



Domestic Violence in the African American Community©

Background

Domestic violence -includes emotional, psychological, economic, physical, and sexual abuse. It is one person's way of attempting to control another person. Domestic violence impacts all communities, regardless of race, class, religion, or sexual orientation. Men also experience domestic violence; however, 85% to 95% of domestic violence survivors are women (Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The National Black Women's Health Project identified domestic violence as the number one public health issue for women of African ancestry (Joseph, 1997). Opponents of this position might argue that domestic violence is more prevalent in communities of African ancestry than other communities (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000); however, due to methodological shortcomings, the over-reliance on data from poor socioeconomic communities, and the disproportionate presence of law enforcement in communities of color (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Hampton & Yung, 1996; Lockhart, 1985), the true prevalence of domestic violence in communities- of African ancestry is inconclusive.

There are links between incidences of violence against women during slavery and the post-Civil War era (Franklin, 2000). Addressing sexism and classism in the communities of African ancestry is key to eradicating the violence (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Richie, 1996; West, 1998; White, 1994).

While other cultures may stress separation of partners; people of African ancestry require a community response to domestic violence because domestic violence has even more adverse consequences in our communities. This is not to say that partners may not need to separate; however, the abusive partner's behavior and circumstances must be addressed to maintain balance in the community (Williams, 1998). Without a collective response, we will continue to avoid and ignore this problem as our families and children suffer.

NABSW's Position on Domestic Violence

We live in a violent society. Media images, movies, videos, and print media glorify violence. Regardless of these influences, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) denounces violence in all of its forms and stands firmly against violence against women both nationally and internationally. The collective survival of the race is threatened by domestic violence and, consequently, is not a private issue but a public issue that must be addressed. It is therefore imperative that the problem be removed from the private confines of whispered discussions and transparent excuses and

placed squarely within the public arena. It is our collective responsibility to address this problem through words and actions. NABSW's position on domestic violence centers on the following African centered principles:

- **Respect** - Each individual should be respected regardless of gender or circumstance. Respect is demonstrated by patience, care and holding one's partner in high regard not abusive language, actions, or threats.
- **Collective work and responsibility** - The community has a responsibility to work on eradicating this problem and helping our people to find solid mechanisms of fortifying healthy and stable relationships. The resolution revolves around both breaking the silence and communal recognition of the problem.
- **Inherent goodness** - We believe that every person has the ability to change. Those that are abusive need to recognize their behavior and seek assistance to change.

Selected Policy Issues

Differential Shelter Treatment and Lack of Cultural Competence

Women of African ancestry have been turned away from shelters for not sounding distressed enough, sounding too strong, or for falling victim to stereotypes that suggest that our women do not need this type of assistance (West, 1999). They have shared experiences with lack of cultural competence around child disciplinary measures, limited images in magazines and pictures, food choices, and services offered.

Experiences with Abuser Intervention Programs and Lack of Cultural Competence

Programs for abusive partners have been found to lack cultural competence and, despite this awareness; programs continue to ignore the cultural reality of men of African ancestry (Williams & Becker, 1994). While most of these programs emphasize the need for the man to take responsibility for his actions, they do not recognize the violence associated with America's peculiar institution of slavery nor do they recognize the violent societal impact of institutionalized discrimination (Williams, 1993). Most women and men of African ancestry do not resort to violence to address feelings of anger, despair, of frustration. Ultimately, individuals - men and women - make the decision to be violent.

Experiences with Law Enforcement

Women of African ancestry often do not call the police for fear of police brutality against their mates or against themselves. This limits the possibility of women calling during times when violence is escalating. Established to eliminate the police's need to rely on survivors to arrest batterers, research shows that mandatory arrest policy has been found to discriminate against both men and women of African ancestry (Mills, 1998). Moreover, women of African ancestry are also more likely to be arrested after calling the police than women of other racial and ethnic groups.

Impact of Racial Loyalty

Women of African ancestry often do not report domestic violence for fear that such reporting would be a betrayal of the race or would contribute to negative stereotypes (Bent-Goodley, 2001; White, 1994). Dealing with the complexity of trying to protect their men and negotiating the realities of their situation, women of African ancestry typically first turn to family, friends, and their faith based community for support and assistance (Bent-Goodley, 1998; Bent-Goodley, in press; Wyatt, Axelrod, Chin, Carmona & Loeb, 2000). Women of African ancestry are at greater risk of their children being removed from the home due to domestic violence and are at greater risk of becoming HIV-infected due to domestic violence. It was found that 70 percent of African American male adolescents in a juvenile facility were incarcerated because of attempts to protect their mother from an abusive episode (Fine, 1989). Clearly, these issues impact the entire family and community, regardless of gender.

Policy Recommendations

(1) Conduct culturally competent research on domestic violence in the African American community

Despite the fact that domestic violence became a more visible issue in the 1980's, there is still limited empirical research on domestic violence as it relates to people of African ancestry. The Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC) has provided important research and information on domestic violence. In addition, to disseminating information and adding to the understanding of domestic violence in communities of African ancestry, the Institute has offered recommendations to change how community members, professionals and policymakers respond to domestic violence. Additional funding should be allocated towards conducting culturally competent research in this area. For example, linkages between sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, and other forms of abuse need to be better understood and illuminated.

(2) Increase funding for culturally competent community based prevention and intervention programs.

Additional funding is needed for culturally competent domestic violence prevention and intervention programs that are community based. Such funding could provide additional shelter services, prevention efforts, abuser intervention programs, and greater services for child witnesses of domestic violence. In addition to supporting community-based programs, such as ASHA in Minnesota, faith based intervention should also be promoted, along with the necessary training to strengthen their capacity to eradicate domestic violence. Issues of fatherhood, same sex relationships, and violence in youth relationships' should all be addressed using a culturally competent, community-based approach. .

(3) Preserve and enhance wealth development opportunities for African Americans across the economic spectrum.

States currently have the choice to implement the Family Violence Option through welfare reform, allowing survivors of domestic violence additional time to receive counseling and defer employment while in treatment. Maintaining the Family Violence Option as a mandatory requirement for all states within welfare reform is necessary. In addition, more vigorous efforts need to be placed on addressing employment discrimination, and inequity in economic and employment opportunities.

(4) Deny funding for programs that are not culturally competent.

It is destructive and wasteful that non-responsive and ineffective social programs continue to receive federal, state and local funding. Programs that continue to provide insufficient and culturally insensitive services should have their funding withheld until they demonstrate the proper execution of culturally relevant services.

(5) Conduct a culturally competent media campaign.

Culturally competent media programs that address the myths of violence in communities of African ancestry, that provide alternatives to violence, that are feasible and realistic, and that identify the components of healthy relationships should be developed.

(6) Stop the silence.

There must be an effort to stop the silence around the abuse that takes place in our homes. To be healthy and live optimally as people of African ancestry, violence must stop. The sexism and gender inequity that supports this silence must be addressed and resolved. We can no longer be aware of this type of violence and do nothing to stop it.

Summary and Conclusion

Domestic violence is a serious problem that must be addressed on the individual, family, community, and societal levels. Violence is not random, inescapable, or uncontrollable. There are various socioeconomic, structural, and psychological factors that contribute to the levels of violence, and although it may be difficult, it is well within our power to address and alter these factors. Violence is a serious issue that can be effectively addressed at the family and community levels but it requires comprehensive, multidisciplinary, long-term attention that is carried forth with respect to race, class, and cultural difference. There is no justification for being violent in a relationship. Issues of sexism and gender inequity must be discussed and addressed in our community to effectively address the problem in sustainable ways. The self-help tradition in our community is rich with possibilities for change (Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Martin & Martin,

1995). We can and we must stop domestic violence in our communities.

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