--patriarchal power. The movement’s dominant ideology was that domestic violence was the result of male hatred toward women. This ideology ignored the realities of domestic violence in gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) communities as well as communities of color, disabled communities, and teens.

By the early 1980s, state governments had begun to respond to this ground swell of activity by allocating state revenues and discretionary federal funds--such as Title XX of the Social Security Act and Emergency Assistance funds--to domestic violence services. This increased public funding, in turn, supported the creation of additional services and shelters. Between 1979 and 1989, the number of shelters in the U.S. increased four-fold. Interestingly, feminist groups started few of the newly formed shelters; during the 1980s, religious groups, YMCA’s, and other civic organizations increasingly began to operate temporary shelters for victims of domestic violence.

As more and more domestic violence programs received public revenue, subtle shifts began to occur in the organizations. Because federal funds were designated for services and not community education, more attention was focused on individual counseling for women and less on peer support and advocacy. To receive public contracts, shelters felt the pressure to employ credentialed staff and move toward more widely recognized social service models. To maintain these government contracts, they needed to provide evidence that their interventions were having the desired effect. Slowly, staff began talking about *treatment* for *clients*, rather than *empowerment* for battered *women*. **

Understanding the roots of domestic violence work in the United States of America gives a context for the work of Casa de Esperanza. The following section describes the current “mainstream” model of domestic violence that grew out of profound change that occurred in the

field in the 1980's—specifically, the change from a feminist movement to a field of social service organizations. Today we continue to live with the effects of that change. Casa de Esperanza has chosen to entitle this article, *Where Did The Movement Go?* to discuss the current state of domestic violence work in this country, Casa de Esperanza's approach, and the opportunity for all of us to reclaim the domestic violence movement for our communities.

The Mainstream Model

Casa de Esperanza defines *mainstream* as the majority culture (usually Caucasian or white), those who have assimilated, and institutions that hold power. The mainstream model integrates the values, experiences, and lived realities of these groups and devises intervention and prevention strategies based on that shared cultural framework.

On a national level, domestic violence practitioners, survivors, and academicians are exploring and studying the relevance of varied theories of domestic violence. Each theory—or framework—about the origins of domestic violence results in a different approach to ending domestic violence. The following is a short list of some of these frameworks.

- Psychopathology (men who abuse are mentally ill)
- Violence as a learned behavior
- Learned helplessness (abuse strips women of their will to live and to get out of the violence)
- Cycle of violence (tension building, release, honeymoon phases)
- Family/relationship conflict model (both men and women contribute to violence in a relationship)
- Power and Control (a pattern of tactics used to reinforce a man's use of physical violence)

Some organizations use just one of the above theories, and others integrate a number of them together.

Trends have emerged throughout the country among advocates, organizations (community-based and systems-based), domestic violence coalition members and leaders, and systems. The mainstream advocacy model of domestic violence is usually consistent throughout the United States:

- Battered women must leave the abuse to be safe.
- Battered women want to leave, divorce their partners, and become "survivors."
- Systems and institutions have a responsibility to "hold the abuser accountable."
- A "coordinated community response" will ensure that battered women are protected and abusers are held accountable.
- Prevention and public awareness campaigns are important to long-term success and behavior change.

Although much work has been done on a policy level (including the passage of laws and training of systems professionals, such as police and judges) flaws exist in the current domestic violence approach. Many of these flaws are related to a few basic assumptions and beliefs.

What are these mainstream beliefs and assumptions? Although most advocacy organizations do not recognize these assumptions openly, they are crystal clear when one examines the organization's processes. It is important to say here that there are wonderful organizations operating outside of these assumptions; and there are wonderful advocates, leaders, and academicians that are re-framing domestic violence services, philosophy, and thought. These groups, however, are far removed from the day-to-day domestic violence work in the United States, which evidences these beliefs.

Current Mainstream Advocacy efforts reveal the following beliefs and assumptions:

- We must structure battered women’s lives. (Think hard about this one. We establish all kinds of rules in our shelters under the pretense of “keeping women safe.”)
- Battered women need many things, and professionals (counselors, therapists, need-based social service providers) can “help” them.
- Battered women experience violence in a vacuum. Children, family, and community should take a back seat to the woman’s need to be safe.
- Domestic violence is the primary/only issue in a battered woman’s life—it establishes her goals and priorities. If she doesn’t want to leave the abusive partner, then we can’t help her.

Casa de Esperanza’s Approach

Casa de Esperanza, founded almost twenty-five years ago, followed the mainstream model of domestic violence advocacy for many years. We had the same assumptions and beliefs and followed funding streams based on these assumptions. In 1998 Casa de Esperanza decided that a new framework was needed—a framework that represented our beliefs about Latinas and their families, their communities, and true *esperanza* (hope).

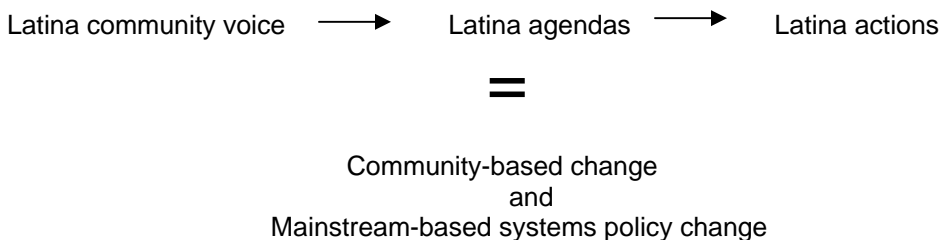
A few philosophical underpinnings are important to understanding Casa de Esperanza’s approach:

- Latina identity is intrinsically linked to family and community. Latina identity is interconnected—it is not individualistic.
- Latinas are agents for change.
- Violence stems from systems of oppression—for example, racism, sexism, homophobia—that are often intertwined. None is more significant than another; oppression is oppression.
- We embrace the role of men as our allies in changing community attitudes.
- We innovate, stay flexible, assess our progress, and are creative.

Casa de Esperanza was evolving “back” to its cultural roots—a culture whose identity is community. We began to reaffirm our place in community—developing a role of convener, bridge, and connector.

Our Framework

Casa de Esperanza believes that collective voice is the basis of action and influencing systems. Policy change on a *systems level* will happen most effectively when collective voice is used to shape policy on the *community level*.



Casa de Esperanza believes in people. We believe in strengthening social networks. We believe in the power of the community to determine its own direction. We believe in the cultural cornerstones of our community, such as *familia* and *respeto* (respect), and we believe that—with knowledge, access to support, and information—Latinas will do what is in their family’s best interest.

Opportunity for Change

Most leaders, policy makers, thinkers, and practitioners within the field of domestic violence say that we need a drastic change—a new beginning. Casa de Esperanza has made this change and seen communities transform right before our eyes.

There is a ripple effect to Casa de Esperanza's work. The more we listen and follow the lead of Latinas, the more we learn and share. The more we learn and share, the more we impact others. The more that we impact others, the more communities mobilize.

The road we took was hard, and, frankly, sometimes we didn't know where we were going. But we had a vision—it was based, in the purest sense, in the belief in Latinas and Latino communities to make change happen. Some of our learnings along the way:

1. We are building on the strength of Latinas, their families, and communities. Who couldn't embrace the issue and mobilize around this concept? It is not about "gloom and doom," and it is not about the "poor battered women and their marginalized families."
2. In advocacy, our job is to support women and their families. It is not to fix them, nor is it to push our own agenda on them. It is not to pity them, nor to take care of them. Battered women are probably the most resourceful, strong women that exist. They have to be—to survive. Why not tap into that strength for true change instead of stifling it so that we, as advocates, can feel important, worthy, or needed?
3. Professionalism has its place in this field. It is desperately needed in order to become a *movement* again and remain strong into the future. The founders shied away from "hierarchy" because it was a "male-dominant" way of doing business; at Casa de Esperanza we recognize that we need *infrastructure*-- for example, the ability to evaluate and talk about results; financial analysis, solid fundraising; and board development. Infrastructure is needed to evaluate whether, how, and why our work makes a difference. In this environment of shrinking resources and extreme agendas, it isn't good enough simply to tell funders and supporters simply that we must support battered women. Because the battered women's movement (for the most part) has not utilized tools to its benefit, such as critical thinking, professionalism, and infrastructure, it has missed a huge opportunity to claim its knowledge, strength, and "added value" to society.
4. Political savvy is a growth opportunity for our field. Again, the old way of doing business just won't cut it in the future. We must establish and support broad-based coalitions--not because it is what everyone is doing, nor because it is what funders want to see. Everything goes back to our customers—battered women and their families. What do they experience? Violence isn't experienced in a vacuum, and it isn't one-dimensional. Our response can't be either. We must work with other movements and fields to serve women to the best of our abilities. Who cares that it doesn't look like "domestic violence work"? Maybe what looks like "domestic violence work" is really outdated and irrelevant?
5. We must learn to "give it away" or "pay it forward"—however we want to label it. Unfortunately, there is more than enough work in this field to go around. If you can support another domestic violence organization, do so. Share your donor lists, and support them to do their best work. Mentor or seek out mentors for women—or men—who are passionate about our work.

Women of color and organizations of color in the domestic violence field have been operating with a multidimensional lens for years, and the mainstream domestic violence world hasn't recognized it. Many women of color work all day—within a mainstream model--answering crisis lines, providing advocacy for women, or leading a support group; then they go home and do the work of engaging their families and communities in ending violence against women. This isn't a

volunteer service, a creative strategy, or a promising outreach method. It IS the way to end domestic violence in our communities.

These women of color have come full circle. They have brought the *movement* back into their homes-into their daily lives-and out of "social service." Group by group, community by community, family by family, domestic violence can be eradicated.

** The first five paragraphs of this article were adapted from a case study written by Dr. Jodi Sandfort, Associate Professor, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.