

Woman

The Dallas Morning News

11-11-92

STRIKING BACK

Women from around the state gather to discuss a problem affecting more than half a million Texas women a year: domestic violence

By Toni Y. Joseph

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN — Although Linda and Jay Hill both were convicted in the starvation death of their son Stephen, comments made after the trial seemed to lay the blame on Mrs. Hill.

"She talks about her own problems," said her lawyer, Charles Baldwin of Fort Worth, in stories published after the sentencing. "She, in her twisted mind, believes she was abused, and she believes that we don't understand her pain."

A physician who said he never spoke to Mrs. Hill offered this assessment: She was "probably born bad."

The comments surprised few participants at "Backlash Mom Bashing," a recent workshop sponsored by the Texas Council on Family Violence. The session was one of 66 attended by more than 400 women and men during a three-day conference on domestic violence.

"It's safer to displace anger and blame women for family violence than to call for the types of societal changes that will be more difficult to achieve," said Patricia Castillo, a social worker with San Antonio's Benedictine Resource Center and a coordinator of the city's P.E.A.C.E. Initiative.

The packed workshop examined how social service workers, law enforcement officials and the courts tend to hold women to a higher standard of conduct and responsibility than men — even when their spouses and partners usually perpetrate the violence that lands the family in the justice or social service system.

"We expect so much from women in terms of their roles as wives, in terms of their roles as mothers," said Ms. Castillo.

KEY NOTES



Associated Press

Andrea Dworkin, feminist author of 12 books of fiction, nonfiction and poetry, was the conference's keynote speaker. She is also the co-author of ordinances in Minneapolis and Indianapolis that define pornography as a civil rights violation against women. Here are some excerpts from her speech, "Freedom Now: Ending Violence Against Women."

"It is staggering to understand that the place where a woman is most at jeopardy is in her own home, that 4,000 women a year in the United States are killed in their own homes, not by strangers who break in but by men who presumably love them.

"Being battered is being a captive. This is the part that is urgent to understand. When you look at what happens to women in battery, the only place where you see the kind of systematic injuries, the physical and psychological injuries that come from battery, are in prisons where people are tortured. Virtually everything we know about people who have been tortured in prisons comes from what we have learned by studying what is done to battered women. In the home, the situation that is created is virtually the same."

"We have these incredible standards for women to live up to, yet we're not yet ready to provide them with the kind of support they need from the community to meet those elevated standards."

Ms. Castillo's comments stimulated a lively discussion. One woman from Houston told the group that her father regularly abused her sexually, but she blamed her mother for the violence in her childhood home.

"I understand my mother better now," she said. "I have sympathy, but only recently have I begun to not be angry with her."

Other 90-minute workshops at the conference provided management training for shelter employees, updated participants on recent research and emphasized the need for children's services. Additional sessions addressed addictions that afflict women and their children, and discussed battering intervention and prevention.

The conference was held to foster improved services to battered women and their children, said Ellen Fisher, assistant director for programs with the Texas Council. Workshops also were offered to help improve services. Please see **WOMEN'S** on Page 7C.

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prove the quality of treatment programs for batterers.

"We wanted to bring family violence program staff members and volunteers together in a non-crisis situation so that everyone could learn and reinforce the importance of one another's work," Ms. Fisher said.

Michelle Ferguson, an administrative supervisor with the Houston Police Department's family violence unit, said the conference was as beneficial as graduate school

field work. It also reinforced the idea that police departments and women's advocates, who sometimes differ over family violence issues, have similar goals.

"The networking will help me do a better job," Ms. Ferguson said. "More than half our calls are from African-American women in distress. I learned things I can do to help African-American victims of domestic violence. I found out what's going on in the shelters. Before the conference I had no idea that shelter leaders were largely responsible for a lot of the (family violence) legislation that's been passed."

Renee Carroll-Grate, executive director of the Collin County Women's Shelter and the council's area coordinator, said the conference gave her a new perspective on the work she does in Plano.

"The workshops helped me get in touch with the big picture," Ms. Carroll-Grate said. "It kept me mindful that the problem isn't just here in Collin County."