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## A Feminist Group for Women Rape Survivors

Shantih E. Clemans

**ABSTRACT.** This article describes a feminist model of social group work for adult women survivors of rape. Framed by both social group work theory and feminist theory, this article reports on the infusion of specific feminist elements, such as consciousness raising, and an explicit focus on the influence of sexism in women's lives, into the group. The value of groups for trauma survivors is also discussed. Recommendations are made for feminism to play a more prominent role in the social work profession, particularly in the context of mutual aid groups. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Feminism, group work, rape survivor, trauma survivors, mutual aid

### *INTRODUCTION*

Among the many complex effects rape victims experience are feelings of isolation, self-blame, shame, anger, and fear of not being believed (Koss and Harvey, 1991). Although individual therapy can be an

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Shantih E. Clemans, DSW is Assistant Professor, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, 2495 Amsterdam Ave. New York, NY 10033 (clemans@yu.edu)

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important source of support, a short-term, semi-structured therapy group with a feminist philosophy provides essential mutual aid, consciousness raising, validation and empowerment. This article describes a feminist model of group therapy for adult women survivors of rape that was offered at a hospital-based rape crisis program. Strategies are included for incorporating feminist content into the group, for attending to feminist process, for exercising mutual aid strategies, and for respecting group diversity.

Practiced since the profession's early Settlement House days, group work generates power and unity from the coming together of people of similar experiences or to share a common goal (Shulman, 1999). This article will articulate the parallels between feminist social work and social group work.

Challenging assumptions about rape was a hallmark of second wave feminists of the 1970s (Ferree and Martin, 1995). Since they were founded over thirty years ago, rape-crisis programs have incorporated various degrees of feminism into their work (Gornick et al, 1985). Although the landscape of sexual assault organizations has changed and broadened remarkably, this article attempts to show the value of a feminist group work ideology in informing thought and action about rape.

## ***REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE***

### ***Feminism and Social Work***

Although feminism and sexual assault are commonly linked in the literature and in practice, a surprisingly small number of recent articles that address a feminist approach to rape/sexual assault groups was found. The subjects reviewed in this section include articles on feminist theory, feminist social work/feminist therapy, social group work, groups for trauma survivors, and feminist groups. Because of their similarities, studies of both feminist social work and feminist therapy are grouped as one.

With an eye toward social work practice implications, Nes and Iadicola (1989) examined three feminist models: liberal, radical, and socialist. The most salient element of feminism, regardless of model, is the attention paid to gender and power imbalances experienced by women. According to Nes and Iadicola (1989), for radical feminist who were instrumental in the founding of the anti-rape movement "patriarchy is a cultural universal, all institutions serve to reinforce patriarchy" (p. 13).

Gorey, Daly, Richter, et al, (2002), in their review of the effectiveness of feminist therapy, ask: "what sets feminist practice apart from other approaches?" This is certainly a relevant question. They say: "The importance of gender is explicitly expressed . . . power is reconceptualized . . . the strengths perspective is emphasized . . ." (p. 40). Conceptualizations of feminism have deepened over time; the lens has broadened beyond gender to also incorporate forces such as racism, classism, and heterosexism (Jones and Hodges, 2001; Raja, 1998; Sharma, 2001; Zinn and Dill, 1996).

Feminism opened the door to our understanding of women's feelings and experiences, separate from male reality. Life events, such as rape, domestic violence, and incest are now better understood, thanks to feminists. It was through feminism that women first broke their silence about rape (Brownmiller, 1975) and domestic violence (Martin, 1976). Feminism exposed women's economic disparities, diverse sexualities, health concerns, family complexities, and countless other issues.

Feminism is, in many ways, parallel to good social work practice, and is especially in-tune with NASW's code of ethics, which opposes discrimination of any kind (NASW, 1996). Social work's person-in-environment paradigm, especially an awareness of how oppression deeply affects individual well-being, is also germane to this discussion (Valentich, 1996).

It is unfortunate that, however, studies of women and/or about feminism represent a tiny percentage of articles in social work journals (Barretti, 2001). Feminist studies of women of color and lesbians likely constitute an even smaller percentage. Even with this underrepresentation, there is evidence of the effectiveness of feminist therapy (Gorey et al, 2002).

Feminism has informed many aspects of the social work profession, including epistemology, pedagogy, research, and direct practice with clients. In their study of feminist therapy effectiveness, Gorey et al, (2002) found that the most common feminist intervention reflected in the literature was group work. This is a hopeful sign for both group work and feminism.

### ***A Feminist Framework***

One may argue that social work practice, with its edict to challenge oppression of any kind, including gender-based oppression, is inherently feminist. One may wonder if further delineation is required. However, there are several specific components, which serve as the theoretical base

for this article, that distinguish feminist approaches from general social work practice. First is the emphasis on women's lives and experiences as the focal point. There is an inherent critique of sociocultural forces—such as sexism and racism—on women's lives, combined with a commitment to reduce isolation brought on by a sexist society. Next, there is an emphasis on skill development and empowerment to help women improve (and honor) their own lives (Gottlieb et al, 1983; Israeli and Santor, 2000; Raja, 1998; Valentich, 1996).

### *Consciousness Raising*

In addition to the key components of feminist social work, the literature also includes descriptions of various feminist intervention strategies. One of these is the process of consciousness raising, as explained by Israeli and Santor (2000, p. 234): "Consciousness raising groups provided forums for women to openly criticize sexist views toward women and the impact of patriarchal forces on women's development and experience . . ." There is an emphasis on raising awareness, often through peer discussion, of the particular pain of sexism and of the desire to change society based on this changed awareness (Israeli and Santor, 2000; Nes and Iadicola, 1989).

Similar to the dual mission of social work, where attention is devoted to helping people and changing society, consciousness raising groups also focused their energies on changing society through raising awareness of gender roles and levels of oppression. Consciousness raising helps women realize that they are not the sole cause of their distress and that, in the case of rape, there are other forces at work, such as patriarchy (Israeli and Santor, 2000).

### *Linking Levels of Oppression*

Historically, feminism has been criticized for its White middle class bias. Recent years have sewn together a broader and more realistic feminism, one where oppressions beyond gender-based, are given equal play in the sociocultural analysis. There are several examples of multicultural feminist approaches, both in social work and related fields. Zinn and Dill (1996) write about "multiracial feminism," which "seeks to account for the multiple ways that women experience themselves as gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized" (p. 327). Jones and Hodges (2001) challenge the lack of social work attention devoted to Black women's lives. Raja (1998) employs consciousness raising tech-

niques to provide a sociocultural context for women of color. Sharma (2001) applies feminist, multicultural principles to “immigrant and racially visible women who have been abused” (p. 1405).

### ***Social Group Work***

Several elements of social group work have already been mentioned but merit underscoring. Social group work, like elements of feminist social work, is a method of bringing people together for a powerful process of giving and receiving help around a common problem or issue (Shulman, 1999). Kurland and Salmon (1992, p.12) summarize the process of mutual aid:

The process of mutual aid, unique to group work practice, takes place when members draw upon their own experiences and deep felt needs to help their fellow members. They, in turn, will relive and relearn through their own offers of help and they will be the stronger for it.

Mutual aid incorporates several important aspects, relevant to this article. Shulman (1999) identifies a range of components, five of which will be explored here: (1) discussing taboo areas, where group members explore topics, such as authority or sex, that they perceive as forbidden in the outside world; (2) The “all in the same boat” phenomenon, experienced when group members sense that they are not alone in their feelings; (3) developing a universal perspective, especially relevant with oppressed populations, is likened to consciousness raising and involves replacing self blame with a broader understanding of societal forces contributing one’s problems; (4) mutual support, where members are encouraged to openly express their feelings and demonstrate genuine empathy for each other; (5) mutual demand, where members pay attention to and are invested in the growth and accomplishments of individual members and the groups as a whole (Shulman, 1999).

Steinberg (2002, p. 35) explains that one particularly moving and powerful mutual aid process is the sharing of different “voices.” She says of this process:

When peers exchange ideas, feelings, attitudes, and personal stories, in an attempt to help one another think things through, not only do they provide opportunities to identify those voices that have served them well in the past but they create opportunities to

learn new voices as well. The process requires a blend of art, skill, and hard work on the part of everyone involved to make it happen; but when it does, new worlds open up, like magic.

### ***Groups for Trauma Survivors***

Since the beginning of the anti-rape and battered women's movements, group has been used as an intervention strategy for survivors of these traumas (Schechter, 1982). "Group services are particularly instrumental for trauma victims. Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community" (Herman, 1997, p. 49). Among other therapeutic functions, groups can help survivors tell their stories, reconnect with others and learn to trust again.

A robust literature is devoted to trauma studies. Since we first broke into taboo areas of rape, domestic violence, incest, and child sexual abuse, studies on violence seem consistently available in the literature. International war crimes and the field of vicarious trauma have opened up new arenas of trauma studies and there seems to be no halting to this momentum.

Upon exploration, more studies were found on groups with survivors of incest and/or child sexual abuse than of rape. Articles on child sexual abuse include: Courtois (1988), DeJong and Gorey (1996) and Marotta and Asner (1999) (whose research provided a summary of incest studies). These authors provide information and make recommendations about the facilitation of survivor groups. The themes that seem most common among the child sexual abuse articles are the importance of group in (1) reducing isolation, (2) discussing taboo areas, such as sex, (3) rehearsing new behaviors, (4) connecting with others with similar (and different) experiences, and (5) growing from the process of "give and take." Other parallel themes found are the value (and difficulty) of telling the story, since, for survivors of child sexual abuse, there is deep pain associated with the secrecy and shame of the experience.

There are more parallels than differences between groups for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and groups for adult survivors of adult rape.

[Rape groups] provide rape victims with an opportunity to meet other survivors in a safe, supportive, equalitarian setting, and to both give and receive a degree of validation, solace, and understanding that may have alluded them in their daily lives (Koss and Harvey, 1991, p. 205).

### ***Feminist Groups***

An abundance of articles that document explicitly feminist social work groups, especially trauma groups, was hoped for but not found. What has been written, however, provides us with valuable practice guidelines. Gottlieb, et al's., 1983 article, *The distinctive attributes of feminist groups* outlines specific characteristics of feminist social work groups that ring true today. The four main characteristics are: (1) Ending women's isolation, (2) Emphasis on social and political factors, (3) No men as a constructive group strategy, (4) Emphasis on women's empowerment and skill development.

Other feminist group articles include: Yassen and Glass (1984) on rape groups, Wood and Roche (2001) on feminist groups for women survivors of male violence, Berwald and Houtstra (2002) on a feminist group for women with disabilities, Saulnier (2003) on a feminist group approach for women with alcohol problems and Jones and Hodges (2001) on a feminist approach to working with Black women. Although presenting different foci, these authors make general statements about the applicability of feminist groups, such as seeing the oppression of women as a defining force in women's lives, empowering women to find their own voices, and building female-specific sources of support.

Yassen and Glass's (1984) article on feminist rape groups is relevant today. They say:

A feminist approach to the process of sexual assault resolution combines therapeutic intervention skills with underlying knowledge that sexual assault, harassment, and exploitation, affect all women in our society and are extensions of sexism (p. 253).

Wood and Roche (2001) weave a "narrative process" into their groups for abused women. This process "unfolds as a series of conversations that unsilence women's own truths . . ." (p. 6).

### ***Summary of Themes Found in Literature***

This review has included feminist roots of the anti-rape movement, the sometimes ambivalent relationship between feminism and social work, theoretical underpinnings of both feminist social work/therapy and social group work, in particular the process of mutual aid. Literature also provides a rationale for trauma survivors' participation in group. Finally, specific illustrations of feminist groups are presented to high-

light specific theoretical and practice elements. Social group work theory-especially the process of mutual aid and feminist theory, and especially the emphasis on rape as an extension of sexism and misogyny-underscore the Rape Survivor's Group highlighted below.

### ***THE GROUP***

This section will document the organizational context, purpose, composition, and structure of the Rape Survivors' Group. Feminist framework elements discussed earlier in the Literature Review informed this group, specifically as follows: (1) emphasis on women's lives and experiences as the focal point; (2) examination of sociocultural forces; (3) reduction of isolation brought on by sexism; (4) emphasis on skill development and women's personal and collective empowerment (Gottlieb et al, 1983). The group also included the fundamental exchanging of ideas, feelings, and stories at the core of mutual aid (Steinberg, 2002). The strategy of consciousness raising was also part of the group experience, as was attention devoted to racism. This discussion attempts to illustrate how feminist content and feminist process were infused into the group. Challenges faced by worker and members will also be explored.

#### ***Organizational Context***

This group was held at a hospital-based rape crisis program committed to feminist, multicultural practice. Services provided at this program included crisis intervention, short-term individual therapy, short term group therapy, and community education. All services were free.

#### ***Purpose***

The Rape Survivors' Group was a twelve-week group that operated with an explicit a feminist analysis of rape. This purpose of this group was to educate women on the causes and aftermath of rape, to reduce isolation, and empower members in an all-female environment characterized by safety and trust. There was a dual focus: working through members' individual problems and developing a sharper awareness of patriarchy and its consequences.

### ***Membership***

There were seven women in this group. They were racially heterogeneous: White, African-American, Native American, West Indian. There were no out lesbians in the group and most women talked about heterosexual experiences. They were employed, unemployed, and students. Their ages ranged from 20s to 50s. All of the women in the group had been raped in adulthood, although the time allotted since the rape varied from two months to ten years. Most of the women were also involved in individual therapy at the program. Nearly all of the women also experienced other forms of violence, separate from the rape incident, including incest, domestic violence, and child sexual abuse. For most, this was their first group therapy experience. Two social workers, a White woman and a South Asian woman, facilitated the group.

### ***Structure***

Structure is important for rape survivors to feel safe and protected. Each of the 12 group sessions was roughly divided into three segments: (1) Check-in, a time for members to reacquaint themselves with each other and to report on the week's progress and difficulties; (2) Session Themes, the middle phase of each group where a member initiated a discussion on a theme related to rape recovery; (3) Motivational Closing, where a member was asked to end the group with a motivational question or statement such as, "Something I will do this week to take care of myself."

### ***Feminist Content/Feminist Process***

Woven throughout the group process was a feminist analysis of rape, that it is an outcome of male power and patriarchy. A feminist analysis makes explicit and objects to the socially sanctioned privilege of men and the culturally ingrained devaluing of women. The focal point was clearly on women's lives and experiences. The members were encouraged to talk about their rape experiences, as well as their experiences as women in the world. Workers attended carefully to feminist process, which included valuing each woman's experience and narrative, and encouraging mutual support among members. Below, feminist themes from the group are discussed.

**Themes:** *Feminist Context/Building Unity as Women*

The early group sessions focused on introductions, group rules, fears and expectations. A feminist context of rape and rape recovery was offered. Members were asked to consider these questions: What is rape? What causes rape? What do we have in common as women? What are our differences? How have we been harmed as women? How can we heal together as women?

**Theme:** *Shame & Blame ('I always blamed myself')*

As the group unfolded and members told their stories, themes emerged of shame and self blame. It is common, under patriarchy, for women to blame themselves and to blame each other for rape. Directly associated with women's lower status and to sexism, rape continues to be a crime where a woman is asked to defend herself and her actions. Although the climate of victim blaming has softened somewhat, a set of culturally embedded myths hold women responsible for and ashamed of being raped. For example, it is not uncommon today to hear, "what was she wearing?" Men are often not held as accountable for their actions as are women. Rape victims and people/systems associated with rape victims are not immune to believing and perpetuating these myths. In a rape group, since society blames women, group members mirror society's attitudes and, in turn, risk blaming themselves and each other.

In the group, members shared feelings of blame. A feminist approach looked at gender specifically, and valued each woman's feelings. The workers offered an analysis of rape as a socially sanctioned expression of male power. Some women held on to self blame and others could forgive their co-members but not themselves. It was important to allow for individual experiences and to not replicate abuses of power by demanding the adoption of one truth.

**Theme:** *Difficulty Trusting ('Never trust women, they'll stab you in the back')*

Trust plays out in any group, but it is a particularly poignant therapeutic task in a rape group (Herman, 1997). Using a feminist framework, group members explored the messages they received about women and how they were taught to devalue women as friends and confidants. The all-female composition allowed members to give and receive emotional support and to reconsider their negative feelings about

women. The group itself placed a value on female friendship, although this was something to be discovered over time by the women themselves.

**Theme:** *Secrecy and Isolation* (“He told me he would kill me if I told”)

Rape is still a crime of silence. Out of fear of death, shame at being judged, anxiety over not being believed, women rape survivors often do not tell of their experiences. This silence can contribute to deep gender-based isolation. Telling the story, for some, occurred the first time in group. Over time, and with difficulty, members ‘broke the silence’ of their rapes and their co-members ‘bore witness’ to this telling. Forced secrecy was examined under the lens of women’s socially sanctioned silence.

**Theme:** *Discussing Taboo Areas* (“He raped me because I am Black”)

Breaking of taboos in a supportive group atmosphere is a normal milestone of groupwork (Shulman, 1999). For this group, discussing taboo areas occurred early in the group, before trust had been established. Racism was one of the taboo topics presented. In this multiracial group, a Black woman raped by a White man expressed deep anger at White people. She saw a connection between these two levels of oppression that could not easily be reduced to gender or race. A White woman in the group had difficulty understanding the power of racism and admitted to fearing the anger of the Black woman. Over time, this fissure healed and the group regained its cohesion, but the importance of valuing one’s personal history and acknowledging the overlapping of oppressions were important lessons for the group. What follows is a snippet of group dialogue that illustrates this theme.

**Becky** [Black woman]: I want to tell my story. I was home and a man, a White man, forced his way into my home. He said he was a deliveryman. [Starts crying and becomes increasingly agitated.]

**Group Worker:** Go on, we are listening.

**Becky** [agitated, almost shouting]: He forced me into the back-room and raped me. He called me all sorts of names, you can imag-

ine, I don't want to say the words. I know he raped me because I am Black it was his hatred toward Black people. He thought he was better than me! [Jumps to her feet in a burst of anger]

**Marie** [White woman]: Could you not scream like that? I am afraid of you right now.

**Group Worker:** Becky, can you respond to what Marie has just said?

**Becky** [shouting]: Afraid of me? Afraid of me? That sounds pretty racist. 'Course you are afraid of me. Aren't all White people afraid of all Black people? We are so scary, aren't we?

**Marie:** I came to this group because I wanted to feel safe to discuss what happened to me. Now I feel like I am being attacked for being White.

**Group Worker:** I appreciate both of you speaking honestly about your feelings about things that are hard to talk about. I hope we can work together to build a sense of safety in this group. You all come from different backgrounds. Some of you, like Becky, have experienced racism, and maybe some of you have not. But racism and sexism overlap. It's hard to separate them. What unites this group is the common experience of being victimized as women. I hope we can talk about these painful experiences in a way that is not harmful to each other. Marie mentioned not feeling safe and I am concerned about that. And Becky, I want you and everyone to feel safe in this group as well.

### *Discussion*

This illustration shows how a taboo subject, such as racism, introduced in a racially mixed group, had the potential to de-rail a newly formed group. The challenge for the workers here was to encourage members to voice their experiences and feelings, but to protect the overall safety and unity of the group. Conflict and disagreement were valuable group functions that needed to be acknowledged and process in a direct, respectful way. Overtime, the racial diversity unified rather than divided the group. This balance requires skill on the part of the worker who needs to attend to each individual member and to the

group as a whole. A worker's race/ethnicity cannot be ignored, as members may either align with her or project onto her feelings of anger and hostility. A worker needs to be conscious, self-aware, and open to this dynamic to ensure connections to and empathy with all members with the ultimate goal of healing from the wounds of sexism, racism and other oppressions.

**Theme:** *Respecting Differences ("I can't believe she didn't go to the cops!")*

The women in this group were joined together at different points in their healing. Although united by the common experience of rape in adulthood, they had vastly different experiences with the medical and legal institutions, with their feelings, levels of pain, and support systems. It was a challenge for members to tolerate different choices among themselves. Police involvement was an issue that illustrated this point. Although most women do not report their crimes to the police (Campbell, 2002; Herman, 1997), in this group, almost all of the women involved the police. When one woman disclosed her decision not to inform the authorities, she was initially met with judgment. There was a responsibility placed on this woman to report; there was not the same level of responsibility placed on the rapist for his assault. A feminist analysis allowed for the possibility that women avoid blaming rapists for their actions. The following group dialogue illustrates this theme.

**Sandy:** When I went to the ER after the rape, the doctor gave me a lot of pressure because I didn't want to call the cops.

**Jada:** You didn't report it? Why not? What about all the other women who could be the next victims?

**Marie:** Yeah! Don't you think that it's our responsibility to speak up and stop the cycle of abuse? I mean, I told about my uncle, it was hard, but I finally told.

**Group Worker:** It's important to remember that each of you in this group has made different choices and decisions. You didn't choose to be raped but you do get to decide what happens afterwards. I hope as a group those choices can be respected. Sandy, how do you feel about Jada and Marie's comments?

**Sandy:** I know your hearts are in the right places but you have to understand that I have to do things my way. I need people to understand that. I feel a little like I am being judged when the people who truly deserve judgment are the men who hurt us.

**Jada:** I am sorry, Sandy, for coming across like that. I feel bad now. It's just that I wish we had a way to stop this from happening. I wish someone had prevented the rape from happening to me. I am so sad about it.

**Group Worker:** I wonder how you all feel about what Jada just said. Even though you are all different, perhaps there is a common feeling of sadness among you?

### *Discussion*

This illustration shows the tension that can develop in a group when members are threatened or do not understand other member's decisions. This dynamic is especially powerful in a rape survivor's group when members already feel alone, misunderstood, and stigmatized. The challenge for the worker here is to honor and respect the individual choices among the members (for example to involve the police or not) while carefully maintaining the focus on the unity of the group and on the promise for members to help each other despite their individual differences. Respecting women's sense of power to make independent life choices is a task for the group members and the worker in this scenario.

**Theme:** *Building Skills* ("I never knew I could do that.")

The trauma of rape affects survivors in many complex, sometimes debilitating ways. Depression, anxiety, shame, isolation, and fear are a handful of examples (Herman, 1997; Koss and Harvey, 1991). A feminist group experience can foster important women's empowerment and skill development. In the group, women learned to talk about the rape, learned to advocate for themselves within the daunting legal system, and learned to implement self care strategies (creating scrapbooks, writing about the trauma, starting new friendships) into their lives.

### ***Implications for the Workers***

Through a feminist lens, one can see the universality of the rape experience for all women. Even those who have not experienced rape are not immune to its emotional and psychological devastation (Campbell, 2002). With or without personal experiences of trauma, the running of a Rape Survivor's Group can be a painful experience for any worker, especially one who is overwhelmed and unsupported (Clemans, 2004). Members and workers are exposed to deep pain of rape recovery. One is also reluctant to witness the atrocities humans inflict upon one another. Workers need to be aware of the warning signs of vicarious trauma and use supervision, peer support, and downtime to protect themselves (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995)

### ***Discussion***

The themes presented above attempt to illustrate the feminist flavor of a Rape Survivor's Group. Of course, each theme did not appear in a linear fashion, but unfolded over time, throughout the life of the group. A general mutual aid group would probably have many of the same attributes and dynamics. What distinguished the Rape Survivor's Group was the feminist context of the host organization, the feminist content and process elements infused into the twelve weeks, and the focus on rape as a particular kind of bias against women.

Many parallels exist between this illustration and other mutual aid groups. Feminism, with its many implications, is the distinguishing characteristic of this group. A feminist group where social work's commitment to help people in crisis is combined with a desire to understand problems (such as rape) in their larger social/political/cultural contexts fits quite well into the purview of the social work profession.

### ***Professional Recommendations***

The articulation and adoption of a feminist framework in group work with rape victims is an important initiative to be made by human service organizations. Leadership is in order for schools of social work to offer courses, field placements, and interdisciplinary dialogues relevant to women's lives, group work and feminism. Despite the assertion that we live in a post-feminist age, with rape and domestic violence incidents at epidemic rates, feminist group work is needed now as much as ever. "Approximately one in four to one in five women are raped in their

adult life times, giving 20 to 25 percent of the adult population first hand knowledge of rape'' (Campbell, 2002, p. 75). Feminism within the context of group work needs to be reclaimed in our profession as a valuable instrument for social change and social justice.

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