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Negotiating the problem: the DHSS and research on violence in marriage

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In their chapter, Jalna Hanmer and Diana Leonard describe the results of their long-term watching brief on developments in the research funding by the DHSS on marital violence. Renewed consciousness of marital violence arose from the activities of Women's Aid and the Women's Movement culminating in a Parliamentary Select Committee reporting in 1975. The DHSS, required to do something, agreed to fund academic research, and the academic response was, according to the authors, 'a characteristic hands up, eyes down'. As well as reviewing the history of the DHSS research funding and detailing the systematic exclusion of the practitioners — Women's Aid — from DHSS-funded research, Hanmer and Leonard explore the territory between research and policy, and the possibilities which exist for funding agencies to define — and thus circumscribe — a problem.

This chapter is concerned to explore some of the politics of research. It looks at what was defined as 'real research' in one instance and at who was enabled to undertake it, viz: the processes by which a state institution (the DHSS) attempted

to delineate and restrict the questions to be explored in a particular area (marital violence). Having observed developments in this field over the last decade from the standpoint of both activists in the Women's Liberation Movement (including Women's Aid) and sociologists working within university departments, we became convinced that good research questions (i.e. those which extend the analysis and our understanding and which suggest fruitful changes in policy) come only from working with those involved in trying to improve their situations, and with continuing study of a particular area over an extended period of time.

In the field of violence to women, the efforts of women to help each other began with the discovery that many women were abused in the home, which widened to a concern about public sexual violence and the representation of sexual violence in pornography, then to the sexual abuse of children, particularly girls, by men in positions of trust and authority in relation to them, and sexual harassment at work. Each stage enlarged the definition of the problem. The role played by the state in patterning individual behaviour, and the ways it critically affects the problems women face (by, e.g., granting violent men access to children, or the particular horrific situation it creates for immigrant women) and the way its agents restructure the problem of male violence as one of women's mental health only slowly became apparent. This widening of the problem and clarification of the role of the state came not from academic studies, but from practice in refuges for battered women, rape crisis centres, and local women's groups. By following the twists and turns in understanding and developments at grassroots level, and witnessing the occasions of outright confrontation between a social movement and its opponents, we have been able to see the formulation, and reformulation, of central issues as possible research questions. And by reflecting on and constantly reappraising such long-term patterns as we describe here, we have seen and tried to understand how a dominant ideology (that of the happy nuclear family as the best basis for a stable society) is maintained under changing conditions and against substantial criticism.

In this paper we shall trace the origins of the call for research

on violence in the home by looking first at the growth of Women's Aid and how this led to the setting up of a Select Committee on Marital Violence. We will examine how the DHSS became involved and why they suggested research (1971-1976). We then look at the first projects they considered funding and the response of Women's Aid to the information they were able to obtain. We also look at how Women's Aid were shut out of research formulation and the history of their relationship with DHSS research initiatives from 1976 to 1982. We end by describing the major research questions that have arisen out of the experience of Women's Aid and we have added a postscript on what we think the DHSS and other state agencies will do next.

We shall argue that, from the start, the DHSS did not want to know the extent of the problem and sought ways to respond which would have minimal impact on existing policies and procedures. In 1976 its response was to commission particular types of research. However, the research produced exactly the conclusions which those who knew about the area (i.e. the National Women's Aid Federation, NWAFF)¹ had initially put forward and which the DHSS did not like. This is rare. The literature would have led us to expect that funded research would reproduce broadly the values of the funders. This makes the example particularly interesting in relation to the study of the role of the state in reproducing, or maintaining, dominant ideology and practice and resistance to it, for it shows the (moderately successful) use of evasive tactics by a subject group, and emphasises that researchers are distinct from, and can at times be in opposition to, the state agency itself. However, the example does not reflect particularly well on academic researchers, as far as we are concerned, for they accepted large sums of money which might (and we know it is only 'might') have been otherwise spent. And, of course, the DHSS is not beaten. It still hopes the problem will go away (i.e. fade from public consciousness). If it does not, we anticipate the Department will simply try a new tack.

The origins of research on 'domestic violence'

In the late 1960s small groups of women began to meet to

discuss their personal lives in order to raise their consciousness about the social situations in which they found themselves. These groups discerned many areas of oppression common to the women within them, some of which were very painful and embarrassing to reveal, including violence from the men with whom the women lived. As more groups came into existence they began to work together and went on to develop local women's centres. The incidence and savagery of violence in the home did not become fully evident until there were women's centres, probably because until then no effective action could be taken. But women soon began to ask to be allowed to stay in the centres in order to escape from their husband's abuse.

The first women's centre to respond to this request was in Chiswick, London, in 1971, even though the centre's lease from the Council specifically forbade the use of the premises for residential purposes, given their inadequacy (Sutton, 1978 and Rose, 1978). The Women's Liberation Movement realised that a major area of women's oppression was being uncovered, and within six months the second house (or 'refuge') opened in Lambeth. Groups to set up refuges formed rapidly and by 1975 there were thirty-five around England, Scotland and Wales, some with and some in the process of obtaining houses. Many of the early premises were acquired by squatting, because hostility from local authorities to this form of aid to women was widespread. Every refuge that opened was quickly filled to overflowing, a pattern that continues to this day.

The refuges, particularly the one that developed from the women's centre in Chiswick, received wide publicity. Erin Pizzey, originally one of a number of women active in the centre, became the sole organiser of Chiswick Women's Aid when she was able to negotiate a house from the property company, Bovis. Through her husband, Jack Pizzey, a producer on the BBC programme *Man Alive*, she had contacts with the media which she was able to exploit with panache. This enabled many women in need to find out where they and their children could go for safety, and helped enormously to publicise the issue. As public concern grew the government responded by establishing a Parliamentary Select

Committee in 1974.

By 1974, Erin Pizzey was in receipt of a small DHSS grant for national work and after the first national conference for those involved in Women's Aid, she appointed a worker to contact other groups. In 1975, at the second national conference, representatives from the different refuges decided to form a national organisation, the National Women's Aid Federation (NAAF). Pizzey's refusal to join with almost all the other groups became known within Women's Aid as 'the split' and decisively influenced NAAF's relationship with central government over the next few years. 'The split' intensified efforts to influence the Select Committee on Marital Violence and it also affected subsequent relations with the DHSS and researchers.

Bringing oppression to light and putting it on the political agenda is a difficult task — and the purpose of a political movement. It took four years, from 1971 to 1975, to bring violence to women out of the shadows and turn it from a private sorrow into a public issue. With the establishment of a Select Committee to investigate the issue and to make recommendations for Government action, the first stage of the struggle could be said to have been won (Parliamentary Select Committee, 1975).

The NAAF submission to the Select Committee stressed the need for solid financial support for the refuges which existed, and for more refuges. From the start all the Women's Aid groups had been desperately short of money, since providing a refuge requires at least the maintenance of a house and the provision of material help for women and children who often leave home with nothing but the clothes on their backs. By 1974 most refuges were surviving primarily on rent payments to individual women made by the Supplementary Benefits Commission, an always quite inadequate sum. Despite these difficulties, the Federation wanted to keep refuge provision in the voluntary sector. They did not believe local authority social service departments, with their history of unhelpful social work attitudes and practices towards women assaulted by men in the family, were capable of making an adequate response.

On the recommendation of NAAF, the Select Committee

visited several local authority areas to see the appalling conditions in which refuges were working because of a lack of funds and governmental co-operation. The Committee also asked for evidence from relevant central Government departments who were required to respond. The DHSS in its submissions made it clear that it was not interested in extending the work of local authority social service departments to encompass provision for battered women, even though social work with families is a prime responsibility of the personal social services. The DHSS had to offer to do something, however, given the amount of public and parliamentary attention focusing on this issue. Their suggestion was to undertake research.

The Select Committee accepted the recommendations of both the DHSS and NAAF by concluding that the DHSS should undertake research and that aid to women should remain in the voluntary sector. It suggested funding for the latter should come from local authority discretionary grants to refuges, and that the DHSS should finance a national co-ordinating network.

The government accepted the views of the Select Committee, and £75,000 was allocated for research through the DHSS. After some negotiation, £15,000 was given to the Federation to organise the national network rather than to Erin Pizzey who was competing for funds. In accepting the central grant, NAAF won the battle for recognition but in effect agreed that funding for local groups would remain discretionary. This has proved to be a major stumbling block, as even today many refuges receive no local authority grants, and even those that do get a substantially lower rate than comparable local authority hostel accommodation.

The DHSS and research on marital violence; and WA's response

The DHSS then circulated a letter to a number of heads of university departments asking for research proposals, and its Research Liaison Group on Homelessness and Addictions was given the task of sifting through the replies. The DHSS have subsequently claimed that they canvassed widely for

research suggestions and that this step was 'relatively unusual' (DHSS, 1978). Some circulars doubtless went no further than the head of department's wastepaper basket, while others were replied to or handed on. We know that in a number of cases the heads of departments themselves responded with research proposals, while in others the circular was passed to a member of staff who had already done work in a (seen to be) related area (though not to his research assistants who had done the fieldwork and much of the analysis).

So far as we know, no head of department told the DHSS that they should go to the people who knew about battered women, nor did many, if any, professors look around for unemployed women sociologists with experience of Women's Aid. The old response of eyes down, palms up, carried the day and those most advantageously placed lined up with their projects (Nicolaus, 1972).

The first news that the Federation had that money was now available from the DHSS came through individual members of women's aid groups employed in universities. But we ourselves, who were known to be interested in violence to women and the family, and were employed in universities, didn't hear for some time, and never saw a circular. At this time NAAF was negotiating for funds to set up its central office and it had already applied for, and been refused, money for an information officer. At the next meeting with the DHSS, headed by Michael Meacher, Under-Secretary of State, members of the finance group were very angry at what they interpreted as a betrayal of their organisation by the DHSS, since NAAF in its submission to the Select Committee on Violence in Marriage had asked to be kept informed of research funding. NAAF knew that their member groups were the major source of information about battered women and their children. The DHSS failure to consult was interpreted as a deliberate bypassing of them. It was feared that the DHSS would sponsor research antithetical to the interests of women; that the abuse of women within their own homes would again be marginalised by being reduced to a personal problem, and by placing the blame upon the women themselves ('they ask for it').

Women's Aid's view was that women are victimised because

men are permitted by society to maltreat them. It is the position of women in society that is central to understanding why women are battered. Men and women have differential power in the family and society generally, and no understanding of male violence to women in the home can proceed without a recognition of this basic fact that informs all social structures and processes. In relation to women, men occupy superordinate social and familial positions regardless of their social class.

In 1976 women in the WA were primarily concerned to confront violence to women by direct action, not theoretical exposition. They sought to make the issue public and to provide refuges as an escape route from marriage or a breathing space so women could reassess their lives. There was considerable hostility to the idea of research being done in the area. This hostility often came from group members who had been through higher education in the late 1960s and whose understandings came from this experience. They saw research as an alienating process whereby accounts were extracted from events or experience and divided into understandings derived from the social location and politics of the researcher. Research methodology, with its emphasis on so-called objectivity, was seen as inevitably leading both to a denial of reality and to the confirmation of the dominant ideology.

None the less, a research group was among the first sub-groups to be set up by the newly formed Federation, since sufficient member groups were aware that the distribution of funds for research was tied to the issue of defining (or redefining) 'the problem', and that the previous 'do nothing' approach of the personal social services could and would change if the status quo was threatened and/or if public understandings of wife abuse changed. They therefore anticipated that the struggle for 'the explanation' of wife battering would be metaphorically bloody.

Members of the research group thought it important to monitor any DHSS – or otherwise funded – research that might take place. They were convinced that those sections of the state whose role it would be to manage this 'social problem' would, of necessity, seek to realign understanding of its nature in ways that did not question prevailing cultural

interests -- in this instance the maintenance of male social and familial domination. In addition, while far from clear on how it was to be done, the research group wanted to find ways of making accessible the information about battering contained within the experiences of individual Women's Aid groups.

At the NAAF conference in 1976, the research group presented a paper entitled 'Research Grants or What Do the Poor Have but Their Information?', in which they made these points and put forward the strategies the DHSS might adopt given its commitment to research (NAAF, 1976a):

- (1) it could fund the Federation or individual members to undertake information-gathering and processing;
- (2) it could negotiate with the Federation for access to the information already gathered;
- (3) it could fund its own people to enter refuges one by one to gather information; or
- (4) it could try to bypass NAAF in some way.

The DHSS seemed already to have ruled out (1) and (2); so the question was, how should NAAF respond to (3) and (4)? It was decided to:

- (i) firm up the initial statement to the DHSS that its researchers could not presume access to member refuges, by saying they would *not* get access;
- (ii) put pressure on individuals seeking grants not to proceed, but to tell the DHSS to approach NAAF instead; and
- (iii) to set up alternative research and ways of doing research.

The first strategy was not wholly successful. Not all groups were affiliated to the Federation and one particular group which *was* affiliated supported a researcher who was seeking funds to study their refuge. NAAF agreed because of this support and because she was a woman and her DHSS grant proposal asked for a very small sum of money.

The second strategy -- to use the British Sociological Association network to tell men not to 'colonise' the area --

worked with some but not with others (there being always the argument 'If I don't take it, someone worse will').

The third strategy produced a number of pieces of alternative research.

- (a) A pamphlet was swiftly published criticising existing research, (NAAF, 1976b). This focused largely on the victim blaming perspective, which assumes that women have control over their relationships, and could stop the violence or the relationship if they wanted to. If they did not, it was because they had personality defects.
- (b) The Federation's finance group reviewed its efforts to get money to employ an information officer. She would enable groups systematically to monitor and write up information in the three areas already seen to be of key significance: income maintenance, housing, and law enforcement, and would disseminate the knowledge and expertise gained by the groups to relevant others. The three areas selected were chosen not only because they were the ones which constantly recurred as problems in the day-to-day running of refuges, but also so as to focus on *state* services which *prevented* women from escaping violent men. This, it was hoped, would challenge the dominant ideology that women were responsible for what happened because they chose to stay with (or to return to) violent husbands or cohabiters.

The Minister agreed to reconsider this proposal and, in 1976, funds were made available. But this appointment was never considered to be 'proper' research by the DHSS. The Minister seemed to be responding to a political situation and the sum involved, £5,000 per annum, was minuscule. On the Federation's part, the post was deliberately called an information officer because member groups did not want the term research to be used, and 'officer' was seen as sufficient concession to the DHSS.

- (c) The April 1976 NAAF conference also considered a preliminary draft of a research project on the housing needs of battered women. This project was brought to

the meeting by a member of a refuge group who had been negotiating with the Department of the Environment but who had decided not to continue with an individual application. The aims of the research, the areas to be investigated and the questions to be asked were carefully scrutinised and, after considerable debate, a research design emerged. A survey of women living in refuges at a given moment in time was to be followed by personal interviews with a smaller sample focused solely on housing. This was accepted by member groups as in no way likely to produce information which could be used to discredit battered women, and an acceptable form of state subsidy. The proposal was accepted and funded by the DOE (Binney, Harkell and Nixon, 1981). Possibly the relationship with this government department developed in a different way because the DOE, unlike the DHSS, does not have as a primary task the regulation of family life and the maintenance of an idealised conception of the family. It was also recognised at the time as a new and lively Department.

Time has shown the 1976 NAAF research group analysis to have been substantially correct. The DHSS did seek an unchanged definition of the problem, and it did try to work around/ignore the NAAF and to penetrate refuges using its own men (and women). Over the following six years a gulf has existed between the aims and practices of this section of the state and the aims of the WLM and Women's Aid, with occasional points of open conflict between it and the DHSS research bureaucracy, and between the DHSS and individual research projects. Before looking at these points of conflict, we will first outline the sort of research the DHSS was interested in.

Projects the DHSS was considering in 1976

NAAF was unable to obtain information on the full range of applicants for the DHSS money and of course the reason why some research projects were accepted and others rejected is

confidential. They did know, however, of the three which were finally funded and of two which were seriously considered; and also of two submitted by women lecturers and one by a woman professor which were rejected (though the last was not markedly different from one which was ultimately accepted).

The two considered but not funded (one because it was withdrawn) came from senior men who proposed to compare in depth a small number of couples where marital disharmony involved violence, with those where it did not, and/or who had other kinds of problem. Although these projects did not survive, the DHSS did not lose interest in this approach. The Homelessness and Addictions Research Liaison Group's document on funding of February 1978 (DHSS, 1978) included a wish to see research into factors that distinguish violent and non-violent couples. Behind this continuing interest lay a belief that violence from men to women in the family is deviant behaviour and qualitatively different from other means of resolving conflicts in interpersonal relations.

The other three proposals under discussion in 1976, which were funded were:

1 Mervyn Merch, University of Bristol, who intended to investigate views on the problems of wife abuse and show how they are being met by relevant professionals, such as solicitors, doctors and police, by interviewing these professionals as well as women who have been in refuges. The sums initially under consideration were £5,000 per annum (total £15,000). The report of this project is now with the DHSS.

2 Professor Ronald Frankenberg, Keele University, who was understood to be seeking £5,000-6,000 per annum (total £15,000-18,000). His original intention was to employ a social worker for three years who, during the first eighteen months, would look at what services, if any, existed in the Keele area. Professor Frankenberg had contacts with Trent Trust, a women's aid house in Keele (not affiliated to the Federation) in which he hoped the social worker could have a room for the second eighteen months so that a twenty-four-hour advisory service could be set up and monitored. This latter idea was dropped before the grant was made. His application also suggested a study of the family networks of

battered women in order to determine if social isolation was a significant factor in marital violence. This was rejected by the DHSS. Ultimately, his research concentrated on interviews with agencies and battered women on the definition of the problem and the evaluation of services, including the police. The report of this project is now with the DHSS.

3 Jan Pahl, University of Kent, who was given £1,500 to study the Canterbury refuge (NAAF affiliated). Her report was published by the DHSS (1978) and a further substantial grant was given to her to follow up women who had left the refuge. The report of this project is now with the DHSS.

The DHSS organised report-back in 1978

The first invitation to NAAF to state its views on research needs to the DHSS did not occur until two years later, in 1978, when the Homelessness and Addictions Research Liaison Group called a meeting for researchers into marital violence. But, even then, this was apparently something of a mistake and occurred only because one of the national workers happened to be in the right place at the right time to overhear mention of the meeting. She requested an invitation for NAAF representatives to give a paper.

This paper politely welcomed the inclusion of WA in DHSS discussions on research around domestic violence, and again asserted that the causes of violence from men to women in the family are linked directly to the position of women in society. It called on the DHSS to recognise in its research effort the power dimension exposed by a rhetorical question from Willie Hamilton MP (when Chairman of the Select Committee on Violence in Marriage three years before). He had asked: 'Why should it be the wife and children who have to leave and not the husband? . . . Why should we not create hostels for battering husbands?' (Parliamentary Select Committee, 1975, p. 190). In practice *and* in law men do *not* have to leave home and turn to hostels; the proposal is nonsensical. The paper again gave housing, law enforcement and income maintenance as priority areas for research. These, it argued, are the social arrangements that currently impede

but could assist a woman in altering her situation. It also said that social work intervention is largely useless and suggested that research emphasis on it diverts attention from more meaningful areas.

The DHSS paper to this meeting, however, said that their research effort was going to remain restricted to two areas; the setting up and role of a woman's refuge, and the attitudes and responses of helping agencies to the problems of the battered women.

A major project ongoing at this time and represented at this meeting was that of Rebecca and Russell Dobash. This was sponsored by the Scottish Home and Health Department (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). They had applied to the DHSS Cycle of Deprivation Committee for funds to extend their research from Scotland into England in 1976, but were refused; possibly in part, they think, because of their commitment to an analysis of battering that recognises the social position of women as the major contributory cause of their position in marriage. The Dobashes were nevertheless invited to the DHSS meeting for researchers into marital violence and they were unwittingly responsible for an interesting and revealing exchange between the representatives from the DHSS and the DOE about the relation between research and state policy.

Towards the end of the meeting, the DOE representative asked the Dobashes to give their views on the policy implications of their research. The DHSS spokesman objected, saying that the question was inappropriate. After an exchange in which the DOE representative maintained that research was only undertaken in her department to aid policy decisions and that the views of researchers were always of interest even if not always followed, while the DHSS replied that policy was not the concern of researchers, a compromise was reached and all DHSS-funded researchers were asked to give their views. The researchers appeared to be somewhat disconcerted by this exchange. Only the Dobashes were prepared to specify the basic knowledge needed to inform policy decisions. Whether politic or truthful responses, this was a telling moment for those who believe that DHSS research is so much flannel, designed to cover and hide rather than to

expose and confront.

The restriction of the DHSS research effort to refuge provision and the attitudes and responses of helping agencies does not allow engagement with major issues, but rather hangs on to the outworn ideology that the interpersonal explains all – even if this ideology is not recognised and acknowledged by specific projects. A belief in the explanatory power of the interpersonal leads inexorably to a belief that there is an opposite but equal issue regarding battered husbands, and this was raised at the 1978 meeting by a woman social work teacher and researcher. This game was played out in full in the US in 1978 when data collected by Murray Straus, Richard Gelles and Susan Steinmetz was used to support a report of widespread husband assault in an article for *Victimology* (Steinmetz, 1978). Their research methodology was contested by Elizabeth and Joseph Pleck, Marilyn Grossman, and Pauline Bart (1978) and the debate raged among those with knowledge of wife abuse. The British intellectual struggle never reached this point, perhaps because research money was not so lavishly dispensed, but the same attitudes are readily available to anyone working with and for battered women and, without doubt, lurk just under the surface among many researchers in this country (for example, see Freeman, 1979, and Bates, 1981).

Report-back in 1979

A second DHSS-sponsored seminar for researchers was organised in September 1979 by Mervyn Merch at the University of Bristol. Membership was again restricted and Women's Aid did not learn of the meeting in advance and was not invited.

By this time several new projects had received small funding:

- (i) a survey of the statutory and voluntary response to domestic violence in Wales (Dr Sara Delamont, University of Cardiff);
- (ii) a study of the experience of marital violence and the social work response (Professor Peter Leonard and

- Eileen Macleod, University of Warwick);
- (iii) an examination of the problem and evaluation of the present provision for battered women (Anne Elsey, Cranfield Institute of Technology);
- (iv) an assessment of a 24-hour crisis centre which covered marital violence among other problems (Mr S. Kew, Institute of Family and Environmental Research).

The areas identified for further research appear to have been expanded as a result of this meeting to include the nature and causes of domestic violence, but no research projects were funded in these areas (DHSS, 1980). Their emphasis on social work provision and on predictive factors, the escalation of violence, and ways in which conflicts between partners can be resolved or managed so as to prevent violence, would seem, however, to present the same limitations on understanding as before.

Report-back 1981: the Kent conference

The next point of conflict between WA and the DHSS came at a large meeting financed by the Homelessness and Addictions subgroup in 1981 at the University of Kent at Canterbury. This included representatives from many social work agencies, the criminal justice system, housing, and research institutions such as the SSRC. The English Federation's representation (NWAFF had become WAFE)¹ at the conference was set at five, but this increased by some women obtaining entry from the organiser, Jan Pahl, as *bona fide* researchers, and by some WA members finding places through other organisations. The final delegation stood at thirteen. The programme was to consist of reports on the projects funded by the DHSS, a WAFE researcher on the DOE project, and Rebecca and Russell Dobash. WAFE negotiated for three months to be allowed to deliver a document prepared by its research group as a plenary paper but without success. This detailed (over 10 pages) work which the DHSS *ought* to have commissioned – or which it should fund in future.

As they were mandated by the English Federation to put

its position to the conference, its representatives prepared a statement asking for a democratic vote from the conference floor on WAFE's right to present its paper. After being threatened with expulsion if they did not sit down and be quiet, the organisers eventually agreed to allow the Federation's representatives to go ahead.

WAFE suggested research topics ranging through the limits women set on their own behaviour for fear of reprisals (as opposed to 'what women do to precipitate violence'); suggestions on the usefulness of the literature on torture and enforced dependency in looking at the long-term effects of violence in the home; the need for information on the general health of battered women and their treatment by doctors, casualty departments and mental hospitals; their drug usage and attempts at suicide; the crying need for a national incidence study — including more on murder and molestation *after* divorce; assessment of the gap between the abstract rights and the actual remedies available to women; surveying the attention given currently to domestic assault, and possible improvement programmes in police, social work, health visitor and lawyers' training; the hidden poverty in violent homes; the magnifying effects of immigration and nationality problems; the history of men's violence to women; the relationship of violence in the home to violence in public places; the differences between men's and women's violence; and the links between wife battering and the abuse (including sexual abuse) of children.

WA representatives saw the main aim of the Kent conference to be a self-congratulatory public relations exercise by the DHSS. This backfired in the sense that all the research reached two conclusions — that Women's Aid is the only agency providing substantial help to women who leave home because of violence and that professional help offered by statutory DHSS agencies, i.e. local authority social service departments, is inadequate or worse. The research could only conclude that Women's Aid should be better funded so that the extent of the problem could be met. The final summing up by Lady Plowden, however, did not mention the financial need of refuges, nor the recommendations from discussion groups, many of which made the same point. She opened and

closed the seminar with the same message — whatever the evidence, there would be no more resources and no serious redistribution from social services departments to Women's Aid. These views were confirmed by DHSS officials at the meeting.

As a result of WAFE's intervention at the Kent conference, two representatives of Women's Aid were invited to the DHSS Liaison group on Homelessness and Addictions for the first time in December 1981 to present the views of WAFE on research. The representatives took WAFE's requests to the meeting, to be told that the three issues now seen to be in greatest need of investigation were either not the responsibility of the DHSS (i.e. the incidence of violence to women and the problems of immigrant women), or not possible to pursue because of a decision by the DHSS no longer to fund research in this area for the foreseeable future (i.e. research into funding of refuges).

From WA's point of view, something in the region of a quarter of a million pounds has been largely wasted by the DHSS on research. Faced with a problem they did not want but were required to do something about, the DHSS chose a way out which would least rock the boat. They did not want to provide direct help to battered women, and they did not want a feminist knowledge to penetrate their understanding of family and married life. They chose research projects which focused on interpersonal causes and helping agency responses. These restrictions were inherently reactionary as they ignored larger social processes and interconnections between social phenomena. They inhibited understanding of the subjective experience of women themselves, even where this actually was sought. We do not regard research in the areas which interested the DHSS as unnecessary, but we believe it must go hand-in-hand with studies of the incidence of male violence to women, the effects of male violence on women and girls, the ways in which social institutions and organisations promote or challenge male violence to women, and the history of violence to women. To eradicate long-standing, entrenched social behaviour involves much more than a study of the immediate behaviour itself.

In WA it was argued that good research could only be

started from the perspective of those experiencing, or helping those experiencing, violence,² but the DHSS would not engage on this level. When they gave NAAF money it was for other reasons and, with the exception of a small grant for research on children in refuges, it was never given by the DHSS research apparatus.³ The DHSS never acknowledged that WA had a research role to play, which, while giving a certain freedom, had the effect of boxing the Federation in and excluding it from the world where the symbolic (or the written understanding of reality or theory) is produced. In an important sense WA was trivialised, seen merely as a victim support group, which made more difficult the work of developing its interpretation of male violence to women.

We still feel, however, that NAAF's response to research into violence to women by men in the family came as close to breaking the mediating role of women, by refusing to provide men with what they wanted, as was possible at that point in the herstory of the struggle against male intellectual hegemony. The Federation would not allow women to 'be observed' by social scientists; and they were very clear that they did not want 'that rubbish' – the sophisticated (male) concepts of the world, the required way in which women must think of their world – to invade the area. But the problem remained; if 'their' way was to be rejected, how were we to reflect and write? The solution at the time was largely to just struggle; to resort to unintellectualised action as that was all that felt safe. The Federation may have been right – to have moved an inch away from concrete reality might have meant that 'their' thoughts, learned at university and by participation in the social world, might have become overwhelming. At the time, radicalism was high and anti-intellectualism and anti-male sentiments prevailed. People do not get as angry now about social research.

What now appears as a new theory of knowledge – viz: that to understand the phenomena you must start with the perspective of those who are subordinated – came from consciousness-raising in the Women's Liberation Movement and gained much from other social welfare movements such as claimants unions and squatters (even if we didn't realise this clearly at the time). In the mid-1970s feminists certainly

didn't see their approach as an epistemology – or even a methodology. It was just political action. It was not 'research'. Only when feminists were excluded from 'real' research and had to struggle anew against imposed definitions and answers to the wrong questions from 'neutral' researchers, 'value-free' civil servants or 'experts', did the relationship become apparent.

We are now much clearer that knowledge is not conceived abstractly but is a dynamic process in which theory develops from practice and that changed understandings help produce changes in material circumstances. The symbiotic relationship of theory and practice forms the basis for the work of WA. It both creates and tests its theory in its daily work, which gives it the authority to direct future research. Women's Aid is not made up of the foot soldiers who are to be informed by the DHSS generals what to think about the experience of pain, humiliation and degradation faced by countless women all over Britain.

What of the part played by the researchers who were not part of Women's Aid? They were all humanistically sympathetic to battered women and supporters of the Federation and its refuges. They reported the appalling or uncomprehending attitudes of certain 'neutral' professionals (police, doctors and social workers) and substantiated that lawyers (who are supposed to be partisan) were of most help to the victims of abuse. They confirmed with systematic data much that Women's Aid knew from experience. They often tried (even if not in the 1979 meeting!) to be honest brokers with the DHSS on behalf of women. But they didn't (with the exception of the Dobashes) get down to *generating* new questions; and they didn't seem to feel they needed to be more than nice and distantly supportive to Women's Aid.

At this stage, then, we feel that DHSS has not been able to obtain either the acquiescence of Women's Aid, or the support of researchers, sufficiently to *secure* the dominance of its 'new' ideology of domestic violence (i.e. a slightly more permissive and kindly attitude towards battered women) while maintaining support for the patriarchal family in more or less its present form. We therefore suspect it will change tack somewhat. If we may indulge in a little crystal-ball

gazing, we believe that it will seek to divide Women's Aid, and probably not in terms of a challenge to or an undermining of its ideology, but in terms of its practice. We think the DHSS will put pressure along the only-too familiar line of WA being for women-only and its strong pro-woman stance. The only major resource put into Women's Aid centrally is the grant for the national office and network, and this has been, and will continue to be, the way by which the DHSS will try to gain political leverage with WA. The exclusion of men from support groups may also be attacked by local authorities; and disagreements among women about the exclusion of men from refuges may be exacerbated and used to split the Federation. Or an alternative challenge to Women's Aid practice may be to hand the package over to the sterner rule of the Home Office, as a 'victim support scheme'. As to the researchers, now well versed in the area, and with lots of important new questions to answer -- there looks likely to be no further funding. Some have already moved their wagons on. WA, if it can systematise and publish its knowledge, may have the initiative at last, for the worst of reasons.

Notes

- 1 Women's Aid is a generic term describing the work of groups providing refuges for women who have experienced physical, sexual and mental abuse, and their children. These groups belong to national federations in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Initially the National Women's Aid Federation included Wales and Northern Ireland as well as England. Scotland was always separate and set up the same year as NWAFF. When Wales and Northern Ireland established their own Federations the National Women's Aid Federation (NWAFF), became the Women's Aid Federation England (WAFE).
- 2 The WAFE proposals for future research will be published in full in Hanmer and Saunders (Hutchinson, 1984). Learning that the conference papers were to be published, and not being approached by the editor, WAFE asked that its paper be included (Pahl, forthcoming). As this was refused, alternative sources for telling this story among sociologists, feminists and the public at large had to be found.
- 3 At the meeting for researchers in 1978 it was made clear that the DHSS were interested in funding projects on children in refuges.

In 1979, NWAFF accepted a small grant to collect information on children in refuges. This project never had the full support of NWAFF groups who feared that the DHSS would use research on children as a way of attacking women, by blaming them for any disturbances their children might be suffering from either a result of leaving home or from having lived in a home with more violence than is the social norm. This project went through several transformations and ultimately concentrated on what should be done for children in refuges and the resources that would be needed to do this work.