

The Stanford Daily

March 4, 2004

Speakers Criticize News Media's Coverage of Domestic Violence

By Brendan Selby

www.stanforddaily.com

The news media present one-sided coverage of domestic violence, according to participants in a symposium last night at the Stanford Women's Community Center. The symposium, entitled "Call It What It Is," focused on whether the media are too sympathetic to perpetrators of domestic violence and on what can be done about the problem.

"We're here because we care about changing public perceptions of domestic violence," said freshman Kanyi Maqubela, one of the organizers.

Rolanda Pierre-Dixon, a Deputy District Attorney with the Santa Clara County Domestic Violence Unit, presented statistics from the county that showed 5,393 cases of domestic abuse in 2003, and 3,656 charges filed, many more than ever make the news. Over the same period, there were 21 deaths that resulted from abusive relationships.

The speakers claimed that the media's presentation of domestic violence cases suffers from lack of coverage, a disproportionate focus on homicides and a tendency to blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator through selective reporting. They pointed to coverage of the Laci Peterson case as an example.

According to Emma Vaughn, a freshman, the news media chastise victims of domestic violence for staying in abusive relationships and places undue emphasis on irrelevant facts like whether the victim dressed promiscuously or was unfaithful. Meanwhile, she says, perpetrators are partially absolved of responsibility when the media claim that violence occurred in the heat of the moment or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Pierre-Dixon agreed, arguing that the media are motivated more by pleasing their audience than by the facts of domestic violence.

"They want the sexy story," she said. "They want the one that is going to make everyone look good."

Pierre-Dixon said she believes that the prevalence of abuse should give news organizations pause to think more about their reporting.

“When the San Jose Mercury lost one of its own reporters to domestic abuse, they had to look inward,” she noted, going on to explain how a reporter fell victim to the largely-ignored crime.

Nancy Fomenko, director of education for the Support Network for Battered Women, said she understands that the media must strike a balance between presenting the truth and keeping its audience interested.

“I can’t blame the media entirely, because this is what we crave,” she said. “We are all guilty of it, myself included.”

The symposium also presented potential solutions to problems in media coverage, including more coverage of domestic violence, a focus on patterns of abuse rather than homicides alone and coverage of success stories in which women have broken free from abusive relationships.

The symposium, attended by a couple dozen people, was the product of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric Community Writing Project where a team of freshman helped the domestic violence agencies examine and explain media coverage.

Allison Mackey, a freshman, felt that better coverage of domestic abuse could help to lift the stigma that prevents victims from seeking help.

“Public perception of intimate violence needs to change,” she said.

Copyright © 2004 Stanford Daily Publishing Corporation.