

The Intersectional Identities of African American Women and Domestic Violence

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Introduction

Domestic violence is pervasive in our communities and as advocates, service providers, and allies we strive to prevent and address this issue which affects people of all walks of life. Thus, we must be cognizant of survivors' respective identities and how these may impact their vulnerability to domestic violence. This paper contributes to advocacy work that seeks to prevent and end domestic violence. It focuses on African American women living in the United States, and how their unique experience with sexism and racism makes them particularly susceptible to domestic violence.

It is noteworthy to recognize that African American women are more likely to experience domestic violence in comparison to women of other races/ethnicities. Indeed, during their lifetimes, 40% of black women experience physical violence inflicted by their partners.ⁱ This percentage is higher than the 31.5% rate for all women combined.ⁱⁱ As the National Black Women's Health Project noted, domestic violence is the number one health issue for African American women and they are twice as likely to lose their lives due to domestic violence in comparison to white womenⁱⁱⁱ. Further, according to a 2017 report by the National Center for Victims of Crime (2017), 53.8% of the victims of intimate psychological aggression were black while only 47.2% were white. The same reports underscored that black individuals constituted 41.2% of the victims of physical abuse but only 30.5% were white.^{iv} At the state level in the year 2016, of all the intimate partner homicides reported in New York State, 39.7% of the victims were black, 34.6% white, and 23.1% were Hispanic as reported by the Division of the Criminal Justice Services; despite black/African American constituting only 17.7% of the population of New York State (vintage year 2010-2017)^v.

It is important to note that African American women's vulnerability to domestic violence is not inherent to black community, culture, or way of life; rather it is rooted in the systemic racism and sexism that black women have experienced and continue to experience. To understand why African American women are at a

higher risk of domestic violence and domestic violence related homicide, it is important to refer to the social conditions, namely racism and sexism, which disadvantage them and put them at risk. Both gender and racial discrimination against African American women are rooted in history and experience with slavery and segregation. These systemic oppressions kept them at the bottom of the social ladder and disadvantaged, in comparison to other women of different races and African American men. Hence, “domestic violence against African American women is a complex problem by virtue of their dually marginalized status (being both female and a member of an oppressed minority group.”^{vi} Further, “sexual and other violence against women... communities of color must be understood in the context of White supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, and economic exploitation of marginalized communities, not as if such violence is inherent in the culture.”^{vii}

Why History, Gender and Race Matter in Our Work Against Domestic Violence

Domestic violence affects people of all backgrounds and does not discriminate based on gender, race or social class. However, social factors such as discrimination, which disadvantages some individuals, put them at a higher risk of experiencing domestic violence and make it harder for them to achieve safety. For instance, low income women suffer more of the consequences of domestic violence than women with higher incomes. Considering how discrimination affects black women’s income, poverty as one of the results of discrimination can be problematic in domestic violence situations. Hence, African American women’s position in the United States, with their intersecting identities, makes their experience with domestic violence unique. Therefore, it is important to underscore how discrimination affects their lives in the U.S.A.

African American women who have been historically disadvantaged find themselves in drastic situations resulting from the unique intersection of their race and gender. These factors make it difficult for black women to live to their full potential and place them at a disadvantaged position relative to other individuals, such as black men, white women, and white middle class men.^{viii}

The plight of the African American women’s situation can be traced back to the beginnings of slavery, when their lives were controlled by slave masters. As bell hooks noted, African American women were treated inhumanely starting on the slave ship. “African females received the brunt of this mass brutalization and

terrorization not only because they could be victimized via their sexuality but also because they were more likely to work intimately with the white family than black male.”^{ix} This condition was even more difficult for pregnant women who had no access to medical care and were facing “physically harmful and psychologically demonizing” situations during childbearing.^x

As a consequence, African American women’s lives have been negatively influenced by both racism and sexism throughout history. Despite the end of slavery and segregation, they are still disadvantaged in their everyday lives. Hence the androcentric and racist nature of society dramatically impacts them. Referring to black women’s condition Cooper notes, “The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the last ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make of our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both.”^{xi}

As a result, African American women are disadvantaged in all spheres of life, be it economically or socially or even in education. As many scholars have stated, black women are more likely to experience discrimination in jobs, health, and housing. This intersection of sexism and racism place them at the bottom of social ladder which in turn creates more poverty and inequality as well as reinforcing the social disadvantages and injustices that they face. The fact that the African American population has difficulties accessing high income jobs and only lower income jobs are accessible to them is even more problematic for African American women. Mishel et al. argued that not only are black people who earn poverty level wages numerous in comparison to their white counterparts, but this number is even more pronounced among African American women. It is important to keep in mind that, as Michel et al. have noted, social mobility is intergenerational and race and gender play a big role. According to the research done by Michel et al., “about a quarter (26.3 percent) of white children and half (50.8 percent) of African American children ended up where they started, in the bottom earnings fifth. But even when they started out in middle income families, more than one-third (34.1 percent) of African American Children slid into the bottom fifth, compared with 15.6 percent of white children.”^{xii}

This is important to note because socioeconomic standing and the ability to access resources and education, play a big role in an individual's well-being in terms of not only health but also sense of security.^{xiii} That being said, it is no wonder that African American women's well-being is hindered when all the things that they need to contribute to well-being is obstructed by the structural and social factors that discriminate against them and subjugate them to inferior housing, education, and access to health. This is real for many black women whose lives are rendered difficult because of their social class, race, and gender.^{xiv}

It is important to underline the economic disadvantages African American women face because the correlation between domestic violence and poverty is very real and can drastically impact the survivors. Indeed, poverty can jeopardize many spheres and aspects of domestic violence survivors' lives and can make them more vulnerable to and/or unable to leave an abusive person. As we know, many survivors may economically rely on their abusers and end up staying in relationships with them. To quote Frias and Angel, "Employment also affects a woman's risk of repeated violence. Those who are unemployed and who lack financial resources are more likely to suffer repeated violence, and they are less likely to leave their abusers permanently than employed women or those with more financial resources."^{xv}

These women are also at risk of many other issues such as poor health and criminalization.^{xvi} As per the status of black women, 64% of state and female prisoners across the nation and 94% "of certain female prison populations" are survivors of physical or sexual abuse.^{xvii} Furthermore, 72% of the female incarcerated are low income women. So, poor black women are at risk of experiencing not only domestic violence but also of continued victimization by the criminal justice system. Hence, the intersection of race, gender, and poverty multiply the risks and vulnerability to other forms of oppressions and domestic violence related victimization.

Barriers to Services

Despite being very likely to experience domestic violence, African American women's access to advocacy services is very limited. There are a variety of reasons of why this is the case. Fear of isolation, family structure, religious belief, and loyalty to their community constitute some of the barriers to service seeking.^{xviii} Additional hindrance to service seeking is created by stereotypical images and misconceptions about African

American women. These stereotypical perceptions depicting black women as strong, resilient and unharmed by abuse prevent them from receiving the services they need. This is unfortunate because due to these misconceptions first responders might not provide equal or sympathetic treatment to these women, particularly with responses from law enforcement^{xxix}.

Furthermore, these misconceptions and stereotypes as result of a history of slavery and segregation continue their hold through racism. They depict African American women as strong and angry and as emasculating African American men^{xx}. This affects African American women as they potentially end up being perceived as harmful rather than vulnerable victims. Consequently limiting their access to the services they need as well as be the cause of their arrest and imprisonment^{xxi}.

Black women's intersecting identities may also prevent them from disclosing abuse and seeking services.^{xxii} Many black women remain in abusive relationships and avoid any contact with the legal system because of fear and distrust of the systems that are supposed to help them. This fear and distrust is validated because even when they come forward about their abuse, they are not trusted by the responders and may potentially lose their children, be incarcerated, and/or have their claim invalidated. Studies have shown that African American women are more likely to be discriminated by systems and are also more likely to be criminalized and incarcerated.^{xxiii} This is corroborated by the fact that mandatory arrest, a law originally instituted to help survivors, have impacted black women survivors of domestic violence disproportionately as they become the ones who are arrested when calling the police to report abuse. This is evidenced by the fact that approximately, 60% of females incarcerated in state prisons have experienced either physical or sexual abuse.^{xxiv} "Black women of all ages were twice as likely to be imprisoned as White women in 2014 (109 per 100,000 Black women were imprisoned in state and federal prisons compared with 53 per 100,000 White women)."^{xxv} And this causes Black women avoid the criminal justice system.

Another cause for hesitation to seek services is suspicion about the cultural competence and awareness of domestic violence service providers.^{xxvi} This constitutes a barrier because survivors fear providers not understanding their situation or being judgmental because of all the aforementioned social factors.

As result, many African American women who are survivors of domestic violence might choose to use informal coping systems. For instance some women might use their faith through prayers and their church as well as their circle of friends or family.^{xxvii} Thus, it is important for domestic violence service providers to be aware of these coping systems and reinforce them to help instead of overlooking them.

The Next Step for Advocates and Service Providers

Service providers' professional attitude as well as cultural awareness can be very influential in gaining survivors' trust. Therein, as advocates for domestic violence prevention, it is important to be conscious of the different identities of the survivors as well as ensure that we do not perpetrate the discrimination or stereotypes embedded in the criminal justice system. This is important because survivors' concern for service providers' ability to understand their intersecting identities and experience might prevent them from seeking needed services. Therefore, as scholars have proposed, it is crucial to ensure that domestic violence work is culturally responsive and embedded in the understanding of the specific needs of each survivor, rather than having a one size fits all approach.^{xxviii}

It is important to keep in the mind that African American women's vulnerability to domestic violence arises from experiences resulting from the intersection of their gender and race. Hence, a feminist approach could be useful in addressing their issues since it "recognizes different ways of seeing black women's reality from a positive standpoint and helps to forge a greater understanding of their strengths, resilience, and struggles."^{xxix} As it takes into account the interlocking nature of their problems and incorporates the recognition of all the stigma and derogatory images that individuals suffer from; it is an approach that domestic violence advocates can use. As Ashley states, during therapy, "successful treatment with Black women must include awareness of the internal and interpersonal impact of destructive stereotypes assiduously integrated with the client's treatment goal(s)."^{xxx} That being said one of the most important things that an advocate can do is to be mindful of one's positionality and privileges, recognizing and confronting one's implicit biases and overcoming them. This could be impactful, as it would enable the service providers/advocates to mindfully help the survivors as well as instill trust between them. Therein, approaching service delivery and advocacy to end and

prevent domestic violence through a feminist lens could be very effective and have noticeable and lasting outcomes.

Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration the different coping methods that some African American women survivors may choose to use instead of more traditional methods. Advocates should ensure that they are conscious and knowledgeable about these informal services, such as family and faith circles, that the survivor uses. If a survivor uses her faith to cope with the abuse, this should be incorporated in the work to end the abuse. This is necessary because “Religiosity can be conceptualized as a protective factor for battered women of color” and this approach can help to create a bridge between the personal experience of the survivors and the available services.^{xxxii}

Another approach we can take is to reach out, go towards this group of survivors, communicate with them and learn about their issues to inform and improve our work in better serving survivors. This is important considering that many survivors might either not know about the existence of domestic violence services or might be unable to access them because of “geographical inaccessibility.”^{xxxiii} Additionally, this approach might allow us to build long term connections, relationships, and create an atmosphere of trust and understanding.

Considering that domestic violence is a significant issue facing our country, we need to look at our work as a community and as a social movement. This necessitates collaboration between domestic violence service providers and advocates as well as working with and within communities. This can be done through coordinated community efforts, and gaining allies including faith based organizations, community leaders, and educators. This effort would raise awareness about the issue, give voice to survivors, and be informative for our work, through community members’ input, to prevent and end domestic violence.

Conclusion

African American women face oppression and discrimination due to their gender and race, which in turn have put them in a disadvantaged position in society. Even in today’s world, they are still depicted through derogatory images, negative perception, and harmful misconceptions as well as stereotyping due to the intersection of their race and gender. This has harmful effects on African American women’s access to

education, housing, and employment. All these combined aspects of their life make them vulnerable to domestic violence. However, if we are self-reflective and take into account the cultural, racial and historical factors that disadvantaged them and incorporate this new consciousness to our work, then we can truly help African American women survivors, prevent, and end domestic violence.

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ⁱ (DuMonthier et al., 2017)

ⁱⁱ (DuMonthier et al., 2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ (Bent-Goodle, 2004)

^{iv} (The National Center For Victims Of Crime, 2017)

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- v (United States Bureau of Census n.d)
- vi Hampton et al., (2008, p. 342-343)
- vii Sokoloff and Dupont (2005, p.47)
- viii Collins (2000); Hooks (1981)
- ix hooks (1981, p. 20)
- x hooks (1981, p.18)
- xi Cooper (1995, p. 45)
- xii Mishel (2012, p. 156)
- xiii Pacific Library (2015)
- xiv Collins (2000)
- xv Frias and Angel (2007, p.1282).
- xvi DuMonthier et al. (2017)
- xvii DuMonthier et al. (2017, p.122)
- xviii Women Of Color Network (2006)
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- xxviii Sokoloff and Dupont (2005); Sabri al. (2013)
- xxix Jones (2015, p. 248)
- xxx Ashley (2014, p. 31).
- xxxI Mechanic and Pole (2012, p.209)
- xxxii Bent-Goodle, T. B. (2004, p.308).