

ColorLines

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'Colors of Violence' by Andrea Smith

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A young Native woman was once gang raped by prominent members of an urban Indian community I lived in. When she sought justice, the community instead blamed her—she was dividing the community by airing its “dirty laundry.” At the same time, she had difficulty getting help from the mainstream anti-violence movement. In fact, the year before I began working in sexual assault services in that city, only one Native woman had received services at a rape crisis center. The primary reason Native women gave for not going outside the community for help was that it was like appealing to a “foreign government” for assistance.

This woman’s story exemplifies the difficulties faced by women of color who are victimized by sexual or domestic violence. Communities of color often tell women to keep silent about sexual and domestic violence to maintain a united front against racism.

Unfortunately, racial justice organizing has generally focused on racism as it affects men and has often ignored the forms of racism and sexism that women of color face. Consequently, women of color must often go outside of their communities to receive services from domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers.

SERVICES OVER POLITICS

Since the opening of the first rape crisis center in 1972 and the first domestic violence shelter in 1974, the mainstream anti-violence movement has been key to breaking the silence surrounding violence against women and providing critically needed services to survivors of sexual/domestic violence. The early anti-violence movement first prioritized a response to male violence based on grassroots political mobilization. However, as the anti-violence movement has gained greater public prominence, domestic violence and rape crisis centers have become increasingly professionalized to receive accreditation and funding from state and federal agencies. Rather than develop peer-based services in which large groups of women can participate, they employ individuals with the proper academic degrees or credentials. This practice excludes most women from full participation, particularly women of color and poor women. Professional service has eclipsed political organizing as the main work of domestic violence and sexual assault organizations.

Over the years, the anti-violence movement has also become increasingly reluctant to address sexual and domestic violence within the larger context of institutional inequality and violence. For example, many state coalitions on domestic/sexual violence have refused to take stands

against the anti-immigration backlash, arguing that this is not a sexual/domestic violence issue. However, as the anti-immigration backlash intensifies, many immigrant women do not report abuse—from the INS, police, employers or family members—for fear of deportation.

This narrow approach toward working against violence is problematic because sexual/domestic violence within communities of color cannot be addressed seriously without dealing with the larger structures of violence, such as militarism, attacks on immigrants and Indian treaty rights, police brutality, the proliferation of prisons, economic neo-colonialism, and institutional racism. It is simply futile to attempt to combat interpersonal violence without addressing the fact that we live in a world structured by violence. It makes no sense to say that it is not OK for a man to hit his wife, but it is OK for him to bomb civilians in Iraq.

THE COLONIAL CONNECTION

Violence against women of color is central to the larger structures of violence, but it is also a special form of oppression. This is particularly evident in the history of genocide against Native peoples in this country. Women were specially targeted for destruction because they reproduce the next generations of Native communities. Not only were they killed but they were routinely raped and sexually mutilated as colonizers tried, both symbolically and literally, to control Native women's reproductive capacities.

Even today, Native women are targeted for acts of sexual violence. When the Chippewa attempted to exercise their treaty-protected rights to spearfish in northern Wisconsin during the 1980s, they were met by white racist mobs carrying signs such as: "Save a Fish, Spear a Pregnant Squaw." As long as Native peoples continue to live on the land and control resources this country wants, the U.S. will continue its assaults on Native women. Unfortunately, the anti-violence movement has become increasingly reluctant to address sexual/domestic violence within the larger context of colonial violence.

Rape crisis centers and shelters rely heavily on state and federal sources for their funding. Consequently, their approaches toward eradicating violence focus on working with the government and criminal justice system. Mainstream anti-violence advocates are demanding longer prison sentences for batterers and sex offenders as a frontline approach to stopping violence against women.

However, the criminal justice system has always been brutally oppressive toward communities of color. For that reason, many organizations address violence directed at communities of color—police brutality, racism, economic exploitation, colonialism. Many other organizations address violence against women within communities. But very few organizations address violence on both fronts simultaneously.

NEW STRATEGIES NEEDED

The challenge women of color face is to combat both personal and state violence. We must develop strategies that assure safety for survivors of sexual/domestic violence without strengthening the oppressive criminal justice apparatus. As Angela Davis said in her keynote

address to the Conference (see *ColorLines*, Fall 2000), “We need an analysis that furthers neither the conservative project of sequestering millions of men of color in accordance with the contemporary dictates of globalized capital and its prison industrial complex, nor the equally conservative project of abandoning poor women of color to a continuum of violence that extends from the sweatshops through the prisons, to shelters, and into bedrooms at home. How do we develop analyses and organizing strategies against violence against women that acknowledge the race of gender and the gender of race?” As Angela noted, this is not an easy task.

Women of color have always been active in the anti-violence movement, challenging its racism, class biases, and depoliticization. Unfortunately, the anti-violence movement has often held itself accountable to state and federal funders rather than to women of color in its organizing efforts.

The Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color conference held at University of California, Santa Cruz on April 28-29, 2000, was called together to address these gaps within anti-violence and racial justice organizing in the U.S. and to finally make women of color central to both. Conference organizers planned a small event, but over 1,000 people attended the conference, and over 2,000 had to be turned away because of space limitations. This overwhelming response suggests that women of color and their allies are hungry for a new approach toward ending violence.

This special section of *ColorLines* highlights some of the key issues and themes of the Color of Violence conference, to encourage social justice and anti-violence activists to develop new strategies for eradicating state, economic, and personal forms of violence.

A new national organization for feminists of color called Incite: Women of Color Against Violence has emerged from the conference. Incite is a national activist organization of feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue, and grassroots organizing. A second Color of Violence conference is scheduled for Chicago on either March 8-10 or October 4-6, 2002. If you would like to be on the mailing list of this new organization, please contact incite_national@yahoo.com, Incite, P.O. Box 6861, Minneapolis, MN 55406.

Color of Violence Facts

47% of women will be raped in their lifetime.

50% of women will be battered by their spouse/partner.

40% of women in prison for felonies are there because they killed an abusive partner/spouse.

Women of color are 64% of the female prison population and serve longer sentences for the same crime as do white women or men of color.

In the 1970s, it is estimated that 30% of all Puerto Rican women, and 25-40% of American Indian women were sterilized without their informed consent.

Two-thirds of college men report they would consider raping a woman if they thought they would get away with it.

Around 50,000 women per year are illegally trafficked into the U.S., where they end up in sex industries, domestic work, and sweatshops.

The life expectancy of Native women in the U.S. is 47 years.

The International Human Rights Association of American Minorities has documented that over 50,000 Native children have been killed in Indian residential schools.