

“WE NEED HELP!”

Voices of African-American Women Survivors of Domestic Violence

Sponsored by End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin

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Suggested citation: Horton, Betty T., Drew Vann, Antonia, Horton, Carl J., (2014). *We Need Help: Voices of African-American Women Survivors of Domestic Violence*. Unpublished manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is an important contribution to an emerging body of qualitative studies that have similar or triangulated findings. The study was sponsored by End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, a statewide coalition for advocacy and training for domestic violence services. The focus groups were conducted by Antonia Drew Vann, CEO of Asha Family Services, Inc., located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Asha is the first domestic violence service provider recognized by the Wisconsin state legislature as ‘culturally competent’ for African Americans in 1992.

The findings of this study could not be more important or timely. The alarming statistics of increasing domestic violence rates and devastating domestic homicides among African American women in our town and cities means that the current status quo in the provision of domestic violence services is dangerous and must change.

Focus group sessions, conducted in four locations in Wisconsin summarize the voices of fifty-five African American women survivors of domestic violence as they shared and explored their views freely and without restraint. This lack of restraint offers service providers a rare glimpse of the gap that exists between what service providers offer and what African American women want.

Out of the voices of these courageous, outraged, struggling women who participated in this study, we listened, heard and understood what they needed in order to feel safe and connected within the domestic violence service system. These fifty-five women have earned our admiration and respect. We want to dedicate this work to them so they will know that sharing their suffering, frustrations, and visions for a truly culturally competent domestic violence service system will not be in vain. We hope the system can recalibrate itself and make the changes these women stated so bluntly as non-negotiable terms of service provision.

This report was compiled by Ms. Antonia Drew Vann, CEO of Asha Family Services, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Dr. Betty T. Horton, and Carl J. Horton of TEACH Consulting, Topeka, Kansas.

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ABSTRACT

A focus group methodology was employed with fifty-five African-American women survivors of domestic violence in four communities within the state of Wisconsin. The purpose of the study was to obtain ‘expert’ information from a consumer-centric approach regarding their view of domestic violence and the domestic violence services system. Using authentic voices of African-American women survivors of domestic violence and past and current users of domestic violence services, the study sought to identify the needs and preferences of African-American women survivors. Their stories and voices, when combined with qualitative results from at least ten other studies, corroborate and triangulate each other to form a body of research that should resonate with some power. These nearly universal statements and themes from this study and others, provide key findings of what needs to change and the vision of the services they want. The title of the study, “We Need Help!” : Voices of African-American Survivors of Domestic Violence was drawn directly from the central theme of focus group voices in Wisconsin.

EXECUTIVE REPORT

The singular theme of fifty-five courageous African-American survivors of domestic violence from focus groups held in four locations in the state of Wisconsin is, “We need help!”. Based on this resounding central theme, the title of this report is, “We need help!: Voices of African-American Women Survivors of Domestic Violence”. “We Need Help!” is a call to action for policymakers and domestic violence service providers. It provides a glimpse of how racism, poverty, and the lack of equitable services for African-American women who seek help from domestic abuse may serve to translate directly into unacceptably high rates of escalating domestic abuse and death.

Throughout the focus groups, African-American women survivors of domestic violence described in graphic detail how they felt re-victimized by some service providers with striking similarities to other qualitative research. These studies include (Bent-Goodley,2004; Gillum, 2008;, El-Khoury et al, 2004; Gillum, 2009; Lucea et al.,2013; Nash, 2005; Gillum, 2004); Brown , 2011; and Simmons et al.,2011). The African American women voices of survivors of domestic violence from these studies are similar in the themes and actual words spoken in the present study. For example, the words from the present study and in the above cited studies are similar to these statement, “We don’t want to be judged or mistreated when we seek help [for domestic violence services]”. Another woman lamented that, “Nobody cares about us. We are not important to nobody.”

According to Rothbauer (2008) when similar findings emerge from several studies conducted by different researchers and with different sets of participants; a triangulation of data occurs. From a review of the literature, at least ten qualitative studies conducted with African American women survivors of domestic violence speak similarly about their experiences with domestic violence and the domestic violence service providers. Such triangulation is a powerful technique that facilitates the validation of data through cross verification from multiple sources. As such, it increases the credibility and validity of the results of this report.

With the triangulated study findings in mind, one of the most poignant statements about feeling re-victimized came from a women staying at a shelter with her children. She stated passionately that, “...this is a women’s violence shelter. We are all mentally abused. They [service providers]

might as well bust you upside your head. You might as well get abused by your abuser than to come up in here to get abused in a different way. Why come up in here and let staff and residents stress you out. You should have something out there for us.”

These women recount story after story of how they felt treated less respectfully, shown less kindness, recounted instances in which they perceived white women got better apartments or other services, encountered slights, indignities, lack of regard, ill-treatment, disrespect, and resistance to providing care. They also talked about their lack of trust in a legal, judicial, and social service system that could separate them from their children and incarcerate them unjustly. Seger (2009) boldly states that, “anti-racism work is essential to today’s movement to end domestic violence. At the same time, it can be personally painful to examine the ways that we, as individuals and within our institutions, have often contributed to the oppression of victims of color.”

As clearly as their voices described their perceptions of the failings of the domestic violence service system, they also articulated well-defined visions of services they wanted and needed. Again, the concept of triangulation of study findings add weight to the findings of the present study. The overwhelming vision for this and other studies regarding domestic violence services was one in which African-American women were served by African-American service providers. A woman in the focus group in Madison, Wisconsin stated, “In Madison, there is a group [program] specifically for Latino women who are victims of domestic violence, for Asian women who are victims of domestic violence and for the deaf community but there is nothing for the African American community. But it’s a huge population that uses the domestic violence services that are African American. And I don’t have the numbers but I believe that it is higher than the Latino and Asian population combined”.

One woman said, “I’d like to see more Black women who are Executive Directors and counselors, and people running things like this. So someone who looks like us. That’s not there. I don’t think that it’s because they are not qualified- it’s because we aren’t considered.”

Asha Family Services, Inc. in Milwaukee was referred to repeatedly as the only example of the kind of services they wanted. For example, one woman stated that, “We need places like Asha that are culturally relevant to us “. Another woman said, “No place to go unless you have a sister or a mother. You can go to Asha, but there ain’t a lot of [other] options”. Another

recommendation regarded housing needs, “We need housing that is Full Service. A home-like setting, not a shelter; with people who love and understand you, look like you and know you.” Other recommendations were for “better legal representation” and “more Black police officers” to respond to 911 domestic violence calls.

The devastating pain and pathos of the fifty-five women’s voices in the present study is overpowering. Combined with the hundreds of voices from at least ten triangulated studies, the written transcripts from the present focus group transcripts may be even more troubling to read. Given the weight of the triangulated findings, it is likely that the full report will be equally troubling to read. Yet, it is clear that policymakers and service providers in the field of domestic abuse must read, discuss, deeply understand, and make the changes that the ‘true experts’, African-American women survivors of domestic abuse, recommend. It should matter that at least ten other studies conducted within the past ten years by researchers throughout the country, have heard remarkably similar statements by other African American women survivors of domestic violence.

As it stands, the current configuration of domestic abuse services is not suitable for African American women. As Seger (2009) states in the Coalition Chronicles (Volume 28 Issue 3) “there is inequitable access to services and sometimes inappropriate responses to violence against women, men and children of color.”

No other expert, however, knows or cares as deeply about what they want more than the women survivors. For that reason, every recommendation for improvement contained in this report has come directly from the voices of domestic abuse survivors in the focus groups. We hope the response from the field of domestic violence to one woman’s statement, “We’re not being heard as black women” will be the collective response, “Yes, we hear you”. The next step for the field should be a clarion ‘call to action’ to respond to their sets of recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence has been termed a silent epidemic (Montalvo-Liendo, 2009; Bent-Goodley, 2001). It generally occurs within the home and the abuse may continue for years. The documentation of domestic violence has been found to occur within every major racial and ethnic group and across all socioeconomic levels. Among women victims, the most vulnerable victims are women who are marginalized by poverty, gender, and racial inequalities.

Use of Domestic Violence Services

The silence of domestic abuse is usually broken and the victim's use of domestic violence services generally occurs in one of two ways. An escalation of the abuse may force victims to seek help and safety from the domestic violence system. Or, an intervention by law enforcement, social services, or emergency medicine may result in the referral of the victim to the domestic violence service providers (Busch. & Wolfer, 2002).

Dangerous Inverse Relationship Exists For African-American Victims of Domestic Violence

It is at the point of entry into the domestic violence services system that a dangerous inverse relationship exists for African-American women. In Wisconsin, for instance, even though African-American women make up only 3% percent of the state's population, they represent between 65-70% of all victims of domestic abuse. This is a nearly 1000% overrepresentation of domestic abuse among African-American women.

The use of the domestic violence service system, however, is significantly underutilized by African-American women. The danger of underutilization of these services may result in death. According to the latest Wisconsin Criminal Justice statistics, African-American women in Wisconsin make up 40% of the homicides attributed to domestic violence. An even more sobering statistic is that the number one killer of African-American women ages 15 to 34 is homicide at the hands of a current or former intimate partner.

Answers to Underutilization of Domestic Violence Service System are Elusive

The answers to why African-American women victims/survivors of domestic violence vastly underutilize domestic violence service systems are elusive. Literature in the field of domestic violence is replete with assumptions and theoretical views about the underutilization of domestic violence services by African-American women. Sullivan & Rumptz, (1994) suggest that African- American women may seek services at the point that violence becomes life threatening, with African-American women reporting more severe abuse in the six months prior to entering a shelter than White women. Sorenson (1996) reported that African-American women participants in focus groups complained that shelters did not provide food that acknowledged different cultural preferences or appropriate grooming aids for African-American women.

A concern expressed by focus group participants in a study conducted by Bent-Goodley (2004) was that African-American women's fear of having their children taken away by social services was realized at a significantly higher rate than for White women in similar household circumstances. Griffin, Chappell & Williams (2006) conducted focus group research in which participants described the racial discrimination present within domestic abuse shelters. African-American women felt they were not given the information or access to services that was given to White women. More recently, (Brown, 2012) regards how race and gender stereotyping within the legal sector of domestic abuse services denies services and protections to African-American women. Her view is that the legal and court system simply does not view African-American women as victims. Rather, these systems may view African-American women as equally responsible for the abuse and, therefore, undeserving of their protection.

Patti Seger, Executive Director of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, stated in a 2009 newsletter what the true purpose of the present study is and the role the domestic violence service sector must assume; [the]“commitment to end domestic violence in all families requires us to step up, figure out who we have left behind, and address the fundamental reasons behind our failure to create services that speak to all victims.”

Dramatic Increase in Domestic Violence Requires Study of Underutilization

Reported cases of domestic violence of African-American women in Milwaukee increased by 48% in 2012. An increase in reported cases increases the need for every facet of domestic abuse services assistance. The impetus for the focus group study sponsored by End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin and conducted by Antonia Drew Vann, Founder and CEO of Asha Family Services, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was to assemble African-American women survivors of domestic violence with experience in Wisconsin domestic violence services. The objective of the study was to document the experiences and views about the services and their recommendations for changes in the domestic violence services system.

A Call to Action to Listen, Understand, and Change Policy and Practice

A consumer empowerment, or more specifically, a consumer-centric approach was used in the conduct, analyses, and recommendations of the four focus groups held in Wisconsin. Asha Family Services, Inc. was founded on the consumer empowerment approach in 1989. As the first culturally competent model of domestic violence services, their primary mission is to listen and understand the perspective of the women, men, and children we serve. Based on a consumer-centric model, the services provided purport to truly serve clients' needs and preferences.

A more fully instituted consumer-centric approach has been utilized in the United Kingdom since 2005. The Survivors Empowering and Educating Domestic Abuse Services (SEEDS) employs survivors as 'expert panels' to guide the planning, implementation and evaluation of domestic violence services at www.seeds-uk.org. *Is Anyone Listening? Accountability and Women Survivors of Domestic Violence* by Gill Hague, Audrey Mullender and Rosemary Aris published in 2003 by Routledge; and a guide-book on how to go about it: *'Professionals by Experience': A Guide to Service User Participation and Consultation for Domestic Violence Services* (2002) are two recommended readings on the emergence of consumer-centric approaches.

The research approach taken in the present study regards the voices of the focus group participants as ‘expert panel responses’. The central belief underlying this approach is that these fifty-five African American women participants are experts about their own stories of domestic violence and their experiences with domestic violence services and service providers. It is of paramount importance that policymakers and service providers involved in the domestic violence service system hear what these fifty-five women survivors have to say and then use their ‘expert’ recommendations to make changes that serve African-American women victims/survivors of domestic violence throughout the state of Wisconsin.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this focus group study was to gain perspectives, enlightenment, and insight into the mind of African-American women survivors of domestic violence as they discuss their experiences with domestic violence services. The reason for conducting the study is that more qualitative studies are needed to capture the voices of African-American women’s lived experiences involved in the domestic violence service system. Their views about their own specific needs and how they believe these needs can best be met are essential to how well policymakers and the entire domestic violence service sector respond and make meaningful changes to serve these women well.

Of the nearly ten studies extant in the literature (Bent-Goodley,2004; Gillum, 2008;, El-Khoury et al, 2004; Gillum, 2009; Lucea et al.,2013; Nash, 2005; Gillum, 2004); Brown , 2011; and Simmons et al.,2011) additional research is necessary to provide further tests of triangulated data. For these reasons the present study seeks: 1) To identify the “NEEDS” of African American women victims of domestic violence in Wisconsin; and 2) To utilize authentic information obtained to better inform policymakers, service providers and funders on how to better serve African-American women victims of domestic abuse. As such, the project will seek to inform an audience comprised of domestic violence service providers, health providers, criminal justice practitioners and public officials about the needs and preferences of African-American women survivors of domestic violence.

The use of ‘word clouds’, a quantitative tool that visually maps the frequency of individual words, is used in the analysis of the written transcripts of the focus groups (Ramlo, 2011). In addition, quotations of the exact words used by the African-American women survivors describe their experiences with domestic violence services and provide ‘expert’ sets of recommendations for change. Presented with their recommendations for change, the women themselves communicate what can be done to assist them to better their lives for their families and communities.

METHODS

This focus group method is a qualitative research strategy that uses a semi-structured discussion format (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al, 2009). The group facilitator begins the process and moves the discussion along with the aid of discussion questions. However, the specific content and order of content are driven by the participants’ responses. This technique is meant to explore understudied issues of topics as well as to capture the authentic voices, personal thoughts and reflections of African American women who have been in violent relationships or know someone who is or has ever been in a violent relationship.

Also employed in this analysis will be some quantitative analysis in the form of graphical representations in the form of word clouds of the focus group data. Ramlo (2011) explains that the purpose of word-clouds is to summarize important terms in a visual presentation that helps synthesize the “big ideas” present in text from a qualitative study.

This focus group data consists entirely of the participant responses to the questions asked of them by the facilitator. The participant responses have been saved to a database according to the date of the focus group and the questions asked therein. The purpose of these word clouds and other graphical representations is to help stakeholders gain a sense of the words and phrases used in the participant responses but also the occurrence and frequency of these words and phrases. For instance, negative words such as “fight” “beating” or “violence” occurring with greater frequency than more positive words such as “safe” “help” or “information” can give an indication on the participants state of mind when answering questions from the focus groups.

This quantitative approach coupled with the qualitative approach is designed to give a more complete picture of the participant responses. This also allows for comparison across all the focus groups of this study and potentially other sources of data from other states or localities.

PARTICIPANTS

Four focus groups were conducted with African American survivors of domestic violence at locations across the state of Wisconsin including Madison, Racine, Milwaukee, and Appleton.

Focus group #1 was conducted on May 25, 2012 at ASHA Family Services, Inc in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and included 12 African American women between the ages of 18-60 participants. Volunteers were requested and participants were compensated with a \$35 Walmart GiftCard.

Focus group #2 was conducted on July 19, 2012 at the Women's Resource Center in Racine, Wisconsin and included 11 African American women between the ages of 18 and 60. Volunteers were requested and participants were compensated with a \$35 Walmart GiftCard.

Focus group #3 was conducted on February 18, 2013 at the Urban League of Greater Madison in Madison, Wisconsin and included 23 African American women between the ages of 18 and 60. Volunteers were requested and participants were compensated with a \$35 Walmart GiftCard.

Focus group #4 conducted on June 18, 2013 at Harbor House in Appleton, Wisconsin and included 9 African American women between the ages of 18-50. Volunteers were requested and participants were compensated with a \$25 Walmart GiftCard.

A total of 55 participants between the ages of 18 and 60 were involved in the four focus groups. No demographic questionnaire was administered prior to participation so there is no demographic data included within this study. It should be of note that as part of the analysis of this focus group study, it is recommended that future focus group studies employ a demographic questionnaire in order to gather more data on each of the participants.

Procedures

The facilitators for the four focus groups were Antonia A. Drew Vann as primary in all four sessions along with Juanita Davis and Armintie Moore Hammond each at one session.

These facilitators were trained in the conduct of focus groups and had years of experience in the domestic violence service system. They were also African American women. Scribes for the

focus groups were Ozara Ode Muhammad and Melynda Schreiber. The discussion of domestic violence was conducted in the context of asking the participants to engage in an honest insightful conversation about their experiences with domestic violence. Each focus group lasted for approximately 90 minutes and examined the domestic violence service utilization in the African American community.

Eleven questions were asked in each focus group. The focus group format, question development, and solicitation for participants was developed by Antonia Drew Vann. These questions were:

Question 1: Knowing what you know about domestic violence, what are some resources available today (services, programs, resource, or strategies) that you believe may be helpful to an African American victim?

Question 2: What are specific options available for victims of domestic violence or what are those you would like to see?

Question 3: How do the specific identified options Rank in terms of value or importance to African American women?

Question 4: Available or not available ... what would you say is the single most important need an African American victim would want available to her? What would you say are the 2nd and 3rd most important needs?

Question 5: Who/where is your preference to refer a family member, friend, or acquaintance that is in need of help with a violent boyfriend, husband, or a Dating relationship? Why?

Question 6: How do you think victims of domestic violence in the Black community feel and why?

Question 7: How do you think the majority of Black victims handle being in a violent relationship and why?

Question 8: Do you feel that Black women are more aggressive and that they are more prone to “fight back”? If so, Why? If not, why not?

Question 9: Women are far less likely than men to kill their abuser. However, in WI when women do kill their abuser, we have found that 85% of the women are African American (research conducted over an 11 year period). What would you say are the reasons more Black women are killing their partners/abusers?

Question 10: What would you say contributes to Black women being disproportionately impacted by DV? And Why?

Question 11: Can you think of anything else that we have left out but feel needs to be included?
Can you think of anything else that we have left out but feel needs to be included?

Discussions were lively and participants appeared to share their thoughts, knowledge and experiences candidly. Several participants discussed personal experiences with domestic violence. Other participants discussed DV experiences of friends and family members. In general, participants had encountered domestic violence and were aware of its prevalence and its impact on their families and communities.

All discussions were audiotaped. The audiotapes were transcribed and independently reviewed by the authors. Shortly after group discussions, an assistant completed detailed field notes based on the sessions and debriefing discussions. Based on review of the transcripts, field notes, and debriefing notes, impressions were consolidated into a list of themes and issues.

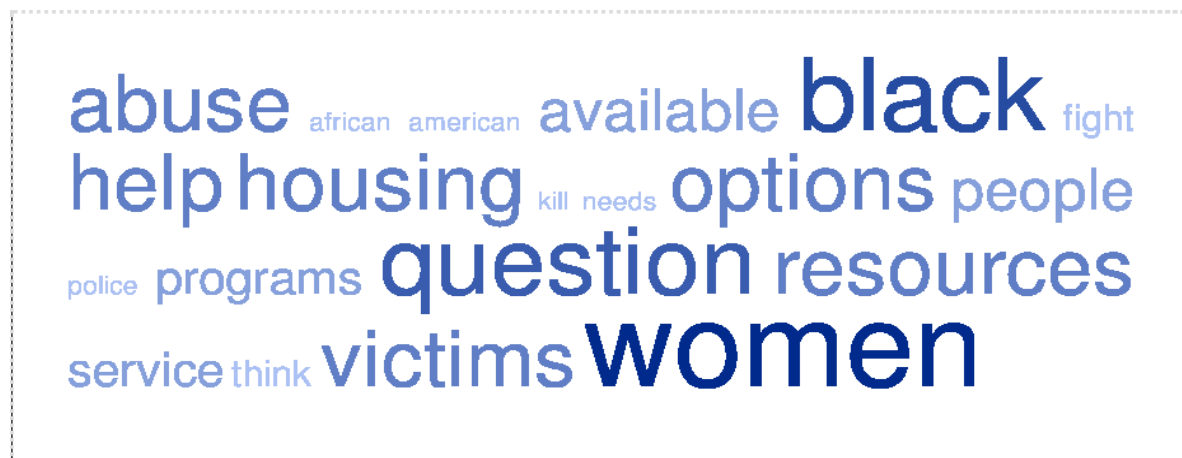
STUDY RESULTS

Word Clouds as Graphical Representations

The following section includes graphical representations of the focus group data in the form of a word cloud. Word clouds are a visual representation of text data, typically used to depict keyword metadata or “tags” from text data sources. These “tags” are single words and the importance of each tag is shown in font size and color. The smaller less vivid words are words that occurred with less frequency while the bigger more bold words occur with a greater frequency. This format can be helpful for quickly perceiving the most prominent terms which in this case are words in that occurred most frequently in the participant responses.

The responses to the 11 questions that were asked to the participants of all four focus groups saw many similarities across each date. Many of the key words were used with similar frequency of occurrence in each focus group. For the purposes of this analysis we will concentrate and explore different key words in each focus group and then examine the similarities across the entire study.

Figure 1: May 25, 2012 Focus Group, ASHA Family Services, Inc, Milwaukee, WI

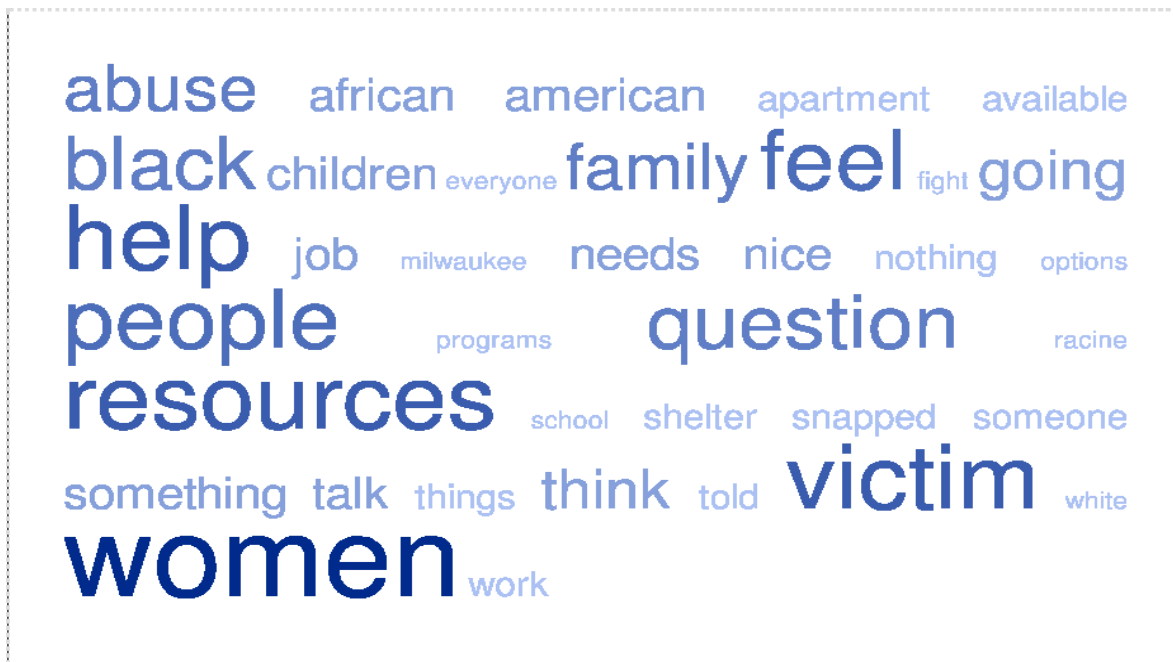


This was the first focus group initiated for this effort to better understand the African American domestic abuse victim. The above noted word cloud (figure 1) depicts the frequency of occurrence of keywords that the participants used in their responses to the 11 questions that

where asked for all the focus groups. The two most frequently used words were black & women. These two words were mostly used together by the participants for this focus group. The participants often included the phrases “as black women” or “black women” to personalize their responses to each question. When these participants use the phrase “black women” it is often used in conjunction with a statement regarding the absence of services or support or the mistreatment and often times racism that these women describe in detail.

The next most prominent group of words include abuse, housing, and resources. When the participants use the word abuse (or its variants of abused and abuser) it is used to describe the physical or verbal abuse they have suffered at the hands of their domestic partners. It is also used to describe the generational cycle of abuse they describe watching their grandmothers and mothers suffer. The participants also used the word “housing” to describe one of the most important needs of African American abuse victims require in the opinion of these participants. Various types of housing that these women describe such as spiritual housing, housing that is full service, or home like housing were mentioned specifically. The participants of this focus group used the word “resources” in their responses as to why (if they believed) that black women are more aggressive and that they are more prone to fight. Their responses include the phrases no resources or little resources as a possible explanation.

Figure 2. Women’s Resource Center, Racine, WI July 19, 2012



This was the second focus group held in this continuing effort. The above noted word cloud (figure 2) depicts the frequency of occurrence of keywords that the participants used in their responses to the 11 questions that were asked for all the focus groups. One of the most frequently used key words the participants used in their responses for this focus group were “help.” The participants used the word help or its variants to describe their personal issues and what they felt they needed. Phrases such as “we feel helpless” or “we need help!” illustrate the great struggle these women have endured and the effect it has had on themselves and their families. These participants have unfortunately become experts on the kind of services and resources they need.

One of the next group of prominent key words used in the responses of these participants was the word “victim.” A good illustration of the use of the word victim is encapsulated in some of the following responses from the participants, “...I feel I will be judged. I don’t feel like there should be division amongst victim”, “...survivors, not victims.”, “It will be hard for me to say I’m a victim.” These participants feel they are the victim of abuse from their domestic partner. The sentiment expressed in the responses from these women is primarily that the word victim is how they identify themselves and others who have experienced abuse.

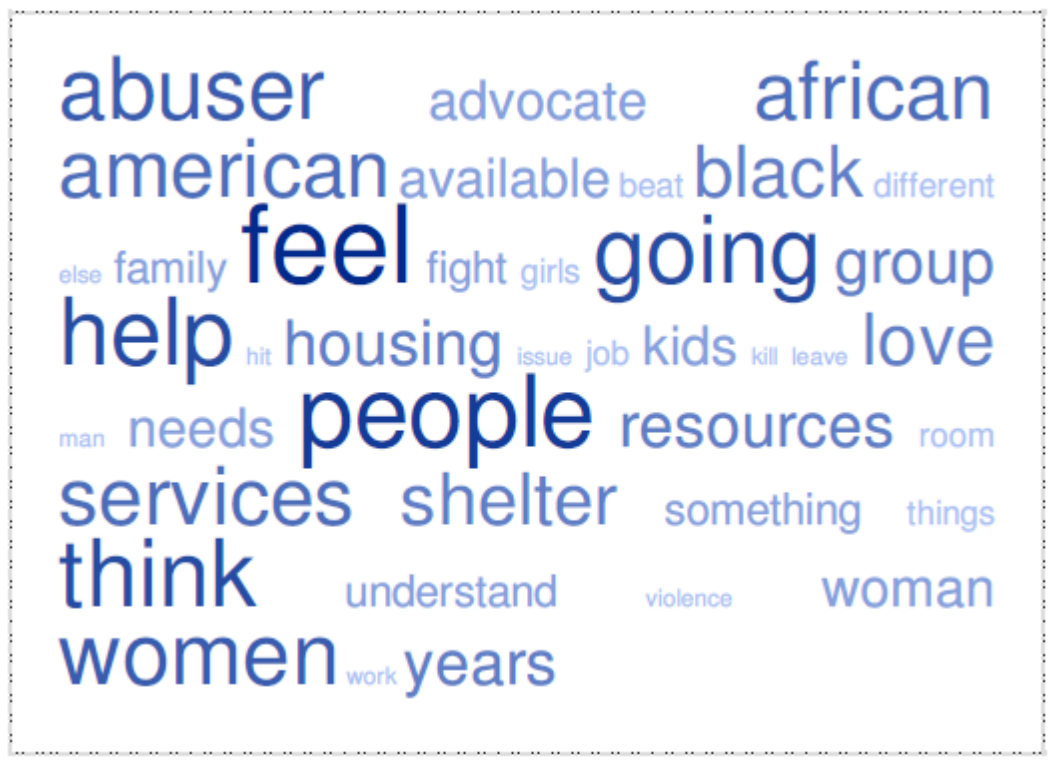
Figure 3. Urban League of Greater Madison February 28, 2013



This is the third focus group conducted for this project. The above noted word cloud (figure 3) depicts the frequency of occurrence of keywords that the participants used in their responses to the 11 questions that were asked for all the focus groups. One of the most frequently occurring words is “feel.” This word in particular captures the emotional state of these women. The majority of the occurrences for the word “feel” for this focus group are concentrated around question #6 which asks participants “How do you feel victims of domestic violence in the black community feel and why?” This question elicited a variety of responses from the participants ranging from, “I feel disrespected” and “...feel alone, ashamed, frustrated.” to “I feel like there is no community because there is nowhere to go.”

Family is a word most would expect to be associated with a positive statement. The participants of this focus group primarily used the word “family” in reference to a resource or a last alternative to help in a time of need or to further illustrate how they have nowhere else to turn.

Figure 4. Harbor House, Appleton, WI June 18, 2013



This is the fourth and final focus group conducted for this project. The above noted word cloud (figure 4) depicts the frequency of occurrence of keywords that the participants used in their responses to the 11 questions that were asked for all the focus groups. One keyword that hasn't been explored thus far that is of great importance is the word "job." This keyword occurred more frequently in this focus group than the other three. The participant's responses that included the word job again unfortunately were of the negative connotation. The participants used the word "job" in their responses primarily to illustrate that getting a job is very difficult for a African American domestic abuse victim. These participants detail what they feel is racist treatment and preference given to other women because they are white or even Latina. Responses such as, "I know I am an outsider, you apply for jobs and you are the only African American." Or another example, "I feel white people are so successful, she gets her job and I don't think she even has a degree."

Graphical Representation Summary of the Four Focus Groups

The responses with the highest frequency across each of the four focus groups are the words, “black women” or “victim” and “abuse”. These words seem to be identifiers much the way that we identify others by their skin color, occupation, or nationality. From the transcripts it appears that these women identify themselves as African American (black) domestic abuse victims and see their plight as one fraught with much difficulty due to these identifying factors of being a black women and an abuse victim.

The vicious cycle these women describe of having the “double whammy” or being black which carries its own history of prejudice and bias with the further label of a domestic abuse victim which also carries its own baggage. Much of the struggle these women describe in their responses is in most instances tied in some way to one or more of these identifier words that occur with the greatest frequency in each word cloud.

Words that seem to be the most important to these participants across all the focus groups are also the words that appear with the greatest frequency. Words such as “resources” and “help” give us an indication of what these women are seeking and in fact what they believe they need in order to make a better life for themselves and their children. We see this example reflected time and again with each transcript in the references and use of the most commonly occurring words.

We also see the occurrence and reference of what these women feel is a prejudiced and biased support system whom in the words of one participant, “...a white woman can get more help than a black woman can. I have been here for 30 days and I sat back and some things I am hearing I was not aware of, things that I saw and heard...” There was not a high occurrence of words such as “white” or “racism” but this was a common thread throughout the four focus groups that was not fully captured on the word clouds.

Again the design of these word clouds is such that a casual observer can look at each example and begin to identify which words and phrases these women are using to represent themselves and their experiences.

TRIANGULATED FINDINGS FROM OTHER QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Several qualitative studies have examined community response and needs of African American women survivors and found reports of dissatisfaction with services received due to lack of cultural competence (Gillum, 2008; Gillum 2009; Bent-Goodley, 2004; Brown, 2012; Lucea et al, 2013; and Nash, 2005). In addition, some of the reasons for the limited use of available domestic violence service resources were explained by multiple studies including Wilson, Silberberg, Brown, and Yaggy (2007).

The findings of these studies and the present study show clearly that domestic violence services are under-utilized by African American women survivors due to barriers faced at the individual, institutional, and structural levels (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Bent-Goodley, 2007; Latta and Goodman, 2005; and Peterson et al, 2005).

Further, Lucea et al. (2013) in their analysis of the relationship between domestic violence and resource use among 545 African American and African Caribbean women found that the type and severity of domestic violence was an independent correlate of community and domestic violence resource use. In other words, as the severity of domestic violence increased so did the likelihood that community and domestic violence resources were utilized. Women reporting a combination of physical and sexual domestic violence (without psychological) were independently two and six times more likely to report utilizing community and domestic violence specific resources. Women reporting either physical or sexual (with psychological) were also nearly two and four times more likely to access community and domestic violence resources, respectively. Women at severe or extreme risk for lethality were independently more likely to access community, criminal justice and DV specific resources than women at variable risk.

The research suggests that African American women survivors may not seek help until violence escalates towards bodily harm or lethality. Although domestic violence services cannot alter individual-level barriers, such services have a duty to address the institutional and structural-level barriers (e.g., culturally appropriate services, addressing racism and discrimination within domestic violence services) that may increase service utilization for abused African American women. Now, more than ever, the alarming rise of domestic violence homicide of African American women, makes it imperative that culturally competent domestic violence services

intervene to prevent domestic homicide and improve overall safety for one of the largest demographic sectors of domestic violence.

KEY FINDINGS

The fifty-five African-American women survivors of domestic violence are regarded as experts on the subject of their experiences with domestic violence and the domestic violence service system. Further, the approach of the study was to conduct qualitative research that enabled policymakers and service providers in the field of domestic violence to hear the voices of survivors and consider their findings and recommendations from a consumer-centric or consumer empowerment perspective.

Great customer experiences don't happen by accident. In the world of business, companies known for their stellar service such as Apple, Harley Davidson and Amazon have made strategic decisions based on customer input as the heart of their business strategy. By using a consumer-centric approach, these businesses have made their products appealing to large sectors of the population.

In the field of domestic abuse, Asha Family Services, Inc. has been at the forefront in the use of a consumer-centric approach that is holistic and survivor life centered. Internationally, the United Kingdom has advanced several promising system-wide programs that use the advice and guidance of survivors of domestic abuse to develop and evaluate domestic abuse services.

In regard to the present study and the numerous studies that share similar themes, there are at least five stages along a continuum of consumer-centric behaviors that agencies and policymakers can adopt:

1. The customer is ignored
2. The customer is heard-only-no response
3. The customer is understood
4. The customer is engaged

5. The customer drives the direction of the agency and the evaluation of its products and services.

The key findings from the study are categorized as, what needs to change and what we want.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SURVIVOR'S VOICES

- No one cares about us
- Re-victimized by domestic violence services treatment
- Subtle and blatant racism
- Few Black domestic violence service leaders

CHANGES WE RECOMMEND: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SURVIVOR'S VOICES

- Home-like full service housing for African-American women
- African-American women to meet us in the home to help us when violence occurs (e.g., police officers, social workers, etc.)
- Advertising campaigns to let African-American women know about resources specifically designed for us
- Organizations that love, know and understand us

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

A preponderance of findings from nearly a dozen qualitative studies have shown that the needs and preferences for domestic violence services for African American women survivors of domestic violence are clear. Although many types of community services exist, the accessibility, sensitivity, and usefulness of these services to African American women is lacking. A high

priority should be given to research-based interventions that are sensitive to cultural differences and effective for African American women survivors of domestic violence.

In the final analysis, an impressive mass of triangulated research findings from qualitative studies clearly define the needs and preferences African American women want from domestic violence service providers. The voices are clear and distinct. Given their voiced answers, a coordinated response is needed from the entire system of domestic violence services including public policy advocates, health care and legal systems, law enforcement, domestic violence shelters, advocates, and other community-based organizations. Statewide domestic violence organizations should be at the forefront of these efforts. By really hearing and responding to the voices of African American women, the quality of domestic violence policy and practice can reach those most in danger.

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