

## Reflection

### SUSAN SCHECHTER

As I browse through the pages of *Women and Male Violence* more than twenty years after its publication, my attention drifts to the books beside it on my desk, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the current rage of my women's reading group and probably thousands of others. Although *Mrs. Dalloway*, and its retelling in *The Hours*, is the almost perfect read for my middle age, thirty years ago it was another of Woolf's books—and the setting in which I found it—that rocked my youth and laid down a path to *Women and Male Violence*.

In the early 1970s, during my very first class in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union School, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was a revelation about the limitations and creative possibilities in women's lives. But reading it was only one of many revelatory moments in courses on everything from literature to car repair to socialist feminist theory. It was in the Union that women began organizing previously unimaginable projects such as Jane, the underground abortion service in Chicago, and drafted hundreds of statements about reproductive freedom and women's health. Women affiliated with the Liberation Union went on to work within groups such as Women Employed, Chicago Women Against Rape, and, in my case, the Chicago Abused Women's Coalition. Without the Women's Liberation Union and the larger feminist movement surrounding it, *Women and Male Violence* would not exist.

In the late 1970s I gave my first speeches about violence against women, cutting and pasting from the only good source available, Del Martin's recently published *Battered Wives*. I worked with other feminists in the Abused Women's Coalition to organize the first shelter in Chicago. The group found excitement in almost everything: in working collectively, starting new organizations, laying bare previously hidden aspects of women's oppression, and helping women and their children to safety.

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 else. 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.

As I interviewed activists around the country and read innumerable documents, digging through meeting minutes and the narrative fragments of how women organized shelters and statewide and national organizations, I also heard disturbing claims about the origins of the work. I documented one of these claims in the original Introduction to *Women*

*and Male Violence*. In 1981, the president of the National Association of Social Workers (an organization to which I belong) stated, “The battered woman is not new. Rather, it is society’s awareness of this problem that is new.” While Nancy Humphrey, the president of NASW, was not completely wrong, as I claimed at the time, she missed the point that became one of my reasons for writing *Women and Male Violence*. As I stated then,

“Society” did not recognize battered women; feminists and grassroots activists did. Nowhere in her Introduction is this fact acknowledged, so, unwittingly her statement rewrites the history of the battered women’s movement.

Because I was determined that this history not be lost, *Women and Male Violence* was finished quickly. Looking back, I realize that the book was written with very little movement history under its belt. It roughly covers the time period between 1975 and 1981, the first six heady years. The ensuing decades have introduced hundreds of new projects and taught many of us about our blind spots—for example, about our inability to respond to the needs of children and families living with poverty, multiple experiences of violence, and racism.

Someday soon I would love to hand over the files in my basement, filled with notes and minutes from the 1970s and ’80s, to the next generation of activists and writers interested in the history of the battered women’s movement. It deserves at least several more tellings. Personally it is a history filled with great satisfaction and sometimes heartache. As I work within the movement today, I am still amazed at what has been accomplished, surprised and disappointed by what we failed to foresee, and awed by the passion, pain, and renewal in the work of liberating women from tyranny and violence. Luckily for me, revelations continue. May they also continue for those who come next!