

# The Overrepresentation of White Women's Leadership in the Movement to End Gender-Based Violence

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Transforming the Gender-Based Violence Movement: Increasing BIPOC Representation and Actualizing Accountability Project (formerly named the Women of Color in Coalition Leadership Project)

 National Resource Center  
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# The Problem:

## An Overrepresentation of White Women in the Gender-Based Violence Movement

For years white women have primarily occupied the most powerful leadership roles in the gender-based violence (GBV) movement. As a result, white women's perspectives, standpoints, and experiences become the primary drivers that shape local, state, and national movement agendas. The overt lack of diversity reflects an enduring racialized systematic erasure of women of color.

Over the past 30 years, practitioners and scholars of scholar have proposed numerous recommendations, created interventions, and led initiatives to address the isolation<sup>1</sup>, tokenism<sup>2</sup>, silencing<sup>3</sup>, and other cultural practices that hindered women of color's advancement into positions of leadership within the gender-based violence movement. Yet, despite these efforts, the overrepresentation of white women in leadership positions persists and the number of women of color remains stubbornly low.

### Institutional Practices that Maintain Racial Disparities in Women of Color Leadership Advancement

Few women of color make it to director positions within gender-based violence organizations. Certain organizational practices create and maintain conditions where racial disparities exist. For example:

- Hiring strategies do not target women of color.<sup>1</sup>
- Women of color lack opportunities to advance into leadership due to limited turnover.<sup>2</sup>
- White women tend to choose predecessors who are similar to them.<sup>3</sup>
- Women of color have little to no formalized mentoring options within organizations.
- There are fewer opportunities for women of color to gain and practice desired leadership skills.<sup>4</sup>
- Women of color with leadership positions are tokenized without access to real power to influence organizational decision making.<sup>1</sup>
- Women of color experience racism and hostile work environments leading to racial fatigue and burnout.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Brade, C. (2002) Women of color and leadership at sexual assault coalitions: Addressing the gap report 2002. Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault: Canton, CT.

2. Women of Color Network (2014). Gaining Ground, Breaking Through: A report on the leadership experiences of women of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals of color, individuals with disability, native women, aspiring allies, and immigrant women working in the anti-violence movement in four states. Women of Color Network: Harrisburg, PA.

3. Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault (2010). Women of Color and Leadership at Sexual Assault Coalitions: Pulse Check Report 2010. Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault: Canton, CT.

4. Sutton, A.K. (2009). Fostering diverse and emerging leadership in the anti-violence against women movement. Women of Color Network: Harrisburg, PA.

## NRCDV Research Study Overview

NRCDV conducted a qualitative study to understand the structural and cultural forces within the gender-based violence movement that sustain racial disparities in leadership. We asked:

1. What contributes to the ongoing underrepresentation of women of color in leadership positions?
2. What long-term, multilevel interventions are needed to increase representation for women of color in leadership?

*Participants.* Fourteen women of color participated in this study. They identified as Black, Asian, and Latinx. Participants' foci and roles varied but each were engaged in the GBV field. They were advocates, leaders, researchers, and practitioners who worked with survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, or childhood sexual abuse. Participants had been in the movement ranging from two years to 30 years. Some participants left the movement and did not plan to come back, while others came back after leaving for many years, and some participants were still active in the movement.

*Procedures.* The NRCDV Vice President of Programs, Prevention, and Social Change along, with the author of this report, developed a list of people in the GBV field who had expertise in women of color leadership. We initially reached out to 18 people across racial and gender identities. We used snowball and purposive sampling to ensure that people who left the movement were included. Of those 18, 14 people agreed and completed an interview. The semi-structured interview guide was comprised of five questions. These questions focused on participant's beliefs about what contributed to the underrepresentation of women of color in GBV leadership positions, their knowledge about current efforts to increase women of color representation, and recommendations to increase representation. The guide ended with demographic questions. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. The audio recordings were not transcribed verbatim but based on interviewer notes. As a result, direct quotes were limited throughout this report and verified through audio recording. All names in this report have been changed to protect confidentiality.

*Data Analysis and Interpretation.* The report author employed inductive thematic analysis to code the interview data<sup>4</sup>. The author read the transcripts multiple times, conducted first and second cycle coding on the data, and then developed 10 major themes which are discussed in the findings section below. Afterwards, the report author shared the findings back with the NRCDV Women of Color Caucus using the Expectations to Change process<sup>5</sup>. The Caucus provided additional interpretations and recommendations, which were compiled in the recommendations section below.

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4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

5. Adams, A.E., Nnawulezi, N., & Vandenberg, L. (2015). "Expectations to Change" (E2C): A participatory method for facilitating stakeholder engagement with evaluation findings. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 36(2), 243-255.

# Five Reasons Why Racial Inequities Exist in GBV Leadership

The study results demonstrated five distinct but interrelated reasons why racial disparities still exist in the gender-based violence field.

## **1. The gender-based violence movement is guided by white cultural norms, promotes white supremacy, and reifies institutional practices that value whiteness.**

All women of color in this study stated that the single largest contributor to the low number of women of color in leadership, and the inability to maintain a leadership pipeline, was white supremacy and racism. White supremacy is defined as the individual, institutional, and cultural practices that center white people and white norms as superior. Racism is a multi-level construct that negatively and disproportionately impacts people of color.

White supremacy is sustained through the GBV movement's historical legacies. Many participants stated that the people lauded as founders or mothers of the field are white. As a result, there is a movement-wide dismissal and erasure of the founding mothers of color. Many participants also believed that historically white women chose to align with the larger power structure (white supremacy) rather than with women of color when investing in the professionalization of the movement. Participants agreed that the advent of professionalization reinforced norms around respectability and professionalism, ultimately pushing out women who were poor and of color.

Another function of white supremacy is to create a separation between white people and people of color. Practices of cultural exclusion (historical erasure) and institutional exclusion (professionalization) necessarily led to feelings of separation and supported a lack of belonging. Many participants said that they did not feel connected to the larger GBV field. They could not bring their whole selves to the work, yet believed they had a right to do so. One participant shared:

*"We are trying to play catch up and include women of color in spaces. But, getting them in the spaces and keeping them in the spaces is tough because of the climate, historical climate, and oppression. [This is true] for women of color who do not fit mainstream ideals. Women of color were not included in the first place [in the movement]. The spaces were not made for women of color. Sometimes we try to fit a square peg in a round hole and wonder why it doesn't work."*

## **2. White women will not give up power.**

Many participants in this study believed that white women's refusal to give up power, both figuratively and literally, made it almost impossible for women of color to occupy positions of power. The powerful and deeply entrenched forces of racism and white supremacy within the GBV movement emboldened the behaviors of white women in leadership. In their experiences, participants felt white women held racist beliefs and employed tactics to maintain power. Some participants believed that white women refused to give up power because they were used to seeing themselves, and those who look like them, in power. Others felt strongly that white women believed they needed to be the "voice" or figurehead of the movement. As a result, participants felt white leaders rarely shared power through mutual decision making or provided opportunities for women of color to step into leadership roles.

Participants indicated that white women used color evasiveness—the refusal to identify the ways that whiteness influences their individual behaviors, interpersonal interactions, and the policies that were created within their institutions—to maintain power. Many participants stated that white women were uncomfortable even discussing whiteness and its impacts on people of color, and often avoided such topics by directly stating this discomfort, which led to the continued maintenance of their powerful leadership positions. A participant explained:

*"They are really uncomfortable with women of color taking the helm. It is just my observation. It just felt like a white women space. You can come in and do work and support women of color in this space, but you are not going to rally around women of color to be the primary voice in this system."*

## **3. Women of color are seen as the "doers," but not the "thinkers" in the movement.**

Participants believed that white leaders did not view women of color as visionaries or strategists, which obscured their ability to view women of color as leaders. Women of color were trained to carry out the visions of others but were rarely asked to shape the vision. As a result, GBV organizations have created and reinforced conditions where women of color were seen as the "doers," but not the "thinkers." One participant described:

*“I don’t know if there is a really a place for us in the mainstream movements. I realized very quickly that there was a ceiling. We were talking about anti-oppression and inclusiveness which sounded good, but this was not a practice. The power remained with white women. So, I got to a certain place, but I knew that it was it. Middle management was fine but [I would never] really be a part of the higher-level decision making. The Vice President and the COO had already decided who would have those positions.”*

The difficulties women of color have accessing leadership positions are also related to not being trained or mentored to acquire the skills and tools necessary to advance into “thinker” roles. One participant discussed what women of color needed:

*“A lot of women of color would jump ship because they were not groomed to do anything else. They want to feel elevated, supported, and like you are cultivating them and their capacity.”*

#### **4. Coalitions engage in practices that create unhealthy work environments for women of color.**

Participants stated that coalitions maintained hostile work environments toward women of color. For example, many participants described coalition leaders engaging in tactics against women of color such as gas lighting around diversity concerns, refusing to establish equitable partnerships, weaponizing the language of diversity and inclusion, and trying to control and diminish the power of women of color. If women of color made these tactics explicit to leadership, they were then demonized and threatened to be, or were, fired from their positions. Many participants stated that negotiating these dynamics while maintaining a living was stressful and exhausting. A participant stated:

*“Black women were exhausted, and it was not sustainable. You have to put up with so much that you wonder if it is even worth it. I don’t want to work with anyone else white—between the oppression, drama, caretaking, and [having to deal with] exceeding expectations and accountability that are not the same [compared to white coworkers].”*

Hostile work conditions also manifested through disingenuous and/or white-washed diversity efforts within coalitions. Participants felt that white leadership used inclusive language but did not engage in aligned action. White women leaders were aware of how racism influenced women of color but did not directly address it. Some participants felt diversity efforts often centered whiteness and white people without an intersectional analysis – leaving it to be “more of the same.” Another outcome of these kinds of diversity efforts, according to participants, was the tokenization of women of color who were often tasked to change these disparities. As a result, women of color were expected to take on a larger burden than was reasonable given the scope of their positions.

## **5. Coalitions need an ideological shift in mission and approach.**

Participants stated that coalitions need to make significant ideological shifts to support the leadership advancement of women of color. The most stated shift among participants was to adopt an intersectional and justice-focused approach. Ideologies need be more complicated and nuanced beyond the singular focus on heterosexual, white ciswomen who are fleeing from their abuser to get safe.

Participants believed that safety was a critical focus for the field. Yet, when only one kind of survivor is centered and safety is identified as the singular, predominant outcome, then it subsequently decenters a myriad of diverse and nuanced experiences that extend beyond, but still influence, safety. Participants stated that an intersectional movement would attract women of color leaders who understand these nuances and have unique insights on how they function. One participant described:

*“DV and SV are symptoms of [a] much bigger issue. It’s about state violence, violence against the earth, and all those things. To our detriment, we [the GBV movement] have been defining justice through criminal justice and that itself will end the issue. We [women of color] are naturally there. We know it is bigger and attached to systemic oppression...It will be safe neighborhoods, a good education system, access to quality jobs, and being able to get around. All of that will contribute to ending violence. Some of us [in the movement] have made the leap. Half of us are very steeped in thinking that the answer is in services and the criminal justice system. The real recognition in our movement coupled with more women of color leaders will help us get closer towards a world that we are trying to create.”*



An intentional inclusion of young leaders of color would contribute to building an intersectional, justice-focused movement. Yet, many participants stated that older leaders do not invest in or mentor young people in the movement. This lack of investment pushed out younger generations from the movement who have embraced and were engaged in intersectional ideologies. A participant explained:

*“There is an exodus of women of color who are 25 - 35. Bringing people in early is very important. There is a movement of women of color focused on social justice who want to be in the work but do not see the benefits of being in the work. They have to choose between doing this work and doing social justice work in the community.”*

## **14 Ways to Respond to Racial Inequity in GBV Leadership**

### *1. Reframe the language about women of color in GBV leadership.*

How organizations choose to frame this issue matters both internally and externally to the GBV field. There is a need to use language that reflects the root of the issue – the overrepresentation of white women in leadership positions rather than the underrepresentation of women of color. A shift in focus will put the onus on white supremacy rather than the perceived deficits of women of color.

### *2. Implement trauma-informed practices.*

Participants suggested coalitions adopt trauma-informed policies that considered both individual trauma but also historical and intergenerational trauma. While these policies would be beneficial for all staff, they would disproportionately benefit women of color. This is crucial given that so many women of color carry unique burdens of historical trauma, state violence, and white supremacist cultural violence and are overwhelmingly survivors of interpersonal violence.

### *3. Engage in ongoing anti-racist practices.*

Participants defined inclusive cultures to mean collectively defining racial equity, adopting anti-racist policies, and integrating a racial justice focus into the entire organization. Therefore, coalitions should be deeply invested in developing organizational anti-racist practices. Organizations can create measurable outcomes on racial equity, such as by developing a Board of Directors that includes community members, and by developing anti-racist policies that include how organizations deal with the external experiences of racism and white supremacy.

Hiring an organizational development consultant that specializes in anti-racist practices to support people while bringing them into greater alignment with the movement's values is essential. At an individual level, the organization can invest in coaching services for women of color to support them through working in predominantly white institutions. White women can also engage in caucusing and coaching around their internalized racial dominance.

#### *4. Remain mindful about creating intentional social networks.*

Participants stated that white women rely on their social networks to make advancements into leadership positions. This places women of color at a disadvantage for being aware of and obtaining opportunities. As leadership positions become available, white women often do not think about women of color nor reach out to them for consideration. Networking events, mentor matching, and offering more collaborative opportunities across hierarchies are all possibilities to disrupt and infiltrate white-dominated social networks.

#### *5. Provide formal opportunities within organizations for focused skill enhancement.*

Many participants wanted coalitions to create more skill-building opportunities. This goes beyond simple skills that were too basic or trainings that did not consider the antagonistic context where women of color were situated. Participants recommended offering leadership coaching or formalized planning to set and meet specific leadership goals. In addition, participants wanted training that focuses on the application of acquired skills rather than only on knowledge acquisition.

#### *6. Developing internal and external readiness for women of color in leadership.*

Coalitions would have to be strategic about how they plan to support women of color leaders both internally and externally. Women of color leaders reported internal difficulties in getting white women to trust their leadership if they did occupy those roles. Coalitions and its member programs were often inflexible and unforgiving. Participants believed that white women who were new to leadership were given more leeway to get adjusted to their positions and make mistakes compared to women of color. In other cases, internally the organization was supportive, but external institutions did not respect their leadership.

#### *7. Create flexible funding to support current or aspiring leaders of color.*

Variable and flexible funding are also recommended to increase leadership and opportunities for women of color. Women of color could choose what type of leadership development programs they wanted to participate in, and funds could take care of upfront costs to attend that program. Another way to support funding is to provide grants for women to carry out grassroots projects in their communities.

*8. Increase opportunities for women of color in positions “on the ground” to contribute in meaningful ways to the organization’s strategic planning and decision making.*

Given that women of color are often systematically relegated to “doer” roles within the organization, one recommendation is to integrate more strategic thinking and institutional power into the roles lower in the leadership hierarchy. Another recommendation is for the leadership style of the organization to become more participatory to ensure that all members have equal opportunity to engage in organizational decision making. This would allow women of color to then talk about these experiences when they apply for leadership positions.

*9. Learn from and collaborate with other radical social movements.*

The GBV movement is not unique in being challenged by issues of racism and white supremacy given how deeply ingrained they are within the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of the United States. Making a concerted effort to connect with other movements and gather ideas and strategies about how they have appraised and responded to the overrepresentation of white women in leadership positions would advance the GBV field.

*10. Develop succession plans for all GBV leaders, but especially white women.*

The GBV movement should require that people in leadership positions develop succession plans. The movement should also move towards placing term limits on leadership positions and implementing co-leadership models. The recommendation could extend to all leaders in the movement who have been in their positions for multiple years. However, given that many current leaders in this movement are white women, this predominantly means that white women need to move towards shorter leadership terms as this will provide more opportunities for women of color to take on these roles.

*11. Establish a formal mentoring network.*

The movement needs to establish formal mentoring networks at the field level for women of color that are led by women of color who invested in building opportunities and increasing options for women. These pathways must be supportive and are crucial for the development of women of color.

*12. Develop an independent accountability structure within the GBV movement for organizations.*

Long-term institutional change for anti-racist practice needs to be considered and continuously implemented and people need to be held accountable to these standards. At a field level, it would be important to identify accountability mechanisms that are not primarily reliant on funders to serve in this role. What kind of formalized systems can we put in place to respond to practices of white superiority?

*13. Invest in a sustainable self-definition process.*

Coalitions and other institutions within the GBV field define leadership by white normative standards which create exclusionary policies and practices that disproportionately impact women of color. There is also a need for women of color to define, on their own terms, what leadership is outside of whiteness, and get specific about how to train people within their organizations.

In addition, women of color also need opportunities to brainstorm, strategize, and implement how to navigate and respond to racist work environments, determine a collective voice and message, focus on ways to center communities of color at the organizational level, and think about the intersections between survivorship and leadership.

*14. Do not rely solely on leadership programs to primarily support leaders of color.*

The current, and most common response, to the issue of overrepresentation of white women in leadership positions are leadership development programs. Many participants viewed these as quick fixes. If the movement locates the problem as women of color needing to advance their skills, then the burden to change racist systems falls solely on women of color.