

# *Domestic Violence at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender*

*Challenges and Contributions to Understanding Violence  
Against Marginalized Women in Diverse Communities*

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*This article provides a comprehensive review of the emerging domestic violence literature using a race, class, gender, sexual orientation intersectional analysis and structural framework fostered by women of color and their allies to understand the experiences and contexts of domestic violence for marginalized women in U.S. society. The first half of the article lays out a series of challenges that an intersectional analysis grounded in a structural framework provides for understanding the role of culture in domestic violence. The second half of the article points to major contributions of such an approach to feminist methods and practices in working with battered women on the margins of society.*

**Keywords:** *culture and social structure; intersectionalities and domestic violence; multicultural domestic violence; race, class, gender, and domestic violence*

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*An emerging body of scholarly work is giving voice to battered women from a wide range of formerly excluded and ignored communities. This literature embodies a variety of theoretical perspectives that emphasize the individual lived experiences of diverse battered women (Garfield, 2001; Waits, 1998) as well as the social structural underpinnings of domestic violence in*

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culturally diverse communities (Sokoloff, 2005; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Scholars adopting these approaches have challenged the primacy of gender as an explanatory model of domestic violence and have emphasized the need to examine how other forms of inequality and oppression, such as racism, ethnocentrism, class privilege, and heterosexism, intersect with gender oppression. This approach calls for public policies that address these structural root causes of domestic violence. Because of the many contributions of this growing body of work, the domestic violence literature has become increasingly relevant to more and more diverse segments of our society (Nesmith, 2001).

In this domestic violence literature, two sometimes conflicting objectives emerge: giving voice to battered women from diverse, and often ignored, social locations and cultural backgrounds, while still focusing on the structural inequalities (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality) that constrain and shape the lives of battered women, albeit in different ways. These conflicting theoretical perspectives have been described as the race, class, gender perspective and the structural perspective (Andersen & Collins, 2001; Mann & Grimes, 2001).

As Mann and Grimes (2001) suggest, the race, class, gender perspective represents a rapidly emerging area of scholarship that attempts to address social problems and to represent the interests and voices of a vast array of marginalized peoples. Within gender studies, the race, class, gender analysis is known by different names, including "intersectionality theory, integrative feminism, the women of color or multiracial perspectives, and multicultural feminism. . . . By any of these names, its focus on multiple oppressions and difference has been its hallmark" (Mann, 2000, p. 477). A guiding principle of race, class, gender analysis is its focus on the "simultaneous, multiple and interlocking oppressions of individuals" (Mann & Grimes, 2001, p. 8). Although this analysis has distinct structural elements, this is rarely its focus. Rather, emphasis is on difference and the unique struggles it presents to each group. Andersen and Collins (2001) distinguish a structural approach as requiring "analysis and criticism of existing systems of power and privilege; otherwise, understanding diversity becomes just one more privilege for

those with the greatest access to" resources and power. They go on to say that

analyzing race, class, and gender as they shape different group experiences also involves issues of power, privilege, and equity. This means more than just knowing the cultures of an array of human groups. It means recognizing and analyzing the hierarchies and systems of domination that permeate society and that systematically exploit and control people. (pp. 5-6)

Both theoretical perspectives are represented throughout the emerging domestic violence literature; however, of the three interlocking systems of domination, class analysis is arguably the least developed (in comparison to race and gender) in this body of work. This article includes both the race, class, gender or intersectionalities perspective and the social structural perspective. We are of the opinion that one without the other will not provide battered women from diverse backgrounds with the kinds of personal and social change required for safety and growth at the individual and communal levels.

This article outlines the challenges that intersectional (race, class, gender approach) and structural approaches present to the traditional feminist framework of domestic violence; it goes on to outline some of the contributions provided by these approaches.

The first part of this article focuses on the special challenges that intersectional and structural approaches present to the mainstream domestic violence literature. These new approaches question the monolithic nature of woman battering, expand definitions of woman battering to include culturally specific forms of abuse, call for a greater emphasis on the structural causes of woman battering, caution against disempowering representations of marginalized battered women, and explore the complex role of culture in understanding woman abuse and our responses to it. In the second half of the article, we will turn our attention to the many methodological and practical implications of intersectional and structural approaches to domestic violence. Particular attention will be paid to emancipatory and culturally competent approaches to dealing with woman abuse.

## CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY INTERSECTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL APPROACHES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### QUESTIONING THE UNIVERSALITY OF WOMAN BATTERING

The traditional feminist approach to domestic violence has generally been to emphasize the common experiences of battered women in the interests of forging a strong feminist movement to end woman abuse. However, this approach has increasingly been questioned by scholars and activists who recognize the need to give voice to women marginalized by the largely White, middle-class feminist movement (Richie, 2000; Ristock, 2002; Russo, 2002). Kanuha (1996) is critical of the use of generalizations about battered women. The suggestion that domestic violence affects "every person, across race, class, nationality, and religious lines" equally is "not only a token attempt at inclusion of diverse perspectives but also evidence of sloppy research and theory building" (p. 40). She suggests that the "tag line that domestic violence affects everyone equally trivializes both the dimensions that underlie the experiences of these particular abuse victims and more important, the ways we analyze the prevalence and impact of violence against them" (p. 41). Similarly, Richie (2000) challenges this notion of universal risk: Poor women of color are "most likely to be in both dangerous intimate relationships and dangerous social positions" (p. 1136). She argues that the antiviolence movement's avoidance of a race and class analysis of violence against women "seriously compromises the transgressive and transformative potential of the antiviolence movement's potential [to] radically critique various forms of social domination" (p. 1135). The failure to address the multiple oppressions of poor women of color jeopardizes the validity and legitimacy of the antiviolence movement.

### QUESTIONING TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF WOMAN BATTERING

Increasingly, domestic violence scholars are questioning traditional methods of defining and measuring domestic violence

(Kanuha, 1996). The prevalence of domestic violence cannot adequately be measured without taking into account the fact that different cultures define this violence differently (Yoshihama, 1999). Yoshihama (1999) suggests that there should be alternative means of measuring domestic violence. She argues that there are major limitations to mainstream measures of domestic violence because they lack sociocultural contexts: "What is considered domestic violence or a specific meaning a woman may give to her partner's act is partly based on the interviewee's viewpoint shaped by her sociocultural background" (p. 873). For example, in Japan, overturning a dining table is a culturally specific form of abuse that questions the woman's legitimate role in the family. Or by Japanese standards, dousing a woman with liquid connotes that she is impure or contaminated. It is interesting that some respondents rated these culturally specific forms of abuse as being considerably more severe than acts such as pushing, grabbing, slapping, and throwing objects, acts that some of the women did not consider to be abusive at all. Similarly, Garfield (2001) suggests that African American women's perceptions of violence may differ from mainstream definitions as well as in the way various forms of violence are experienced. In a study involving life history interviews with nine African American women, Garfield found that the women did not always regard physical aggression as violence, whereas acts of racism were uniformly experienced as such. These findings suggest that there are different definitions of domestic violence as well as varying perceptions of what constitutes severe versus milder forms of abuse.

Yoshihama's (1999) findings suggest that our definition of domestic violence is incomplete if it does not include the specific forms of abuse that are particular to women's cultural backgrounds. This does not mean that domestic violence is relative so much as that women must be able to voice their concerns about how violated they feel within a cultural framework that is meaningful to them.

#### QUESTIONING THE PRIMACY OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN EXPLANATIONS OF WOMAN BATTERING

The traditional feminist perspective argues that violence against women is a consequence of socially constructed and

culturally approved gender inequality (Yllo, 1993). This approach is far superior than prior theoretical models of woman battering, which often blamed the victim for her circumstances or pathologized battered women. However, scholars, survivors, advocates, and activists, particularly women of color and lesbians, are challenging the traditional feminist view that gender inequality is the primary factor determining domestic violence.

Bograd (1999) suggests that domestic violence is not a monolithic phenomenon and that "intersectionalities color the meaning and nature of domestic violence, how it is experienced by self and responded to by others, how personal and social consequences are represented, and how and whether escape and safety can be obtained" (p. 276). We exist in social contexts created by the intersections of systems of power (e.g., race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) and oppression (e.g., prejudice, class stratification, gender inequality, and heterosexist bias). No dimension, such as gender inequality, is privileged in explaining domestic violence. Most important, gender inequality itself is modified by its intersection with other systems of power and oppression.

This intersectionality of race, class, and gender has real-life consequences for many battered women who are seeking safety: "Individuals may have internalized ideologies antithetical to disclosure of violence" (Bograd, 1999, p. 281). For example, a Vietnamese woman who has been taught that saving face and family unity preempt individual safety will be reluctant to seek outside help for domestic violence (Bui & Morash, 1999). As a member of a devalued racial identity, some women of color, particularly African American women, may fear that calling the police will subject their partners to racist treatment by the criminal justice system as well as confirm racist stereotypes of Blacks as violent (Richie, 2000; Websdale, 1999). Furthermore, lesbians who are not out, or voluntarily open about their sexual orientations, may remain silent about the abuse in their relationships (Butler, 1999; Ristock, 2002).

A major challenge to traditional feminist models of domestic violence comes from theories on lesbian battering (Leventhal & Lundy, 1999; Renzetti, 1998; Ristock, 2002). The fact that both abuser and victim are women calls into question the primacy of gender inequality in explaining the dynamics of lesbian battering. Renzetti (1998) suggests that although there are many similarities

between heterosexual battering and lesbian battering (e.g., the intent of abuse is to assert power and control over one's intimate partner), the two phenomena are not the same. An important factor of lesbian battering is that the abuse occurs within the greater context of homophobia in society. Outing, or the threat of informing others that the victim or survivor is gay or lesbian, is a tactic often used by batterers in lesbian relationships to control their partners. Homophobia may prevent many lesbians from leaving abusive relationships because they may fear negative responses by police, family members, religious institutions, social services, or battered women's organizations. Internalized homophobia may also be a contributing factor to domestic violence in lesbian relationships (Renzetti, 1998). The challenge becomes even more apparent and more complicated as transgendered and intersexed survivors of domestic violence transcend stereotypes of gender expression or physical sex (Courvant & Cook-Daniels, 2000-2001).

And although controversial, there is considerable empirical evidence suggesting that the most severe and lethal domestic violence occurs disproportionately among low-income women of color (Benson & Fox, 2004; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Hampton, Carillo, & Kim, 1998; Raphael, 2000; Rennison & Planty, 2003; Websdale, 1999; C. West, 2004, 2005). Studies consistently find that the majority of homeless women were once victims of domestic violence (Browne & Bassuk, 1997) and that more than half of all women receiving public assistance were once victims of domestic violence (Lyon, 1998). These findings seriously challenge the mainstream feminist contention that domestic violence affects all women equally.

Finally, the need to question the primacy of gender becomes apparent when one realizes that the violence and control by an individual batterer is not the only form of violence experienced by marginalized battered women. Instead, the lack of adequate institutional support in the form of social services and public housing as well as the intrusions and coercive controls by the state and its agencies (e.g., welfare) is another level of violence experienced by battered women, which occur in ways that are racialized as well as gendered and classed (Coker, 2000; Razack, 1998; Stark, 1995).

### **TENSIONS BETWEEN CULTURE AND STRUCTURE**

By presenting the multiplicity of diverse women's lived experiences and cultural differences, there is the potential of "annihilating group concepts like gender, race, and class" (Mann, 2000) and of downplaying the significant role that racism, sexism, social class, heterosexism, and other forms of structural discrimination have on battered women. Our position is that the crucial task of giving voice to marginalized and oppressed women who are battered should not obscure the reality that "race, class, and gender . . . [are] structures of oppression that are somehow larger than the individuals who produce them" (Mann & Grimes, 2001, p. 11) and are integral to understanding domestic violence in diverse communities. As Collins (1998) argues, the treatment of cultural differences must not "erase [the need to look at] structural power" (p. 149), or it will undercut social change or the political activism that is required for such changes. Ideally, scholars would emphasize the structural underpinnings of abuse while not denying the existence of real differences among battered women from diverse backgrounds. In short, although culture is crucial to understanding and combating domestic violence, we cannot rest on simplistic notions of culture. Rather, we must address how different communities' cultural experiences of violence are mediated through structural forms of oppression, such as racism, colonialism, economic exploitation, heterosexism, and the like.

### **TENSIONS BETWEEN CULTURE AND GENDER: ATTRIBUTING BLAME FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ONTO OTHER CULTURES**

Many domestic violence scholars are struggling with the role that culture may play in perpetuating domestic violence and how to talk about the relationship between the two. Dasgupta (1998) cautions us that all too often, there is a quick allocation of blame to an immigrant's culture when discussing domestic violence:

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 woman 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. (pp. 212-213)

The goal is to reject simplistic analyses of the role of culture in domestic violence. Although culture may be used to justify violence against women, there is a danger of presenting the role of culture in domestic violence as a purely negative force. All too often, the fact that cultural practices and beliefs can serve as protective factors for battered women (Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996; Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldarondo, 1994) is ignored or denied.

On the other hand, cultural explanations can and have been used to justify violence against women and have arguably resulted in a certain degree of moral relativism. For example, there are accounts of batterers who have used cultural defenses to justify brutal acts against their female partners (Gallin, 1994; Maguigan, 1995). According to Gallin (1994), cultural evidence has been used primarily to undermine the progress that has been made in the United States to reduce violence experienced by women and children. In the case of *People v. Dong Lu Chen*, a Chinese immigrant brutally killed his wife by bludgeoning her with a claw hammer after learning of her infidelity. The trial court admitted defense testimony from an anthropologist that Chen's rage and violent impulses were normal in his culture of origin and that in China, others would have intervened to prevent him from committing homicide. Largely based on this cultural evidence, the defendant was convicted of manslaughter and was only sentenced to probation (Maguigan, 1995, p. 37).

When oppression and violence occur in communities of color or immigrant communities, culture is often alleged to have a particularly influential explanatory power. Specific cases are not conceptualized as reflecting individual behavior; instead, entire groups are stereotyped (Pratt & Sokoloff, 2005). As Volpp (2005) argues, the behavior of devalued groups is widely perceived as more culturally determined than that of the dominant culture. The powerful are depicted as having no culture, other than the

universal culture of civilization. The belief that non-White others are said to engage in oppressive and misogynistic cultural practices fits long-standing biases and serves to downplay the existence of culturally prescribed and equally horrendous acts of violence against women in White Western communities.

Domestic violence scholars struggling to achieve a balance between the role of culture and structure make it clear that culture should not be confused with patriarchy. Instead, we should look at how patriarchy operates differently in different cultures (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Baker, Gregware, & Cassidy, 1999; Dasgupta, 1998). Almeida and Dolan-Delvecchio (1999) argue that

wife battering is not culture; dowries, wife burning, and female infanticide are not culture; the forced use of purdah or veiling for women are not culture; foot-binding and the practice of concubines among the Chinese are not culture. These are traditional patriarchal customs that men have practiced, and women have accepted, for generations. (p. 667)

Or as Razack (1998) cautions, “violence [against women] in immigrant communities is viewed as a cultural attribute rather than the product of male domination that is inextricably bound up with racism” (p. 57). Sexual and other violence against women in Native communities and communities of color must be understood in the context of White supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, and economic exploitation of marginalized communities, not as if such violence is inherent in the culture.

## REPRESENTING MARGINALIZED WOMEN

Some domestic violence scholars question how research findings may affect women who are already severely disadvantaged. They emphasize the need for researchers to think about how their work could be misused to create policies to further alienate and disempower some battered women. As well, these scholars emphasize that information about domestic violence in marginalized communities must be presented in such a way that their findings do not negatively affect marginalized battered women and survivors or their partners or reinforce negative stereotypes about them.

One dilemma is the problem of how to report race and class differences in domestic violence prevalence rates. This literature indicates that there is tremendous diversity among women regarding the prevalence, nature, and impact of domestic violence, even within ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic groups and sexual orientations (Hampton et al., 1998; C. West, 2005). Several studies indicate that Black women are severely abused and murdered at significantly higher rates (Hampton et al., 1998; Websdale, 1999; C. West, 2005) than their representation in the population.

By itself, this information serves little purpose but to reinforce negative stereotypes about African Americans. One of the solutions to this problem of representation is to contextualize these findings within a structural framework. An emerging body of research offers support, in large part, for an economic or structural explanation for differential prevalence rates. Many studies on intimate partner violence have found that when socioeconomic factors are controlled, racial and ethnic differences in the rate of intimate partner violence largely disappear (Hampton et al., 1998; Rennison & Planty, 2005). This finding suggests that at least one major underlying reason for the greater level of domestic violence among African Americans is not attributable to racial and cultural factors but to the high and extreme levels of poverty in Black communities. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that not only is abuse more likely to be found among impoverished African Americans, they are also more likely to be young, unemployed urban residents (Hampton et al., 1998; C. West, 2005). Thus, age, employment status, residence, poverty, social embeddedness, and isolation combine to explain the higher rates of abuse within African American communities, not race or culture, *per se*.

Despite the best intentions, there is always the danger that research findings will be misconstrued or deliberately used against vulnerable populations, even when scholars make every effort to represent their findings in a favorable light. To prevent this from happening, Kanuha (1996) argues that research with marginalized populations requires a method of research that is "participatory, empowering, and based in a community action model" (p. 45). Such culturally competent research involves collaborative research efforts with the people who are directly

affected by and living with domestic violence. By doing so, scholars can be responsive to the concerns of marginalized communities.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS TO FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES AND PRACTICES**

### **GIVING VOICE TO MARGINALIZED WOMEN**

The intersectional approach provides ways to legitimate the experiences of women who have been marginalized and hidden from dominant cultural discourses about battered women. This growing body of literature details the experiences of battered women from diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic class, religious, sexual orientation, and immigrant backgrounds. These voices and experiences “must be heard across different perspectives, from different theoretical disciplines, and in different forms” (Kanuha, 1996, p. 46). This endeavor is necessary to address the paucity of such perspectives in the mainstream literature. On a practical level, such accounts will likely also improve the response to victims and survivors from diverse backgrounds.

### **ENCOURAGING ACTIVISM THAT PLACES WOMEN TYPICALLY AT THE MARGINS IN THE CENTER**

The intersectional and structural approaches to domestic violence offer necessary critiques of the battered women’s movement, which has traditionally failed to represent battered women most at the margins—“women of color, lesbians, poor women, immigrant women, women with disabilities and other women for whom gender is but a part of their marginalized status” (Kanuha, 1994, p. 45). Although this situation is not easily resolved, there are many social movements asserting the particular problems and addressing the particular needs of marginalized battered women in their communities (Abraham, 1995; Sun-Hee Park, 1997).

The emergence of South Asian Women’s Organizations across the country suggests that “women who derive their identification from both ethnicity and gender” require a space where they can address the complex issues that arise from such a position (Abra-

ham, 1995, p. 468). These organizations generally provide psychological, social, legal, and economic support to South Asian battered women and raise community awareness of the problem within the South Asian community. They encourage others, within and outside the community, to address the intersection of ethnicity and gender when dealing with the issue of domestic violence. Moreover, they politicize the position of battered South Asian Indian women, arguing that battering is much more than an individual problem; it is a social problem of the community (Abraham, 1995, 2000).

Despite their successes, domestic violence scholars, researchers, activists, and survivors make it clear that domestic violence organizations attempting to address ethnicity, race, and gender face considerable challenges. One example bears noting: that of a community-based Korean domestic violence hotline. The women at the hotline have struggled to come to terms with the tensions between the hotline and the Korean American community it serves, as well as with the conflicts it has with mainstream feminist organizations with which it shares much of its ideology. On one hand, the hotline serves an immigrant community whose traditional, patriarchal values generally conflict with its feminist, egalitarian beliefs and organizational structure. The hotline's success also disturbs the Korean community's sense of unity and family cohesion by drawing attention to domestic violence within the Korean family. The pressure to keep family secrets hidden is magnified in immigrant communities that feel pressured to counter negative stereotypes of their members (Dasgupta, 1998). On the other hand, mainstream domestic violence agencies tend to view immigration policy as outside their purview, causing tension between the Korean hotline and these mainstream agencies. Hotline members consequently straddle two worlds to serve women who occupy both.

#### **CALLING FOR CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICES FOR BATTERED WOMEN**

Both cross-cultural and multicultural domestic violence studies make it clear that there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for domestic violence and that, consequently, solutions must reflect these differences (Campbell, 1999; Dasgupta, 1998; Gondolf, 1998;

Richie, 2000). "Strategies based on the experiences of women who do not share the same class and race backgrounds will be of limited utility for those whose lives are shaped by a different set of obstacles" (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 96). Similarly, battered women who have different religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, and nations of origin require different interventions as well. For example, the primary concern of poorly housed battered women may be to secure safe housing (Bassuk, 1995; Websdale & Johnson, 1997) and to apply for welfare (Josephson, 2002), whereas immigrant battered women may predominantly require bicultural and bilingual services (Rivera, 1997). In addition, although lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and intersexed (LBTI) battered women may need services that avowedly are not homophobic or biphobic and are explicitly open and accepting of LBTI survivors (Butler, 1999; Courvant & Cook-Daniels, 2000-2001; Leventhal & Lundy, 1999), some religious women, such as Muslims and Orthodox Jews, may require special accommodations at shelters regarding (e.g., kosher) food preparation (Horsburgh, 1995). And of course, many women require many of these services all at once.

Multicultural perspectives on domestic violence support the use of culturally competent services for both victims and perpetrators. Cultural competence requires an understanding of the cultural differences of clients as well as the particular cultural and structural needs that different communities have (Almeida & Lockard, 2005; Gondolf, 1998; Rivera, 1997). Gondolf (1998) suggests that a culture-blind approach is counterproductive to achieving cultural competence. He suggests that service providers, particularly counselors, must educate themselves about how cultural and ethnic differences can affect the therapeutic process. He advises clinicians to further their understanding of diverse racial and ethnic groups so that they can be alert to the ways in which racial and ethnic differences may affect the assessment of woman battering. For example, Gondolf (1998) explains that Latina women are generally socialized to be nurturing and submissive in accordance with the cultural concept of *marianismo*, whereas Latino men are encouraged to be macho or domineering. Such confining gender roles, in combination with cultural prohibitions against disclosing abuse to outsiders, may result in the reluctance of many Latinas to report abuse to counselors. Latinas who are immigrants may also fear legal problems, loss of services,

or deportation. Clinicians need to be aware of such culturally specific barriers to help-seeking among different racial and ethnic groups. On the other hand, as Gondolf (1998) makes clear, clinicians should be wary of facile categorizations of women based on race and ethnicity.

At the same time, scholars emphasize that providing culturally competent services without providing for changes in the underlying and intersecting structural conditions of poverty, isolation, racism, sexism, and homophobia will not provide battered women with the means to significantly change their own situation and that of their battered sisters (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Incite!, n.d.; Richie, 2000). As Incite! (n.d.), a group of Women of Color Against Violence, makes clear, battered women advocates must adopt antiviolence strategies that are mindful of the larger structures of violence that shape the lives of poor battered women of color: "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.)" (p. 1). One without the other is inadequate; for battered women on the margins of society, the two are intimately connected.

Structural solutions that address some of the contributing and aggravating factors associated with domestic violence are required: more public housing and generally more affordable housing, domestic violence shelters, and long-term transitional housing for women and their children (Websdale & Johnson, 1997); access to public education so that battered women without skills or job experience will be eligible for well-paying jobs (Fine & Weis, 2000); available jobs with living wages; quality, affordable child care (Fine & Weis, 2000); culturally competent services (Almeida & Lockard, 2005; Gondolf, 1998); and a flexible, humane welfare policy that can respond to battered women's needs on a case-by-case basis (Lyon, 1998). However, as Coker (2000) reminds us, no matter how well we are able to redistribute material resources to the most marginalized battered women in a patriarchal, racist, capitalist society, these economic reforms will not ultimately result in the radical social change needed to undermine the whole structure of violence against poor communities of color and battered women in them.

### DEBUNKING STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES OF BATTERED WOMEN

Many domestic violence scholars challenge stereotypical images of battered women in both popular culture and traditional domestic violence literature (Allard, 1991; Ammons, 1995; Stark, 1995). Much of this literature explains how stereotypes of Black women have prevented them from successfully using certain legal defenses, including the Battered Woman Syndrome (Allard, 1991; Stark, 1995). Others suggest that stereotypical perceptions of Black women as aggressive, resilient, and immune to the effects of violence have prevented Black women from receiving equal and sympathetic treatment in the criminal justice system, particularly by police officers (Ammons, 1995).

Another image that has been challenged is that of the passive, helpless victim. This literature suggests that such an image has been based largely on studies of White, middle-class women. Women who resist the abuse or fight back have been characterized as bad women (Allard, 1991; Ammons, 1995; Kanuha, 1996; Richie, 1996), and race plays a major role in the cultural distinction between who is considered good and who is considered bad (Allard, 1991).

On the other hand, many domestic violence scholars make it clear that we cannot generalize about all White women either (Waits, 1998; Weis, Fine, Proweller, Bertram, & Marusza, 1998). In their qualitative study of poor and working-class White women, Weis et al. (1998) remind us that White women are not monolithic in their responses to domestic violence. In fact, the main reason for their staying in abusive relationships has to do with economic concerns, not problems of passivity or psychological dependency.

In Abraham's (2000) study of South Asian battered women's strategies of resistance, she found that contrary to popular images of South Asian women as passive, the women in her study used many creative tactics to challenge their abusers' power and control. Women's resistance strategies included a wide range of tactics, such as silence, avoidance, confrontation, hiding, talking back, hitting back, challenging the abuser's fiscal control, contemplating and resisting suicide, and seeking both informal and institutional help. Contrary to all expectations, at some point in their relationships, all of the women in her study had left the abusive relationships. These findings are consistent with other studies on

battered women, suggesting that battered women are not passive or helpless in the face of abuse (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988) but that they fight back and resist to the extent they are able, given the structural and cultural constraints they face.

### PROVIDING NEW THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Some domestic violence theorists have applied the concept of intersectionality to explain the added difficulties that battered women from the margins experience. As Bograd (1999) explains, “the trauma of domestic violence is amplified by further victimization outside of the intimate relationship, as the psychological consequences of battering may be compounded by the ‘micro-aggressions’ of racism, heterosexism, and classism in and out of the reference group” (p. 281). Efforts to seek safety may therefore expose many battered women to additional social risks and degradations. She also reminds us that domestic violence does not have a singular impact on all families:

Not only do different patterns of domestic violence have different consequences for different families, intersectionality asks us to integrate into theory and practice the simple recognition that, for many families, domestic violence is not the only or primary violence shaping family life. Intersectionality also requires that we develop theories that go beyond single-factor descriptions of domestic violence, such as gender inequality. (p. 283)

Increasingly, domestic violence theorists urge us to reject the idea that battered women are helpless and lack agency: “In our society, agency and victimization are each known by the absence of the other: you are an agent if you are not a victim, and you are a victim if you are in no way an agent” (Mahoney, 1994, p. 64). As hooks (1989) and Collins (1998) argue, oppressed people cannot afford to feel powerless. Collins argues that “while identifying patterns of victimization remains important, because it strips African American women of agency, focusing on victimization can function as a mechanism of control” (p. 928). Battered Black women, she stresses, must acknowledge and deal with their victimization without being paralyzed by it. This emerging characterization of battered women, the survivor-empowerment

approach, “assumes strength even in the most devastated survivor or the most troubled current victim of violence, oppression, or degradation” (Browne, 1998, p. 97). The goal is for us to simultaneously acknowledge the existence of victimization and agency among all battered women and how they may play themselves out differently depending on social and historical circumstances.

**FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE:  
ALTERNATIVE VISIONS TO DEALING  
WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Many women of color feel ambivalent about using the police to deal with domestic violence (Richie, 1996; Rivera, 1997). Richie (2000) argues that there has been an overreliance on law enforcement to deal with social problems in poor communities of color and that this overreliance has had several unintended negative consequences: increased use of force, mass incarceration of young men of color, and police brutality. These conditions create tensions for poor women of color between the need for some kind of state intervention to protect them from abuse in their homes and the recognition that many of the women most in need of such protection are made more vulnerable by these very interventions. Thus, Coker (2001) elaborates at least three ways that state intervention can cause more intrusion in the lives of and harm to poor battered women of color by increasing the risks of (a) arrest of those very same battered women for domestic violence, (b) unwarranted removal by the state of children from women who have been battered, and (c) prosecution of battered women involved, even peripherally, in criminal conduct (sometimes related to their being abused). For state interventions to have any hope of being useful to poor minority battered women, Coker (2001) argues that two sets of conditions are necessary: First is the need for significant material resources to be made available to the poorest and most disadvantaged battered women to better their chances of success in leaving or changing the immediate battering situation, and second is the need for effective battered women’s organizations and coalitions to act as institutional reformers by monitoring police, prosecutorial, and judicial responses as well as to be advocates for the particular needs of individual battered women from marginalized communities.

Because of the problems related to relying on the criminal justice system, many domestic violence scholars are looking to institutions other than just the criminal justice system to find solutions to woman abuse (Almeida & Lockard, in press; Richie & Kanuha, 1993; T. West, 1999). These scholars recognize that the safety of battered women and their children must be the primary concern of policy makers. This means that providing sanctions to batterers and sanctuaries for victims and survivors is crucial (Campbell, 1999). However, there are many ways to achieve these two aims without necessarily relying on typical law enforcement responses. One possible sanction is public shaming of the batterer as a way to change public opinion about domestic violence (Campbell, 1999). Although quite controversial (Goel, 2000), another alternative to mainstream legal approaches to domestic violence is a form of restorative justice used by the Navajo, which is called peacemaking.

Peacemaking is an informal method of adjudication in which a peacemaker who is familiar with Navajo common law and traditional Navajo stories guides disputing parties to develop a just resolution (Coker, 1999). Coker (1999) suggests that peacemaking has many advantages over formal legal approaches to domestic violence. It often offers women tangible material support and assistance including reparations (*nalyeh*). Because of its unique approach, peacemaking may be better equipped to cut through batterers' denial and hold them accountable for their behavior. Peacemakers often use traditional Navajo stories with themes of egalitarianism to challenge batterers' attitudes about women and male dominance. Peacemaking can also disrupt the familial support for battering that often exists by confronting both the batterer and his family (Coker, 1999). However, Goel (2000) cautions that using peacemaking can increase the problems that Native American battered women face when these approaches are applied without a full understanding of the history on which they are based. She argues that peacemaking should not be used for domestic violence until First Nation Canadian and Native American women are first given equal status in their communities, something that was taken away from them under colonization.

Another alternative, suggested by the North Gottingen Drop-In Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is to reduce economic inequality to prevent domestic abuse. Here, a group of immigrant and

refugee women, many of whom were victims of woman abuse, torture, political persecution, and the violence of poverty, created an informal support group out of which came a cooperative, a catering business in which they all worked, assistance with housing needs, shared child care, and emotional support (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997, p. 169).

Other scholars cite the importance of antiviolence movements to address domestic violence in an honest and self-reflective manner. Collins (1998) suggests that for antiviolence movements to be successful, participants must reject simplistic views of violence that assume that "men dominate women, Whites oppress people of color, and oppressors victimize the oppressed" (p. 936). Collins calls for a transversal politics that recognizes how the intersections of race and gender affect antiviolence social movements and calls for members to examine the possible ways in which they both experience victimization and bear some responsibility for systemic violence targeted at other groups. She argues that it is not sufficient to "build an alliance on the foundation of shared victimization" (p. 934). Although White women and women of color share a group history of domestic and sexual violence against them by men, White women must recognize the benefits that they receive from their White skin privilege. Similarly, claims by some African American men that racial oppression is more fundamental than gender oppression should be seen as an unwillingness on their part to take responsibility for their victimization of African American women. Collins suggests that successful antiviolence coalition building requires a view of violence grounded in intersectionality, critical self-reflection by participants regarding their own responsibility for perpetuating oppression, and empathy (not sympathy) for the suffering of others.

Still, other scholars emphasize the important role that religious institutions can play in addressing domestic violence (Ayyub, 2000; Horsburgh, 1995; T. West, 1999). T. West (1999) calls for Black churches to take an active stand against violence perpetrated against African American women. This ethic of resistance against domestic violence must include both political and spiritual aspects because doing so "can counter the barrage of subjugating influences that are a part of so many of the prevailing communal responses to intimate violence" (p. 188). She calls for Black churches to reinforce the fact that God does not require women to

suffer and that the church must be engaged in a continual process of self-critique, focusing on removing any messages that may directly or indirectly reinforce the acceptability of woman abuse. T. West (1999) urges churches to integrate rituals to resist violence into their internal practices and community outreach efforts. This includes eliminating any biases from church doctrine and practice. Rituals might include prayer vigils in support for women's rights or creating songs and prayers that address women's concerns. According to T. West (1999), antiviolence training should be provided to youths and adults in all church forums where ideals about what it means to be a Christian are taught.

Another alternative approach to responding to domestic violence is based on the Cultural Context Model (CCM), a holistic treatment approach that is used with batterers and their families at some domestic violence agencies (Almeida & Lockard, 2005). This approach requires abusers to take responsibility for their violence and supports the empowerment of victims and children by providing a wide range of services to the entire family. The CCM rejects the commonly held belief that domestic violence is the product of other cultural traditions by identifying domestic violence as a universal pattern of domination and control. At the same time, this therapeutic model acknowledges the powerful impact that social, cultural, and structural forces can have on families. It links gender ideology and subordination in individual couples with experiences of racial subordination and colonization in marginalized communities, thereby linking the struggle for gender equality with the struggles for racial and economic justice, without requiring the women to choose between cultural identity or group membership and their safety and autonomy.

Given the racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia inherent in (i.e., structured into) the criminal justice system, the CCM offers battered women an alternative approach. A unique aspect of the program includes men's and women's culture circles, where participants can discuss the ways in which structural factors may help shape peoples' choices with regard to domestic violence. Participants are also assigned a sponsor who provides ongoing support with a focus on accountability for batterers and empowerment for victims and survivors. Although this model places full responsibility for violence on abusers, it also

recognizes the impact of a number of social forces, including both structure and culture, on families. As the authors suggest,

This system of intervention offers a range of new options: the possibility of returning to their now nonviolent partners, the possibility of children rebuilding relationships with their abusive parent, the possibility of having a civil and safe divorce, and last, the possibility of maintaining safety through community rather than criminal justice intervention. (Almeida & Lockard, 2005, p. 25)

Several programs in the Latino community share similar features to the CCM (Garza, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

There is an emerging body of scholarly work that attempts to acknowledge both the individual lived experiences of diverse battered women and the structural underpinnings of domestic violence in culturally diverse communities. However, this area of scholarship is arguably in the midst of an identity crisis. One of the major criticisms of this literature is that it underemphasizes the role of class as an explanatory model in favor of other types of oppressions (i.e., racism, gender inequality, heterosexism). According to Gimenez (2001), class analysis is the least developed in the trinity of race, class, and gender analysis in current sociological scholarship.

Much of the new domestic violence literature focuses on the differences between battered women and their polyvocality, which may unwittingly undermine structural analyses. The idea, advocated by many scholars, that every individual has both a race, class, gender identity and a "unique position of penalty and privilege, such that individuals can simultaneously be oppressed and oppressors" (Collins, 1998, p. 28) can also be problematic. All too often, this perspective seems to regard race, class, and gender as individual identity characteristics, not as interlocking social structures that perpetuate inequality. Considering these critiques, we agree with Mann and Grimes (2001) that for scholarship on domestic violence to remain emancipatory, it must emphasize both individual and structural analyses of race, class, and gender

inequality and marginalization in culturally diverse communities. In this way, the pursuit of both equality and safety is more possible in battered women's daily struggles for survival for themselves, their children, the men in their lives, and their communities.

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