

THE ROLE OF ADVOCACY IN COORDINATION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

1. The Language of Advocacy

The word *advocacy* is often misunderstood. It is a word that is part of the discourse of several disciplines: law, social services, health, child protection, environmental conservation and others. Because of the lack of understanding across disciplines of the meaning of advocacy, and because it is an activity not allowed to qualify for charitable non-profit status it has been thought to be “too provocative” a term to use. We use it here to explain the role of coordination in improving women’s safety. We use it to describe this role as one of “working on behalf of” women, and “to promote” improvements in a *systemic* response for women who have experienced violence. We are not using the term to describe *lobbying* activities, which are outside the purview of the work.

“The feminist principle of advocacy means supporting or recommending a position or course of action that has been informed by women’s experiences in our efforts to bring about equality and inclusion. Advocacy may take place through a variety of actions and strategies, ranging from demonstrations and protests to meetings and dialogue.”

DisAabled Women’s Network Ontario

2.0 Advocacy in Practice

2.1 Individual Advocacy

Individual advocacy is part of the daily work life of a feminist service provider when she supports a woman to find her own voice or when requested, advocates with institutions on her behalf. Advocates are continuously making strategic choices about where to direct their energies on behalf of the women they represent. Every day they work within their community with others to address gaps in services, problems with policy implementation and the need to negotiate solutions at the local level on behalf of their clients.

2.2 Systemic Advocacy

When many women experience the same problems we say the problems are *systemic* in nature. Many women-serving organizations believe it is the role of the advocate to question the *structures* impeding women’s access to service.

Advocacy can build a critical bridge between theory and practice, and between issues experienced on the ground by women to policies and structures that are producing and perpetuating inequalities.

Some advocates will say that the act of moving an issue “up the line”, is reenergizing and supportive to the worker, particularly because it has the potential to impact change for all women. One way for a member of a coordination initiative to move an issue “up the line” is to bring it to the coordination table.

A coordination initiative should be an “A” advocate for improving women’s safety. Just as it is the individual advocate’s job to represent the needs of a particular woman, and identify in her community when an issue has become systemic, it is the job of a coordination initiative on violence against women to advocate for improvements to this systemic issue.

For instance, if a woman has come to an advocate to say that she is attempting to leave an abusive relationship but cannot get emergency funding from MHR, the advocate may decide to call the worker directly on behalf of the woman in order to sort out the problem. The advocate knows there is a MHR policy in place that allows for emergency grants to women in this situation. Through her conversations with the MHR service provider, she is likely able to solve this problem for this particular woman. However, if after several months, she has encountered *several* women who have been unable to access emergency grants, she recognizes there is a *systemic* problem with her local MHR office. This situation could be addressed by a coordination initiative.

For coordination to work effectively, all members must be committed to bringing the work to the table. **Recognized systemic issues are the work!** Social change for gender equality may be a by-product or underlying principle of the work of coordination, but it is not the central focus. The central focus is to improve safety for women and accountability of offenders *on the ground*.

2.2.1 The Work of a Coordination Initiative In Advocating For Change.

When developing a strategy a coordination initiative will need to consider many things including the political climate that is affecting the behaviour of service providers. Some of the questions one might ask in a situation such as this: (for a general process see the CCWS Solutions Management Tool)

- Is MHR at the table?
- Do we have the facts correct about the policy?
- Do all the workers in the office share the problematic practice?

- Is the problem one of a shared attitude?
- What is the work climate in the office?
- If MHR is not at the table is there someone who is, who has a strong connection with someone in the MHR office?
- Do others at the table experience the same difficulties in accessing emergency grants for their clients?
- Do we know what the regional practice is?
- Do we have documentation of the numbers of women who have experienced the barrier?
- Could the policy be unclear to workers in the MHR office?
- Does the problem need to be addressed at a higher level?

The strategy developed collaboratively by the coordination initiative will ideally be one that builds relationships and community capacity rather than blames and isolates one agency. Any time an advocacy action is taken we must consider and plan for the potential for backlash either on the clients or on collaborative relationships.

2.2.2 The Role of the Members in the Implementation of Advocacy Strategies

Not all members of a coordination initiative will be comfortable or have leave from their agencies to sign on to a strategy that advocates for change within a sister agency. For this reason it will be necessary to work with your group to determine who can support your strategy. Sometimes there will be a way to compromise or adjust your strategy so that everyone at the table is comfortable with its implementation.

2.2.3 Balancing your roles as Advocate and Chair of your Coordination Initiative

If you are a woman's advocate and the chair of your coordination initiative you have a delicate balance to achieve in managing these two *advocacy* roles with grace. As a woman's advocate you will hold the passion to move the work ahead in your community. As chair of your local coordination initiative you will have to transform your passion into a deeply democratic neutrality that nurtures a collective vision that includes all perspectives. To balance the role of the *advocate* and the role of *Advocacy* in coordination, one will need to facilitate with your group a *common* understanding of the needs for which we must advocate for change.

For more on the facilitation role in coordination see Other CCWS Tool:

On Finding Common Ground
Building a Mission Statement
The Role of Leadership in Coordination
The Solutions Management Tool

Sources:

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