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Waking Up the Dissident: Transforming Lives (and Society) with Feminist Counseling¹

By Donna F. Johnson²

Abstract

When I was a student in the 70's I took a year off to travel the world with a friend. Despite taking every precaution, I was sexually assaulted twice. The incidents changed the course of my life. I completed my studies and began working in a refuge for battered women. There I bore witness, not only to unimaginable cruelty, but to widespread institutional indifference to women's suffering. Decades later, police, judicial and child welfare responses remain inadequate in Canada (as everywhere), and mental health practitioners continue to routinely blame and pathologize women. As a counselor, first at the shelter, later in a police crisis unit, I struggled to know how to respond when women sought my guidance. Should they report being beaten, raped, threatened with death? Should they seek treatment for depression? Could they lose their children? Could they be charged for defending themselves against their batterers? Women were looking for reassurances that I couldn't give. What I could give them was tools to understand the forces acting upon their lives. I began to incorporate a feminist analysis into my work, including a sociology lesson and consciousness-raising in every session. I started bringing women together in groups, where many problems considered personal and psychological were recognized as common and social, requiring political solutions. For many women, reflecting on their problems from a feminist perspective was truly liberating and empowering.

Keywords: Feminism, Counseling, Feminist Therapy, Women's Mental Health, Patriarchy, Women's Anger, Women's Condition, Battered Women's Shelters in Canada.

Introduction

I reread some of Nawal El Saadawi's work in preparation for coming to the 5th World Conference on Women's Studies,³ and in the rereading saw that she had written *my* story. How is this possible? I grew up in Canada, 10,000 kilometres from Nawal and the Arab world! But such is the power of a woman speaking truthfully about her life. Such is the power of feminist consciousness. Dr. El Saadawi is breathtakingly conscious, and she has written every woman's story, revealing the prisons we all live inside, laying bare "the hateful, constricted world of women"⁴—

¹ This paper is dedicated to Helen Levine (1923-2018); beloved mentor. Her passion for feminism changed my life.

² I taught a graduate seminar in feminist practice at the School of Social Work, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, from 2007-2014.

³ Dr. El Saadawi, renowned Egyptian writer, activist, physician and psychiatrist, was scheduled to be the keynote speaker at this conference; unfortunately, ill-health prevented her from attending. By great good fortune, I was able to spend a few hours with her at her home in Cairo prior to coming to the Bangkok conference—and to thank her in person for her work. Nawal gifted me with volume one of her inspirational autobiography, *Daughter of Isis: The Early Life of Nawal El Saadawi, In Her Own Words* (London: Zed Books, 2018); highly recommended.

⁴Nawal El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (London: Saqi Books, 1988.), 14.

“their general, social oppression and their private oppression through the institution of marriage”.⁵ She writes unflinchingly about the coercive power of the state, tradition and religion, and about the fear and humiliation that is women’s birthright in a patriarchal world. She calls on women to become dissidents; to challenge the institutions that uphold male supremacy; “to abolish the ascendancy of men over women”.⁶

Through her medical practice Dr. El Saadawi observed the link between women’s oppression and their physical and psychological problems. The connection between the personal and political is the central theme of feminist counseling. Rereading her work, I see that she used a feminist approach in her practice long before such a method had even been conceptualized.

Today I am going to talk about my own evolution into feminist consciousness, and about how becoming a feminist counsellor made sense in light of my deepening understanding of women’s common plight. In my work I saw women getting beaten up, literally and figuratively, first by their husbands, then by police and courts, then by doctors and psychiatrists who routinely pathologize their legitimate responses to injustice and oppression. I saw that women are in desperate need of a critical framework through which to understand their lives. I will outline some of the practices I found most helpful in my work; work which, since rereading Nawal, I have come to see as “waking up the dissident” inside women.⁷

Why do I begin with my own story? Establishing common ground with women is article one of a feminist approach. “When a woman tells the truth, she is creating the possibility for more truth around her,”⁸ wrote Adrienne Rich. And we cannot help others become conscious if we are not ourselves fully conscious of the tentacles of patriarchy reaching into our own lives.

Coming to Feminist Consciousness

I was born in Montreal, Canada in 1954, the youngest of four daughters. When we were very small my father used to say he was going to put an ad in the newspaper to exchange his four girls for one boy. We knew he was teasing, but the joke wouldn’t have worked if we hadn’t understood at some level the lesser value of our sex.

Like Nawal, I hated being a girl. I envied boys their adventures and freedoms. I resisted as I could, refusing the restrictive clothing, makeup and toys assigned to my sex. I was warned I’d never get a husband if I didn’t learn to cook. Growing up, I saw my mother flounder in her role as wife and mother. A registered nurse, she never worked outside the home after marriage. She grew increasingly diminished and depressed, retreating to a darkened bedroom, becoming dependent on alcohol and prescription drugs. My father, meanwhile, flourished in marriage and career and was regarded as a hero for putting up with a sick, impossible wife.⁹

If only I had been exposed to Nawal’s writing as a child! If only my mother had read her work, how different things might have been for her. Alas, my mother never understood the forces acting upon her life¹⁰—and I would spend nearly three decades figuring it out.

⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (London: Zed Books, 2007), xii.

⁷ Nawal El Saadawi, “Creativity, Dissidence and Women”, https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/7/045_ElSaadawi.pdf, (accessed 26 January 2020).

⁸ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (W.W. Norton & Co.,1995)

⁹ “Your father is a saint, he’s so patient with your mother,” people would say. They did not see how he belittled and disregarded her behind closed doors.

¹⁰ Specifically, the prescription for marriage that relegates women to auxiliary, care-taking roles and encourages them to live vicariously through others.

In my early 20's I took a year off my studies to travel overseas with a friend. My mother begged me not to go. "The world is not a safe place for two girls travelling alone", she said. "It's a man's world, Donna. You might as well get used to it." Despite taking every precaution, I was sexually assaulted twice on that trip, once in a bathroom on a Greek ferry, once while sleeping on an overnight train in India. I never saw either man's face.

The incidents started me thinking about what it means to be a woman. I had been sexually harassed many times prior to that trip, on the street, on public transportation, in a movie theatre. As a student, pornography had been left on my desk in the university library and sent to me in the mail. I did not know any of the men who did these things, so I knew the incidents were "nothing personal" but a response to the fact of my being female. But what was the intent? To make me fear the public space? To bolster these men's sense of their own power and privilege? To reinforce the message that women in public are considered sexually available? I was at liberty to move about, yet there was a sense of being policed. What kind of freedom was this?

I recalled other incidents in my life, the stuff women don't talk about because it's too small, because it's just the way life is. My father used to read Playboy magazines in the drugstore while my mother was having her prescriptions for valium filled. How humiliated I felt for my mother, my sisters and me! Even as a small child I felt degraded. I wanted to scream at my father but instead would pretend I didn't see what he was doing. I felt powerless against him and internalized my shame and rage. It was the beginning of losing my voice.

At the end of my travels I returned to Canada, completed my studies and got a job in a shelter for battered women. I had no analysis and really no idea what was happening to women in their homes and marriages. But I was searching for something. It was a specific historical and cultural moment, where shelters were emerging in response to social movement activism and discourse, and I gravitated towards the juncture.

It was a rude awakening. I quickly discovered men's cruelty to women knows no bounds. Every woman who came through our doors had been told she was stupid, incompetent, disgusting, worthless and crazy. All had been relentlessly accused of having affairs and degraded as sluts and whores. Woman after woman had been beaten, kicked, choked, and threatened with death and the loss of her children. Woman after woman had been raped while sleeping, sick, or recovering from childbirth. I met women who had been raped by their own husbands while undergoing cancer treatments, and women with brain injuries from attacks with baseball bats. I met women with chronic internal injuries from penetration with iron rods.

Women live in a kind of nether world where the violence perpetrated on their bodies, minds and spirits is trivialized, denied, and rendered invisible to the community; indeed, even to themselves. There is pressure for women to remain quiet lest their accusations of battering and rape ruin a man's reputation. Silence covers wrongs and makes them disappear. I've run many support groups where we've spent six weeks out of twelve just naming individual acts of violence so that women can start to take hold of their experience.

Of course, not all women survive the brutality. Many women were murdered on my watch,



and I helped establish a monument in those years to commemorate them.¹¹

We held a public vigil after each murder to denounce the system failures that regularly accompany these deaths. The most distressing—and ultimately, the most politicizing—aspect of my work was discovering that there is widespread institutional support for men’s abuse of women.

In Canada, police, courts and child welfare agencies regularly fail women through policies and practices that minimize men’s violence. Criminal law interventions are weak, leaving women to deal with violent husbands as best they can. Our family courts are an unmitigated disaster, regularly forcing mothers to hand over their kids to abusive men with little regard for the risks and harms to both the women and their children.

People often ask, why do women put up with this, why do they stay? Women do resist, they do try to leave, only to find the exits blocked. Many forces conspire against their freedom. Their families and communities, their churches and mosques, police and courts—all are against them. Leaving can be as dangerous as staying if the resources, networks and supports are not there.

Colonized Minds

Women don’t necessarily have to be *forced* to wind up prisoners in their own marriages. The coercive power of gender, religion, romance and tradition acts on us unconsciously, and most women assume the subservient roles assigned to them, more-or-less willingly. Our minds are colonized—Nawal would say, circumcised—from birth. We are groomed to be passive, dependent and self-sacrificing; conditioned as caretakers, servants and playthings. “Cultural prescriptions

¹¹ The monument’s inscription reads, in French and English, “To honor and to grieve all women abused and murdered by men. Envision a world without violence, where women are respected and free.” The small stones bear the names of individual women slain by an intimate partner.

pressure women into giving up the self, yielding our own individual potential in the name of love or normalcy or reason,”¹² wrote Helen Levine.

Through hundreds of conversations in the shelter I realized that most women are not aware of the forces acting upon their lives. Few recognize themselves as belonging to an oppressed group. Each battered woman thinks she’s the only one; that the problem lies in her individual bad marriage or with her particular controlling spouse. Women see their problems as individual and psychological rather than common and social. Prohibitions against women organizing on our own behalf ensure that we remain separated from each other. The home remains a strictly private domain, where each woman is left to bear her pain in isolation.

Pathologizing Women’s Distress: The Plot Thickens

“It is inevitable that women will become depressed or anxious under these conditions,” wrote Helen Levine, “at which point they turn to the helping professions where they are viewed as inadequate, abnormal or sick and in need of assessment, diagnosis and treatment.”¹³

It gets complicated here, because there *is* a connection between mental health and oppression. Women do suffer in these conditions, they do become distressed, and the distress is real and can be debilitating. But depression, anxiety, rage, wanting to run away, hurt oneself, etc., are normal responses to the inequality, injustice and violence built into our lives. They do not stem from intrinsic illnesses, deficits or disorders. We used to say at the shelter, “You are not crazy. You are a sane person responding to a crazy situation.” Many of the problems that women present in counseling are symptomatic of their subordinate status—or exacerbated by patterns of dominance in their lives.

In her groundbreaking work *Women and Madness*,¹⁴ Phyllis Chesler noted that most women committed to asylums were not insane but suffocating within the institution of marriage and the family. She cited examples of ‘uncommonly stubborn, talented and aggressive’ women hospitalized for not following the rules, their religions or their husbands. Women who refuse to serve and obey men are sanctioned faster and more effectively than any batterer. In Nawal’s novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, the main character asserts, “I wouldn’t spend my life in the kitchen peeling onions and garlic, wasting all my days so my husband could eat and eat.”¹⁵ Such a self-promoting statement would net many women across the globe a good disciplinary flogging; a designation of mental instability; or worse.

Mainstream mental health practitioners are trained in traditional models of sickness and health. They are generally not taught to understand the forces of oppression acting on women’s lives. However well-intentioned, their interventions may do more harm than good.

An immigrant woman I worked with, a professional engineer, was confined in the home by her husband. He refused to allow her to work, drive, or leave the home without his permission. One day she attempted to throw herself out of a moving car driven by the husband. He drove directly to hospital where she was committed for suicidal behaviour. But was she suicidal, or

¹² Helen Levine and Alma Estable, *The Power Politics of Motherhood: A Feminist Critique of Theory and Practice* (Occasional Paper, Centre for Social Welfare Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1981), 19.

¹³ Helen Levine, “The Personal is Political: Feminism and the Helping Professions,” in *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics*, ed. Geraldine Finn and Angela Miles (Montreal, PQ: Black Rose Books, 1982), 180.

¹⁴ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹⁵ El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 22.

simply determined to take back her life, come what may, from a man who sought to imprison her? Would a man trying to escape captivity be considered sick, or a hero?

I've worked with many women who, no longer willing to accept mental or physical abuse, have struck their partners in self-defense. These women are typically arrested and prosecuted as criminals. Often, they are seen as mentally ill as well—for why else would a woman attack her husband?

Awakening the Dissident

There was a poster hanging in the shelter where I worked. It contained a quote by American suffragette Lucy Stone, words spoken at a women's conference in 1855: "In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."¹⁶ The text scared me at first, it seemed a bit too radical, but as I came to understand the condition of women's lives, it became the guiding theme for my work. Lucy Stone was talking about consciousness-raising. She was encouraging women to resist the unjust and limiting roles assigned to them by virtue of being born female. She was calling on women to become dissidents. Once my own consciousness was raised, there was no turning back. I began to work from within an explicitly feminist framework.

I began to read feminist theory and women's history in order to better articulate how oppression operates in women's daily lives.

Consciousness-raising became a central component of my work. I used feminist texts, films and current events as springboards to discussion.

I started sharing, appropriately, my own experiences and struggles as a woman.

I started connecting women with each other, extremely important in helping women understand the common nature of their problems.

I began to emphasize women's courage and resilience in the face of tremendous odds.

I helped women understand their anger and rebellion as strengths.

I put women at the centre of their own story, helping them take their feelings and needs seriously.

I refused to blame or pathologize women. I would no longer collude in their oppression.

I would no longer send women unarmed into systems that worked against their interests.

When a woman asked me if she should report her rape, I would tell her truthfully what was likely to happen: she will be blamed and revictimized, and her rapist will get off scot-free. I would explain how the deck is stacked against women—and invite her into the political struggle for women's equality.

When a woman asked if she should report her batterer husband, I would explain that we live in a world that shores up male power, and that likely little will be done to protect her or her

¹⁶ Lucy Stone, "Disappointment is the Lot of Women" (Women's Rights Convention (Cincinnati, Ohio, October 17, 1855), http://www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/lucy_stone-women.html, (accessed 26 Jan 2020).

children. She may very well be forced to hand her kids over to her abuser, regardless of the risks to herself or her children. Then I would invite her into the struggle for women's liberation. I found that women responded well to having their oppression put before them. Hard as it might be to hear, they felt respected as equals, treated as thinking adults rather than patronized with partial truths and empty assurances. For most women it was an affirmation of what they already knew at some level but had never been encouraged to think about; truths that had lurked their whole lives just below the surface of awareness.

Understanding social context can make a massive difference if and when police and courts fail women. Knowing the game in advance helps. Knowing that we live in a patriarchy and that women in every country in the world are fighting the same fight for control over our lives can prevent individual women from lapsing into depression and despair. Isolation is a killer. As the poet Audre Lorde wrote, "Silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness."¹⁷ I advised women to be very cautious when it came to doctors and psychiatrists. Diagnoses and labels may be used against them as proof of their "instability".

I always assured women I would support them in any decision they made, but first they got a sociology lesson. In feminist counseling, society is the first client.¹⁸ The best way I can sum up what it means to be a feminist counsellor is to say that I take, into every single encounter with a woman, everything I've talked about here. Not the whole story, of course, but nuggets, links, threads and themes.

Conclusion

When we remove the veil that obscures women's subordinate status, we are left with some urgent questions. Is the mentally healthy woman the one who functions well under unjust conditions, or the one who breaks down? Is she the one who resists and rebels, or the one who adjusts and accommodates?

Feminist counseling is rooted in a liberatory vision for women. It replaces traditional mental health assumptions with a personal and political understanding of distress. Part consciousness-raising, part sociology lesson, the counselor makes visible the universal conditions of women's lives, helping women see and free themselves from the control and limits placed on them by virtue of their sex.

¹⁷ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Iowa: Aunt Lute Books, 1980), 35.

¹⁸ Laura S. Brown, *Subversive Dialogues: Theory in Feminist Therapy* (Basic Books, 1994).