



Turning Points

A Nonviolence Curriculum for Women

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Acknowledgments

We want to acknowledge a number of people whose life experiences and work have helped shape our thinking and practice. Because all three of us come from very different histories and influences, our list is long. First, we want to acknowledge each other. This has been a complicated, detail-ridden, time-consuming, draining, fulfilling, challenging creation. It started out so simply: let's make some vignettes and write down the best exercises we do in women's groups. But of course nothing to do with women's lives, especially those of women who live with violence every day, is simple. So it all snowballed and we all stuck together and we never even had one fight—well OK, maybe one.

We also each bring our own mentors to our work. They include Jo Sullivan, Anne Amundson, Lydia Kopesky, Marilyn Rossman, Paulo Freire, Andrea Dworkin, Dorothy Smith, Shamita Das Dasgupta, Shirley Oberg, Anne Marshall, and Coral McDonnell.

We never could have gotten started without the guidance and help of Dr. Melanie Shepard, who attended a number of women's groups, did extensive research for us on the literature related to women who use force in their intimate relationships, and got us started on the writing. Dan Connelly, Laura's brother-in-law, and his friend Korey Kazmarek (an extreme snowboarder when he's not behind a camera) spent hours with us shooting video as we developed the lectures and commentary that accompany the curriculum. For every minute you see, there are eight more you won't. Anne Breckenridge and her crew spent a day with us filming and capturing the voices of ten women telling their stories and talking to each other about the realities of living with and using this kind of violence.

Ute Rösemann was visiting from Germany and we cajoled her into conducting a four-hour interview that is the basis of the facilitator's guide.

We each admire the longstanding work of the staff at the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women and are grateful for their efforts. They have been bringing attention to the issues facing battered women as defendants for almost three decades. We also want to acknowledge the work of the DAIP and the Duluth City Attorney's office for their foresight and once-again pioneering work: they have shown how a dedicated group of people committed to the principles of justice and safety can confront the violence of battered women without emboldening their abusers.

Of course we had an editor, Kate Regan, but as we go to print we ask ourselves, shouldn't she really be credited as a co-author? She sent back our final final copies with more red ink on them than black. She made us stay consistent throughout and she questioned us until we clarified every significant point. She just made the whole thing better. We owe her so much.

So that leaves us with our mothers, JoAnne, Rodann, and Anne. Thank you for borning us.

Foreword

At my wedding, my mother advised me, “If your husband ever hits you, hit him back. Don’t come back home crying.” Given that I was a young South Asian woman, a group (ill-)reputed to be docile and subservient, this was curious advice indeed. However, as I grew older and ended up organizing against domestic violence in the South Asian American community, I learned that my mother was not an anomaly. Most South Asian mothers offer similar counsel to newlywed daughters with a couple of additional admonitions: “Save your marriage at all costs. And try not to shame the family.”

Later, while conducting research with heterosexual women who have used violence against their intimate partners, I learned a few contradictory truths in this realm:

1. It is not only South Asian American women who act under the compulsion of saving their marriages, but also women from many other communities. Consequently, many believe—and perhaps quite rightly so—that seeking help from law enforcement or other outside resources would signal an end to the marriage.
2. Many women who struggle with various impediments to securing legal justice such as racism, language barriers, non-resident status, prohibitive cultural dictates, financial insolvency, and economic dependency believe that they are without recourse when being abused by intimate partners. Thus they see responding with violence to the abuse they experience as the only way to end and/or escape this mistreatment.
3. Women experiencing long-term intimate partner violence are often fed up with weak social and legal responses and so decide that using violence to stand up to their abusers will provide a semblance of justice.
4. The law frequently overlooks the conditions that have driven some women to use violence against their partners. Interestingly, in my research, the overwhelming majority of women who had used violence against their partners took clear responsibility for their actions and accepted culpability as “wrongdoers,” behavior rarely seen in male batterers, who generally come from a position of entitlement. Nonetheless, the same women often confronted me with the question “I know violence is not the answer, but where were they [legal and social authorities] when he was beating me up?”

The issue of women’s violence against their intimate partners came to the fore nearly a decade ago, when more and more women across states were getting arrested and charged with domestic violence-related offenses. Alarmed at the unprecedented turn of events and resultant uproar among researchers and lay people, the domestic violence advocacy community responded in different ways.

Some challenged police arrests of victims of ongoing abuse who used violence to defend themselves, while others challenged the arrest of those who used minor violence against their abusers. The latter group also pushed against prosecutors’ efforts to convict battered women arrested for assaulting their abusers as domestic violence offenders. They argued for “interventions”

that would reduce the use of resistive violence by women without giving their abusers more power over them. Many advocates were uncharacteristically silent, believing that “those” victims were somehow different from the ones who came to shelters and counseling centers seeking relief from abuse. Still others made hasty offers of BIPs (batterers’ intervention programs) that were poorly differentiated from the programs for men who batter.

During this time, Ellen Pence, Laura Connelly, and Melissa Scaia did not ignore the phenomenon of women’s use of violence in intimate relationships. Rather, they continued to extensively research and educate advocates on the topic. In addition, they held fast against labeling women in these situations as “batterers” and refrained from creating a group process targeting them as such. The difference is subtle and yet profound.

Now, Ellen, Laura, and Melissa, have written a curriculum, a guide for leading educational groups for women who have used violence

in their intimate relationships. The resources this curriculum provides—DVDs, theoretical understanding, and researched information— are extraordinary and will inevitably be helpful to facilitators. The most important feature of the curriculum is that it does not offer rigid tenets, but flexible strategies that emerge from the participants’ own life experiences and analyses thereof. More than anything else, it offers women the options of self-reflection and alternative behaviors that will assist them in choosing a path of peace, dignity, and self- respect.

Shamita Das Dasgupta

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Additional resources available at [www. dvturningpoint.com](http://www.dvturningpoint.com):

- The Blueprint for Safety Memo: Interventions with Victims of Battering As Suspects or Defendants
- Excerpt from Making Social Change: Reflections on Individual and Institutional Advocacy with Women Arrested for Domestic Violence. By McMahon and Ellen Pence, Violence Against Women, Vol. 9, No. 1, January 2003
- Towards an Understanding of Women's Use of Non-Lethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships. By Shamita Das Dasgupta, Ph.D., DVS February 2001
- Intimate Partner Violence Victims Charged with Crimes - Justice and Accountability for Victims of Battering who use Violence Against their Batterers. By Jeffrey P. Greipp, Toolsi Gowin Meisner and Douglas J, Miles
- Re-examining Battering: Are All Acts of Violence Against Intimate Partners the Same? By Ellen Pence & Shamita Das Dasgupta June 20, 2006
- At A Crossroads Developing Duluth's Prosecution Response to Battered Women Who Fight Back. By Mary Asmus, Chief Prosecutor, City Attorney's Office, Duluth MN
- Self Defense Training Materials • Sample Group Contract • Specialized handouts for the groups

Introduction

Successful interventions to stop domestic violence always account for 1) the abuser, 2) the victim of the abuse, 3) those who are in relationships with the abuser and/or the victim (children, brothers, sisters, parents, friends), and 4) the outside intervener. This outsider, whether a police officer, an employer, a therapist, an advocate, a child protection worker, a spiritual leader, or any other intervener, occupies a particular and essential role in confronting the violence. When the facts of a case are clear, and we all agree on who did what to whom, when, how, and to what effect, then the role of the intervener is equally clear. However, getting those facts and putting them into context isn't always easy.

A victim of abuse is usually not passive when being physically, psychologically, or sexually attacked. Instead, she fights back, resists her assailant, attempts to cope, and tries to survive. As one woman told us, "I just was trying to get myself and my kids through what was becoming an intolerable situation." This educational group curriculum is written for those outsiders who seek to help women like her—women who are being abused, living with a cloud of intimidation constantly hovering over them, struggling against the ongoing abuse and now themselves using violence, both legal and illegal. Their violence is directed at their abusers, but in some cases it falls on new non-abusive partners, who are paying the price of another man's violence.

Most curricula for domestic violence offenders are intended to be used with men who batter their partners through the use of a pattern of intimidation, coercion, control, and violence; the most frequently used group models are cognitive behavioral therapy and education.¹ Leaders in the field of batterer's treatment and education have designed group content and group methods based on the assumption that a man's repeated acts of violence against his partner are rooted in his belief system that he has the right to control her and gain or maintain dominance in the relationship.

¹ The cognitive behavioral approach was first introduced to the domestic violence field by Dr. Anne Ganley, then further developed by men's offender programs in Boston (Emerge), St. Louis (Raven), and Minneapolis (Domestic Abuse Project), and finally developed into a curriculum in Duluth, Minnesota, by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. Other programs have adapted the Duluth curriculum to work with specific populations of men who batter. They include Sacred Circle, a project of Cangleska, Inc., which works with the Oglala Lakota Nation; Men in Change, a project of Mosaic in Vancouver, British Columbia, which works with men who speak Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Spanish, or Vietnamese; Hamilton Abuse Intervention Project, New Zealand, which works with Maori men; and Hawaii State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, batterer intervention programs in Hawaii, which work with Hawaiian men

Of course, some women are required to attend the group for a single act of violence and others have been required to attend when all of their violence has in fact consisted of legal acts of self-defense, but this would be the exception rather than the rule.

Group program models typically focus on changing the thoughts, behaviors, and belief systems that support the abuser's notions of entitlement to control. The groups focus on men's socialization. Although women can benefit from aspects of these programs, such as learning about the battering dynamics of power and control and developing anger management skills, the model for male batterers misses the most essential element of the experience of most court-ordered women: they are

both being battered and using repeated acts of violence against their abusers.² They have not been socialized as men, though like men ordered to batterers' groups, they have come to see violence as a potentially useful method of controlling their partners' behavior. Their motivation is rarely a sense of entitlement to dominate another person; most often, they act from a perceived right to resist such domination.

The differences in these two groups are far more fundamental than are their similarities. When a batterer engages in an ongoing, patterned, system of controlling, coercive, and intimidating behaviors, his victim is eventually trapped in a set of harmful circumstances over which she has little or no control. Attempts to resist are punished; attempts to leave are thwarted; attempts to adjust are deemed inadequate. A man who is being physically attacked by the woman he batters can usually end the violence against himself by ending his own violence toward her. Conversely, a battered woman who responds to battering with violence rarely succeeds in thwarting her abuser's iron grip or continued pattern of abuse.

"Turning Points" is a group curriculum for women who have been violent in their intimate partner relationships. The focus of its organizing principle is not on challenging the morality of their use of violence; instead, it is on exploring with them the nature of their intimate relationship and their ability to function within it in ways that are life giving, dignifying, and life sustaining, rather than life draining and diminishing. The curriculum is designed to draw on their strengths, providing education and support and helping them envision a future that is free of both their violence and that of their abusers. This takes place within a framework that a) recognizes their experiences as battered women, b) offers coping and survival that do not include violence, c) recognizes the right (and sometimes the need) to defend oneself with force when facing violence, and d) challenges the notion that violence is the only alternative to a bad situation.

Some battered women who are arrested for assault or are the respondents in a protection order do not see themselves as victims of abuse. Because they fight back, because they often initiate the violence, because they believe true victims are helpless and they don't see themselves as helpless, battered women who fight back often consider themselves to be in a mutual combat situation. Most sense something is wrong about them being sent to an abusers' group, but they also know they've stepped over some line of acceptable action.

Sometimes it will not be evident to the facilitator or to the woman herself how and when she's using violence until she's attended the group for four or five weeks. Few women we have worked with are clear about this at their intake or even during their first few groups. Thus helping women reach an understanding of the violence they are using and the violence being used against them is a central goal of the group process. This is not to say that women need to be convinced they are being battered; rather, they are asked to name their world as they live it, to reject the notion that they cannot change that world, and to look critically at their relationship, their own beliefs and values, their aspirations, and the connection between what they are doing and who they want to be.

Women's confusion is not such a big problem if the facilitators are not equally confused. It is true that some heterosexual couples engage in what can only be described as mutual abuse. Those women will find their way into our groups, and some will probably benefit from this curriculum. But battering isn't the same thing. Battering often involves two people using violence, but it rarely involves mutual abuse—two people causing similar harm to each other. Millions of women are battered in the U.S. every year, and most use some violence in return.

Differentiating between the woman who batters and the woman who is being battered and responds with violence is a crucial step in the intervention process. It is not a question of proper categorization for the sake of accuracy. Getting it right is a matter of safety and essential in reducing severe and escalating violence. To work with a battered woman who is using violence to cope with her situation as if she were a batterer is to align oneself with the batterer. It is not what outside interveners want to do.

Men's use of violence in their intimate relationships is a social problem of immense magnitude. Women's violence against men is not, not because women never hit men but because in general, women do not use violence as a form of relentless, dehumanizing control over men. Women ending their violence against their partners would spare many men some pain, decrease some men's escalating violence, and surely save some men's lives, but the social consequences would be negligible.

There is increasing agreement that intervening agencies and professionals must be able to distinguish between kinds of domestic violence, scope of domestic violence, severity of the violence, patterns of the violence, function and purpose of the violence, and finally, primary perpetrator of the violence. Theorists and policy makers have proposed a number of categorization schemes that offer a way forward in this work. We recommend reading Shamita Das Dasgupta and Ellen Pence; Evan Stark; and Peter Jaffee; selected articles can be found at the Minnesota electronic clearinghouse: Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse, www.mincava.umn.edu/.

Kinds of domestic violence

For the purposes of this curriculum, we categorize domestic violence into three groups:

1) coercive controlling domestic violence (battering), which is the ongoing use of coercive and controlling actions, including acts of intimidation and violence, targeting a victim whose autonomy and safety is thereby reduced;

2) responsive violence, including both legal and illegal use of force, which is used by victims of battering to control their abusers' use of coercive and controlling tactics or in reaction to other men's violence against them as women.

3) non-battering-related violence, which is violence used by one intimate partner against the other that is neither an ongoing attempt to exert control through coercion, nor a response to that coercion. It encompasses all other acts of intimate partner violence, which can again be subdivided into some general categories for the purposes of intervention:

a) ***pathological violence***, in which ending or controlling the pathology would end the violence (mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction with no pattern of coercion and entrapment of the partner, brain damage);

b) ***anomie***, violence associated with a breakdown in social order. Examples include the increase in rape and abuse of women by their partners in desperate social conditions, such as those experienced during war and in refugee camps. In such violence, women are often targets because of underlying gender asymmetry in the society, but the elements of attempting to control and assert entitlement in a personal relationship are not necessarily present; and

c) *common couple's violence*, in which one or both parties use violence, but it is not part of an ongoing pattern of coercion and intimidation; no element of entrapment is present.

Using the three categories of violence—battering violence, responsive violence, and non-battering-related violence (or any similar groupings)—means interveners must differentiate among the cases coming into the system. Such differentiation requires an interagency effort to capture and share contextualized information about the ongoing nature of the violence that is occurring. Depending on the location of an intervention (e.g., criminal justice system, child protection agency, supervised visitation center, mental health center), interveners must uncover the pattern of abuse, its severity, and the context in which each party is using and experiencing it.

In communities where the criminal justice system practitioners and mental health providers are unclear about who is doing what to whom and with what impact, misguided and even harmful interventions will be common. When they attempt to determine who is the abuser and who is the abused by simply counting different acts of violence all as “domestic assault,” batterers are given a powerful tool of control.

WHEN THESE REFORMS ARE NOT IN PLACE, THE WRONG WOMEN END UP IN THE WRONG GROUPS USING THE WRONG CURRICULUM.

When abusers live with their victims, they exert their control in an intimate setting. When a victim of battering leaves the relationship, those abusers who are driven to continue their abuse shift the battleground from the privacy of the bedroom, the kitchen, and the living room to the criminal courtroom, the child protection agency, and the church. Many abusers rely on our collective inability to distinguish among the various types of violence to exploit the very reform efforts instituted to protect battered women and their children. In such cases, our actions become their weapons of post-separation control and punishment. Ensuring that his victim is labeled as an offender is the abuser's most powerful means of protection from community intervention.

The facilitator who walks into a room packed with court-ordered women who have all used some form of violence against their abusers and fails to ask how each woman got there is turning a blind eye to what Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells us are the fundamental obligations of justice:

That the truth be told; that the harm, to whatever extent possible, be repaired; and that the social conditions that created the injustice be forever altered.

Understanding the Curriculum and Preparing as a Facilitator

Some people learn best by reading, some by listening, and some by plunging right in and doing. If you are charged with facilitating a group we've given you a bit of each. We have included a DVD with an interview of Ellen Pence by Ute Rösemann, a German activist in the anti-violence movement. It also features short clips from a women's group demonstrating much of what Ellen discusses with Ute in the interview.

We strongly encourage everyone, including the people who want to plunge in, first to watch each segment of the facilitator's guide. This manual and the exercises and weekly session plans do not speak for themselves. The way they are taught is considerably more important than the details of group design.

Ute's interview with Ellen is divided into a series of short clips; here we have included notes on some key points made in each clip.

The Overarching Goals of the Curriculum

- **To help women understand the violence in their lives.**

This means understanding the way violence is shaping who they are, what they can and cannot do, and how they relate to others—including, for mothers, their children. Of course, understanding the violence means determining how much violence is actually going on, but more than this, it means understanding how women are both using and experiencing violence. How have violence and all its accompanying acts of intimidation, coercion, control, and abuse come to define the quality of women's

lives physically, spiritually, emotionally, and cognitively? Comprehending this is a huge goal, and achieving it requires thinking critically. The curriculum provides structured ways to examine and come to terms with the context, scope, and meaning of violence in each participant's daily life.

- **To help women take concrete steps to end the violence in their lives, both the violence they are experiencing and the violence they are using.**

In this goal we turn from analysis to action; participants focus on the changes they can make to achieve the quality of life they seek and deserve. Alcoholics Anonymous has a saying, "Nothing changes until something changes," and this goal is to radically transform women's sense they can't change what is going on in their lives.

Many of the women are victims of ongoing abuse and can't change their partner's use of violence, so they feel stuck. At the same time, would-be helpful friends and practitioners are bombarding them with constant advice to "just leave him." They often don't realize that leaving is far less possible than they think. If it were a feasible option, few women would be beaten, few women would be stalked and killed, few women would lose their children in custody fights that turn more than ugly. Few women would turn to alcohol and drugs, fall into long periods of despair, or commit suicide. But thousands of women do lose their children, become addicted, fall into despair, kill themselves—not because they are weak or flawed or lacking something that strong women have, but because of the nature of the violence. It is relentless, fused with tactics of coercion and

intimidation and carried out in settings that are unsupportive of the victim and permissive of the abuser.

The curriculum is not Pollyannaish: it contains no admonitions to “just assert yourself” when living with a batterer. It is attentive to the social realities of women’s lives but never fatalistic about the possibilities for them to end the violence.

The Difference between Men’s and Women’s Violence

The way that men and women use violence in heterosexual relationships differs significantly in context. This becomes apparent when we ask about its use: What is the form of the violence? How intense is it? What is the motivation? What is the impact? When and how often is it occurring? What is being said and done during the violence? What happens when it’s over? Who has more power when it starts? Who has more when it’s over?

Much of the work of this curriculum is to take apart acts of violence and abuse to answer these contextual questions. Our assumption is that the violence is always located within a certain relationship with certain power dynamics; understanding the meaning of the violence starts with identifying who is acting from what position of power and how the violence affects the power in the relationship.

Do Women Batter?

Women in heterosexual relationships rarely engage in a patterned use of abusive, intimidating, and coercive tactics, because they are neither physically able to do so nor typically socialized to use such tactics in their personal relationships. The woman is not physically capable of doing things such as dragging her partner by his hair to the mirror while screaming, “Look at you! Who would ever want somebody as ugly as you?” or pinning him up against a wall and threatening him or strangling him until he faints.

For the same reasons, they rarely taunt their partners with physical threats such as the one described by a man to his group: While cleaning his gun in front of his wife, he pointed the barrel at her face and told her that “wife- hunting season” was coming up. Issuing a

threat like this requires the ability to ward off an immediate, forceful reaction from its recipient. At the same time, because of the way they’ve been socialized, women don’t feel entitled to use certain kinds of violence when their expectations are not met. There are women who dominate the men they live with. Battering simply isn’t the way they do it.

Women are more likely to use violence as a form of domination against children and in certain social relationships in which the use of violence is not so direct.¹²

The Differences between Men’s and Women’s Groups

1. In men’s groups, facilitators are constantly trying to break through the denial. Women often admit what they have done, and since they feel justified in having used violence, they describe what they did and take a certain responsibility for it.

2. Men who batter don't typically come into our groups with injuries, while women do. Many of the women are experiencing high levels of abuse while participating in the group. This reality always has to be part of what we talk about.

3. Challenging women's use of violence on a moral basis is generally ineffective. Instead, we challenge the function of their violence, because clearly it isn't working for them. When a woman resists being battered by using force herself, she may actually embolden her partner in his violence by giving him something to hold over her: "You started it. You're just as violent. What about when you...."

4. A woman may not see herself as battered if she doesn't cower in a corner meekly taking her partner's abuse. Her self-image doesn't match her image of a battered woman (an image we often create our literature). She doesn't see herself as weak: she does push back, she does resist, sometimes she does get him to stop.

Using the Turning Points Log To Facilitate Dialogue

The Turning Points curriculum borrows from the long tradition of using logs in work with domestic violence offenders. Logs help “unpack” a person’s use of violence. Of all our curriculums, the Turning Points log is the least directive, because we want women to have a wide-open opportunity to name and reflect on the experiences that brought them to the group—a place where ending violence is a critical focus. Section Two contains a discussion of how to use the log.

The Design of the Curriculum

As described in the introduction, the curriculum has three parts: the first focuses on understanding the violence; the second focuses on using a log to analyze vignettes and stories; and the third focuses on exploring themes in women’s lives through group exercises.

Part One has nine segments intended to teach the group much of what there is to know about domestic violence: what it is and what it is not, the kinds of violence common in families, and the characteristics of the three basic forms of domestic violence—battering, resistive violence, and non-battering violence. It covers the ways to distinguish among violence used to dominate, violence used to resist domination, and violence that is not connected to significant power imbalance between the partners. The intention of this section is to accomplish the first goal of the curriculum: to help women come to a full understanding of the violence occurring in their lives. Once the group participants see clearly the nature of the violence they are experiencing and using, they can set a course of change to eliminate it from their lives.

Part Two provides a series of vignettes depicting acts of violence commonly used by women in the groups and includes clips of women talking about their lives and describing the violence in it. They are primarily women who have been arrested, charged, or brought into the court system for using violence. The vignettes and women’s stories are meant to be analyzed by the participants through a log that asks them to describe what was going on. We then ask them to “problematize,” identifying what in the scene was a problem. (It’s important that the women, not the facilitator, do this.) We ask who it is a problem for, because the impact of the coercion and violence in the life of a woman coming to these groups is very different for her, her children, her partner, and her circle of family, co-workers, and friends.

Once we have articulated the many levels of problems linked to all of this violence, intimidation, coercion, and emotional abuse, we move to identifying the source of the problem—both the big source, the social, and the immediate source, the personal. This naturally leads to the question of what needs to change for the violence to end, both in the short term and in the long term, and what can make those changes happen.

While we were writing the curriculum we would talk about a point, and then Melissa or Laura would say, “Yes, like Sandy’s story...” or “This is just what Lucinda said.” We wanted you, the reader, to meet the women in Melissa and Laura’s group, and so we decided to get all of us together—the facilitators, us, the women who will be joining Turning Points groups—to meet women like those in their group. Melissa and Laura are from a small town and anonymity for members of their group would be impossible to maintain once we put something on DVD. We

asked several advocates in a larger community to form a group of women who had been arrested for or charged with domestic abuse-related crimes. We wanted some women who were in the thick of things and a few who had some distance from their experience. The women you will meet in this curriculum make up the group we managed to cobble together. (We just couldn't un-cobble ourselves and we continue to meet today.)

We use the recording of the half-day group in three ways. First, we asked each woman to introduce herself and tell her story however she wanted to, but to give us as an audience a picture of when and how and how often she used violence. We've edited most of these 15-20 minute introductions down to 4 or 5 minutes by selecting some interesting aspect of each woman's story. They are stand-alone pieces used as conversation starters for many weeks of the curriculum. Second, we selected excerpts that revolve around certain themes arising from the group, such as the relationship of love to jealousy and jealousy to violence, or how the violence was shaping their ability to parent, or why some of the group members felt so little remorse when they injured their abusers in an attack. These can be used both to start conversations and to show facilitators how to find themes in what group participants are saying. Third, we chose brief interactions within the group to reinforce the principles and methods of group facilitation and edited them into the interview of Ellen Pence on the philosophy and underlying assumptions of the curriculum.

Every woman's story raises a number of issues. In the weeks these stories are used to start a conversation, the facilitator simply introduces the woman, shows the clip of her story, and asks the group to reflect on it by logging the clip. For a full explanation of using the log, see "Turning Points Log" in Part Two of the curriculum.

We've learned that the same clip can generate different conversations. So for each one, we provide a short summary as a way of introducing it to the group and then offer a number of talking points about the issues that might come up as women reflect on the stories they hear. The Turning Points log provides a method of guiding this dialogue. We hope you enjoy watching the first recorded Turning Points group as much as we did making it. ("Enjoy" is an odd word to use about a group of women sitting around talking about abuse, but there was an awful lot of laughter and that unmistakable joy of finding each other that comes with this work.)

Part Three of the curriculum is a series of exercises we have used that have been particularly helpful in focusing women on its goals. We describe each exercise in great detail, but the fact that we do so contradicts our insistence that the facilitator allow the group its own organic process. The trick for the facilitator is to help focus the group and keep it moving toward understanding the violence and figuring out how to end it. Once you've used the curriculum for a few months, you'll find yourself developing your own exercises. We have borrowed from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who insisted on presenting to people codes (skits or plays or poems) that spoke to their experiences. He then asked the group to de-code the code in order to pull apart the forces operative in their lives and come to a critical (as opposed to mystical) understanding of the forces operative in them.

Every program, community, and group has its own identity. These codes came from groups the three of us have facilitated. If you're working with mostly immigrant women, the process we suggest will work, but you'll have to quickly start producing your own more relevant codes. If you're working with women from a reservation, some of our codes will work and some won't. Again, you'll have to start creating your own. If most of your group members are South Asian, or

middle class, or in their early twenties, then you'll need to create codes that resonate with them.

Regardless of the cultural background or demographics of the group, the basic premise remains central. For women to change what isn't working for them to live free of violence, we need to do three things: facilitate the process of constantly stepping back to name and explore the social as well as personal forces at work; create an experience that is the opposite of domination; and together with them seek a kernel of truth in every conversation. This approach will work in any group if you stay true to the spirit of the process and give the women the reins.