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Tactics of antifeminist backlash: The view from advocates for abused women

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## **Introduction**

In 1976, Del Martin published *Battered Wives*, the first book devoted to the subject of battered women in the United States. Martin observed that, 'The news media have often treated wife-abuse as a bizarre and relatively rare phenomenon- as occasional fodder for sensationalistic reporting- but rarely as a social issue worthy of thorough investigation' (1981, p. 15). While many of the underlying cultural issues Martin described in 1976 are still relevant, there has been a sea change in hegemonic discourses on men's violence against women. Opposition to men's violence against female intimate partners has become politically popular in the United States. One of the most visible symbols of this marked social change is the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). VAWA is a federal law which has enjoyed broad-based support since its passage in 1994. VAWA has been refined and expanded with each subsequent reauthorization. The United States Department of Justice website describes it this way,

In 1994, the U.S. Congress enacted the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), a comprehensive legislative package focused on violence against women. VAWA recognized the devastating consequences that violence has on women, families, and society as a whole. VAWA also acknowledged that violence against women requires specialized responses to address unique barriers that prevent victims from seeking assistance from the justice system (n.d.).

This excerpt highlights the now-dominant conceptualization of violence against women as an important and gendered social problem requiring collective action.

Resistance to the battered women's movement is often overlooked in the contemporary political context that produced and sustains VAWA. However, violence against women and state responses to it continue to be mired in cultural tensions about crime, law, gender, economics,

knowledge, and the family. As I write this chapter in 2012, VAWA is due for reauthorization. This time around there has been unprecedented resistance to the law from Republican lawmakers. Conservative commentators like Alana Goodman contend that rather than being about violence, VAWA is a ‘smear tactic’ created to make it look like Republicans support violence against women. Goodman claims that the revised bill is ‘a transparent, politically-motivated attempt to provoke Republican opposition to VAWA and allow the left to claim the GOP supports violence against women’ (2012). Unfortunately, such expostulations are not limited to extremist blogs. *New York Times* reporter Jonathan Weisman quoted Republican senator Jeff Sessions saying,

‘I favor the Violence Against Women Act and have supported it at various points over the years, but there are matters put on that bill that almost seem to invite opposition....You think that’s possible? You think they might have put things in there we couldn’t support that maybe then they could accuse you of not being supportive of fighting violence against women?’ (2012).

The public debate about the reauthorization of VAWA is but one instance of efforts by antifeminists to negotiate the relatively recent social norm condemning violence against women. This paper outlines key tactics of antifeminist backlash against the battered women’s movement as they affect the provision of support for abused women in real life, based on interviews with anti-violence advocates in the United States,

## **Backlash**

Popularized by Susan Faludi (1991), the term backlash refers to ‘efforts to contain, undermine, and reverse the gains made by women under feminism’ (Dragiewicz 2008, p. 127). Campaigns to transform men’s violence against women from a private shame to a public political

issue have been among the most popular and widely embraced projects of feminism. As is the case with other progressive social movements, the battered women's movement's successes were accompanied by 'criticism, cooptation, and silencing' (Collins 2004, p. 3). Ultimately, while feminism has succeeded in substantially altering discourse and law on violence against women, many of the beliefs and practices conducive to this form of violence persist.

As feminist scholars and activists have noted, efforts to harness state power to address violence against women are ripe for unintended consequences (Chesney-Lind 2006; DeKeseredy 1999; DeKeseredy & Schwartz 2005; Faludi 1991; INCITE! 2003; Minaker & Snider 2006). Feminists wary of neoliberal appeals to formal equality have documented the ways in which gender-blind approaches to crime and violence have not only failed to ameliorate gender inequality but, in some cases, exacerbated it. Justice system responses to violence against women and race and gender-blind criminal justice policies have both been associated with disproportionate unintended negative consequences for women, especially women of color (Chesney-Lind 2006; INCITE! 2003; Schlesinger 2008). In the case of violence against women, resistance to state campaigns is convoluted as opponents of feminism seek to couch their objections to anti-violence efforts in ways that sidestep normative anti-violence positions (Collier & Sheldon 2006; Dragiewicz 2008, 2010, 2011; Kaye & Tolmie 1998; Menzies 2007). Attacks on feminism, both veiled and overt, are an important part of the backlash against the battered women's movement (Dragiewicz 2008, 2010, 2011; Flood 2010; Girard 2009; Mann 2008).

## **Methodology**

The findings discussed in this paper are drawn from semi-structured interviews on support for and resistance to anti-violence work since the inception of the battered women's

movement. The exploratory study utilized a convenience sample, with invitations to participate extended online via professional listservs for anti-violence advocates, scholars, and lawyers. Study participants were recruited and interviewed until responses reached thematic saturation. The sample consisted of 35 interviews which were conducted and transcribed between 2007 and 2009. Interviews ranged from fifty-two minutes to over two and a half hours, with an average of approximately an hour and a half. Transcribed interviews were coded using MAXQDA, a qualitative software analysis package.

### ***The Sample***

The average age of respondents for this study was 59, and the age range was from 30-67. Thirty one of the respondents were Caucasian, and four identified as mixed race, including a mix of Caucasian, Asian, Native American heritages. Thirteen respondents had a JD, fifteen had Master's degrees, five had PhDs, two had some college, and one had a college degree and some graduate classes. Respondents were from twenty different states. For respondents who reported salaries, the annual average was \$49,000. Two respondents reported being retired and working on a volunteer basis. A few respondents noted that their income fluctuates from year to year due to consulting work. Thirty of the respondents were female and five were male. Seven respondents identified as lesbian or queer, and 28 identified as straight or heterosexual. Respondents averaged twenty-two years in the field, ranging from nine years to more than forty years. The sample included professors, practicing attorneys, battered women's shelter staff, state coalition staff, national advocacy organizations, university antiviolence program staff, child counsellors or therapists, and independent advocates. Most of the respondents had had more than one job working on anti-violence projects prior to their current position.

### **Findings**

While the larger study looked at a range of issues related to support for and resistance to battered women's movement work, this paper is focused on the tactics of antifeminist backlash against the battered women's movement. In what follows, I review several key tactics identified by the study participants. This review provides a general description of backlash tactics rather than a comprehensive list, and many specific tactics have been subsumed under the named categories. To protect the identities of the respondents, which is especially important given the nature of their work with violent men, I have not provided identifying information about the sources of individual quotations and have redacted location and organization specific information where necessary.

In response to a question about whether respondents experience resistance to their antiviolence work, the most common reply was 'absolutely.' While all respondents indicated experiencing or observing some forms of resistance to their work, the nature, level, and impact of resistance varied widely according to respondents' specific professional locations. Six primary tactics emerged in descriptions of resistance to anti-violence work:

- resistance to acting on legal and policy changes;
- victim blaming;
- discrediting women/feminists;
- individualization;
- changing the subject;
- direct attacks and threats.

### ***Resistance to acting on legal and policy changes***

Respondents named ‘Lack of implementation of the law, which comes from a variety of places: ignorance, lack of training, and just plain old fashioned misogyny’ as a key form of resistance. This type of resistance was characterized as a way of pushing back against legal and policy changes imposed by authority figures. Respondents repeatedly described the failure to implement new policies in meaningful ways as manifestations of resistance to anti-violence efforts. For example,

We also have a lot of people that don't do what they should do in the criminal justice system..... Our problem is implementation of the law. A lot of cops don't arrest, or the cops will do dual arrest, or they won't do any arrest, or they arrest the wrong person. Judges or state's attorneys won't prosecute or they'll plea down to just simple battery. Judges won't do what they're supposed to do. In some communities perpetrators come before the criminal justice system repeatedly. They go to batterers' intervention programs, they stop going to the batterers' intervention programs, and those programs are designed to, basically it's court supervision, and when they stop, when the perpetrators stop going to the batterers' intervention program probation should turn them in to the court and they should go to jail. But the probation office lets the ball drop and doesn't turn them in. And so they know that they can get away with it, and so the perpetrators know that they can get away with abuse because someone turns a blind eye to them and there are very few counties where all the systems and all the players from criminal justice do what they are supposed to do.

This quotation describes a range of ways that local authorities fail to implement the laws that are in place in the state.

Many respondents described the implementation of positive policy changes in ways that punish survivors of violence, such as responding to pro-arrest policies with dual arrests or arresting the victim of violence rather than the perpetrator. For example,

I find it really challenging when the criminal justice system doesn't follow through and do what they should be doing. I find it challenging when state's attorneys want to arrest victims for violating their own orders of protection because if you're a petitioner of an order of protection, you can't violate it. But we have had some state's attorneys who have actually arrested victims.

Another example of this is officers responding to pro-arrest policies by refusing to investigate the situation, as in this example:

We get dual arrests or we have law enforcement officers who don't necessarily understand the dynamics. Or they're left with finding a guy who's been... who has some kind of injury and the woman doesn't so they don't look at, is this injury primary aggression? Or is this a defense injury, like the injuries that happen to men's faces or hands but men are strangling women, and they scratch the hands trying to get the hands off the throat? Yeah, there's been scratching, there's been damage, but it's not because the woman is the primary aggressor.

As in the situation described above, some police officers fail to investigate the circumstances surrounding violence calls like they do other crimes, leaving it for the judge to sort out.

Unfortunately, if police officers do not investigate thoroughly, there is no evidence collected to facilitate fact-finding in the court. This approach undermines the investigative role of police and creates a 'he said/she said' scenario that equally discredits both parties. Arrests of victims of



abuse can have serious repercussions for survivors' ability to access services, willingness to call police for help in the future, and custody cases in the event of divorce.

### ***Victim blaming***

Another frequent theme in accounts of resistance to antiviolence work is victim blaming. Respondents identified two primary types of victim blaming. In the first type, friends and family members blame victims of woman abuse for their own victimization. This type of victim blaming serves a defensive purpose that allows people to maintain their view of the world as safe. For example,

I think it is really hard and we don't want it to happen to us and we don't want it to happen to our loved ones and we wish it didn't exist at all so we have to find somebody to blame. It's easier to blame the victim because they are the one who is carrying the story and they are the ones who are carrying the pain right to our doorstep.

Victim blaming takes the pressure to solve the problem off of the individual hearing the disclosure.

Another frequently mentioned type of victim blaming is portraying woman abuse as mutual, reciprocal, bi-directional, or symmetrical. One advocate expressed it this way,

I can quote verbatim from [a local shelter's] brochure which says domestic violence will not stop until people realize that it is the responsibility of all parties involved to end domestic violence. It is not an either/or proposition, it is a both/and proposition and both partners must recognize their responsibility. So it's a dance of mutual destruction.

According to this understanding of violence, violent men cannot stop being abusive until women change their behavior.

A closely related type of victim blaming is claiming that women are as violent as men. Respondents reported that this argument is used for several purposes: to attack existing services for abused women, to discredit women's reports of violence, and to dismiss gendered understandings of violence. For example, 'The biggest arguments we get are that they are saying that women are just as violent as men and when there is physical violence on a woman they are saying she is at fault because she attacked him first.' As in this quotation, the argument that women are as violent as men is often raised when there is a record of physical violence. In these cases, the argument is used to explain away reports and evidence of abuse.

### *Discrediting women/feminists*

Discrediting women and feminists as sources of knowledge is another popular backlash tactic. It is used by individual abusers, individuals involved in state institutions such as the courts, and organized anti-feminist groups. One respondent described the way that abused women's accounts are dismissed as not credible if they fail to mesh with cultural stereotypes, 'So one of the implicit arguments is that we all know what battered women look like, and this isn't it.' Another respondent described how stereotypes continue in the face of evidence due to women's lesser authority as scholars and experts:

One of the things about domestic violence is that most people have had some experience regarding domestic violence. They've committed it, they've been a victim of it, they've had a friend or someone that was involved and therefore they think they understand it. And often they don't have the full story or they can't be objective, but they think they know it. There's not an openness or a willingness to look for the real experts. And I think most of the time the experts are women and in this society we don't take women as

seriously as men. And so I think that contributes to it. So you have people who think they know the issues who don't. And so they keep making mistakes and they're not open to being told they are making mistakes.

Another example of discrediting women is the application of a higher standard of proof to women than men in abuse cases. One respondent said, 'Women are given a higher standard of proof than their abusers, are given less credibility than the abusers, they face stereotypes and they are paying for their abusers' actions.'

Many respondents reported that individual women's reports of violence are routinely dismissed as false allegations. For example, '... this is utterly pervasive throughout the court system and all areas of jurisprudence, is that she's making it up. She's just vindictive and she's using this to get back at me.' Claims of false allegations appear to be especially common in custody proceedings where mothers raise the issue of abuse in court. One respondent said, '...the assumption is that women are making false accusations in order to gain an advantage, or to take children out of their father's lives so you have that.' The claim that women gain some advantage over men by reporting violence serves to discredit all women's reports of violence.

In addition to discrediting individual women's reports of abuse, discrediting feminists and 'the domestic violence industry' were frequently named by respondents as backlash tactics. Despite the popular belief that domestic violence awareness is a *fait accompli*, the idea that 'Domestic violence doesn't happen here' continues to be used against anti-violence advocates. This idea rests on the assumption that the battered women's movement exists not because violence against women is an actual problem, but because '... feminists have an evil agenda to take over the world and they must be stopped.' As another respondent put it,

I think one of the biggest arguments which is so ludicrous it's almost impossible to refute, the big one that we hear from the mad dads is that domestic violence is not actually a problem. And that it's something that is so exaggerated and that it's just sort of perpetuated by the domestic violence industry.... It's not part of this scenario because domestic violence only happens in you know .0001% of all relationships.

Such claims are used to minimize the extent of men's violence against women and argue against the continued provision of resources for survivors.

### ***Individualization***

As a backlash tactic, individualization promotes popular understandings of violence and abuse as interpersonal problems that do not merit a collective response. For example, respondents reported decontextualizing the problem of violence by saying things like 'it's a people issue, not a gender issue.' Individualizing approaches to violence dismiss the cultural context in which it occurs as irrelevant. Sometimes, this involves dismissing the research on violence altogether, as in this example:

Another thing that I've seen is when we talk about research and they'll say well just because most abusers do that it's unfair, you're dealing with an individual case. So we don't need that kind of research, we're dealing an individual case here.

This effectively dismisses the thousands of studies on the nature and dynamics of violence and abuse.

Another example of individualization involves looking at specific acts or behaviors through a narrow and decontextualized lens. One respondent put it this way:

If a woman hits back in self-defense or to make him stop or whatever you'll get unqualified professionals to say well that's the same as what he did without an understanding of what was the purpose. Controlling behaviour patterns, all that.

Another respondent described individualization in media coverage of abused mothers' custody disputes.

You will get the media talking about individual cases. What you don't get is the media doing the kind of investigation to show the patterns of abuse that are really important. Because you know, if you take one of these cases and we've... I don't know if you've seen the term, we tend to call them custody visitation scandal cases.... But we tend to get these cases, and if you look at one case, you have an extreme result, which on the surface looks like it's wrong but you can't be sure 'cause you know maybe there's something wrong with that one mother. And after all, one of the common abuser tactics is to demonize the woman. But when we look at hundreds and thousands of these cases, it's easier to see a pattern of mistakes that the courts are making, that cause so many children to be sent to live with abusers. And the media has really been remiss in exposing this pattern.

This quotation describes the relationship between media accounts and collective understanding of the issue of woman abuse and child custody.

### ***Changing the subject***

Changing the subject away from woman abuse to some other problem was a backlash tactic named by many of the respondents in the study. One advocate described efforts to persistently change the subject during a training session.

There were a couple of men from an anti-violence organization in [our state] in that training and they argued, they argued with us about whether the problem of teen dating violence was more really more equal, that really, boys and girls were both being victimized at the same rate. And just keeping us stuck in that, stuck there and not being willing to get off of it and move on. It looks like men coming to workshops and participating and then having to be right.... You know like, not being able to take coaching, not being able to move on after they've been asked to sit down.... And just, what do you mean, what do you mean by that? you know and just ... you know like, typical white male privileged bull, you know?

Similar experiences were recounted by a number of advocates who saw the insistence on changing the subject as a way of resisting the expertise of survivors, advocates, and scholars who focus their energies on violence against women. The expectation appears to be that neither advocates nor scholars should be focused on women and girls' experiences if men and boys' needs and demands are not being met first.

Many respondents also reported abusers' use of frivolous complaints against their partner in order to retaliate for reporting of abuse or to distract the courts from reports of abuse. For example,

One of the early cases that I got into was a police officer who would throw everything he could throw at his former wife so and she was arrested I think 8 times in the end. None of his charges ever stuck, but it made her lose a lot of jobs and so, in one case he would be accusing her of... the first way he got the baby was to accuse her of drug addiction. And she went through the hoops, jumped through the hoops she went through 18 random drug tests, all of them came out clean. The head of the drug testing unit was there to testify that

she was not a drug user and yet the courts favored the father and the judge very clearly said that it was because he was a police officer and he trusted the police officer. So first it was drug abuse, then he came back later and charged her with parental abuse and then he charged her later with one thing after another and it was like throwing ... it was like throwing wet toilet paper at the ceiling to see what can stick. It's a game, he charged her with a whole series of different things. And to see what could stick and now what they've come up with is parental alienation and that's the one that's sticking now.

When used as an individual tactic, changing the subject serves to distract the court or others from investigating the abuse at issue. It also serves to create an impression that the parties are engaged in a mutual fight since they are both making complaints. Often, this is used as an excuse to avoid fact finding or investigation of the reported abuse.

### ***Threats and attacks***

Finally, direct attacks and threats continue to be used to resist the battered women's movement and support and services for abused women. Of course, threats and attacks are used by individual abusers against their partners. In addition to the obvious examples of threats and perpetration of physical and sexual violence against partners who had reported abuse or sought assistance in leaving, abusers used a variety of other tactics. In a cultural context where the use of violence is publicly condemned, more indirect forms of abuse have developed. One example of this is abusers' threats and efforts to take custody of children. These were frequently reported by advocates. For example,

You know the basic, the most common tactic is seeking custody or joint custody. And, what we're talking about and I probably didn't say this before but we've made a lot of

progress in the movement to end domestic violence and ... there's now more people in the community to help victims of domestic violence, there are more services and resources and ability to, for women to get away, and obviously abusers don't like that. They believe they are entitled to maintaining control. So they've needed to develop other tactics to maintain what they believe is their right to control their partner. And the most unspeakably cruel tactic is seeking custody for the purpose of punishing her for leaving, or to try to make her come back. And so you have all of these cases where the mother has been the primary parent or the father has been abuser to her and often the children also. And he's seeking custody for all the wrong reasons. And the court isn't getting it.

In this example, the respondent notes the courts' complicity in facilitating ongoing abuse and control via the child custody determination processes.

Direct attacks and threats were also used against advocates and anti-violence organizations.

For example,

I've had threats from individuals, right? Of personal violence against me... and I think about the individuals, abusers, everything from being in my face, sort of like physically threatening me in the courthouse. ... There was the guy who was threatening one time ... left me phone threats against my family, they tracked me down right? Described where I lived. So there's that kind of level of threat stuff. Primarily from abusers. There's also periodically over the years the threat to contact funders has come up, either from individuals or from other programs or agencies who haven't liked a sort of stance. So that's a common one you know.

Other respondents described attacks related to their jobs, such as complaints to professional organizations and frivolous lawsuits. Often, these attacks were instigated by individual abusers



against an individual or organization that had provided assistance to the woman or children they were abusing. However, a variety of allies assisted the abusers in carrying out the attacks both directly, by facilitating particular cases, and indirectly, by legitimating abusers' claims and catering to their demands.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided a brief introduction and overview of the tactics of antifeminist backlash as reported by advocates who work with abused women. In sum, the study participants identified a staggering variety of tactics including: resistance to acting on legal and policy changes; victim blaming; discrediting women/feminists; individualization; changing the subject; and direct attacks and threats. These tactics were deployed at multiple levels of the social ecology, from individual level intervention in specific cases to the promotion of understandings of violence and abuse that jibe with abusers' articulated beliefs at the cultural level. The tactics were often contradictory and inconsistent, drawing upon sexist stereotypes while simultaneously making demands for formal equality.

Like sexism and woman abuse, antifeminist backlash is multivalent. As such, it requires a broad collection of responses. We need to strive to maintain the visibility of the larger gendered patterns in violence while maintaining the programs and services that have been specifically created in response to overwhelming and disproportionate demand for assistance for abused women. As indicated by pervasive, persistent, and striking sex differences in violence perpetration, gender is pertinent to all forms of violence. Returning to gender-blind language or gender oblivious programs will not solve the problems of inclusiveness, social inequality, or discriminatory justice practices. Instead, scholars can study multiple types of violence in specific

communities, generating accurate information that can guide program and policy formation for the communities where they are most needed.

There are several areas where further research is needed to understand and counter the backlash against the battered women's movement. As many of the interviewees noted, scholars need to continue to develop measures of violence that more accurately reflect its realities. They also need better measures of the social context of persistent inequality that continues to promote violence and abuse. Existing measures of social inequality are extremely crude and narrow. Many were developed in the 1960s and 1970s and are inadequate to identify much less assess contemporary manifestations of inequality-perpetuating beliefs, attitudes, practices, and structures.

Additional research is also required to investigate the outcomes of antifeminist backlash. Contexts such as the family courts, which are central to abused women's safety, have barely been investigated in the United States. As the Australian experience with family law reform and its evaluation shows, this is one area in which the demand for future research is heightened due to their impact on entire families. Careful attention to the interaction of justice and other systems are of central importance to ongoing work to prevent and intervene in violence against women. The respondents' accounts reveal the interlocking dynamics of oppression of abused women that, viewed individually, do not tell the whole story. As Marilyn Frye argued,

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence unavoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction (1983, p. 4).

Abused women's experiences might be understood in a similar fashion. By definition, criminologists focus on formal and informal justice systems. However, it is equally important to attend to the interplay of media, economics, academia, and culture if we want to end violence and abuse.

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