

**CONVERSATION WITH MOTHERS OF COLOR WHO HAVE  
EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REGARDING WORKING  
WITH MEN TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

**Angela Autry, Lonna Davis, Kelly Mitchell-Clark and Gabrie'l Atchison**

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*Synopsis written by Rus Ervin Funk, MSW  
Center for Women and Families, Louisville, KY*

This report addresses the perspectives and voices of women of color who have been abused by a partner in respond to the question of working with men to end domestic violence. Rarely do we hear the voices of women of color who have been abused, and not previously (to my knowledge) has there been a documented attempt to examine what women of color think about programming to reach men to end domestic violence.

This project was based on a series of focus groups of women of color in Boston and San Francisco. In total, 32 women took part in the focus groups. In general, the women felt that there is a need to work on domestic violence beyond institutional responses. Additional findings are explored later in this paper.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus groups project was designed to examine how formerly battered mothers of color felt about domestic violence in general, and efforts to engage men as partners in working to stop domestic violence in particular. Three key questions were examined throughout this process:

1. What do mothers of color who have experienced domestic violence think about how service providers can help abusive men change their behaviors?
2. What do these women think about how service providers can help engage non-abusive men in violence prevention activities?
3. What do these women think about how service providers have worked with men historically?

Participants were recruited from community-based domestic violence programs to take part in the 2-hour presentations. In addition, one key informant was used – who works at a program that oversees the **supervision of men who have used violence and their children.**

## ENGAGING MEN IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The themes discussed in this aspect of the focus group centered on responsibility – both the need for men who are abusive to take responsibility for their violence, and the need of non-abusive men to take responsibility to work to stop the violence of other men.

The women also discussed the need for abusive men to heal in order for them to be able to have healthy families, and the community's responsibility to provide healing opportunities for these men. One common suggestion, for example was for a 24-hour peer-led hotline of men able to respond to men who grapple with abuse or control issues.

These women defined a healthy family as one in which “parents and children feel comfortable communicating and feel safe and at peace. ...being able to trust one another and have respect for each member of the family are also essential” (p. #9).

Men’s role in caring for children was also mentioned frequently in relation to men’s responsibilities.

#### LONG TERM EFFECTS OF ABUSE

These women all agreed that men need to understand the effect of abuse beyond the physical violence. Many of them discussed the emotional abuse as being as harmful as the physical violence, and the lack of recognition they encountered (thus also the lack of support and advocacy) when they disclosed emotional abuse. They all felt that defining domestic violence was “fundamental to stopping it” (p. #11).

#### IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL INTERVENTIONS

This report acknowledged that over the past 25 years, the primary institutional responses (from domestic violence programs and law enforcement) have been some version of the following:

1. Protect survivors through shelters and protective orders
2. Arrest and incarcerate abusive men
3. Mandate abusive men to some type of intervention

The women were then asked their perspective on these traditional responses.

#### Shelter

Most of the women in this project had experienced shelters. Several of them had positive things to say about their experiences in shelter. Most of the women, however, felt that shelter life was stressful and the short time they were allowed to stay was problematic. Some felt that shelter staff needed more extensive training and thought that shelters ought to recruit formerly battered women as workers.

Most of the women in this project felt that the lack of programming for abusive men from battered women’s shelters or similar programs was a gap and it undermined the shelters’ ability to help heal families and nurture healthy relationships. By focusing exclusively on women, service providers were seen as (albeit in an unintended way) holding survivors more accountable than abusive men.

In general, the women felt that shelters were supportive and their experiences were positive. But they also felt that shelters and other organizations have a responsibility to reach out to men, and abusive men in particular.

#### Interventions with Men

Most of these women felt that the traditional methods of responding to abusive men (arrest, incarceration, and mandated intervention) were not effective at changing abusive men’s behaviors. They all felt that other strategies of encouraging men to stop their violence are needed.

#### Criminal Justice System

The majority of the women in this focus group experienced the legal systems as negative or harmful. Several reported being treated like the criminal and most reported being afraid of police violence or that

their children would be taken away. Some women explained that they would stay in the relationship before calling the police. Most believed that if the police were involved, the situation would either remain unchanged or worsen.

## SOCIETAL NORMS

The participants in this study felt that community apathy had the effect of supporting violence against women, and that society teaches girls that they are less valuable than boys and that their primary worth is sexual. The majority of these women felt that society in general accepts violence against women and encourages men to batter.

## CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND WITNESSING VIOLENCE

Most of the women stated that they did not initially recognize the ways that witnessing domestic violence affected their children. Most felt that their children's age at the time of the violence mitigated the degree of harm to the child. The majority also felt that it would be difficult for boys to overcome the experience of witnessing violence without some form of intervention. They also felt that parents need to be able and willing to talk to their children about the violence they have witnessed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Communicating and networking between men could have a powerful impact in reducing men's violence. Specifically, the women thought that a peer-led 2h-hour hotline and peer-led men's support groups that are culturally appropriate were crucial aspects.
- Non-abusive men should reach out to male youth within their communities. Participants also thought that formerly abusive men could have a powerful role in crafting messages for younger boys/men.
- Messages that women identified:
  - *Be your best for your children.*
  - *You don't have to beat a woman to be a man.*
  - *Showing respect for women is the definition of a good father.*
  - *Take responsibility for your violence.*
  - *Support your children no matter what your relationship is with their mother.*
  - *Understand that your violence has a detrimental effect on all aspects of women's lives.*
  - *Your violence towards your partner permanently damages your children, whether you are violent towards them or not, and whether they witness to the violence or not.*
- Service providers and activists help both parents talk to their children about violence they witnessed.
- Service providers should support fathers who have renounced their violence and would like to make amends to their children.
- Shelters and women's organizations should do more to help families heal and should accept some role in reaching out to abusive men for the sake of the children.
- Supplying communities with information about services available as well as how to intervene safely to protect battered women.