

## An interview with Margaret Frimoth by Katrin Bridget Snow

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence took some verbal abuse from the Reagan administration last fall and received a forty-five thousand dollar cut in funding because of allegations on the part of the Free Congress Foundation, a right-wing government group, that the Coalition was anti-family, anti-Reagan, pro-lesbian and made up of radical feminists. The Foundation's attack came after a governmental task force had recommended a six hundred and twenty-five thousand dollar grant for the National Coalition in recognition of the importance of their work. Because of those allegations, the Coalition's grant came under review and the group was asked to sign a five-page document detailing the kind of work they were and were not allowed to do. The Coalition was prohibited from setting up a national speakers' bureau to address professional groups that dealt with battered women, and they were prohibited from leading police training workshops to aid law enforcement officials in understanding the causes of domestic violence and techniques for dealing with it. The Coalition also may not advertise that they will aid lesbian women who are battered. In effect, said Margaret Frimoth, former coordinator of the Clatsop County Women's Crisis Service, the government prohibited them from doing the kind of work that gets at the root of the problem to change it. The grant finally approved was for 581,621 dollars, to be distributed over two years, the second year contingent on whether the Coalition has properly used the first year's funds.

The following is an interview with Margaret Frimoth about the government's attack and the effect it may have on the National Coalition.



KATHE KOLLWITZ, "DEATH REACHES FOR A CHILD"

MF: It's not so much the new cooperative that we had to sign, although it felt like we were being dragged along and having our hands slapped for saying that we do believe in gay rights, we do believe in rights for women, we do believe in good things happening in families. What bothers me most is that the government said, "We will give you money only if you promise that this money will be used in the best interests of the government." My belief is that with the trickle-down effect of what the government is like, that the best interest of the government creates domestic violence. It creates violence in our society. It allows men to beat women. So you have a government agency hanging this carrot, this money, in front of a group of people and telling us we can have this money, which is our survival, only if we do what the government says we can do. Then we realize that what the government says we as women can do often tills the soil for domestic violence, tills the soil for inequality.

KBS: What kinds of things did the government allow you to do? Is it that you can't do enough work in the areas you're allowed to work, or is that there are certain kinds of work you can't do at all?

MF: I guess the way to explain that most clearly is to look at all the buttons that right-wingers pushed. They told us, "Don't ever use the word lesbian, don't ever do anything that has to do with gay rights." That is like saying, "Don't ever use the word racism, don't ever use the word classism, don't ever use any of the words that demonstrate inequality between people, that deal with any kind of oppression. Just do your work, okay? Just be a nice little sewing circle of women who create quilts and sell them at the local rummage sales to get money for your good little program. But don't upset anything, don't roll the cart over." In effect, it's saying, "As long as you just shelter these poor, battered women who get trapped in situations they should not have been in anyway, you're doing your job."

KBS: That comment, "protect the battered women who were in a place they should not be anyway," implies that it is their fault, that something is their fault.

MF: Right. And the government is saying, "We can deal with you as an organization as long as you continue to say that a battered woman is a battered woman because she has done something wrong." But if we start saying that a battered woman is a battered woman because violence to women is allowed in our society, the government doesn't want to hear that, it is too threatening.

I hear it expressed that the biggest threat to people in power is oppressed people getting power. Personally, I don't believe it. Equality in relationships is a perfect example. When a husband and a wife are equal in power in that

## BEATING UP WOMEN AND CHILDREN IS ANTI-FAMILY

relationship, it does not mean that one person has to give up their self-esteem. It usually creates better self-esteem in all people, including their offspring. We have these misunderstandings of power and we think that, "If I am in a place of power and I see anybody who is oppressed getting power, it may threaten me, it may take away my power."

KBS: Do you think that part of the reason the government focused on this particular grant was that it included money for training police, who represent the power in a society? So you were talking about retraining values?

MF: Yes. We were talking about helping police officers, who are usually the first people on a domestic violence scene, training them to realize that the wife has not necessarily been a "nagging wife who deserves a beating." It is retraining values to see that as a social myth, and to say that what really happened was that the guy got out of control and beat up his wife, and he needs to be stopped.

KBS: Have you had police officers come to you for help in domestic violence situations?

MF: Yes. Usually the comment is, "I don't know how to deal with this situation. Why in the world does she stay? I give her every opportunity to get out and she sticks around, she drops the charges."

When police officers go in not understanding domestic violence, they often go in thinking they can help. They tell the woman that she can press charges. They tell her her rights, and that she can get a restraining order or have her husband jailed. But a woman in the midst of domestic violence knows that he may violate the restraining order or that he will only be in jail for twenty-four hours and when he's released he is going to be real mad. She will often say that she doesn't want to press charges and that she will stay where she is.

She may also feel that if she was a better wife it wouldn't happen, so she's going to try it again. For whatever reason she stays, the police officer usually buys into the myth that she wants it and she likes it. It is vital that

police officers, who are the first people on the scene of most domestic violence situations, understand what the cycles of violence are like, that they understand why she's going to say some of the things she will say, and that if they do arrest the guy, it could put her in a more dangerous situation.

Training for police officers is vital. So is a national speakers' bureau, through which we would have people doing the same kind of community education to social groups, professional groups that meet with battered women daily but may buy into all of the social myths rather than the truth of what is happening in domestic violence situations.

We were accused of being anti-family because women and children who go to domestic violence shelters are somehow breaking up the family by leaving. What we are saying is, "We are not anti-family. Violence is anti-family." We are trying to stop violence by breaking the myths in our society that allow it to continue.

KBS: What are some of the social myths that allow women to be battered and that you feel the government's action also represented?

MF: One of the reasons that women are battered is because they nag a lot and somebody who nags needs to be taught somehow to shut up. I think this is a real good analogy because when you don't have a lot of power you usually have to request some form of power over and over again, just to survive. A battered woman who is denied medical and financial resources, which is very common, has to say, "Look, my child needs a dental appointment," or "I'm pregnant and I need medical care. I need these things. Please make an appointment or let me make an appointment. Let me have this care." Or she will need money for groceries: "You can't go out drinking tonight. I need money for groceries." These things can be defined as nagging, and once defined as nagging, somebody can rationalize slapping somebody across the face to teach them a lesson, to stop them from nagging.