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# **The (Un)Making of Martyrs**

## ***Black Mothers, Daughters, and Intimate Violence***

Public discussion of intimate violence has long been considered by Black communities in the United States an unspeakable taboo, having consequences contrary to the sociopolitical and economic uplift of Blacks in the United States. The cultural stigma attached to speaking out about the prevalence of intimate violence against Black women has affected not only the extent of research conducted with Black participants but also the kind of questions generated by researchers. A review of the literature indicates that few family social scientists have studied intimate violence issues unique to Black women. Researchers have ignored Black women in the theoretical and public discourse by either excluding them as participants or labeling them as “Other” in the intimate violence research. In this manner, family science has, as Crenshaw (1993) suggested, “reinforce[d] [a construct of] ‘otherness’ of battered women of color” (383). This omission has resulted in the longstanding stereotypes of Black women as mummies, superwomen, welfare mothers, sapphires, and consensual victims of violence. It is these images that have become deeply embedded in the American psyche as normative behavior of Black women.

In general, it is the experiences of heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-income White women that define both the frequency of this social problem and the standards used in public policy making. Black women, have been, in effect, generalized into a kind of “everywoman,” independent of institutional racism, classism, and sexism. The irony of the invisibility of Black women as subjects in the violence research is that Black women are often depicted as the “typical” victims of intimate violence in the mass media and in public debates. The lack of studies focusing on both the Black mother-daughter relationship and the effect of intimate violence on this relationship has also contributed to the invisibility of Black women.

As a scholar interested in the experiences of Black families, I have found Black feminist thought especially helpful. Black feminist thought particularly stresses the inclusion of the diverse qualitative experiences of Black women in social sciences research (Bell-Scott, 1982; Collins, 1994; Crenshaw, 1993; Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, 1982; Joseph and Lewis, 1981). In the case of violent relationships, many Black feminists argue that the experiences of battered Black women cannot be generalized to the experiences of battered White women; there are many mitigating factors (i.e., racism and classism) that affect the social lives of both White women and Black women differently. Ritchie (1985) included the cultural aspects of one's community as one of those many mitigating factors.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how attitudes of race, class, and gender influence the interpersonal relationships of battered Black mothers and daughters but also contribute to the making of silent martyrs within the Black community. In addition, an analysis of the role in which female-headed social support networks play in the decision-making processes of battered women is considered. Finally, this paper includes ways in which law enforcement, shelters, and social services can devise policy more inclusive of women of color by utilizing an untapped source in order to break the cycle of intimate violence in Black communities: the strength of the relationship between Black mothers and daughters.

The contribution that this examination makes to the family studies discipline is to specify how future research might be directed in order to (a) build a knowledge base focusing on the meaning of Black motherhood and Black mother-daughter relationships and (b) broaden our understanding of women's experience of violence in intimate relationships.

### **Black intimate violence**

Intimate violence is a critical problem within the Black community in the United States. Black women are more likely to be victims of criminal assault (e.g., rape, battery, and murder) than any other ethnic group (Rollins, 1996). Lockhart (1991) found that 48 percent of Black women reported having had a weapon used against them more often than either White or Hispanic participants (39 percent combined). Hampton and Gelles (1994) found that Black wives were 1.23 times more likely to experience severe violence. They also estimated that more than 603,000 Black women were victims of husband-to-wife violence in the survey year, 1985.

Staples (1976) found that Black couples were not, contrary to popular belief, more inherently violent than White couples. Lockhart's study (1991) of battered women indicated that there were no significant differences between the proportions of Black and White women that reported that they were victims of husband-to-wife violence. Interestingly, Coley and Beckett (1988) reported that the incidence of Black women who are battered is slightly lower than the rest of the American population.

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By excluding Black women from the intimate violence research, myths and stereotypes of Black women and their families fester and proliferate. But what is more dangerous than the proliferation of these myths outside of Black communities, is the acceptance of these sometimes pathological, sometimes domineering images of Black women within Black communities. And it is these beliefs that are largely responsible for creating martyrs out of women who are being victimized at the hands of their partners.

### **Hush, hush, voices carry: making of martyrs**

Two major conditions that are characteristic to African American culture can be associated with the creation of suffering martyrs in violent relationships: the internalization of stereotypes of Black women and the high priority placed on racial discrimination over gender discrimination .

Asbury (1987) suggested that some Black women do not seek help because they have come to believe that the many portrayals of Black women in the mass media, movies, and literature must be true and therefore, must be true about themselves. Perceptions of Black women as being strong, domineering, matriarchal, emasculating superwomen are antithetical to disclosure of abuse and help-seeking from social services and shelters. Disclosure to and help-seeking from those outside of the abusive relationship may be perceived as a sign of vulnerability and weakness by the battered woman. Asbury (1987) stated that Black battered women may be more reluctant to call attention to the abuse because they feel that they should be able to find the strength to handle their own relationship problems. They may even go as far as denying the severity of the physical and psychological abuse that they are suffering. McNair and Neville (1996) argued that Black women from low-income and working class backgrounds may be particularly more susceptible to these myths because it is from backgrounds that they are derived.

Speaking out against Black perpetrators is considered taboo within many Black communities because to speak out is to publicly reaffirm violent, dysfunctional images of Black families for people outside of Black communities (Asbury, 1987; Bell, 1992; Collins, 1991; Hull *et al.*, 1982; McNair and Neville, 1996; Morrow, 1994; Staples, 1993; Uzell and Peebles-Wilkins, 1989). Boyd-Franklin (1991) found that many of the Black women in group psychotherapy report that they experience great internal and external pressure to disprove negative stereotypes, even at the risk of their own mental health.

To speak out is to become a co-conspirator against the Black community and Black men. In fact, many Black feminists and writers such as Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, bell hooks, Sapphire, and Anita Hill have been labeled traitors by both men and women in some Black communities for breaking the silence and talking about physical, psychological, and sexual abuse or discrimination. Patricia Bell-Scott, Gloria Hull, and Barbara Smith have been criticized for including the painful experiences of lesbians of color in their works. To endure the "inconvenience" of intimate violence is to save face and to

become a martyr, silenced, revered, and isolated.

The primacy of racial discrimination over gender discrimination is a longstanding practice in many Black communities. Separating the subjective experiences of racism, classism, and sexism for many Black women can be an unsettling challenge to face (Boyd-Franklin, 1991). Institutional racism has served as a mainstay of a strong allegiance between Black women and men. Bell (1992) suggested some Black women are socialized early to “suffer the vent of some Black men’s pain and rage resulting from their living in a hostile, racist environment” (371). It is a social obligation passed on from mother to daughter to support Black men and to protect them from a criminal legal system that has historically engaged in racial discriminatory practices. Lorde (1984) stated that “violence against Black women...often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured” (120). In concordance, Bell (1992) argued that the precarious social position of Black women can only be addressed when the struggle of African Americans ceases to be defined as the struggle for Black manhood.

#### **Strength in mother-daughter relationships: unmaking martyrs**

Black battered women can find the strength to leave abusive partners in the same community that sometimes demands their silence. The deliverance of daughters or mothers in violent relationships can be found in a community of mothers and othermothers and in therapy groups and battered women’s shelters that integrate Afrocentric and feminist perspectives into their programs.

#### **Mothering and othermothering**

Daughters learn survival strategies first and foremost from their mothers. Mothers and daughters can interchangeably serve as lifelines to one another when they feel overwhelmed by societal and interpersonal factors. Othermothers and community mothers also share the responsibility of mothering in their communities and provide daughters with more strategies for resistance and models of Black womanhood (Bell-Scott *et al.*, 1991; Collins, 1991, 1991b; Debold, Wilson, and Malave, 1994; Joseph, 1991, 1981). Othermothers encourage Black mothers to trust their expertise in mothering (subjugated knowledge), to reclaim lost power, and grow from lessons learned. Through close relationships with othermothers, young women come to know a range of possibilities in their lives and thus, experience greater control in their own lives (Debold, Wilson, and Malave, 1993). Community mothers could eliminate some of the distrust of social services and lessen anxiety about seeking help outside of family and the church.

At work within this community of women, the mother-daughter relationship between bloodmothers, othermothers, and community mothers can arm battered Black women with the courage to take control of their lives by not defining themselves through their relationships with abusive intimate partners.

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The work of mothering and othermothering should be considered a site of maternal empowerment for daughters involved in violent relationships because these women create an environment where women are respected and valued.

### **Afrocentric and Black feminist perspectives in therapy**

Two integral parts of an Afrocentric model is the notion of the centrality of female-headed social support networks and the collective responsibility for all in the community (Ho, 1986; King and Ferguson, 1996; McNair, 1992; Parham, 1996; Sue, Ivey, and Pedersen, 1996). The challenge facing most battered Black women who seek outside intervention and therapy is learning how to balance the needs of the self with familial and communal obligations. It is important for the therapist to focus on how structures of racism, classism, and sexism influence the concrete and subjective experiences of Black women, especially those in violent relationships. Helping battered Black women to understand these interacting factors may encourage them not to accept the role of martyrs in their communities. In the cases where battered Black women have been isolated physically or psychologically from their kin support networks, a major goal of the therapist should be to help their clients rediscover natural helping relationships with their mothers, othermothers, and community mothers.

### **Policy suggestions**

In reviewing both the Black mother-daughter relationship and the intimate violence literature, certain policy suggestions as to how law enforcement, shelters, and social services can be more inclusive of, and sensitive to the needs of Black women in the design of programs for battered women need to be addressed. The following is by no means a complete listing, but it is my hope that at least some brainstorming can be incited and further investigated.

1. Domestic violence police handbooks should include current family and intimate violence *research on ethnically and culturally diverse families*. Many American police handbooks derive their information about intimate violence from family science and health researchers who generally study families and women from the majority population. Any domestic violence seminars given in support of the handbooks should include how racism affects some Black women's decision to involve and cooperate with the police.

2. Staff members of battered women's shelters should provide reading materials that address the subjective experiences of Black women in order to make them feel more comfortable *and supported in shelters*. Marginalized women need to be exposed to media that discusses how racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia influence the decisions that women in violent relationships make. Battered Black women can circulate and discuss these reading materials with mothers, daughters, and other significant women friends and family members. Black women need to see their experiences represented and centered in intimate violence reading materials.

3. Efforts should be made to recruit ethnically and linguistically diverse staff members and *directors in shelters*. If the physical settings and services of shelters do not change to reflect the population that they serve, Black women will continue to report feeling isolated and ignored in shelters. In addition, family and friends of battered Black women may hesitate to recommend these shelters and like services if they feel that the service cannot meet the basic need of effective communication.

4. *Battered women's shelters should not make it a policy to completely isolate the battered woman from family ties other than the batterer*. Mothers, othermothers, fictive kin, and friends are important naturally occurring support systems that help women feel less isolated. Staying in a shelter for the first time can be an alienating, frightening experience for some women. Staff members need to be aware of how strong the bonds of family, in particular, the mother-daughter bond, and community obligations are for Black women.

5. *Community leaders and social services should come together in order to depathologize clinical therapy and public assistance*. Community leaders should make efforts to help social services and public health workers publicize, make accessible, and humanize intimate violence prevention programs in ethnic communities. The clergy can help young women, mothers and their children feel more comfortable about raising the issue of intimate violence by integrating education seminars in the agendas of all church groups. Teachers, principals, and school nurses could help students recognize indicators of intimate and family violence by organizing a single class period, general assemblies, and parent-teacher meetings with speakers from women's shelters and police domestic violence units. Parent-teacher meetings can provide the spark that encourages parents, particularly mothers, to pay more attention to the social aspects and social relationships in their daughters' lives. The presence of intimate violence should not be a secret in a community of women.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the policy suggestions indicate that it is necessary to surround a survivor of intimate violence with her naturally occurring social support network. This social support network includes the many women in a survivor's life. This community of women—mothers, othermothers, and daughters—must give one another permission to voice and name the violence that they experience in their lives; Only with this freedom can Black women begin the process of unmaking martyrs in the Black communities.

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