

## SOCIAL WORK SUMMIT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women remains a global phenomenon against which no country, no society, and no community is immune (United Nations [UN], 2001). The United Nations defines *violence against women* as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Jensen & Otoo-Oyortey, 1999). Violence against women and girls includes physical, emotional, and psychological violence; sexual abuse, including rape, sexual harassment, and incest by family members; and coercive and abusive language used to exert emotion control.

In the United States, violence against women and girls has increasingly gained public recognition at the policy and program levels. Acts of violence against women affect not only the individuals targeted by the abuse and control, but their families, the community, and the larger society. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office on Women’s Health (OWH), urges us to understand violence against women (and girls) as an urgent criminal and growing public health issue with devastating consequences for women, children, and families ([www.hhs.gov/topics/women.html](http://www.hhs.gov/topics/women.html)).

### BACKGROUND

As part of the public health campaign to ensure professional response to violence against women, OWH convened a Social Work Summit on Violence Against Women in April 2000. In the formal invitation to participants, Wanda K. Jones, DrPH, deputy assistant secretary for health, Women’s Health, DHHS, framed the work of the summit as an opportunity to hold a “strategic meeting for the discussion of the role of social workers in addressing domestic violence (and sexual assault) and developing strategies to maximize the contributions of the social work profession to prevent and respond to this major (public) health problem.” Dr. Jones recognized that social workers are “frontline providers” who provide a supportive and critical role in the efforts to address violence against women and girls.

The OWH Social Work Summit on Violence Against Women brought together representatives of national social work organizations, as well as domestic violence and sexual assault experts, to develop strategies to improve the quality of education, prevention, screening, and intervention strategies related to violence against women.

The goals for the summit were to create a social work forum for the exchange of information; to reach consensus concerning priorities for the social work field to address regarding violence against women; to develop coordination among social work organizations with a focus on violence against women; to build partnerships between social work organizations and DHHS agencies/offices; and to develop new strategies and policies to improve education, prevention, and intervention.

## The Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

The Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provides a universal definition of discrimination against women.

CEDAW is the international treaty that provides a universal standard for women’s human rights in areas such as education, employment, marriage, family relations, health care and reproduction health, politics, finance, and the law.

The National Association of Social Workers supports the ratification of CEDAW.

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### **OVERVIEW OF THE SUMMIT**

Dr. Wanda Jones and Dr. Josephine Nieves, former NASW executive director (1995–2000), welcomed the participants. Barbara Hart, JD, MSW, a social worker and attorney, gave the keynote address. Ms. Hart, a longtime leader and advocate in the domestic violence movement, presented an outline to develop a comprehensive community approach to end violence against women. Next, a panel presented an “Update on Violence Against Women and Current Social Work Response.” Ruth Brandwein, PhD, MSW (professor and former dean, SUNY Stony Brook School of Social Welfare), addressed “Trends and Research,” and Anne Menard (special consultant on violence against women, OWH) discussed policy and funding issues.

Next, a panel presented “Model Programs.” Joan Gillece, PhD, (Maryland Department of Health and Human Hygiene), Gabrielle Strong, MSW (executive director, Ain Dah, Yung (Our Home) Center), Diane Stuart, MS, (state coordinator, Utah Domestic Violence Cabinet Council), and Gwen DeVasto, MEd, LCSW (formerly of the Norfolk County District Attorney’s Office) presented an overview of model programs working to address violence against women.

During a working lunch, an “Interactive Roundtable” was held. Jackie Payne, JD (policy attorney, NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund), addressed legal issues (including an update on the Violence Against Women Act); Annie Brown, DSW (associate professor, School of Social Work, Howard University), addressed violence against women and children from a larger macro or systemic perspective; Oliver Williams, PhD, MPH, LICSW (associate professor, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota and executive director of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community), discussed culturally competent practice; and Jan Richardson, RN, MBA (executive director, Women’s Community Health, Ontario, Canada), addressed vicarious trauma.

Social workers, historically, have been and continue to be involved in work to address violence against women and girls. Social workers are in a unique position to work on the issue of violence against women because of the diversity of practice settings and expertise in clinical practice, group work, policy development and analysis, and community organizing. The profession’s commitment to social change calls on the social work profession to take a leadership role in addressing this public health problem.

### **THE WORKING GROUP SESSION**

Each participant was assigned to one of four working groups: (1) Awareness and Education, (2) Prevention and Intervention, (3) Screening Initiatives/Assessment Issues, and (4) Public Policy and Social Work Agency Policy. Each group was tasked with developing a list of recommendations. Five guiding questions facilitated the discussion:

- ◆ What unique role does social work play in the matter of violence against women?
- ◆ What information do social workers need to know to address the issue of violence against women in their profession? (that is, formal education, continuing education, licensing requirements, and position and policy statements)
- ◆ How can social workers collaborate to develop partnerships with community-based programs and other organizations to increase prevention and treatment for violence against women? (coordinated community response)
- ◆ What are social work professionals’ priorities in addressing violence against women?
- ◆ What products can we produce that would assist social workers in addressing violence against women?

Participants reconvened to present and discuss the Work Group recommendations. Evelyn P. Tomaszewski, MSW, ACSW (senior staff associate, NASW), moderated this session. The recommendations were released by DHHS, OWH, during the NASW Annual Meeting of the Profession, November 2000.

## **WORKING GROUP SESSION REPORTS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

The DHHS Public Health Service's OWH released the report of the following recommendations with the commitment to work with the participating social work organizations to further address and implement the recommendations.

### **❖ Awareness and Education**

The social work professional is often the first "point of contact" for the victim/survivor of domestic abuse and/or sexual abuse. Because social workers constitute the largest professional group providing mental health services, a comprehensive assessment of domestic violence and sexual abuse or victimization is crucial in all practice settings. In addition, education efforts should cut across the diverse areas of social work practice. Awareness and education efforts must ensure an understanding of violence against women as a gender issue (for example, that domestic violence and sexual abuse disproportionately affect women), the impact on both the individual survivor and family members, and the responsibility of the larger society to work toward ending violence against women. Awareness efforts also must include ongoing education of social work students and social work professionals.

### **Recommendations**

- ◆ Update NASW's policy statement on "Family Violence," to ensure inclusion of domestic violence and sexual abuse content.
- ◆ Increase social work visibility in the policy-making process regarding violence against women legislation.
- ◆ Create an NASW policy statement on Victim's Assistance, to include new information and additional issues.
- ◆ Include continuing education on domestic and sexual abuse where CEUs are required for licensure.
- ◆ Integrate study of domestic and sexual abuse in core curriculum for BSW and MSW students, including awareness of cultural competence, and outreach and collaboration with local programs that focus on family.
- ◆ Provide additional education to child welfare workers to detect, assess, and intervene with families experiencing domestic violence.
- ◆ Work actively to develop stronger relationships with Native American tribes and nations.
- ◆ Increase field placements in the area of violence against women and family violence.
- ◆ Initiate discussions between social work students and local criminal justice agencies and providers on sexual abuse/violence and domestic violence issues.
- ◆ Use the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research to facilitate increased research addressing violence against women and girls.

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- ◆ Move toward acknowledging, collecting, selecting, and promoting model curricula that focus on violence against women.
- ◆ Create special journal issue focusing on violence against women and girls, and family violence issues.
- ◆ Create a faculty development institute at CSWE Annual Program Meeting that focuses on violence against women.
- ◆ Develop core standard of practice or practice guidelines produced by NASW around the area of violence against women.

### **❖ Prevention and Intervention**

To better ensure appropriate prevention and early intervention efforts, the social work profession must strive to develop and incorporate a comprehensive understanding of violence against women. The social work profession should focus on capacity building within the profession and through leadership in collaborative work with other helping professionals.

#### **Recommendations**

- ◆ Expand research efforts, including those sponsored by schools of social work, to better define what kinds of prevention–intervention efforts are truly effective in reducing the incidence of violence against women and the larger context of family violence.
- ◆ Work in communities to define effective prevention–intervention efforts.
- ◆ Ensure that culturally competent practice is a core component of all prevention and intervention efforts.
- ◆ Work toward developing standardized definitions of violence against women, including primary, secondary, and tertiary violence or abuse.
- ◆ Connect prevention efforts to and provide them in local communities in a manner that provides quality comprehensive social services with a strategic social change effort.
- ◆ Advocate for NASW to commission a “white paper” on prevention—which includes but is not limited to an explanation and description of the role of social work, the social work professional, and community partnerships and capacity-building efforts.
- ◆ Work to improve efforts on evaluation and research of current prevention and intervention efforts.
- ◆ Include a focus on children in prevention and intervention efforts.
- ◆ Address substance abuse in prevention and intervention efforts.
- ◆ Ensure that prevention and intervention strategies look beyond the individual (sole focus) to encompass the social context of violence against women in the United States and its many communities.

## ❖ **Screening Initiatives/Assessment Issues**

Screening and assessment, conducted by social work professionals and guided by the *NASW Code of Ethics*, ensures autonomy, self-determination, respect, and safety. The biopsychosocial perspective ensures that family issues, cultural diversity, gender, and trauma histories are integrated into the screening and assessment process. The profession must ensure that universal screening tools exist across the fields of practice and are used consistently.

### **Recommendations**

- ◆ Recognize and promote the biopsychosocial knowledge, practice skills, and core social work values (for example, social justice, autonomy, self-determination).
- ◆ Challenge organizations to develop assessment processes and tools grounded in social work values, including culturally competent practice.
- ◆ Integrate salient content (gender-based violence and trauma risk and resilience) in foundation-level courses in preservice education and continuing education and staff development courses for social workers across fields of practice.
- ◆ Collect, compile, evaluate, and adapt screening and assessment tools, protocols, and processes that incorporate social work knowledge and values and promote cultural competence.
- ◆ Identify stakeholders, broaden the definition of community and work and train together (for example, social workers' involved in violence against women, child welfare, health care, and economic services).
- ◆ Ensure that agencies have appropriate policies and procedures for using information from assessment tools, protocols, and processes.
- ◆ Ensure that agencies have appropriate follow-up services to respond when domestic violence is identified.
- ◆ Educate and ensure that agencies practice "Do No Harm," by clearly identifying how and why assessment information will be used.
- ◆ Support the development and implementation of domestic and sexual violence curriculum for child protective services personnel.

## ❖ **Public Policy and Social Work Agency Policy**

Social workers are often the "gatekeepers" for clients' gaining access to the legal and social service systems. Policies of the criminal justice system, as well as legislation at the local, state, and national levels, have direct bearing on victims of violence and family members, as well as assailants. Social workers strive to ensure that agency policy and regulations facilitate access to services, including the ability to translate real-world "experiences" to policymakers.

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### Recommendations

- ◆ Support public policy and laws that focus on empowerment.
- ◆ Educate policymakers about the link between youth development programming and prevention and early intervention of domestic and sexual violence.
- ◆ Strive to bring the disciplines together to build on the diversity of the social work profession and enhance collaborations.
- ◆ Support public policy that serves all people while addressing the unique needs of different ethnic and cultural groups.
- ◆ Ensure policy that works to strengthen social and independent living skills.
- ◆ Link professional organization to domestic violence organizations and other special interest or focus groups.
- ◆ Ensure that both social workers and community-based or grassroots advocates are “at the table” when policies are being developed.
- ◆ Promote interdisciplinary linkages at the national level between NASW, the American Psychological Association, the American Nurses Association, the American Medical Association, and so forth, to promote client-centered, strengths-based policy.
- ◆ Support cross training for direct-line social service staff and domestic violence shelters.
- ◆ Create curricula products that address both foundation social work practice and policy issues as well as curriculum focused specifically on domestic violence and sexual assault.
- ◆ Support public and agency policy that looks at violence against women and domestic violence as a public health issue.
- ◆ Support advocacy efforts that ensure support, implementation, and funding for the Violence Against Women Act.
- ◆ Provide information on models for practice–service delivery and research findings to inform advocacy efforts.

## References

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### **Public Health Services, Office on Women’s Health, (DHHS), Planning Committee**

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### **Social Work Summit on Violence Against Women Participant List**

American Association of State and Social Work Boards

National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work

American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work

National Association of Social Workers

American Indian Social Work Educators

National Hospice Organization

American Network of Home Health Care Social Workers, Inc.

National Lesbian, Gay Health Association

Asian/Pacific Islander Social Work Council

National Network for Social Work Managers

Association for Community Organization and Social Administration

National Social Work AIDS Network

Association of State and Territorial Public Health Social Work

Organization of Latino Social Workers

Clinical Social Work Federation

School Social Work Association of America

Council on Social Work Education

Social Work Section of the American Public Health Association

Federal Social Workers Consortium

Society for Social Work and Research

National Academy of Practice in Social Work

Society of Social Work Leadership in Health Care

National Association of Black Social Workers

Uniformed Service Social Workers

NASW supports the “continued efforts to combat violence against women of all ages as well as adequate health, mental health, and social services for women and girls who are victims of violence in all forms” (NASW, 2000, p 326).