

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN OF COLOR

INCITE? WOMEN OF COLOR AGAINST VIOLENCE

Women of color live in the dangerous intersections of gender and race. Within the mainstream anti-violence movement in the U.S., women of color who survive sexual or domestic abuse are often told that they must pit themselves against their communities, often portrayed stereotypically as violent, to begin the healing process. Communities of color, meanwhile, often advocate that women keep silent about the sexual and domestic violence in order to maintain a united front against racism. Therefore this analysis argues the need to adopt anti-violence strategies that are mindful of the larger structures of violence that shape the world we live in. That is, strategies designed to combat violence within communities (sexual/domestic violence) must be linked to strategies that combat violence directed against communities (i.e. police brutality, prisons, racism, economic exploitation, etc). In addition, as will be discussed later in this report, the remedies for addressing sexual and domestic violence have proven to be inadequate for addressing the problems of gender violence in general, but particularly for addressing violence against women of color. The problem is not simply an issue of providing multicultural services to survivors of violence. Rather, the analysis and strategies around addressing gender violence have failed to address the manner in which gender violence is not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but also serves as a tool of racism and colonialism. That is, colonial relationships are themselves gendered and sexualized.

Within the context of colonization and racism, sexual violence does not affect men and women of color in the same way. However, when a woman of color suffers abuse, this abuse is not just attack on her identity as a woman, but on her identity as a person of color. The issues of colonial, race, and gender oppression cannot be separated. Women of color do not just face quantitatively more issues when they suffer violence (i.e. less media attention, language barriers, lack of support in the judicial system, etc.) but their experience is qualitatively different from that of white women. Hence, the strategies employed to address violence against women of color must take into account their particular histories of violence.

Historical Context

Colonizers have long tried to crush the spirit of the peoples they colonize and blunt their will to resist colonization. One of the most devastating weapons of conquest has been sexual violence. In the eyes of colonizers, the bodies of people of color are considered inherently 'dirty.' For instance, as European settlers of California described in the 1860s, Native people were "the dirtiest lot of human beings on earth (Rawls 1984, 195)." They wear "filthy rags, with their persons unwashed, hair uncombed and swarming with vermin (Rawls 1984, 195)." The following 1885 Proctor & Gamble ad for Ivory Soap also illustrates this equation between Indian bodies and dirt.

We were once factious, fierce and wild,
In peaceful arts unreconciled
Our blankets smeared with grease and stains
From buffalo meat and settlers' veins.
Through summer's dust and heat content
From moon to moon unwashed we went,
But IVORY SOAP came like a ray
Of light across our darkened way
And now we're civil, kind and good
And keep the laws as people should,
We wear our linen, lawn and lace

As well as folks with paler face
And now I take, where'er we go
This cake of IVORY SOAP to show
What civilized my squaw and me
And made us clean and fair to see (Lopez n.d., 119).

In the colonial worldview, only "clean" and "pure" bodies deserve to be protected from violence and these concepts are always already racialized. Violence done to "dirty" or "impure" bodies simply does not count as violence. Because the bodies of women of color are also seen as "dirty," they too are considered "rapable." The practice of mutilating Indian bodies, for instance--both living and dead--makes it clear that colonizers do not think Indian people deserve bodily integrity. This attitude dates back to the earliest periods of westward conquest, as these examples from history illustrate:

I saw the body of White Antelope with the privates cut off, and I heard a soldier say he was going to make a tobacco-pouch out of them (Wrone and Nelson 1982, 113).

One more dexterous than the rest, proceeded to flay the chief's [Tecumseh's] body; then, cutting the skin in narrow strips. ...at once, a supply of razor-straps for the more "ferocious" of his brethren (Wrone and Nelson 1982, 82).

Andrew Jackson... supervised the mutilation of 800 or so Creek Indian corpses--the bodies of men, women and children that he and his men massacred--cutting off their noses to count and preserve a record of the dead, slicing long strips of flesh from their bodies to tan and turn into bridle reins (Stannard 1992, 121).

Although Native men have also been scarred by abuse, Native women have often been the primary focus of sexual violence because of their ability to give birth. Control over reproduction is essential in destroying a people; if the women of a nation are not disproportionately killed, the nation's population can always rebound. This is why colonizers such as Andrew Jackson recommended that, after massacres, troops complete the extermination by systematically killing Indian women and children. Similarly, Methodist minister Colonel John Chivington's policy was to "kill and scalp all little and big" because "flits make lice (Stannard 1992, 131)." Symbolic and literal control over their bodies is important in the war against Native people, as these testimonies of colonization attest:

Two of the best looking of the squaws were lying in such a position, and from the appearance of the genital organs and of their wounds, there can be no doubt that they were first ravished and then shot dead. Nearly all of the dead were mutilated (Wrone and Nelson 1982, 123).

One woman, big with child, rushed into the church, clasping the alter and crying for mercy for herself and unborn babe. She was followed, and fell pierced with a dozen lances... the child was torn alive from the yet palpitating body of its mother, first plunged into the holy water to be baptized, and immediately its brains were dashed out against a wall, (Wrone and Nelson 1982,97)

I heard one man say that he had cut a woman's private parts out, and had them for exhibition on a stick. I heard another man say that he had cut the fingers off of an Indian, to get the rings off his hand. I also heard of numerous instances in which men had cut out the private parts of females, and stretched them over their saddle-bows and some of them over their hats (Sand Creek Massacre: A Documentary History 1973).

The history of sexual violence and genocide for Native women is illustrative of how gender violence functions as a tool for racism and colonialism for women of color in general. As with Native women, African American women have also been viewed as inherently rapable. Whereas colonizers used sexual violence to kill of Native populations, however, white slave owners used rape to reproduce an

exploitable labor force. Because the children of Black slave women inherited their slave status, it was economically profitable to systematically rape Black women in order to reproduce their slave labor. Because Black women were seen as the property of their slaveowners, their rape at the hands of these men did not count. As one southern politician declared in the early 1900s, there was no such thing as "virtuous colored girl" over the age of fourteen (Davis 1981, 182). The testimonies from slave narratives and other sources reveals the systematic abuse of slave women by white slaveowners.

For a period of fourth months, including the latter stages of pregnancy, delivery, and recent recovery therefrom... he beat her with clubs, iron chains and other deadly weapons time after time; burnt her; inflicted stripes over and over with scourges, which literally excoriated her whole body; forced her to work in inclement seasons, without being duly clad; provided for her insufficient food, exacted labor beyond her strength, and wantonly beat because she could not comply with his requisitions. These enormities, besides others, too disgusting, particularly designated, the prisoner, without his heart once relenting, practiced ...even up to the last hours of victim's existence. (A report of a North Carolina slaveowner's abuse and eventual murder of a slave woman) (Genovese 1976, 72).

He was a good man {my master} but he was pretty bad among the women. Married or not married, made no difference to him. Whoever he wanted among the slaves, he went and got her or had her meet him somewhere out in the bushes. I have known him to go to the shack and make the woman's husbands sit outside while he went into his wife. ...He wasn't no worse than none of the rest. They all used their women like they wanted to, and there wasn't nobody to say anything about it. Neither the woman nor the men could help themselves. They submitted to it but kept praying to God (a slave testimony from South Carolina) (Johnson 1969, 90).

Immigrant women as well have endured a long history of sexual exploitation in the U.S. For instance, women were often lured into the U.S. with the promise of a stable marriage or job, only to find themselves trapped in the sex trade. Financially impoverished Chinese families were often forced to sell their daughters into prostitution and in other cases, racially discriminatory employment laws forced thousands of Chinese immigrant women into prostitution. By 1860, over 23.4 percent of the Chinese in San Francisco (all female) were employed in prostitution (Almaguer 1994, 174).

In these histories, while women of color suffered from routine sexual exploitation in the process of racist and colonial expansion, men of color become stereotyped as sexual predators. Prior to colonization, Indian societies tended not to be male-dominated. In fact, many societies were matrilineal and matrilocal and Indian women often served as spiritual, political, and military leaders. When work was divided by gender, both men's and women's labors were accorded similar status. Violence against women and children was rare -- in many tribes, unheard of (Jaimes and Halsey 1992). Consequently, through the proliferation of "captivity narratives" in the 1800s, the message was spread that sexual predators were not white men, but were Indian men bent on capturing and raping white women.

Similarly, black men were targeted for lynching for their supposed mass rapes of white women. White women needed to be protected from predatory black men, when in fact it was black women who needed protection from white men. Anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells calculated in her investigations of lynchings that between 1865 and 1895 over ten thousand Blacks had been lynched, whereas no white person was ever lynched for killing a Black (Davis 1981, 184). In addition, while the ostensible reason for these lynchings was to protect white women from black rapists, Wells discovered that only a third of those lynched were even accused of rape. And of those accused of rape, most were obvious consensual sexual relationships with white women (Giddings 1984, 28-29).

Present-Day Context

The historical context of rape, racism and colonialism continues to impact women of color today. This legacy is most evident in the rates of violence in American Indian communities- American Indian women are twice as likely to be victimized by violent crime than women or men of any other ethnic group. In addition, sixty percent of the perpetrators of violence against American Indian women are white and Asian American women are most likely to be victimized by whites as well (Greenfield and Smith 1999). Rates of violence against African American women as well are higher than the national average (Rennison 2001). In general, forty-three percent of women will be raped (including marital rape) and one-half of women in the U.S. will be battered in their lifetime (MacKinnon 1987, 23-24).

Not only has sexual and domestic violence become internalized within communities of color as a result of this sexual colonization, but women of color continue to be targeted by racialized gender violence in a number of ways. Within U.S. popular culture, Stuart Kasten marketed a new video in 1989 called, "Custer's Revenge," in which players get points each time they, in the form of Custer, rape an Indian woman. The slogan of the game is "When you score, you score." He describes the game as "a fun sequence where the woman is enjoying a sexual act willingly."

During times of heightened tensions between Native and white communities, sexual violence remains prevalent as is evident in some of these events I was involved in. During the Chippewa spearfishing controversies in the 1980s when Chippewa spearfishers were being harassed by white racist mobs for exercising their treaty-protected rights to spear fish, one white harasser carried a sign saying "Save a fish; spear a pregnant squaw." During the 1990 Mohawk crisis in Oka, a white mob surrounded the ambulance of a Native woman who was attempting to leave the Mohawk reservation because she was hemorrhaging after having given birth. She was forced to "spread her legs" to prove she had given birth. The police at the scene refused to intervene. Two women from Chicago WARN went to Oka in Mohawk Territory, Canada to videotape the crisis. They were arrested and held in custody for eleven hours without being charged, and were told that they could not go to the bathroom unless the male police officers could watch. The place they were held was covered with pornographic magazines.

Trafficking in women from Asian and other Third world countries continues unabated in the US. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, 45,000 to 50,000 women are trafficked in the US each year (Brinkley 2000). In addition, there are over 50,000 Filipina mail-order brides in the US alone (Tadiar 2000). White men, desiring women they presume to be submissive, procure mail-order brides, who then, because of their precarious legal status, are vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence in their homes. Neferti Tadiar, scholar of Philippines history, reports the promotional material for procuring mail order brides: Filipinas have "exceptionally smooth skin and tight vaginas... [they are] low maintenance wives. [They] can always be returned and replaced by a younger model (Tadiar 2000)."

Women of color are also targeted for sexual violence crossing the U.S. border. Blacks and Latinos comprise 43% of those searched through customs even though they comprise 24% of the population (Bhattacharjee 2001). The American Friends Service Committee documented over 346 reports of gender violence on the US Mexico border from 1993-1995 and this is just the report of one agency, which does not account for the women who either do not report or report to another agency. The following case illustrates the kinds of abuse women face at the border:

A Border Patrol agent, Larry Selders, raped several women over a period of time. Finally one of the rape victims in Nogales, Arizona had to sue the United States government for not taking action to investigate her rape. Selders demanded sex from the woman in return for her release. When she

refused, Selders drove her out of town to an isolated area, raped her and threatened her not to say anything to anyone. Her defense describes in great detail the horrible trauma that she continued to suffer after the incident. Although the rape took place in 1993, it was only in October 1999, that the court finally arrived a decision in favor of the victims. "The government guarded information about Selders' prior acts. It took more than three years of legal battles to uncover that at least three other victims were known to the government," declared the victim's attorney. Jesus Romo (Bhattacharjee 2001).

Undocumented survivors of violence face many barriers to accessing services as a result of their legal status. They are often reluctant to report crimes because their partners threaten to report them to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) for deportation. Many programs for domestic and sexual violence survivors in the U.S. do not provide services in languages other than English. In one case reported by a Chicago rape crisis center, a Latina was raped by a prominent businessman. During the trial, the basic line of defense taken by the defense attorney was to ask her repeatedly, "You've been in this country for a long time. Why don't you speak English yet?" Her attacker (who was a friend of the judge) was acquitted.

Meanwhile, the media generally ignores this pervasive violence and focuses on the individual acts of violence by men of color. Examples include the media hype of their murder trial of O.J. Simpson (an African American celebrity charged with killing his ex-wife), Clarence Thomas (U.S. Supreme Court Justice accused of sexual harassment) and Mike Tyson (an African American boxer tried and convicted for rape). In the public discussions over these cases, women of color continued to be marginalized. That is, communities of color often focused on the racism directed against the men in these cases, neglecting to see how their female victims (in the Tyson and Thomas cases) are also victimized by racism. The response by many communities of color to these cases was to blame the victims for breaking silence around violence. Meanwhile, the white women's anti-violence movement made these figures the symbols of male violence against women rather than white perpetrators. For instance, William Kennedy Smith (a white prominent figure who was tried for rape) was acquitted, no public outcry resulted even among activists in the anti-violence movement as it did when O.J. Simpson was acquitted. In fact, the outcry was so tremendous among white people after O.J. Simpson's acquittal that many publicly called for an end to affirmative action programs because of his acquittal. The thousands of white men who batter and rape women have failed to attain the same public scrutiny as have men of color. This demonization of men of color as the real rapists, from whom white women need protection, ironically hinders white women as well from securing real safety from violence. That is, white women fear violence from men of color and consequently are less likely to protect themselves from those most likely to perpetuate violence against them-white men whom they know.

Remedies

Because violence against women of color cannot be separated from racism and colonialism, it is necessary to develop remedies for violence that also counter racism and colonialism, particularly as they are manifested in state violence. Unfortunately, the remedies that have been pursued by the mainstream anti-violence movement have often had the effect of strengthening rather than opposing state violence. The anti-sexual/domestic violence movements have been critical in breaking the silence around violence against women and providing critically needed services to survivors of sexual/domestic violence. However, these movements have also become increasingly professionalized around providing services, and consequently are often reluctant to address sexual and domestic violence within the larger context of institutionalized violence. As a case in point, many state coalitions on domestic/sexual violence have refused to take stands against the anti-immigration

backlash and its violent impact on immigrant women, arguing that this issue is not a sexual/domestic violence issue. However, as the immigration backlash intensifies, many immigrant women do not report abuse for fear of deportation. However, it is impossible to seriously address sexual/domestic violence within communities of color without addressing these larger structures of violence, such as militarism, attacks on immigrants' rights and Indian treaty rights, the proliferation of prisons, militarism, economic neo-colonialism, and institutional racism. Consequently, it is critical that those interested in combating sexual/domestic violence adopt anti-violence strategies that are mindful of the larger structures of violence that govern our world. In other words, strategies designed to combat violence within communities must be linked to strategies that combat the violence directed against communities of color.

As a case in point, increasingly, mainstream anti-violence advocates are demanding longer prison sentences for batterers and sex offenders as a front line approach to stopping violence against women. However, the criminal justice system has always been brutally oppressive toward communities of color. In 1994, for instance, one out of every three African American men between the ages of 20-29 was under some form of criminal justice supervision. Two-thirds of men of color in California between the ages of 18 and 30 have been arrested (Donziger 1996, 102-104). It is problematic for women of color to go to the state for the solution to the problems it has had a large part in creating. Consider these examples from reports from rape crisis centers from around the United States:

An undocumented woman calls the police because of domestic violence. Under current mandatory arrest laws, the police must arrest someone on domestic violence calls. Because the police cannot find the batterer, they arrest her and have her deported (Tucson). An African American homeless woman calls the police because she has been the victim of group rape. The police arrest her for prostitution (Chicago). An African-American woman calls the police when her husband who is battering her accidentally sets fire to their apartment. She is arrested for the fire (New York).

In fact the New York Times recently reported that the effects of the strengthened anti-domestic violence legislation is that battered women kill their abusive partners less frequently, BUT batterers do NOT kill their partners less frequently (Butterfield 2000). Thus, ironically, laws passed to protect battered women are actually protecting their batterers!

In addition, as Beth Richie notes in her study of Black women in prison and Luana Ross describes in her study of American Indian women in prison, women of color are generally in prison as a direct or indirect result of gender violence. That is, for instance, women of color, often become involved in abusive relationship in which they are forced to participate in men's criminal activities (Richie 1996: Ross 1998). In addition, over 40 percent of women in prison are there because they murdered an abusive partner (Jurik and Winn 1990). Thus, the criminal justice system, rather than solving the problems of violence, often re-victimize women of color who are survivors of violence. And in fact, Luana Ross notes the criminal justice system actually criminalizes the attempts of women of color to resist and survive violence (Ross 1998).

The basic problem is that the premise of the justice system is that most people are law-abiding except for "deviants" who do not follow the law. However, given the epidemic rates of sexual and domestic violence in which 50 percent of women will be battered and 43 percent will be raped in their lifetime, it is clear that most men are implicated in our rape culture (MacKinnon 1987, 23-24). It is not likely that we can send all of these men to jail. Addressing rape through the justice system simply furthers the myth that rape/domestic violence is caused by a few bad men rather than acts which most men find themselves implicated in. Thus, relying upon the criminal justice system to end violence against

women strengthens a criminal justice apparatus that has been historically racist, while providing little more than the illusion of safety to survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

At the same time, however, many of the alternatives to incarceration that are promoted under the "restorative justice model" have not developed sufficient safety mechanisms for survivors of domestic/sexual violence. In addition, anti-prison activists often uncritically support restorative justice programs as alternatives to incarceration without considering how to ensure these models provide safety for survivors. "Restorative justice" is an umbrella term that describes a wide range of programs which attempt to address crime from a restorative and reconciliatory rather than a punitive framework. That is, as opposed to the US criminal justice system that focuses solely on punishing the perpetrator and removing him from society through incarceration, restorative justice attempts to involve all parties (perpetrators, victims and community members) in determining the appropriate response to a crime in an effort to restore the community back to wholeness. These models have been particularly well-developed by many Native communities, especially in Canada, where the sovereign status of Native nations allows them more an opportunity to develop community based justice programs. In one program, for instance when a crime is reported, the working team that deals with sexual violence talks to the perpetrator and gives him the option of participating in the program. The perpetrator must first confess his guilt and then follow a healing contract, or go to jail. The perpetrator can decline to participate completely in the program and go through normal routes in the justice system. Everyone (victim, perpetrator, family, friends, and the working team) are involved in developing the healing contract. Everyone is also assigned an advocate through the process. Everyone also holds the perpetrator accountable to his contract. One Tlingit man noted that this approach was often more difficult than going to jail:

First one must deal with the shock and then the dismay on your neighbors faces. One must live with the daily humiliation, and at the same time seek forgiveness not just from victims, but from the community as a whole... [A prison sentence] removes the offender from the daily accountability, and may not do anything towards rehabilitation, and for many may actually be an easier disposition than staying in the community (Ross 1997, 18).

These models seem to have much greater potential for dealing with "crime" effectively because if we want perpetrators of violence to live in society peaceably, it makes sense to develop justice models in which the community is involved in holding him/her accountable. Under the current incarceration model, perpetrators are taken away from their community and are further disabled from developing ethical relationships within a community context. As Rupert Ross, an advocate for these models notes: "In reality, rather than making the community a safer place, the threat of jail places the community more at risk (Ross 1997)."

The problem, however, with these models in addressing sexual/domestic is that they work only when the community unites in holding perpetrators accountable. However, in cases of sexual and domestic violence, the community often sides with the perpetrator rather than the victim. So for instance, in many Native communities, these models are often pushed on domestic violence survivors in order to pressure them to "reconcile" with their families and "restore" the community without sufficient concern for their personal safety. Thus, we face a dilemma: on the one hand, the incarceration approach for addressing sexual/domestic violence promotes the repression of communities of color without really providing safety for survivors. On the other hand, restorative justice models often promote community silence and denial around issues of sexual/violence without concern for the safety of survivors of gender violence under the rhetoric of community restoration.

Thus, our challenge is, how do we develop community-based models of accountability in which the community will actually hold the perpetrator accountable? While there are no simple solutions to violence against women of color, it is clear that we will not develop effective strategies unless we stop marginalizing women of color in our analysis and strategies around both racial violence and gender violence.

To answer this set of challenges, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, was organized to combat violence against women of color in all its forms. This organization arose from the Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color conference held in Santa Cruz, California in April, 2000. The primary goals of this conference were to (1) develop analyses and strategies around ending violence that place women of color at the center; (2) address violence against women of color in all its forms, including: attacks on immigrants' rights and Indian treaty rights; the proliferation of prisons; militarism; attacks on the reproductive rights of women of color; medical experimentation on communities of color; homophobia/heterosexism and hate crimes against lesbians of color; economic neo-colonialism; and institutional racism, and (3) encourage the anti-violence movement to reinsert political organizing into its response to violence. Originally designed to host 100-200 participants, over 1000 attended the conference while 2000 had to be turned away because of space limitations. Due to the overwhelming response at this conference, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence was formed. Incite! is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue and grassroots organizing. This organization complements the work done by domestic and sexual violence agencies which focus on social services by emphasizing a grassroots, political mobilization approach toward ending violence. By supporting grassroots organizing, we intend to advance a national movement to nurture the health and well-being of communities of color. Through the efforts of Incite!, women of color and our communities will move closer towards global peace, justice and liberation.

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence
PO Box 6861, Minneapolis, MN 55406

415-553-3837

incite-national@yaboo.com

www.incite-national.org