❚ Article ❚

Domestic Violence and the Impacts on African American Women:
A Brief Overview on Race, Class, and Root Causes in the United State

Natalie Jones & Christine W. Thorpe

Abstract

Victims of domestic violence from ethnic minority groups in the United States have a higher impact rate and less effective intervention services available to them than victims from the majority group. African American women have experienced traumatic psychological impairment due to partner abuse and lack intervention services that fail to fully apply comprehensive methods that can meet the victim's needs. To comprehend the individual's experience, one has to consider the varied factors and elements. This paper provides an awareness of this issue experienced by African American women in urban communities. We will explore how racial inequalities, class stratification, and ethnocentrism have influences and structural root causes that impact effective services.

❚ **Key words** : domestic violence, African American women, abuse, womens' health, health disparities

Overview

The impact of domestic violence in the United States is far reaching across gender, racial/ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic categories. There is not one group that is not impacted by violence and abuse, yet there are some which are more disproportionately affected than others. Research from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) (Black et al., 2011) revealed that 5.1 million men and 4.3 million

women in the United States experienced some form of injurious phys-icalassault in 2010. With regard to violence in intimate relationships, Desmarais et al. (2012) indicated that over a ten-year span, one out of four women and one out of five men in America experienced intimate partner violence.

When examining abuse and partner violence with respect to sexual orientation, Walters, Chen, and Breiding (2013) conducted research across the United States that found bisexual women experienced the highest rates of psychological abuse (76.2 percent), then lesbian women (63.0 percent), gay men (59.6 percent), bisexual men (53.0 percent), heterosexual men (49.3 percent), and heterosexual women (47.5 per-cent). West's (2012) examination of ethnic minority gay, lesbian, bisex-ual, and transgender populations revealed that psychological aggression and mutual violence had the highest reported incidence. Such research highlights the overlapping experiences across groups, but exposes the need for deeper examination of these experiences for more in-dividualized services.

For the purposes of this article, African American women will be the focus because of the limited discourse on the sociocultural impact of abuse. Four out of 10 black women have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). Intimate partner violence results in negative mental and physical outcomes such as eating disorders and substance abuse (Lacey et al., 2015). The impact of abuse on African American women is an understudied topic that deserves a close examina-tion of the factors that influence potential intervention strategies. Given the statistics on African American women, we felt it was necessary to provide critical thought on this issue.

Domestic Violence and the Impacts on African American Women

Despite numerous services, strategies, intervention techniques, evalu-

ations, and discussions about better understanding domestic violence, very little effort and attention has been placed on how domestic violence affects cultural minority women differently when seeking services and assistance. Due to the lack of awareness, more researchers and service providers need to recognize and understand the effects of domestic violence on women of color and acknowledge the intersection of domestic violence with race/ethnicity, class stratification, and ethnocentrism (Kasturirangan et al., 2004). For services to be effectively delivered, an interpretation and understanding of the racial/ethnic nuances plays a crucial role in comprehending the abuse and implementing the best services for women of color. Given that there are unique cultural differences and circumstances among women of color, one cannot generalize the effects and provide "generic" intervention services in the hopes that it will yield positive results on the same scale.

Women of color do tend to share similar traits and commonalities such as strong personal identity; a distrust of the judicial system; religious beliefs; and sense of community within their family (King, 2015; Lopez & Nuno, 2016; Cooper, 2016). They are more able to identify with collectivist society rather than an individualist society that is more familiar to their white counterparts (Porter & James, 2016). Very minimal literature about the fate of minority women and domestic violence is a perfect example of the lack of knowledge surrounding this group (Lacey & Mouzon, 2016). As noted, "Independently of each other as classes, women, minorities and victims of domestic violence have been overlooked by mainstream criminology in the United States" (Rasche, 1988, p. 150). It is important to understand that the outcomes of domestic violence among white, European American women are very different compared to those women of African descent, immigrants, or even same sex relationships (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2007).

With the lack of understanding domestic violence among women of color, domestic violence is still a national public health issue that results in severe injuries, psychological dilemmas, mental health issues, and deaths every year (Lacey & Mouzon, 2016). It is necessary to in-

vestigate and do more research within this group since an increase of demographic changes among minority groups is on the rise and will soon constitute more than half of the US Census; all the more reason to understand multiculturalism and domestic violence (Colby & Ortman, 2015). The question that remains to be answered is why is there a lack of literature and or investigation about domestic violence within the minority community? Certainly domestic violence has drastic and negative effects on all women regardless of race and ethnicity; however, it is important to understand that services provided does not necessarily meet the needs of all these women equally and effectively. The needs of minority women, particularly black women, are over-shadowed by the issues of racism and sexism and have received very little to no interest compared to white women (Rasche, 1988). There is a need for research to go beyond the white, heterosexual segment of the United States and to increase research based on sexual orientation and racial/ethnic groups (West, 2012).

Some researchers may be apprehensive about studying domestic violence because the population may not be "their own." Some may be concerned about language and cultural barriers, as well as worrying about reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes about families of color (Kasturirangan et al., 2004). Essentially, all of this can contribute to a very complex societal context and in turn black women and other minority groups are left to face more social problems than their white counterparts.

Prevalence and Characteristics

It is true that domestic violence is a widespread social problem that affects families of every socioeconomic and demographic status. Boyfriends, husbands, lovers, and partners batter women of all cultures, races, occupations, income levels, and ages. According to Black et al. (2011) "nearly 3 in 10 women…in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and or stalking by an intimate partner" (p. 2).

In accord, it is also indicated that approximately half of all domestic violence crimes are reported, making the true measure of the problem statistically unknown (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014).

Despite their initial statement that provides research from the traditional feminist approach that domestic violence affects all people equally (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005), research findings provide evidence that African American women experience a higher rate of domestic violence than Caucasian women (Taft et al., 2009). It is equally important to comprehend that there are various structural root causes that influence domestic violence. The literature has concluded that it is vital to explore forms of "inequality and oppression, such as racism, ethnocentrism, class privilege, and heterosexism [that] intersect with gender oppression" (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, p. 39). A study conducted by Lacey, Saunders, & Zhang (2011) sought to understand the similarities and differences between women of color and white women when they leave an abusive relationship. The women of color included in the study identified themselves as Hispanic (43.5 percent), Black/African American (41.7 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander (4.6 percent), American Indian/Alaskan Native (2.8 percent), and mixed race (7.4 percent). White women were among the sample, but a concrete percentage was not provided by the researchers who stated that the sample was too small to provide specific numbers.

However, credible data on domestic violence collected from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Black et al., 2011) indicted that approximately four out of 10 black women reported being raped, experiencing physical violence, and/or being stalked by a partner. As is apparent, domestic violence is a multicultural issue that has to be addressed accordingly. Without objective and effective intervention strategies, domestic violence will continue to be a dire issue. Noted researchers, Dasgupta, Sokoloff & Dupont (2005), explained that "the dominant group often fails to recognize the adaptive qualities of other cultures, overestimates the role of culture in family violence, and assumes that White middle-class Western culture is superior to other cultures"

(Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2007, p. 947). As such it is highly recommended that researchers and health professionals proceed to providing help from a cultural variant perspective (Ibid.).

Racial Inequalities

Race is one of the most significant determinants that arbitrate the level of violence a woman may experience (Sumter, 2006). Many women belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group feel that they are less likely to receive help than a white woman because of prejudice. The psychological effect, combined with racism, often impact the choices women of color make with regards to seeking services when they are victimized. Women of color are more reluctant to seek services due to distrust of social service agencies (Sumter, 2006). They tend to rely on informal networks of support (Bryant-Davis et al., 2015). African American women may be reluctant to seek help because they do not believe anyone will help (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2015). A high percentage of black women are severely abused and murdered at significantly higher rates than any other ethnic or racial group (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Women of all races are equally vulnerable to violence by an intimate partner (Bureau of Justice, 2014). However, despite the many social agencies offering services to victims and the role of the judicial system, African American women are provided with less services and minimal intervention to assist them.

Multicultural skills are tremendously lacking when serving women of color and particularly African American women living in rural and poor areas who are one of the most vulnerable, yet under served populations. Services must be conducted with cultural sensitivity and supportiveness, ideally with health insurance coverage (Black et al., 2011). Additionally, African American women may be concerned about encountering prejudice from staff, volunteers, other battered women, and the judicial system. In accord, African American men are frustrated, feel pow-

erless, experience economic instability, and vent their anger on defense-less spouses. Severe physical violence has been identified as the primary use of force perpetrated by African American men (Lipsky et al., 2012). African American women are also reluctant to have police intervention because of the guilt of having their spouses arrested by the "white legal system" (Richie, 2012). While community pride and racial loyalty pre-vented abused women from calling the police, black women reported that male members of their families would sometimes intervene (Sleutel, 1998).

With that said, African American women have also been stereotyped by society as loud, angry, bossy, welfare queens immune to violence; this has resulted in them receiving poor services from social agencies and the judicial system (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). African American women have no protection and their appeals for help are ignored due to individual and institutional racism. As noted by Lynora Williams (1981). "Minority women in American society may be viewed as bearing a cross 'on each shoulder'- racism and sexism" (p. 41). As such, black women have garnered very little support and attention.

Class Stratification

Domestic violence occurs among various socio-economic groups. Many of the victims are poor, unemployed, and receiving some type of public assistance. Families with an annual income of $7,000 or less ex-perience a higher rate of domestic violence of 20 per 1,000 cases, while those making an income of $15,000 to $24,000 experience a rate of 10 per 1,000 cases (Sumter, 2006). Studies have shown that there is a higher rate of domestic violence among the poor and that a sizable pro-portion of welfare recipients have been or are victims of domestic violence. African Americans are reported to have the second lowest in-come grouping (Taft et al., 2008). Thus, poverty is higher, leading to a lack of services within the African American community. The priv-

ileged have more access to resources than poor urban victims. With limited access to crucial resources such as employment opportunities, affordable housing, social and mental services, homeless and domestic violence shelters, health care, and police protection, African American women are more likely to depend on their partners for financial help (Sumter, 2006). To add to this, African American women are less likely to receive a reasonable amount of child support or alimony to fully support themselves and their children.

According to Richie's (2000) research presented by Sokoloff & Dupont, "Poor women of color are more likely to be in both dangerous intimate relationships and dangerous social positions" (2005, p. 41). African American women living in poverty are at a greater risk for abuse than the general population. According to Lacy and Mouzon's examination of severe physical intimate partner violence (SPIPV) and Caribbean Black women living in the United States, "Those with the most socioeconomic resources would be more likely to visit a healthcare professional than those with lower socioeconomic status" (2016, p. 9).

Hence the concept that all women of different races and cultures are affected by domestic violence equally does not capture the unique experience of African Americans and does very little in aiding them. When socioeconomic stressors are controlled, racial and ethnic factors are greatly reduced (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). It is quite essential for private and public agencies that target low income communities to try to obtain and maintain adequate funding in order to meet the financial burdens of domestic violence victims. Such funding can securely allow them to live safe and independent lives. As such, we can conclude that extreme levels of poverty can influence the rate of domestic violence.

Ethnocentrism

Understanding different cultures is vital to combating domestic violence. It is equally important to comprehend how structural forms of

racism, prejudice, and economic instability can cripple social service agencies and intervention services to give voices to marginalized women of color. Often times, victims from different cultures do not garner the empathy and understanding needed to fully help them because individuals are too quick to blame the victim's culture and way of life. The problem at hand is often ignored and instead prejudices are projected whether consciously or not. As stated by Dasgupta (1998) and referenced by Sokoloff and Dupont (2005):

> Many White Americans presume that "other" cultures, especially minority ones, are far more accepting of woman abuse than the U.S. culture.⋯American mainstream society still likes to believe that women abuse is limited to minority ethnic communities, lower socio-economic stratification and individuals with dark skin colors. The impact of this public violence of imperialism, classism and racism on battering in the private sphere of home and intimate relationships has unfortunately, received little research (p.45).

Therefore, effective interventions for African American women and other minority groups of women that are victims of domestic violence require that helping professionals apply a model of practice that is socially, culturally, racially, spiritually, and gender sensitive. Communities with immigrants, minority groups, and different cultures are often stereotyped as an entire group instead of applying individual contexualism based on each person's behavior (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

It is suggested that culturally sensitive intervention ensures safety, increases coping skills and resource mobilization, and promotes developing supportive relationships in a manner that is consistent with each woman's cultural context. It is also important that human service professionals learn the social and cultural contexts of various communities so they can be skillfully trained service providers. Not only will they be able to apply comprehensive services to the vulnerable, victims will feel a sense of hope and acquire stronger resilience when they have the support they need.

Conclusion

More scholars are increasingly studying the dynamics and factors of domestic violence among diverse cultural victims because it has become a major public health issue. A contextualized format is being applied but still lacking comprehensive methods that can be of more help to victims of domestic violence and particularly African American women. We must consider the individual's micro and macro systems and how they are impacted by these elements surrounding them. Service providers and public policies alike must address the structural root causes of domestic violence so accurate research and intervention techniques can provide necessary details and contribute to a more diverse society.

Objectivity is necessary when helping the victims and giving voice to women of color. More focus is required on structural inequalities, race, gender, etc. African Americans seem to be more vulnerable to family violence (Taft et al., 2008). Counselors and human service providers should consider if they are using the traditional paradigm or the new paradigm when working with victims. Even though structural approaches are not easily applied, more and more social movements are asserting specific issues and addressing the varied needs of marginalized victims of domestic violence (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). The emergence of these social movements is aiming to address the complexities many victims face. Specific ways of challenging such complexities are providing more affordable homes, domestic violence shelters, legal aid, and access to education so that the victims can acquire decent wages from jobs and childcare to name a few (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Stress must also be placed on the importance of intervention services to address the mental health of African Americans and treatment approaches that will essentially help them to cope since they face many risk factors. As such, intervention for the perpetrators should also be considered (Taft et al., 2008).

To conclude, agencies should encourage human service providers

to effectively address the needs of each victim and keep in mind that inequality of power helps to contribute to the trauma that marginalized victims face. Researchers and service providers also need to approach this issue from a greater contextual stance. This would truly help the women and their children.

References

Bloemraad, I., Korteweg, A., & Yurdakul, G. (2008). Citizenship and immigration: Multiculturalism, assimilation, and challenges to the nation-state. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *34*, 153-79.

Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M. R. (2011). The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury. Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrievedfrom: http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS _Executive_Summary-a.pdf

Bryant-Davis, T., Ullman, S., Tsong, Y., Anderson, G., Counts, P., Tillman, S., & Gray, A. (2015). Healing pathways: Longitudinal effects of religious coping and social support on PTSD symptoms in African American sexual assault survivors. Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 16(1), 114-128.

Buttell, F. P., & Carney, M. M. (2005). Do batterer intervention programs serve African American and Caucasian batterers equally well? An investigation of a 26-week program. Research on Social Work Practice, 15(1), 19-28.

Carbone-Lopez, K., Slocum, L. A., & Kruttschnitt, C. (2015). "Police wouldn't give you no help" Female offenders on reporting sexual assault to police. Violence against Women, 22(3), 1-31.

Colby, S. L., & Ortman, J. M. (2015). Projections of the size and composition of the US population: 2014 to 2060. US Census Bureau (Ed.), 25-1143.

Cooper, B. (2016). Afterword. In G. T. Hull, P. Bell-Scott, & B. Smith 2ndEd.(Eds.). But some of us are brave: Black women's studies. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY.

Dasgupta, S. D. (1998). Women's realities: Defining violence against women by immigration, race and class. In R. K. Bergen (Ed.). Issues in intimate violence (pp. 209-219). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

_____. (2005). Women's realities: Defining violence against women by im-

migration, race, and class. In B. E. Richie, N. J. Sokoloff, & C. Pratt (Eds.), Domestic violence at the margins: Readings on race, class, gender, and culture (pp. 56-70). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Desmarais, S.L., Reeves, K.A., Nicholls, T.L., Telford, R. & Fiebert, M.S. (2012). Prevalence of physical violence in intimate relationships - Part 1: Rates of male and female victimization. Partner Abuse, 3(2), 140-169.

Kasturirangan, A., Krishnan, S., and Riger, S. (2004). The impact of culture and minority status on women's experience of domestic violence. Trauma, Violence & Abuse. 5(4), 318-332.

King, M. L. (2015). A blog, a bittersweet mess, and black and white identity development. In K. E. Tassie & S. M. B. Givens (Eds.), Women of color and social media multitasking: Blogs, timelines, feeds, and community (pp. 145-162). London: Lexington Books.

Kolander, C.A., Ballard, D.J. & Chandler. C.K. (2011). Contemporary women's health: Issues for today and the future. 4th Ed. New York: WCB McGraw Hill.

Lacey, K. K. and Mouzon, D. M. (2016). Severe physical intimate partner violence and the mental and physical health of U.S. Caribbean black women. Journal of Women's Health. doi:10.1089/jwh.2015.5293.

Lacey, K. K., Sears, K. P., Matusko, N., & Jackson, J. S. (2015). Severe physical violence and black women's health and well-being. American Journal of Public Health, 105(4), 719-724.

Lacey, K. K., Saunders, D. G., & Zhang, L. (2011). A comparison of women of color and non-Hispanic white women on factors related to leaving a violent relationship. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 26(5), 1036-1055.

Lipsky, S., Cristofalo, M., Reed, S., Caetano, R., and Roy-Byrne, P. (2012). Racial and ethnic disparities in police- reported intimate partner violence perpetration: A mixed methods approach. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 27(11), 2144-2162.

Lopez, V., & Nuño, L. (2016). Latina and African-American girls in the juvenile justice system: Needs, problems, and solutions. Sociology

Compass, 10(1), 24-37.

Malley-Morrison, K., & Hines, D. A. (2007). Attending to the role of race/ethnicity in family violence research. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 22(8), 943-972.

Porter, C. P., & James, T. D. (2016). Race, gender, and class distinctions among aging middle class black and white women: Implications for feminist interventions. Women & Therapy, 39(1-2), 35-55.

Rasche, C. E. (1988). Minority women and domestic violence: The unique dilemmas of battered women of color. Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 4(3), 150-171.

Richie, B. (2012). Arrested justice: Black women, violence, and America's prison nation. New York: New York University Press.

Richie, B. (2000). A Black feminist reflection on the antiviolence movement. Signs, 25, 1133-1137.

Sleutel. MR (1998). Women's experience of abuse: A review of qualitative research. Issues in Mental Health Nursing. 19, 525-539.

Sokoloff, N. J., & Dupont, I. (2005). Domestic violence at the intersections of race, class, and gender challenges: Contributions to understanding violence against marginalized women in diverse communities. Violence against Women, 11(1), 38-64.

Sumter, M. (2006). Domestic violence and diversity: A call for multicultural services. Journal of Health and Human Services Administration, 29(2), 173-190.

Taft, C. T., Bryant-Davis, T., Woodward, H. E., Tillman, S., & Torres, S. E. (2009). Intimate partner violence against African American women: An examination of the socio-cultural context. Aggression and Violent Behavior, 14(1), 50-58.

United States Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2014). Domestic violence. U.S. Department of Justice, pp. 1-13. Retrieved from: http://www.bjs.gov /content/pub/pdf/C-SPAN_domestic violence2_oct2014_5.pdf

Walters, M., Chen, J., & Breiding, M. (2013). The National intimate partner and sexual violence survey (NISVS): 2010 Findings on victimization by sexual orientation. Atlanta, GA: National Center for

Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

West, C. (2012). Partner abuse in ethnic minority and gay, lesbian bisexual, and transgender populations. Partner Abuse, 3(3), 336-357.

Williams, L. (1981). Violence against women. The Black Scholar, 12(1), 18-24.

Biographical Note

Natalie Jones received the B.S. in Human Services from New York City College of Technology, New York, the M.A. at Brooklyn College in Sociology and currently enrolled in the M.S. Ed. program at Hunter College, New York. She is a Teach For America 2016 Corp Member and currently a Special Education teacher. Her main research interest includes, education equity in non-white communities, race relations, domestic violence and Caribbean immigration.

Christine Thorpe received her Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from Syracuse University, a Master of Education degree in international educational development and a doctorate in health education from Teachers College Columbia University. She is department chairperson and assistant professor in the Health and Human Services Department at New York City College of Technology/City University of New York. Her interests include women's health and wellness, health disparities, holistic nutrition, patient navigation, motivational interviewing, and health literacy. She is a certified wellness coach and health education specialist. cthorpe@citytech.cuny.edu