

One of the hurtful effects of trauma is that it often leaves survivors feeling powerless and voiceless. In a culture where women generally still have less power than men, this can leave women trauma survivors feeling especially hopeless or immobilized. In this chapter, we will examine how taking social action, individually or as part of a group, can be a positive act of healing for women trauma survivors, helping them to reclaim their own power in the world.

### Social Action as a Tool for Healing

As we move through the healing process and begin to emerge from feelings of powerlessness, we may become aware of a sense of rage about what was done to us. We may also become outraged when we see others harmed or treated unjustly. This understandable anger is a potent force. Unexamined and unchecked, it can be hurtful to ourselves and others.

But if we recognize our rage as a force that can be channeled for our own benefit and for the good of others, it can be a powerful force for positive change. Taking social action—working to change harmful policies and practices and to overcome injustice—can be a healing and productive way to explore and express our new-found power.

#### TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION

Whether we talk about the sexual and physical abuse of women and children, the abuse of the inmates of asylums and prisons, the imprisonment and torture of people of conscience, or the abuses of the totalitarian state, all violence focuses on the unfair distribution of power and the abuse of this power by the powerful against the helpless. The solutions to these problems are not individual solutions; they require political solutions. It is not surprising, therefore, that many traumatized individuals turn to political action as a way of transforming their own individual and group pain.

– Sandra Bloom

### Organizing for Social Action

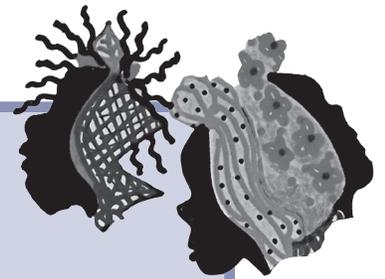
There are many issues around which a group can organize that are relevant to women trauma survivors. For example, women may wish to advocate for their local behavioral health system to provide trauma-informed services and supports. Maybe there is not enough funding for domestic violence shelters or rape crisis services in your city. Perhaps state law makes it difficult for women with behavioral health issues to keep custody of their children. Every woman and every community will have their own priorities. It is likely that there are existing groups in your community interested in the same issues who would be happy to collaborate with you and may have existing campaigns that you can become involved with.

Organizing for collective social action requires many different skills, which means that each person in the group has the opportunity to use their strengths in the process. For example, some people are good at sizing up a situation and planning strategy. Others excel at gathering information. One person may be good at writing letters, while another has the ability to remain calm in stressful situations and is a good negotiator. Since social action in a group uses many kinds of skills and personal strengths, everyone has the chance to shine!

No matter what issues you choose to tackle, organizing for social action requires planning, preparation, and coordination to be effective. An important first step is to express the issue from the group's point of view.

To break down the problem, ask questions like:

- What is it that we want to change?
- What outcomes or solutions would satisfy us? What are we willing to trade, compromise about, or just let go of? What are we not willing to trade, compromise about, or give up?
- Research the issues. Is there a written statement of rights? Is a rule, policy, or law being violated?
- What additional information or resources do you need? How can you get these?
- Who has the power to change the situation or fix the problem? If you are not sure who is ultimately in charge, how can you find out?



## SOCIAL ACTION PRINCIPLES FOR TRAUMA SURVIVORS

- We express our rage nonviolently and humanely.
- We are focused and strategic; we are aware of the effects of our actions on others.
- Our means are consistent with our ends. We are committed to not acting abusively, regardless of—and in resistance against—how we have been abused.
- We maintain compassion for ourselves and compassion for others.
- Our actions are linked to positive visions. We react against our own mistreatment and broader conditions of social injustice. We also take responsibility for translating that reaction into ideas and possibilities for a more just society.
- We know that we are not powerless in the present, despite the ways that we have been overpowered by abuse and trauma in the past.
- We act from a commitment to equal power relations. Our goal is to share power to the greatest extent possible—to step outside of the oppression paradigm which places people in subordinate and dominant roles.

– Adapted from Steven Wineman, *Power-Under: Trauma and Non-violent Social Change*

- What are some possible barriers to reaching an outcome that everyone can live with? Think about how you might find a solution for each of these problems.
- When there is conflict, is there a point of shared interest on which there is some agreement? This may be a good place to begin conversations and build understanding of the concerns from both points of view.

Develop a clear and concise understanding of the problem and the group's desired solution in about five spoken sentences or no more than one written page. Once you have developed your position statement, you need to frame it in a way that is likely to get results. Think about what the other side has to gain by agreeing to resolve your problem and how to express this in a positive way.

Next, decide *who* to approach and how to approach them. Here are some tips:

- Focus on facts, not on feelings. While you may be angry about the problem, present your information in a calm, matter-of-fact way. This will have a stronger impact on the decision-maker.
- Usually, it is best to start with the most direct approach, such as meeting with management or with the government officials who are most clearly responsible for the issue.

- You can move on to methods that are more public and bring more pressure if the first steps are not effective. The techniques you choose will depend on the nature of the problem and your desired solution, as well as who the target of the advocacy is and what approaches might be most effective with them.
- Start by asserting the lowest-pressure technique and apply only as much as is necessary to succeed. The activities below are arranged in order of increasing pressure, from lowest to highest:
  - Meet with management or policymakers
  - Meet with the responsible government officials
  - Letter-writing, fax, phone, e-mail campaigns
  - Develop and distribute position papers and fact sheets
  - Join relevant committees and task forces
  - Testify at public hearings
  - Media campaigns
  - Rallies and demonstrations
  - Lawsuits

Organizing for social change is not only a tool for reclaiming our own power as individuals, it can help rebuild the trust and sense of community that is often shattered by traumatic events. Even when we face barriers or our short-term social action goals are not met, we can still feel a sense of satisfaction and camaraderie in the work itself.



## BUILDING & MAINTAINING GRASSROOTS PROJECTS

Not all social action involves organizing to change policy, practices or funding priorities. In many instances, people come together to create projects or structures that meet a local need which is not being well-addressed by existing systems. Often largely based on volunteer labor and donations of goods and services, such grassroots efforts can give disempowered people a feeling of ownership as they work to solve the problems that affect them and their neighbors. Women can come together to decide what is needed in their communities.

Examples include:

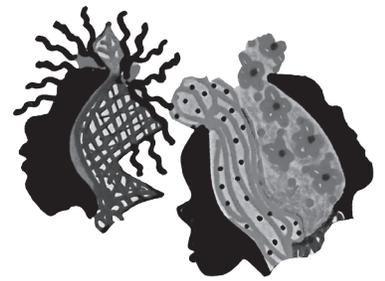
- Food pantries and soup kitchens
- Ride-sharing services
- Self-defense classes for women
- Community gardens
- Safe houses for domestic violence survivors
- Childcare cooperatives

## WITNESS TESTIMONY: SEEKING JUSTICE AND HEALING THROUGH TELLING ONE'S STORY

There is a long history of survivors of violence and injustice seeking justice by giving testimony about what happened to them. Survivors of the Holocaust, families of the “disappeared” in Latin America, and survivors of torture and political violence across the world have all used this technique. This serves to document the truth about the violence and injustice that has been done. But people often find that telling their story is a cathartic and healing activity.

Psychotherapists in Chile pioneered a therapeutic approach based on giving testimony that was later adapted by therapists in Europe. As Dick Blackwell explains it, “The client would tell her/his story to the therapist who could interrupt, question, and explore the emotional experience of the events recounted. The testimony was recorded, typed up, given to the client to review with the therapist and revise and develop as necessary, again including ‘therapeutic’ attention to the emotional experience. The final document constituted an indictment of the regime under which the client had suffered, which (s)he could use as (s)he chose in the pursuit of justice. The testimony locates the victimization in the context of the rest of the client’s life and in the contemporary political context in which it has occurred, and it provides the client with a form of positive action within that context. It also locates the therapist within that context as a participant in the struggle for social justice.”

As peer supporters, we can adapt this technique as a way for women trauma survivors to tell their truths and consider what kind of justice would be necessary for healing. We can interview each other, write our individual stories as narratives, or record our testimony on video. These records could be kept private, could form the basis for discussion in peer support groups, or could be used as raw materials for arts and cultural projects.



## Resources

Blackwell, Dick (2005). Psychotherapy, Politics and Trauma: Working with Survivors of Torture and Organized Violence. *Group Analysis*, 38(2):307–323.

Bloom, Sandra (1998). By The Crowd They Have Been Broken, By the Crowd They Shall Be Healed: The Social Transformation of Trauma. In R. Tedeschi, C. Park, & L. Calhoun. *Post-Traumatic Growth: Theory and Research on Change in the Aftermath of Crises*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bobo, Kim, Kendall, Jackie, & Max, Steve (2001). *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists, 3rd Edition*. Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press.

Center for Community Change, <http://www.communitychange.org/>

Community Problem-Solving Project@ MIT, <http://web.mit.edu/cpsproject/home.html>

Highlander Research and Education Center, <http://www.highlandercenter.org/index.html>, includes Spanish-language organizing resources at: <http://www.highlandercenter.org/r-spanish.asp>

Midwest Academy, <http://www.midwestacademy.com/>

Organizing for Social Change: Tips for Group Organizing for Everyone, <https://www.msu.edu/~corcora5/org/grouporgtips.html>

Resources for Organizing and Social Change, <http://resourcesfororganizing.org/>

V-Day: A Global Movement to End Violence Against Women and Girls, <http://www.vday.org/home>

Wineman, Steven (2003). *Power-Under: Trauma and Non-violent Social Change*. Available for free download at <http://gis.net/~swineman/>

Young Women's Empowerment Project, <http://www.youarepriceless.org/>