

The parallel is that we are a grassroots organization struggling for money — a national coalition representing hundreds of shelters across the nation. The voice of the nation on issues revolving around domestic violence. We don't have a lot of money. We don't ask battered women to support our organization with their money in order to get support. So we need financial support from somewhere else, and when we go out looking for it we have to ask over and over for it. Six hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars was going to do the National Coalition a lot of good, but it was yanked away from us. If the government gets tired of what it sees as nagging for money they can just call us anti-family, anti-Reagan, a radical feminist group which is not in the best interests of the government.

I am going to digress for a moment because it sounds like I am trying to say that the government is entirely at fault, which is not what I am saying. The original grant came straight from the recommendations of a government task force. It recommended that the National Coalition get money to do the work that we do because the Coalition was seen to be the voice of the nation, the experts in domestic violence. It was a major show of support for the Coalition by the government. What happened was that the work includes certain socially unacceptable issues. We dealt with battered lesbians and with racism, for example. It was the powerful people in the right wing of government who opposed the grant. So the struggle was not the government versus the National Coalition, it is the struggle of different values — values of a family staying together no matter what, versus the healthy family. A traditional family structure does not always mean a healthy family. There is battering of women and children and sexual abuse in families that look "right." The struggle is also between keeping women in a traditional place versus helping them live up to their full potential, which they can only do if they feel safe.

KBS: Is that another one of the myths, what makes women feel safe?

MF: That comes up a lot. Women are trained to need men. I know from talking to women who are faced with leaving an abusive man that they are very much afraid. They are afraid of being alone and afraid of the wrath of the man if they leave him.

The myth is that women are weak, that women need a man because a man is stronger. And that is also a myth. I've known lots of men who want to admit that they have fears but feel very strongly that they can't make that admission because they are expected to be strong all of the time.

The stereotype of the man needing to be strong to be masculine sets him up in a position of power, and it is the misuse of that power that keeps the myth going. All you have to do is hit somebody to make that person feel less strong. One of the things about violence is that it works. It is a very effective method of behavior modification. It works that way with children also. Children are seen as needing adults to be strong for them, and certainly there are times when children do need adults, but not when adults abuse their privileges of power.

KBS: Is that another parallel — that one of the things about violence is that it works — whether or not withholding money from the National Coalition will "work?"

MF: Certainly. That was what we were faced with in the meetings. That is why the meetings went so long. It was a decisive tactic that worked.

KBS: So one of the things you have to deal with over the two years of the grant is if the work that you can do will overcome that decisive tactic.

MF: I am sure that it is on the minds of many people. If we have been able to use the money effectively — did it change us? Are we still grassroots? What are the values of the National Coalition? Six months into having this money, have we changed? Are we more concerned with meeting the governmental standards than with doing the work?

We also knew that this was the hard hitting slap of one governmental group, the Free Congress Foundation. We knew that once the contract was signed we could, in some respect, just go about doing our work and believe that we would not be threatened. But it is all those subtle messages that change people.

That is another good parallel. Lenore Walker, a writer on domestic violence issues, often says that battered women are never safe because there is never free negotiation in a relationship that includes a battered woman. Battered women are always wondering when they will be hit next. I think that is a good parallel with what is happening in the National Coalition. We have this money now, we have said we will do what the government wants us to do, we are just trying to do the best work we can but always wondering when they will hit us again. How will we know if what we are doing is acceptable? What is the next accusation going to be?

KBS: And does that start to subtly change what you consider doing?

MF: It could. It very well could. And because it is so subtle we might not see it right away. That is what is most frightening, I



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think. The subtle change that we are now subject to.

There was a point in the meetings when we thought we could take the money, do the work, and see if they yank it away from us. But the legal ramifications of that were incredible. If we did something that the right wing hated, would we be liable for the money we already spent? There is no way we could ever repay it. We just don't have the financial means. That would be the destruction of the National Coalition and we couldn't take the risk. So there was our strongest stance — Take the money and do the work we do, and if they call us on it and yank the money, so what? But that would have meant the destruction of the National Coalition and that was a risk we could not take. It is really unfortunate when you have to look at your greatest strength being your destruction.

I think battered women have to deal with that all of the time. The greatest risk is to leave. It is the strongest thing they could do, but it is the greatest risk. What do you do if you are a woman without means and you leave? You could be leaving all of your financial resources if you're not working. It could mean that the medical provisions, the insurance that your children get good medical care could be gone the instant you leave. It is a risk that is sometimes too hard to take.

It is pretty amazing to think that the work we are doing is trying to get rid of violence in families and we are having such a hard time doing it. It irks me something fierce to see all the money that is being spent on the Nicaraguan Contras while the National Coalition is struggling to do away with violence. We are called anti-family, and yet the government destroys families when it sets up a war.

One of the things that this experience tells me is that we are going to find financial stability in some way other than depending on grants from structures that don't understand the power issues that we are dealing with. We have to depend on individuals, on believers of the new way of looking at power, the new

understanding of families, to get the funds to keep us in existence. Grassroots organizing is crucial to our effectiveness because it does not buy into the power structures that trickle down into violent structures.

It certainly has been an eye-opening experience, in which you see all of your personal values and confront them. I remember in one of the meetings a woman stood up and talked about how much good the money would do us and that it was not a lot to ask the National Coalition to tone down its radical influences. She was being as honest as she could.

I thought to myself that I was supposed to be like her, the person who gets up and says, "Take the money, do good with the money, don't worry about the other work, we can do that later." But I felt myself pulled in another direction and I thought, "But that's not right!"

But there were other women who stood up after her and told their stories. They had their children taken away from them because they were now involved in a lesbian relationship and the court couldn't handle that. There were women of color who were dealing with injustices daily, and threats on their lives for the work they were doing. There were plenty of women who this money would affect personally.

I was pulled apart because of my values and what other women told me about needing the money. They told me that in my safe environment as a white woman who was not rich but not poor either that I was unable to see the pain and lack of safety that many women live with.

To have myself torn apart was an incredible experience. It really changed me. It has made me a radical feminist, radical in the best sense of the word, radical meaning "roots." I am a woman looking at the roots of women's issues and seeing that we need to change from there. I am not threatened any longer by that word.

KBS: That gives you more strength for what you are doing, because it is stronger in you.

MF: I think so. But you know, I can't say that I am grateful for those injustices because they have made me stronger. I am not willing to say that. I am not willing to tell a battered woman that she is stronger for the experience. She should never have been battered. She might be stronger because she survived it, but she's not stronger because of that beating.

I feel the same way about the National Coalition. We may come out ahead. We may be able to do our work. We may have a great victory because we have five hundred and eighty-one thousand dollars in our pockets. But I am not going to say that the struggle was worth it and that it should have happened, that because I am stronger I feel good about it. I may be stronger but we should never have had that money come under review. We should not have been attacked like we were.

Margaret Frimoth was the coordinator of the Clatsop County Women's Crisis Service in Astoria for eighteen months. She will work with victims of incest with the Children's Service Division and will continue as a volunteer with the Crisis Center. Katrin Bridget Snow was formerly the program director of KMUN-FM in Astoria and is freelance writing for print and radio. This interview was conducted for In The Public Interest.



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