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Black Women and Violence: 'Bad' Alone Doesn't Work

By Tonya Lovelace, WeNews commentator

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's Enews.



Tonya Lovelace

Credit: Pennsylvania Coalition
Against Domestic Violence.

(WOMENSENEWS) – It is rare that one gets an opportunity to recall a comment and reissue a longer, improved version. But that is the chance this article affords me.

I was interviewed by Women's eNews for an article about domestic violence, "Black Women Seek Protection Closer to Home," published in January 2007.

I waited in anticipation for the article and had excitedly asked my colleagues to look for it. What I didn't bargain for was being shaken by my own quote.

Not far from the start of the article I was quoted as saying, "When you are talking about black women, you are talking about everything bad about domestic violence and then some."

The words – truncated to the point that they no longer seemed my own – boomeranged back at me like a drumbeat of negatives, "When you are talking about black women, you are talking about everything BAD about domestic violence and then some."

As an African American woman, I immediately felt that familiar feeling I have had throughout my life: of being associated with negativity, of being targeted, of being considered "the example" or "epitome" of all things bad. Reeling, I went from colleague to colleague, proverbially stumbling over myself, attempting to sort out why the phrase itself struck me as wrong.

Simple Statements Don't Suffice

It wasn't until I began to write my concerns to the editor that it came to me more clearly. What was wrong was that one simple statement didn't suffice. Black women, like other women of color, are disproportionately affected by violence. Yes, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, black women experience domestic violence at a rate 35 percent higher than white women. But there is yet no way that one phrase, or one statistic, can fully capture the experiences of those that go unreported, undocumented and unaddressed and that have more dimensions than represented.

I knew immediately that the statement, in isolation, serves to further marginalize and truncate the complexity that lies behind the words and the people they reference.

And of course I was still stuck with the word that was out there in cyberspace. BAD. This placed a burden upon me, and from the feedback I received from colleagues I knew it also burdened those women who are marginalized by race, counted out by color and considered "bad" by birthright of blood and caste. When your legacy is that of chattel slavery, corporate battering, rape and murder, seeing yourself depicted in this way simply adds to the pain of your people.

Speaking to the Violence

But am I to walk in shame for speaking to the severity of violence and tremendous barriers my sisters face?

The answer is no, not if I am able to describe the situation in its entirety.

So first off: I am not implying that black women are the only women experiencing domestic violence. I am also not implying that they are experiencing more violence than any other group of women.

I am clear however, through years of local and national advocacy, that due to historical, socioeconomic, interpersonal and situational circumstances, black women are one of the most isolated groups that have to overcome racial, sexual and economic barriers simultaneously while seeking safety and security.

Due to the necessity of survival, of standing in the face of adversity, and an inheritance of strength and endurance, black women are among those who may not experience violence early in the relationship but may face an escalation of abuse and an intensity of brutality that reach levels of high lethality before they seek help or, as in many cases, when it's too late.

Difficult Choices

When the very person who is battering you is also your brother in the struggle for community survival; when you know that in calling the police that you and your partner are likely to be pre-judged as inhumane and animalistic, as naturally prone to

bloodshed, and that you both may be carted off to jail; when seeking safety options means turning over someone you love and who is already expected to be imprisoned within his lifetime; when you know that as strong as you are expected to be, that you may not be able to convince your friends or even your family that yes, you are a victim of intimate partner violence; then the experience can be characterized as “bad.”

Black women are a diverse group, a global group, and can't be summed up by one phrase, one set of statistics, one article or even one commentary.

But as I know it, I say to you that for black women, whether they are forced to quit their jobs and be completely financially dependent or forced to be the sole financial earners in the home and required to promptly turn over their money to their partners; whether their partners are male or female; whether they have kids or not; whether their partners are of the same socioeconomic or racial background or not; whether their partners are well-respected and hold a place of power in the community or not; whether they themselves or their partners are immigrants or not; when you talk about domestic violence and black women, I can say sincerely and without trepidation that you are talking about everything bad and then some.

And I can say that by way of birthright, we as an African Diaspora, as black women, we continue to overcome, and I will spend my life dedicated to ensuring that we do so.

Tonya Lovelace is Project Manager for the Women of Color Network, a national grassroots initiative providing leadership training, technical assistance, resources and support to women of color advocates and activists working to end violence against women and families. Women of Color Network is a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

Women of Color Network: <http://www.womenofcolornetwork.org>

“Black Women Seek Protection Closer to Home”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3028/>

“Dangerous Trends, Innovative Responses”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2906/>

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