



Plenary Session

**The Role of Institutions in the Black Community in
Preventing Violence**

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Introduction

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Throughout history, African American women and their children have often been the victims of harsh physical violence, severe emotional abuse, and devastating sexual trauma within their communities and their homes (Holton, 1990). The problem of domestic violence can be found in all socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups. However, the unique political-historical reality, chronic institutional denial, societal oppression, wide-scale poverty, and out-of-control drug problem in Black communities all serve as contributing factors to the tolerance and often lack of accountability for violence against African American women and children. It is difficult to imagine an issue of greater significance than ensuring the safety of women and children, yet many institutions have failed to reach out, and they have failed to be protective. Consequently, thousands of Black women and children die each year from violence in their homes. Additionally, children witness incidents of brutal violence in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods almost daily. Disruption to the social fabric of Black families continues as violence in the home continues.

Critical questions addressed in the *Role of Institutions in the Black Community in Preventing Violence* session included: What is the role of institutions in the Black community in the prevention of family violence; and How can we identify effective strategies, develop model programs, and expand research knowledge to prevent violence in Black communities?

A dominant theme of the session was that people depend on institutions for resources, services, and support; but all too often, institutions fail the families they are intended to serve. Discussions centered on how schools, police, and churches, among other institutions, have succeeded in promulgating the shattered existence of people who are often socialized and conditioned to believe that their lives are meaningless and devalued. The manner in which ignorance, denial, fear, and shame perpetuate the cycle of violence in Black communities was also noted. Schools, for example, were condemned for miseducating young African American children about the history of their existence. These children never learn that there were Africans and other people of color who were in America long before Christopher Columbus “discovered” the land.

The police, whose responsibility it is to enforce the laws and protect citizens, have also failed the Black community—particularly in domestic violence situations. Observation tells us that many police departments are apathetic to domestic violence situations because all too often, the police officers themselves perpetrate violent acts within their own homes or because they are frustrated by the ambivalence of emotionally damaged women who often drop charges against their batterers. African Americans who are victims of crime are susceptible to further victimization by uncaring, misinformed, or antagonistic police systems, and consequently, they often don't seek help because of a total lack of trust in the law enforcement system. Black women in particular feel that they will be further traumatized, as they are likely to be blamed for the abuse they are enduring. In instances where the police are involved, Black men—who are

viewed as inherently violent—are processed through the criminal justice system rather than receiving an opportunity for participation in treatment programs. American jails are already institutions of color, as African Americans total from one-quarter to one-half of the jail population in all regions of the country. More importantly, processing African American men through the law enforcement system ultimately serves to further disrupt families and perpetuate violence.

There is strong evidence suggesting that many Black churches have also failed African Americans in the prevention of violence against women and children. As spiritual people, African Americans are likely to turn to the Black church as the primary institution to promote healing and reconciliation. It is well documented that African Americans are people whose lives and spirits have been torn to shreds by poverty, drug abuse, homelessness, unemployment, and other social issues—all of which are stressors that promote domestic violence. Most people would agree that these lives and spirits cannot be reassembled without spiritual nurturance; the institution responsible for providing such spiritual healing and reconciliation, the Black church, seems to be at a loss as to how healing begins in domestic violence situations. The church is in denial about the seriousness and complexity of this problem and has limited understanding as to how to adequately address domestic violence when it occurs in the homes of parishioners and even pastors. There is also the issue of theology, as the Bible promotes the celebration of women's sacrifices for men. Thus, many women feel that leaving abusive relationships would disappoint God, which, as spiritual people, they do not want to do. There is also the issue of the absence of a female entity in the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. To some, this omission indicates that women have no role in the development of the universe, thus making them inherently subordinate. Indeed, there exists a paradox within the church about the oppression of women versus the caring and support of them.

Despite the obvious problems in traditional institutions, the African American family—as the primary institution—must share the responsibility for extinguishing violence in Black communities. African Americans have become complacent in the very system they criticize for not meeting their needs. When in a position to effectuate change, few African Americans step up to the plate, yet are likely to point the finger and hold White institutions accountable for failing to provide adequate services. African Americans must hold Black institutions equally accountable for supporting and improving services to the Black community. It is only with this holistic view that institutions can begin to reform to meet the needs of all people they are intended to serve.

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The Role of Institutions in Preventing Violence

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African American women are often victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in their homes. A number of African American women die each year as a result of this domestic violence. These victims represent a wide range of professions and socioeconomic groups, and there are no particular characteristics that determine potential victims. Even female police officers, who should seemingly feel secure, cannot avert domestic violence in their homes. Domestic violence is clearly a societal problem whose effects are devastating to many.

Part of the solution to stemming domestic violence in homes and communities involves the proactive involvement of institutions within these communities. These institutions must help, rather than hinder progress in efforts to diminish domestic violence. Yet these institutions, such as police departments, churches, and the like, have greatly failed the communities they are intended to serve—particularly African American communities. In fact, these institutions have succeeded only in promulgating the shattered existence of people who are socialized and conditioned to think that their broken lives cannot be put back together again.

The Role of Police in Preventing Violence

Police, charged with protecting and serving citizens, have failed African Americans on many levels—particularly in domestic violence situations. Part of the problem is that some police are apathetic to domestic violence because it is happening in their own homes. In instances where police officers are the perpetrators of violence, there exists a code of silence that can diminish victims' cries for help. Victims often receive responses suggesting that abusive police officers' impressive records of arrests absolve them from the need for psychological evaluation. They're also told that nothing can be done because there is no proof of domestic violence, even where there is evidence of physical abuse. It is often implied that they are co-abusers who should stop hurting their spouses.

Police may also be apathetic to domestic violence because they are tired of women dropping charges against perpetrators. Officers are cynical in their dealings with domestic violence situations, wondering why they should even try to help when women are bound to drop the charges anyway. But what police fail to realize is that the experience of dealing with the criminal justice system can be very traumatic and intimidating for victims. Police fail to give women the protection they need to feel safe and secure, and courtrooms can be an environment in which the abused are revictimized. So rather than encounter a harsh criminal justice system, many women opt to remain silent about their abuse and continue to live with the fear, shame, and pain that result from abusive relationships.

The Role of Churches in Preventing Violence

The Black church, too, has failed African Americans in violence prevention. African Americans have historically been very spiritual people, so it is only natural that they seek the Black church as the primary institution to provide healing and reconciliation. Few would argue that African Americans are people whose spirits have been broken by racism, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and other social issues—all of which are stressors that promote domestic violence. But these spirits cannot be reassembled without a strong spiritual base; and the institution responsible for providing spiritual healing and reconciliation—the Black church—is at a loss as to how healing begins in domestic violence situations. Among other issues, denial prevents churches from adequately addressing domestic violence because abuse can often occur in the homes of pastors and lay leaders. In this case, who will be responsible for pastoral leadership to address the violence?

There is also the issue of theology, as the Bible promotes the celebration of women's sacrifices for men. Take, for example, the story of Jephtha and his daughter. Jephtha prayed to God to help him win a battle and promised that he would, upon his return home from a victorious battle, sacrifice to God the first thing that comes out of his home to greet him. Jephtha won the battle and returned home. His daughter came out to greet him, and Jephtha cried and asked his daughter why she would do this to him. Now, she would have to be sacrificed. This is a classic example of blaming the victim. In some Bible commentaries, Jephtha's daughter is celebrated as a model for women, as women were hailed for serving their husbands and fathers—even if it meant dying for them. What is disturbing is that no one ever questions Jephtha's willingness to sacrifice the life of his daughter for his own glory, power, and recognition. Instead, it is accepted that this woman's life was of so little value, she could be sacrificed at the will of a man.

Another passage in the Bible that is abusive to women and promotes their silence is the rape of Tamar in the book of Samuel. Tamar's brother lured her to his home, raped her, shamed her, and put her out of his house. She was then told not to tell anyone. This illustrates how the voices of women have been silenced since the beginning of time. Indeed, sexism in the Bible is alive and well. Even sermons in the 1990s promote messages that are abusive to women. There are ministers who say Black women are abused because they take jobs away from Black men, fail to build their self-esteem, and emasculate them. Others preach that women should not live with men, and that any woman who does so is nothing but a whore. So there is a pattern of blaming women for their abuse and promoting negative sexual stereotypes of Black women.

The messages delivered by Black churches are clearly not of the healing quality necessary to curb domestic violence. Rather than enabling victims to flee violent relationships, these messages compel women to remain in abusive relationships so as not to disappoint God. Women are taught that it is their responsibility to fix the abusive relationships and that if they stay in their place and shut their mouths, they would not be abused. They learn that they are responsible for their own abuse because they aren't sexy or loving enough. Thus, women not only bear the burden of abuse by their spouses, but also the responsibility for fixing the abusive relationship by being more submissive.

Reducing Domestic Violence—Police Departments

There is no question that the institutions intended to serve communities must be radically reformed to address the needs of African Americans. These institutions must focus on proactive, positive involvement, rather than their historically negative participation that has allowed domestic violence to continue. Police departments, in particular, must work to improve their reputations of only responding to lawsuits and forming task forces when there is a threat of litigation. They must also stop blaming the victims of domestic violence and offer viable solutions for victims, perpetrators, and their families.

One strategy for improving the utility of police departments in domestic violence situations is the development of a unit within the department that can respond to the needs of victims and the perpetrators. This approach requires that there be an advocate in the department to provide resources for the victims, do follow-up calls, and offer guidance. This approach also requires that police officers be trained to appropriately respond to domestic violence and that they assemble a team to respond to domestic violence calls for help.

Police departments must also acknowledge that their officers are, in some cases, the perpetrators of violence against women. Curtailing violence in the homes of police officers requires that the code of silence be broken within the department so that justice will be served. The criminal justice system must penalize police officers, as it does other abusers, and provide appropriate resources for the spouses victimized by these officers. Police must not be judged by their accomplishments as officers of the law, but rather by the laws intended to protect and serve all citizens. Instead of turning a deaf ear, police departments must hear the cries of domestic violence victims—even if the abuser is one of their own.

It is important to note that perpetrators and victims of domestic violence are not the only persons harmed by the abuse. The abuse can also negatively impact children who witness the violence. Take, for example, the story of a police officer killed by her husband, who was also a police officer. After killing his female companion in front of their children, the police officer went to a nearby hotel and killed himself. As the children saw their parents being buried, they asked why the father had to kill himself—because now they had no parents instead of just one. These children were left wondering why their parents hurt each other. In this situation, this woman's voice was silenced like the voices of countless other women. But equally important is the fact that the children witnessing this violence and left behind as orphans were immeasurably harmed by the incident.

Reducing Domestic Violence—Churches

Despite the failings of the Black church, African Americans must seek spiritual solutions to their secular problems. The Black church must be proactive in ensuring that faith-based solutions to domestic violence are achieved. In order to be a place of healing and reconciliation for women who have been victimized by domestic violence, the Black church must provide an atmosphere where intentional ministry to violated women can happen. The church, through its silence as well as its teachings, has contributed to the abuse of women and must bear the responsibility to change the thinking, attitudes, and environment that facilitate and support

oppression and the silencing of women, as well as dominance and control by men. This can best be achieved through the implementation of programs, workshops, and lectures that address how the Black church can prevent violence.

Pastors, congregational members, and the community must join forces to develop church-based domestic violence advocacy/care ministries. Parishioners can be trained in domestic violence advocacy and pastoral care, and engage in theological reflection on issues of power and abuse. During support groups, there should be discussions regarding how the church has hurt, as well as helped, victims of domestic violence. These support groups should teach victims how to appropriately receive messages that once oppressed them and kept them in bondage. The Black church must emerge as a prophetic voice that says no to violence, no to women being violated, and yes to abusers being accountable. Churches must also become involved with other institutions in the community, allying with such institutions as the police department to train staff on handling cases of domestic violence.

Conclusion

An important first step for African Americans in addressing the pain and suffering in their communities is giving themselves permission to stand up for what is right. African Americans, particularly survivors of abuse, must stand up and do what is necessary to prevent violence and to help liberate those who are oppressed. This is especially important for African Americans because of the history of ineffective institutional involvement in Black communities. Many African Americans have had a number of major institutions negatively impact their lives and find it difficult to turn to these institutions when they need them the most. Thus, African Americans must take leadership roles in the communities where the institutions have failed. They must strive to stem the effects of racism, internalized oppression, and sexism that exacerbate domestic violence and other social problems.

While residents of Black communities are essential to diminishing violence, they are not solely responsible for achieving this goal. Institutions must also realize that the role they play in preventing violence in African American communities is key to ending the abuse. It is not merely a suggestion that these institutions become involved in decreasing violence; it is a charge. Communities and institutions alike must realize that while they may not all be guilty of committing violence, they are all equally responsible for ending the abuse that plagues society.

Response: The Role of Institutions in Preventing Violence

Respondent:

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The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the presenter, Rev. Dr. Sharon L. Ellis.

Commendations

I applaud Rev. Dr. Sharon L. Ellis for her work with abused women and her continual efforts to transform two major institutions in American society—the police force and the church—to be not only sensitive, but also effective in responding to the needs of women.

Police Department

Rev. Dr. Ellis describes how she, a policewoman being abused by her husband, who was also a police officer, was provided no assistance from the institution whose societal mandate it is to protect the vulnerable and to apprehend perpetrators of criminal offenses. In fact, she became the outcast and endured the “blaming the victim” syndrome. Rev. Dr. Ellis was viewed as an intruder in a male-dominated profession. I am supposing that her husband was African American; given that assumption, it is interesting that the nature of this “good old boys” profession disregarded the issue of race in deference to male oppression and ownership of the profession.

Church

Then there is the issue of the church, in this particular case the Black Pentecostal Church. The church’s hierarchy is usually male dominated, while, paradoxically, the majority of the parishioners are female. The Black church in America has historically been a place of nurturing and support. It has been the institution and the physical facility where one develops his/her relationship with the universal force and a sense of personal and group security and faith. It has been the institution fighting for liberation from racial oppression. Yet women have historically found themselves in subordinate positions in all church denominations in America, regardless of whether the denomination is Black or White.

The church supported, and in some cases still does, male dominance and the oppression of women through male-selected scripture usually taken out of context. Rev. Dr. Ellis in her presentation has provided us with examples like the story of the rape of Tamar, in the Book of Samuel, and the sacrifice of Jephtha’s daughter.

Etiology

I am suggesting the issue of patriarchy has its roots in an Euro-centric worldview and that we can find the root cause of abuse by males in this philosophical orientation to the world. In this worldview, anything different is feared. This worldview focuses on control through power. In fact, even the Holy Trinity comprises of three male energies. I am suggesting that a new paradigm be the foundation through which we govern our lives. This new paradigm should be Africentric, that is, having an African worldview reminiscent of the era before Arab and European domination of traditional African culture. In this paradigm, the focus is on cooperation, equality, and influence through what is morally right. Horus, the male energy; Isis, the female energy; and Osiris, the creation from the interaction of the male and female energies, best represent the Trinity in African cosmology. Even though some might take exception, I would suggest that Niara Sadarkasa's work on African women be read. I further suggest reading some of Linda James Myers' work on African cosmology.

Transformation

I read Rev. Dr. Ellis' account of her personal transformation into what we in social work call a social advocate for peace and social justice. In the church, we call this work social ministry. From an Africentric paradigm, there is no conflict of interest between her police work and her ministry because there is no separation of the sacred and the secular. Rev. Dr. Ellis has called on the work of progressive Black church theologians, such as James H. Cone and his liberation theology, to move the church in the direction of addressing the issues surrounding abuse by spouses. Her call has been to work in a structured and organized manner to transform two of the institutions essential to a civil society. She has developed a nexus between these two institutions in order to relieve the suffering of the least among us.

Rev. Dr. Ellis employed a number of methods to sway these two institutions to become sensitive and appropriately responsive to the issue of abuse in the community. Probably the most significant approach was her becoming a part of the solution to domestic violence by:

1. raising the issue;
2. educating the community about the issue;
3. providing structures and programs through which the issue can be addressed;
4. participating in and guiding these structures to ensure they stay on task;
5. addressing the issue through both prevention and treatment approaches;
6. never alienating the police or church and the male constituency, but incorporating them into the solution; and
7. becoming a nationally recognized expert in the field, so that the issue of domestic violence is always addressed from the abused woman's perspective.

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The Role of Institutions in the Black Community in Preventing Violence

Conclusions and Recommendations

Institutional approaches to dealing with domestic violence must include actions that influence policy and legislation, change organizational priorities, foster coalitions and networks, educate and train providers, promote community education, and strengthen individual knowledge and skills. Specific recommendations were formulated for approaches to prevention, intervention, and creating culturally appropriate programs within African American communities. The following is a summary of the recommendations resulting from the discussion and contributions of all the conference attendees:

- **Faith-based Solutions Must be Created**

Black churches must address domestic violence with the same determination it has used to combat racism and oppression. The first step is acknowledging that the church is often the first point of contact for those in abusive situations. Church leaders must maintain a Christian base, yet respond appropriately to the needs of domestic violence perpetrators, victims, and their families. Clergy must be trained to provide a faith-based, non-condemning environment in which people can talk about what hurts them and heal their minds, bodies, and spirits. Ministers need a similar structure to facilitate healing, as their needs are often overlooked because they are held in high esteem.

Clearly, there is a need to go into churches to initiate the healing phase because African American victims and perpetrators often have faith-based attitudes and values. The key to successful healing is acceptance and humility. This humility requires that we recognize the essence of who we are spiritually. If we can identify God in others and ourselves, there is no room for abuse. The leadership of the church must ensure safety and condemn violence against women at every opportunity.

- **Establishing a Common Ground between Black Males and Black Females**

Society cannot function without complementary male and female entities. But oftentimes, women are viewed as subordinates, rather than complements. This attitude has infiltrated institutions and begs the question of whether women should take more dominant roles in institutions in an effort to bring about systematic change. Again, there is an issue of denial that impedes progress. African Americans have failed to acknowledge sexism and gender issues in the community and in Black institutions. This hidden sexism creates a rift between men and women and carries over into issues of gaining balance in male-female relationships. The balance sought can best be achieved if Black men and women find common ground on which they can begin a process of healing that entails anger management, recognition of pain, and forgiveness. Efforts to this end should include outreach to men of all economic backgrounds, as domestic violence knows no class. Men should also be encouraged to be allies to women and advocates for justice and equality.

- **Identification of Promising Models That Can Work**

It is erroneous for African Americans to view other cultures from their perspectives and to project Black ideologies onto those cultures. Thus, it stands to reason that models designed for other cultures are not likely to be effective for African Americans. Eurocentric worldviews, for example, focus on power and control—major factors in domestic violence situations. However, Afrocentric worldviews tend to be based in spirituality, as they promote cooperation, equality, and doing what’s “morally correct.” Therefore, it is important that social scientists begin examining theology as a means of resolving domestic violence and other social issues in African American communities. Even within the context of the Afrocentric worldview, we must hear the cries of women’s pain and oppression. We live in broken a world, and we must seek spiritual connections for healing.