
Domestic Violence In Context Unmet Needs and Promising Strategies

Introduction

The work of the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP) focuses on addressing the complex, intersecting needs that members of low-income communities of color commonly experience. In particular, our advocacy and policy analysis take into account the realities, the impact, and the barriers that poverty and racial discrimination present in individuals' lives.

While all victims of domestic violence share a common need for safety, specific service needs may vary greatly from person to person. A wide range of factors, including race and economic class, can influence what any one victim may need from an advocate. Therefore, developing best practices and evaluating services reasonably begins by taking into account the broader context of women's lives and identities.

This short paper foregrounds the experiences of low-income African American women as we consider outstanding needs for domestic violence intervention and prevention strategies.

Context: Economic Class and Race

It could go without saying that individuals' lives, experiences, and opportunities are

framed by our race and economic class.

However, if we pause to consider this idea, it becomes clear that differences in identity and social status can and do result in differences in need with regard to social welfare and domestic violence services.

While domestic violence victims frequently have overlapping service needs (for shelter, crisis hotlines, legal advocacy, etc.), how these services are best provided will differ from one person to the next. Best practice has shown that it is important to respond to each individual victim within the broader context of that person's life and to tailor services to fit their particular needs and concerns. For this reason, services are continually being developed and improved to respond to disability, language, culture, immigration status, gender, and/or sexuality. Similarly, services that respond to differences in class and race must also continuously be enhanced and refined to best meet the needs of low-income African American women.

For more information about domestic violence in low-income communities of color see:

Safety and Services: Women of color speak about their communities (2011)
www.cffpp.org/pubdomviol.html

While many victims of domestic violence experience a loss of income or face financial insecurity as a result of leaving an abusive partner, women from low-income communities experience violence within the context of chronic poverty and need, with or without an abusive partner present in the home. In other words, women living in poverty cope with ongoing economic instability and uncertainty, regardless of their relationship status. For women who are dealing with poverty as a daily struggle, the need for stable income, safe housing, food, and other essentials often takes precedence over the very real need for safety. Victims and advocates alike have said that many women come to domestic violence programs asking for basic resources for their children well before discussing the violence they have experienced. Poverty and income insecurity are critical factors that impact and define women's day-to-day lives and that shape the options that are available to them.

Similarly, race and ethnicity are essential aspects of individuals' identities and experiences. Women have expressed that it is important to see themselves reflected in the spaces they enter – be it the services they access or the businesses they use. For women experiencing the trauma of domestic violence, seeing a service provider's face or artwork on the walls that reflects one's own background can signal that the racial or cultural aspects of a person's identity will be recognized. Additionally, it can be important to understand that for some women of color, concern for

community and family well-being can be valued alongside one's own need for safety. As one example, many African American women report that despite a partner's violence toward them, they delay calling or involving law enforcement because they don't want to be responsible for "putting another black man in jail." A victim's perception of her available, viable choices is influenced and informed by her experiences and the experiences of her community. Therefore, having a fundamental understanding of racial discrimination – from the interpersonal to the institutional – can help advocates provide quality services. Furthermore, understanding the strengths and supports that many low-income African American women gain from family and community can be a valuable asset to safety planning with victims. In general, having an openness toward differences in cultural context can enhance domestic violence service provision.

According to low-income women of color, it is crucial for domestic violence programs and social welfare providers to truly understand and address poverty and racial discrimination. In order to provide culturally relevant and responsive services, the broader context of women's lives – the lived realities and experiences, including the options, opportunities, and constraints that women, their families, and their communities face – must help guide service development and implementation.

Unmet Needs

The intersection of race, class, and gender is not only relevant, but is a crucial part of the broader context in which women experience violence. Many low-income African American women who are domestic violence victims do not access local programs or develop a beneficial relationship with an advocate when they perceive that the available services will not respond to what they have identified as their most urgent needs.¹

For some women, the words “domestic violence” do not express, reflect, or resonate with their experiences. They may not identify the fighting or conflict in their relationship as “domestic violence.” Some women may not feel like “victims.” This is often true for victims who have ever fought back. Other women may experience “victimization” as “power and control” in an “abusive” relationship, but still may not use these words to name or describe their experience. As a result, many women who could benefit from a domestic violence program do not think of themselves as needing those services and never contact a shelter or call a crisis line.

Other women may not contact a domestic violence program because they identify their family’s basic economic needs as being more urgent than the need for safe, temporary shelter. Many local programs are not equipped or funded to respond to basic needs for food, long-term housing, or income. Most advocates provide referrals to organizations that can help

with these needs. However, victims who are in crisis may not reach out to a domestic violence program when they are looking for basic resources, or they may leave if a shelter cannot meet these needs.

Other women do not access domestic violence services because they choose to remain in contact with a partner who has used violence against them. For some women, remaining “in contact” may entail maintaining a romantic relationship or a marriage. For others, it might mean navigating co-parenting time with a former partner or sharing the same tight-knit community and/or family. Regardless, women in contact often believe that a domestic violence program cannot or will not help them unless they sever ties with the partner who has abused them. Many women who remain in contact (either by choice or by circumstances) have significant, outstanding need for an advocate’s support and safety planning services.²

Victims in contact who are women of color living in poverty have also identified that providing social welfare services to men could potentially benefit everyone in their community. Most women are in favor of providing social services that would help their fathers, uncles, brothers, and sons find work, secure a safe place to live, or receive health care services or addiction treatment.

Moreover, many women in contact also identify that providing such services to men who have used violence against them could provide victims with some relief. Simply getting him out of the house more often, sending him to a social welfare agency where he can get some assistance dealing with his issues, or helping him get a job so he can contribute to the household finances would help ease her burden.

Additionally, some women of color who are victims and survivors of domestic violence have expressed that providing social welfare services to the men in low-income communities might be a useful prevention strategy. Most women are not saying that financial stress or substance abuse causes violence, nor are they asking advocates to provide these additional social services. However, women do feel that – for some victims – having community-based services available and having advocates share referral information about services that address his economic and social welfare needs could reduce violence and increase safety.³ Further, advocates who know about such services have an opportunity to provide critical safety planning services. When it comes to sharing referral information with a current or former partner, important safety planning steps include: talking through what she would say, when and where it would be safest to have the conversation, what he might say or do to signal that the conversation is not going well, and what she can do to best maintain her safety and well-being.

For low-income African American women, identity includes, but is also much broader than being a “woman of color,” a “victim,” or living “in poverty.” While it is obvious that women’s identities cannot be reduced to our race or ethnicity, our experiences of violence, or our economic status, the true fullness of our identities – including our desires and aspirations for ourselves and our families – can easily get lost in the busy routine of the workday. At the same time, it can benefit victims and promote safety when services take into account the breadth and depth of women’s identities. Although a woman walks into shelter separate and separated from her larger community, she remains a member of important social networks, and viewing women as members of their families and communities can be incredibly relevant to providing high-quality advocacy services. For example, taking into account this broader context can help make sense of why a victim might ask about social services for a man who is important to her. Or, there may be people in her life who support her and who can contribute to her safety plan in significant ways.

When working with victims from low-income communities, it can also be important to know that social welfare services in the United States primarily address the needs of children and their custodial parents (most often women). These meager resources are not adequate for meeting the needs of low-income families, and at the same time, noncustodial parents (most often fathers) and adults without children are

largely invisible and excluded from the policies and programs that respond to poverty. In other words, there are very few services that address economic need among adults who do not have children in their custody. However, low-income men – whether as partners, fathers of children, or other relatives – are integral and valued members of families and communities. Women living in poverty who are marginalized by race and class recognize that the men in their families and communities share similar experiences of disenfranchisement. Despite the privileges of being a man in a male-dominated society, not all men are granted the same degree of privilege; men of color are disadvantaged by their race. Women of color know this to be true and see the effects throughout their communities. Many women are asking social service providers and policymakers to take this reality into account and to provide social welfare and economic support services to every member of their community who is in need. Within this context, it can be easier to see why victims may want to know about the availability of social welfare services for the men in their communities. And, for some women, providing assistance to men will help lift her burden and promote her well-being.

Ongoing Challenges

While this paper has laid out some of the unmet needs and opportunities for responding to violence in low-income African American communities, programs and advocates face obstacles to creating new services.

Funding is an ongoing, pressing need for domestic violence agencies. While only a fraction of victims contact a domestic violence program, there are not enough resources to meet the current demand for services. Due to cuts in funding, many shelters have been forced to reduce their services and, in some cases, close. These cuts mean that fewer and fewer advocates are available to serve victims who often have increasingly complex needs. Despite the inadequacy of funding, an excessive amount of time and energy is required from programs and coalitions to fight just to maintain current funding levels.

Programs not only need increased resources to provide shelter, advocacy, and support services to all victims who need them, but there is also need for increased flexibility in the use of funds. In particular, programs need flexible funding that allows them to expand services and develop innovative approaches to adequately address the complex needs that victims experience. The provision of individualized, victim-centered responses requires talking with other professionals and service providers throughout the community, developing relationships and collaborations, and building a wide network of contacts who can help advocates respond to the multiple needs that any one victim may face. However, this type of work is time-intensive and often does not count toward program outcome goals or fit into grant reporting requirements. Consequently, it is rarely woven into an advocate's job responsibilities, and providing

more traditional services – which are more easily counted and reported – often takes precedence over developing new services or collaborations.

Funding, innovation, and services can, of course, all be jeopardized by the prevailing political climate. It is important to keep in mind that when all women are disadvantaged, poor women and women of color – women who are more marginalized – are disproportionately negatively affected. Take, for example, the fact that domestic violence victims from low-income communities of color have been asking for the development and implementation of more holistic advocacy approaches, including referrals to social welfare services that respond to the economic needs of men. Given Congressional debates in recent years over the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and women’s access to health care services, out of necessity, we advocates have focused our

efforts on maintaining basic, fundamental rights and services for women. However, this draws our attention away from a conversation about holistic responses. In this way, broadly responding to the attack on services for women actually results in further marginalizing the expressed needs of women of color from low-income communities.

Conclusion

Domestic violence services are continually being refined to best respond to disability, language, culture, immigration status, gender, and/or sexuality. It is equally important to develop services that attend to differences in need created by race and class. Having an openness to understanding and responding to differences in cultural context can provide a strong foundation for victim-centered advocacy.

Endnotes:

¹ For more information, see CFFPP’s *Safety and Services: Women of color speak about their communities* (2011), www.cffpp.org/publications/Safety_and_Services.pdf

² For more information on advocacy for women in contact, see Jill Davies’ *Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact with Current or Former Partners* (2009), [www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Advocates%20Guide\(1\).pdf](http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Advocates%20Guide(1).pdf)
Additional resources are available through the Building Comprehensive Solutions website, www.bcsdv.org

³ For more information, see *Safety and Services*.