

Partner Assault Response (PAR) Programs for Women
An Ethical Dilemma
Presentation on Practice

Conference Presentation at:
Bringing Together Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence Sectors:
Implications for Research, Policy, & Practice

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This presentation explores the ethical dilemma facing Partner Assault Response (PAR) Programs for women charged with Domestic Violence (Intimate Partner Violence) in Ontario. It is based on the experiences of The Men's Program (CMHA Grey Bruce), which has provided PAR groups for men since 1989. Women facing domestic violence related charges are increasingly mandated to attend PAR Programs to fulfil their probation, early intervention, or 810 peace bond conditions. In 2016 as part of the contractual agreement with the Ministry of the Attorney General (MAG), the Men's Program was required to provide PAR groups for women.

The PAR program was originally created for men. Its founding principles and expectations are based on a feminist analysis with the goal of ending violence against women and children. The Men's Program resisted offering PAR for women because relationship violence by women against men is different in nature than violence by men against women (Michael Johnson, Typology of Violence 2008). Offering PAR for women creates various ethical dilemmas from the feminist perspective because:

- Women who are charged with DV often have long histories of physical and sexual violence and may still be living with an abusive partner
- Women are more likely than men to admit their violent behaviour and are consequently more likely to be charged,
- Women involved with the criminal justice system need support, strategies for empowerment, safety, and ways to move forward in their lives without being

charged again.

Although we recognize that women benefit from support and counselling, involvement in the PAR program usually follows the criminalization of their resistance to relationship violence. The cumulative effect of women's involvement in the criminal justice system regularly causes further harm and trauma by undermining their resilience and autonomy, increasing isolation, risking job loss, threatening access to children and increasing their economic vulnerability. The expansion of PAR programing for women reflects a gender-neutral approach to mandatory charging but leads to further women's oppression. As a result, despite being designed to increase women's safety, PAR programs for women risk colluding with a justice system that further oppresses women.

We will explore how a PAR Program (the Men's Program) collaborates with VAW services to meet these challenges while delivering Women's PAR in Grey Bruce. Together we decided on a Violence and Trauma informed approach that pays particular attention to women's life stories, discussing the nature of gender based violence and its effects, and exploring avenues to support women's solidarity and empowerment. We also will highlight the need for fundamental differences between Men's and Women's PAR.

Discussion will include:

- How and why women are charged with DV
- Common themes in women's stories of coercive control and sexual violence in context of their own use of violence towards partners
- The impacts of past trauma, violence, systemic oppression (Justice response, Child Welfare, Mental Health) on women and their children
- Alternatives to the present criminal justice approaches
- How to best support women and make system change