

BETWEEN A ROCK & A HARD PLACE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

By Rinku Sen

Race versus gender? Rinku Sen explores the complexities of domestic violence in communities of color.

One out of four American women becomes a victim of domestic violence during her lifetime; one in three African American men comes under the supervision of the police and courts before the age of 25. Sometimes these two realities create conflicting loyalties, especially for women of color, who desperately need solutions to both problems.

Women of color have been involved in the battered women's movement since its beginnings. Yet sometimes communities of color display deep, race-based ambivalence about the causes of, and solutions to, domestic violence. In the O.J. Simpson case, the African American community's recognition of racism in the courts overrode concern about abuse (or murder?) of a privileged white woman.

In the early 1970s, the original leaders of the battered women's movement made a conscious, strategic decision to insist that battering was universal, took place in all communities, and in all classes. Chuck Turner, a black counselor and manager at Emerge, which provides rehabilitation to court-supervised batterers of all races, identifies one of those commonalities: "that the batterer feels entitled to services and authority from women, and believes that if she is not behaving the way that fits that role, he has the right to punish her." Focusing on the universality of domestic violence helped get woman battering on the national agenda.

In so doing, advocates of all colors avoided the view that men of color might be more likely to be violent toward their partners, or that women of color were more tolerant of violence against themselves or their peers. They feared that such views would play into preexisting racist stereotypes.

But What is the Truth? Statistics from the National Family Violence Survey show that poverty puts women at added risk for sustaining physical and psychological injury. Since women and children of color constitute disproportionate numbers of the poor, it may be that domestic violence is more prevalent in communities of color because of poverty.

However, many anti-domestic violence activists question the accuracy of such statistics. Alana Bowman, who is white, is a deputy city attorney in Los Angeles and former supervisor of that county's domestic violence prosecution unit. She said that domestic violence might simply be more visible in poor, immigrant, and racial minority communities because "people call the police when they need any kind of social service because the police are there 24 hours a day and they are free." By contrast, some middle and upper class women, mostly white, can choose to hide

their bruises and wounds by going to a private doctor instead of the emergency room, and can buy an airplane ticket to escape instead of going to a shelter.

Yet, many activists are convinced that domestic violence takes distinctive forms in different communities of color. Long-time African American activist and researcher, Beth Richie says that the search for solutions has to “recognize that women who are addicted to an illegal drug, or trying to live on subsistence wages, or have unclear immigration status, experience violence differently because of our further marginalized position.”

The Color of Criminalization Activists express mixed feelings about the effectiveness of criminal justice strategies to prevent and stop domestic violence, and in keeping women safe. Bowman and Turner support the criminalization because domestic violence is legally defined as a serious crime that carries escalating sanctions. Bowman considers herself to be “in the business of making criminals out of men who do not see themselves as criminals,” further noting that eighty percent of the men who batter women have no other contact with the criminal justice system. Though distressed by the racist criminalization of African American men, Richie acknowledges that many women’s lives have been saved by police intervention.

None of those interviewed for this article believe criminal prosecution alone is adequate to deal with the root causes of violence against women. Richie argues that criminalization does little to raise consciousness or protect individual women in black communities. Oliver Williams, director of the National Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community, says that the criminal justice system can only “capture the easy targets—low-income white men and men of color. We can’t expect the legal system to catch all the people doing the battering, so there have to be community sanctions for batterers and community protection for women.”

Unfortunately, criminalizing domestic violence ensures that some women, mostly of color, get no help. Many women of color simply will not call the police for fear of what will happen to themselves or their abusive partners in the hands of law enforcement officers. Many immigrant women will not call for fear of having their immigration status questioned. Mandatory arrest laws are often used by police to arrest both partners in a dispute, with the claim that both partners were being violent. Sue Osthoff, a white woman who directs the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, says that “if we keep increasing criminal sanctions, we will increasingly see that who is getting pulled into that net are women, especially women of color.”

Some groups are pursuing alternatives to criminalization that focus on raising awareness and censuring batterers. Sakhi, a group of South Asian women in New York, regularly conducts marches and rallies, sometimes at the homes of batterers. Leah Aldridge, an African American who works at the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women, runs a program to reeducate teens about rape and battering. Working through schools and community organizations, this program aims to break the cycle in which children experience family violence and go on to either tolerate it or perpetrate it as adults.

Sovereignty and Domestic Violence In Indian country, anti-domestic violence activists confront the benefits and costs of criminal justice and shelter systems from a position of sovereignty. Karen Artichoker, an Oglala Lakota and Hochunk woman who directs Cangleska, Inc. in Rapid

City South Dakota, says that communities that operate a sovereign tribal force “recognize the police as front-line people who come and help whether you have a domestic dispute or need your refrigerator moved.” She says tribal control of the police force makes a tremendous difference “because it is our own system and the cops are Indian.”

On the other hand, Artichoker points out the racist history of Bureau of Indian Affairs’ policing in Indian country. Additionally, many Indians choose not to call the authorities in cases of rape, severe violence, or murder because such crimes would be handled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Activist Maggie Escovita Steele (Chiricahua Apache) says “they take forever to come, and nothing’s going to happen.” Artichoker, who supports criminalization in general, says that calling the Feds “is not the stance of a sovereign nation.”

Such cases force many Indian communities to develop their own sanctions against abusers, sanctions which can be politically delicate in small communities where everybody knows one another. Escovita Steele recounts an example in which a young woman was killed, splitting the community over family and friendship loyalties. The young people of the community got together, called out the perpetrators, asked the tribe not to pay their legal fees, and to pay all the burial costs for the victim. Such interventions require high levels of consciousness by advocates who, Artichoker says, push communities to “get past the stigma about ratting each other out.”

Artichoker’s organization has developed a shelter system that supports abused women. “We’ve built our shelter to be different from the usual. We don’t keep the food, phones, or people locked up, and have no curfew.” Although the shelter helps, Artichoker wants an Indian-run criminal justice system which would pull the batterer, not the woman, out of the home and community. “I wish we had a place where the men would have to stay, but where they’d get some information about how to change their behavior. Right now all he gets is the guys saying ‘forget the bitch, have another beer.’”

Where to go from here? While many anti-domestic violence activists have pushed for public awareness to help prevent violence, others question whether batterer re-education programs get to the root causes of violence any more effectively than criminalization has. Bowman feels that much of the new money entering the field is going to questionable programs which promote individual rather than social solutions. Such campaigns threaten perpetrators with jail, but fail to counter men’s sense of entitlement to control women’s lives through the use of intimidation and violence. Turner admits that “programs like ours have some benefits, but their effectiveness depends on the attitudes of the community surrounding the couple. Attitudes that blame the woman or deny the abuse create a framework that gives men a lot of room to deny their own responsibility.”

Women of color also wonder whether they can expect support from white battered women’s activists to specifically address domestic violence in communities of color. Richie says women of color increasingly feel able to act without support from white women, but that white activists are also increasingly open to questioning criminalization as the main solution to domestic violence. She thinks some of this openness stems from white women’s negative experiences with criminalization—being hassled by the cops, getting arrested themselves, going to prison for

killing their abusers, losing time from work and school while trying to prosecute abusers, or suffering from declining economic status that makes leaving less of an option.

Still Richie questions whether the anti-domestic violence movement's internal critics, including herself, will be able to "undo our rigid stance about [the universality of battering and the need to sanction batterers] without demeaning the integrity of our own work over the last 30 years."

In short, women of color are between a rock and a hard place: perhaps at greater risk for domestic violence than white women because of poverty (of self and of partner); unable to trust the police for themselves or their partners; less able to rely on internal community resources because of low awareness of domestic violence; and confronted with reluctance from progressive people of all colors to further criminalize men of color.

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