

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

For years white women have primarily occupied the most powerful leadership roles in the gender-based violence movement. As a result, white women's perspectives, standpoints, and experiences became the primary drivers that shaped 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 have proposed numerous recommendations, created interventions, and led initiatives to address the isolation¹, tokenism², silencing³, and other cultural practices that hindered women of color's advancement into positions of leadership. Yet, despite these efforts, the overrepresentation of white women in leadership persists and the number of women of color in leadership remains low.

Women of color have identified racism and white supremacist culture within the movement as the most significant inhibitor for career advancement. Racism manifested as: racial disparities in recruitment and hiring, the ongoing placement of women of color in low-level positions focusing on outreach and implementation rather than supervision and strategic planning, and the ongoing negotiation of racially hostile work environments.

"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] the exceeding expectations and accountability that are not the same [compared to white coworkers]."

NRC DV interviewed fourteen women of color about their experiences with leadership in the gender-based violence movement. Participants described multiple causes for lack of advancement by women of color into leadership positions and proposed multi-faceted and complex solutions that were categorized into the following themes:

1. The gender-based violence movement is guided by white cultural norms, promotes white supremacy, and reifies institutional practices that value whiteness.
2. White women will not give up power.
3. Women of color were the "doers," but not seen as the "thinkers" in the movement.
4. Domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions engage in institutional practices that create unhealthy work environments for women of color.

"Young women of color are experiencing the same things that I experienced 30 years ago, and nothing has changed."



1 Brade, 2002,
2 Women of Color Network, 2014
3 Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault, 2010

5. In order to support women of color, coalitions must: implement trauma-informed practices, implement anti-racism practices, engage in mindful hiring practices, increase pay, actively fund spaces for women of color to process, create opportunities for skill development, and build readiness for leadership positions.
6. Coalitions need an ideological shift in mission and approach.

The findings highlighted multi-level systemic issues within the gender-based violence movement. In order to address white supremacy and racism, movement leadership must recognize the historical contributions of women of color, create supportive equitable work environments that emphasize anti-racist practices, and maintain accountability structures.

“We’re leaving because when we’re in the work we’re not valued. Quite frankly, it feels like an abusive relationship.”

We recommend the following strategies:



- 1. Reframe the issue** of women of color in GBV movement leadership from the underrepresentation of women of color to the overrepresentation of white women.
- 2. Create flexible funding** opportunities to support current or aspiring leaders of color.
- 3. Increase opportunities for women of color** in positions “on the ground” to meaningfully participate in strategic planning and decision making within institutions and the larger movement.
- 4. Learn from and collaborate with other radical social movements.**
- 5. Develop succession plans** for all GBV movement leaders, but especially white women.
- 6. Develop an independent accountability structure** within the movement for organizations.
- 7. Women of color should define for themselves what it means to be a leader** in the gender-based violence movement.
- 8. Develop ongoing accountability processes and practices** to address racism and white supremacy.



For more recommended strategies go to <http://www.transformgbv.org>

This study illuminated how deep cultural and structural changes are needed in order to address the underlying role that white supremacy and racism play in creating and maintaining racial disparities in movement leadership.

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