

'And they STILL say some women  
like being beaten'

An account of what its like to work in a Women's Refuge.

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I arrive in the morning - its 9 o'clock and the phone is already ringing - it doesn't stop much all day. I'm greeted at the door with a cluster of problems. Sometimes its flattering to be thought of as a problem solver, sometimes it just seems impossible to do anything. Sometimes I feel so helpless, so untouched by a tough life - and yet being a woman unites me with all these women.

Someone says "a woman with three kids rang and she's coming in an hour: she was crying and she's got no money and I said we'd pay her taxi fare. We're getting really crowded - that's nine women and twenty children staying altogether." But we're always crowded.

Someone else introduces Janet, the police brought her here last night. She has two black eyes that would do credit to any makeup firm in the variety of blues, greens and purples surrounding her sad eyes.

The older kids are all at school but there seem to be endless little ones coming up for cuddles. With a blue-eyed baby on my knee I answer the phone - a drunken voice (at this hour?) asks for Vicky. She's not here. "Tell old jam-face I love her. You've got a nice voice, what's your name?" "I work here". I put down the phone before he can say anything else and talk to Janet who came in last night.

One of the collective who's on voluntary roster that day arrives. Some of us sit down round the dining room table, have coffee, check whose come and whose left over the weekend, ask whose got appointments with legal aid, housing and welfare. Janet just wants to recuperate for a day or two before she goes anywhere. Paula has to go to court but is terrified of seeing her husband there: one of us goes with her to support her.

In a momentary lull we chat around the table. "All I wanted when I got married was a nice house and kids, and outings at the weekend like barbeques. Then he started to drink. He spent over \$400 one week on drink - we'd been saving the money up to go on holiday."

"My husband didn't drink much, only a couple of beers in one night. But he couldn't take it. Then he'd get violent".

Sue's husband destroyed all the furniture: cut it all to ribbons, broke all the chairs. She's left the Refuge now but he still bothers her, still threatens her. The police come and take him away but he comes back the next night. Robyn was so desperate that she drove thousands of miles interstate in a 25 year old car with three children in the back, to get away from an ex husband who wouldn't leave her alone.

The doorbell rings...its a lady from the local church with a home-made cake which we put away carefully for the kid's tea.

The phone rings - someone asking us to speak about the Refuge at a Health Centre. The woman with three kids arrives in the taxi, the cake is brought out again to give to these kids and while everyone else entertains them I try and comfort and support the new arrival.

Sometimes I go home from the Refuge thinking that the whole world must be peopled by men who are sexual perverts and alcoholics; men who have no respect for women, men who are so jealous that they won't let their wives out of the house to shop or take the kids to preschool, men who take out their miseries on their wives with violence and rape.

I need to get away from the Refuge to correct my world vision.

But I still have to face the reality for many women three days a week at the Refuge, and getting away is more difficult than it might seem. I only have to say where I work and everyone turns to me with bated breath...and they're not always sympathetic. The stereotypes come out in a typical Canberra dinner party. "Some women like being beaten", I'm told, after months of trying to help women cope with the terror induced by violence. "It takes two to make an argument". Indeed - but violence is no solution to an argument: its the coward's way out. "Wife-beating is a working class habit". But we had a bruised and battered millionaire's wife in the Refuge last week - and middle class women ring up frequently for advice. If we tend to have less middle class women staying its only because they have more resources, and can go elsewhere.

While writing this I receive a phonecall...the second this evening from the Refuge. (All the workers work much longer than the 2½ days we're paid for). A collective member on roster rang up. A woman with six children has just arrived minus their school clothes. Everybody will know something has happened if they go to school tomorrow without them, and it won't be much fun for them. She's been back to the house with the police but her husband wouldn't let her in. The police said "a man's home is his castle", thereby denying her any rights. What to do? Ring the police and try again. She has got rights. By law half the contents of the house are hers.

Fighting for women, by women - along with friendship, support and shelter, its what a Refuge is all about. We have to fight for better houses, more houses. We fight to educate bureaucracies, the police, politicians and the community in general. We fight to change laws and end the oppression of women.

It's why I wanted to work at the Refuge. But I keep on working at the Refuge because I have never before seen such courage and determination as shown by the women who go through the Refuge. I love and respect the women I'm employed to help.