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# Battered and on Welfare: The Experiences of Women with the Family Violence Option

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*Noting the incidence of battered women on welfare, lawmakers passed the Family Violence Option (FVO), which allows states to offer waivers from welfare program requirements. Assumptions were made that many women would seek relief under the FVO. However, reports indicate that less than 5 percent of welfare recipients are receiving waivers. This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study that sought to explore the experiences of 29 battered women with the welfare system and the FVO in New York State. Their experiences suggest that changes in FVO screening process are necessary to fully implement the program in the way legislators intended.*

*Key words: Battered women, welfare, Family Violence Option, domestic violence*

## Introduction

Welfare reform drastically changed how women in poverty receive cash assistance. No longer entitled to benefits, women now must meet certain program requirements including workforce participation, cooperation with child support enforcement, and agreeing to drug and alcohol assessments and treatment within a limited time frame. Predictively, these changes caused a stir among a variety of advocacy groups, including battered women advocates who questioned how women victims of domestic violence would fare under these new requirements.

Research indicates that 20 to 32 percent of welfare recipients report current intimate partner violence and between 55 and 65 percent of recipients have experienced recent or past intimate partner violence (Allard, 1997; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Lidman,

1995; Lloyd, 1997; Raphael, 1996). Noting the incidence of battered women on welfare, lawmakers passed the Family Violence Option (FVO) as part of welfare reform in 1996. The FVO allows states the option of responding to battered women on welfare by providing waivers from program requirements. Almost all states have adopted the FVO or made specific provisions for battered women in their welfare plans (Raphael & Haennicke, 1999).

Based on the incidence of domestic violence among welfare recipients, assumptions were made that many women would come forward to seek relief under the FVO. However, early reports indicate that less than five percent of welfare recipients are receiving waivers (Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). In New York, one of many states that adopted the FVO, all applicants and recipients of welfare are screened with the Domestic Violence Screening Form (New York State, 1998). New York State tracked the number of welfare recipients who screened positive for domestic violence and received waivers. Between April 1998 and June 1999, 5,700 of the over 500,000 welfare recipients in New York State indicated during the screening process that they were in current danger of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse (New York State, 1999).

The rates of screening for domestic violence in New York State seem especially low in light of the organizational and financial relationship between the state and the shelter system. Domestic violence shelters in New York State rely on funding from the Department of Social Services (DSS), based on client eligibility for public assistance (Davis & Hagen, 1988). Thus, most, if not all, shelter clients in New York State are required to apply for welfare. In a situation in which screening is supposedly universal, the low rates at which New York State welfare recipients screen positive seem surprising. This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study that sought to explore and report the experiences of 29 battered women with the welfare system and the FVO in New York State. As will be seen, their experiences suggest that changes in FVO screening process are necessary to fully implement the program in the way legislators intended.

### Review of the Literature on the Implementation of the FVO

The discrepancy between the number of battered women who are receiving welfare benefits and the number of battered women

receiving the FVO waivers raises several questions about the implementation of the FVO. First, *could the disparity between the incidence of domestic violence among welfare recipients and those receiving waivers be explained as a problem of victims not self-disclosing?* If women view front-line workers as unsupportive or even judgmental, they may be unwilling to divulge highly personal and potentially embarrassing information about their abuse experiences.

To date there are no published studies that examine the perspectives of battered women on their interactions with front-line workers. In fact, very few studies exist that record welfare recipients' experiences of their treatment by front-line workers. Kingfisher (1996) asked welfare recipients in Michigan how they characterized the front-line workers. The recipients reported that front-line workers make arbitrary decisions, do not explain policies or procedures, and punish recipients if confronted. The recipients also characterized the workers as lazy, concerned with their own statuses, inaccessible, ignorant, and naysayers. Some recipients indicated that the workers were nice and helpful; however, the positive comments seemed minimal when compared to the long list of negative characterizations (Kingfisher, 1996).

Secombe, James, and Waters (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with 47 women receiving assistance from the welfare offices in Northern Florida. The women identified the welfare office as one setting in which they heard negative comments and felt stigmatized. The women claimed the workers tried to "make you feel bad or talk to you like dirt" (Secombe, James & Waters, 1998, p. 854), and suggested that the workers were more concerned with enforcing compliance than with helping clients.

Even in a supportive welfare environment one must examine what may happen if a domestic violence victim does disclose to welfare workers. If she is able to overcome her fears—fear of her abuser finding out, fear of retribution, fear of being labeled by the system as a "problem"—she faces the possibility of being in violation of other policies or being dealt with punitively (Davies, 1996; Pollack & Davis, 1997).

Battered women face the distinct possibility that the Child Protection Services (CPS) may be notified due to her "failure to protect" the children from the abusive environment (Brandwein, 1999; Howell, 1997; Kenney & Brown, 1996). Researchers esti-

mate that 30 to 60 percent of families with reported child abuse also experience domestic violence and vice versa (Edleson, 1999). Questions are raised regarding how to protect mothers and their children when at times, these goals of protection may be in direct opposition to each other.

Second, *could the discrepancy between the incidence of domestic violence among welfare recipients and those receiving waivers be a problem with front-line workers not screening for domestic violence?* In a study conducted in New York City in 1998 (Hearn, 2000), over 110 welfare recipients interviewed outside of welfare offices were asked three questions having to do with whether they were screened for domestic violence or informed of the FVO. Fifty-six percent of those responding reported they did not receive the screening form from their eligibility worker.

### Methodology

Challenged by the discrepancy between the number of battered women on welfare, the number receiving waivers, and in light of the limited scope of previous research, this study sought to explore and report the experiences of battered women with the welfare system and the FVO in New York State. The research questions included exploring the experiences of battered women with the various steps of the FVO such as the screening and the waiver process.

### Sample

Two counties in upstate New York were purposively selected for this study based on the demographics of the county, the proximity of the county to the researcher, and the feasibility and accessibility to domestic violence service providers, homeless shelters, community health centers, and other social service agencies.

To be included in this study, each respondent must: 1) have applied for or received welfare (cash assistance) in the previous six months; 2) self-identify as females, 18 years or older; and 3) report being current victims of domestic violence. Recruitment flyers were posted in domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, community health centers, and local vendors where low-income women frequented. Each woman was then screened for her involvement with the welfare system and domestic violence.

*Data Collection*

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 29 respondents in a mutually agreed upon location such as offices within agencies or domestic violence shelters and local restaurants. The questions for the interview included open-ended exploratory questions with probes and closed-ended questions. Questions focused on the various steps involved with the FVO such as the screening, getting to the DVL, obtaining waivers, and receiving referrals.

With the respondents' permission, all interviews were tape-recorded.

*Data Analysis*

The data collected from this qualitative design were analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each interview tape was transcribed and analyzed to identify key words or phrases that became codes. These initial codes were then merged into categories and themes using the constant comparison method.

The limitations to this study are inherent to qualitative designs and include the potential biases of the participants and the researcher, the inability to generalize to a larger population, and potential bias in the collection and analysis of the data. The intent was to construct *their* reality of their experiences based on their perceptions and memories and not to construct *the* reality for all battered women on welfare. To insure the integrity of the data, triangulation methods were used and data were independently coded and placed into key categories that emerged from the analysis. Comparison of the codes resulted in a 93 percent match, indicating strong inter-rater reliability for the results of this study.

### The Women Who Participated

Twenty-nine women—from various backgrounds and with different experiences—participated in the study. Sixteen women heard about the study from the local domestic violence service provider and of these, most (n=14) were currently residing in the shelter. There were 14 African American women, 11 white women, and 3 women of another racial background. Separate from racial background, 3 of the 29 women in the study identified

themselves as being of Hispanic or Latina origin. The ages of the women ranged from 21 to 49 years of age with an average age of 35.

The following sections reveal two themes—the screening process and disclosure decisions—that emerged from the data analysis. All of the names of the women have been changed to protect their confidentiality. Furthermore, the women’s actual quotes have been edited but the integrity of their comments has been maintained.

### The Screening Process

In New York, everyone who applies for or receives welfare must be screened using the Domestic Violence Screening form. When shown the form, over half of the women (n=16) in this study either said that they saw the form or they thought they saw the form. Some of the women recalled seeing one question on domestic violence as part of a checklist of problems that included substance abuse, smoking, last eviction, and so forth. Some women found the form in the midst of a large application packet while others were handed the form along with a substance abuse screening form. Many of the women did not see the Domestic Violence Screening form (n=13) and were not asked about domestic violence by the front-line workers. A few mentioned that they wished they had seen the form because they might have received help to escape their abusive relationships.

No, this is not in your packet. When you look at the top, it reminds you of the landlord’s form. But I never seen this. No, I would remember this. My goodness. This would have been good too.

- Kathy

Yeah, they didn’t ask me no questions. They didn’t ask if I needed help. You could look at me and see that I have been battered. It was very obvious. A lot of times, I was just waiting for them to tell me to pack up my kids’ stuff and my stuff and they’d hide me away or something but that didn’t happen and I just never pursued it because I felt like they didn’t care.

- Yasmine

### Disclosure Decisions

The women who were screened for domestic violence were asked how they responded to the screening form, the checklist,

or to any direct inquiries about domestic violence. The women who deliberately chose not to disclose (n=9) talked about their reasons for not identifying themselves as victims. One reason was a lack of trust in the worker's ability to maintain confidentiality, leaving the women open to further problems with the abuser.

I don't think DSS has what it takes . . . to hide what they are doing. Any of the people that I know that are mean to their partner are relentless . . .  
- Rachel

She just says it stays confidential and apparently the way I understood it, she keeps that stuff. But some of that stuff . . . wanting copies of this and that . . . DSS has no business with any of that.  
- Caroline

The women also thought that it would not help if they were identified as victims; in fact, many thought that more problems would surface as a result of their disclosure. These problems included having less control over their lives and being required to attend counseling, parenting classes, or go into a domestic violence shelter.

I think I checked no to everything. Because how it was explained to me was that it was to put me in more counseling . . .  
- Betty

I was learning the less I said yes to the easier the process. They would ask more of me and then again have another person involved in my case and it was not going to help but only hinder.  
- Rachel

A few women talked about their fears of getting into more trouble and running the risk of losing their children or benefits.

I lied. I thought they would take him [my son] away . . . Just because I was abused.  
- Betty

Yeah, depending on who I talk to. I run the risk of losing my kids and I also run the risk of losing Social Services because in the first place, he's not even supposed to be there. Not only that, I'm on Section 8. And that's the first thing Social Services is gonna say, and they're right. They're paying your rent. You ain't supposed to have this man there.  
- Angela

And before they [DSS] send you to a battered women's shelter where you can get the help that you need, they call CPS. And they send CPS to your house and a majority of the time your kids are taken.  
- Yasmine

Some of the women experienced the workers as being judgmental and skeptical of their situations; a few women compared applying for welfare with their abuse experiences and wondered if they would have been better off if they had stayed in the abusive relationship.

I honestly needed help. And I don't think that if you don't qualify for help and you're looking for help that you should be yelled at and accused of things you haven't done. I wasn't trying to trick them. I was trying to see if I needed help. If I don't qualify for them, then I deserve a polite explanation and possibly they could give me some other referral sources. [Instead], they abused me. They yelled at me and verbally abused me.

- Linda

Interviewer: Let me try and understand this. You're saying that sometimes systems can also abuse you—like DSS? "Absolutely and then you have to weigh your options and you have to compromise and you have to say which one is the lesser of the two evils."

- Liz

To tell you the truth, I was getting very, very frustrated and I was getting very angry because, I see other people going in there and they were getting whatever they wanted, when they wanted it. The women who I dealt with made me feel like I should not have left [my husband].

- Carla

## Discussion

The women in this study offer an interesting view of the FVO based on their experiences of being screened and their willingness to disclose. While all of the women identified themselves as current victims of domestic violence, consistent with the study selection criteria, why were only half of them screened for domestic violence? Of those screened, why did some women choose not to disclose their abuse? Several answers are possible given the women's responses in this study.

First, the intended procedure for screening was inconsistently implemented. New York State policies require *every* person who applies for or receives welfare to be screened with the Domestic Violence Screening form. Many of the women interviewed (45%) did not see the domestic violence screening form nor were asked about domestic violence. Several of these women indicated that they wished they had known more about the FVO and the services available for battered women on welfare. Similarly, Hearn's

(2000) study indicated that 56 percent of the women surveyed did not receive the domestic violence screening form. Clearly, more research is needed to identify how many women are screened for domestic violence and how the screening form is distributed.

Second, several of the women who were screened for domestic violence refused to disclose their abuse experiences. Some did not disclose for fear of creating more problems, thinking that they might be judged unable to protect their children from harm and CPS would become involved. Others thought that DSS would have more control over their lives, forcing them to jump through more hoops, attend counseling or other classes, or be forced into a domestic violence shelter. A few women thought that DSS would be incapable of maintaining confidentiality and would thus put them at risk of further abuse from their partner. Finally, some women feared being judged or questioned by the DSS worker about the abuse.

### Implications

Is the FVO helpful to battered women on welfare? It is difficult to answer this question at this point. It seems that the major barrier to implementing the FVO rests with the screening process. Either women are not disclosing, based on real fears of losing their children or further complicating their lives, or else the front-line workers are not adequately screening for domestic violence. Regardless, to encourage women to self-disclose, the system must be prepared to respond sensitively and not punitively by, for example, removing their children or creating more system complications.

The women in this study revealed a strong motive for not disclosing their abuse experiences. More research is needed that examines the interview conditions that are needed for women to feel comfortable disclosing their abuse experiences. The research should also examine what factors encouraged them to disclose and the consequences suffered for disclosing their abuse experiences.

Finally, the current philosophy of reducing the welfare rolls and promoting work activities creates obstacles that discourage front-line workers from screening for domestic violence. Absent a change in its current philosophy, the welfare system will not

be able to appropriately identify or respond to battered women on welfare. An environment in which battered women feel safe to disclose their abuse without fear of retribution or judgment from front-line workers must be developed. To that end, front-line workers must have the time to respond to clients and a work environment that encourages them to focus on the needs of their clients, not on whether they meet eligibility criteria or how quickly they can go to work. The workers must be trained in understanding the challenges of domestic violence and the appropriate ways to respond to victims in a non-blaming manner. The application and screening process must be improved to identify battered women and to offer assistance that is wanted. Additionally, front-line workers must provide better explanations of the limits of confidentiality regarding child abuse to lessen the very real fears of recipients.

In conclusion, the results of this study provide a glimpse into the struggles and triumphs battered women face when dealing with the welfare system or the FVO. Telling these women's stories is only a first step to understanding their experiences; much more work is needed to truly understand how to provide needed, appropriate, and desired services for battered women on welfare.

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