

CALCASA Webinar – September 29th 2009

Good afternoon, I am quite thrilled to be a part of this conversation. I am new to Webinars but I absolutely love the idea of finding new and meaningful ways to share knowledge, Koss (2005) who has been conducting research on gender violence for years says that “knowledge proves its importance by its application to improving human life (p.107).

In alignment with her sentiment, I hope that we all depart from this conversation more conscious than we were when we arrived to this conversation. I also hope we depart with new ways of helping those who hurt deeply, new ways of strategizing against oppression, and new ways to combine our efforts to create a larger activist base.

Clearly, this is a conversation that is vital in the context of gender violence. Based upon the work of those who came before our time, we have made major inroads in the last 30-40 years in terms of gender violence research, funding, shelters, and advocacy and yet we know that we must press forward. For motivation, I always return to the United Nations (2006) estimate that 1/3 of all the women in the world will be abused, beaten, or raped in her lifetime. When I think about this, I become reaffirmed in the idea that that cannot be the best we can do.

In addition to being an issue of epidemic proportions worldwide that oftentimes robs survivors of their peace, pride, health, security, and tragically sometimes their lives -- the CDC (2003) estimated that intimate partner violence costs approximately 6 billion dollars per year in the U.S. which is an astronomical amount of money.

From my perspective, to reduce the personal, political, and financial costs we need to tell multiple stories about gender violence to work on and against the ways that we are told who survivors “can be”, how survivors “should look”, and how survivors “should feel.”

Here comes my optimist self -- I am hopeful that if we tell more stories from more viewpoints that more people will care. If people can identify with the movement, I think they will join the movement or at least consider joining. All of that being said, it is quite a tall, tall order to shift our individual and collective consciousness. I know for myself that I usually feel quite, QUITE overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issue and yet the work that people like you folks do is amazing! So thank you for your efforts.

Linked to where I want to move myself and others in terms of consciousness, Allan Johnson (2008) has this phenomenal essay entitled “To Tell the Truth” that details his personal journey to learn how to tell the truth about “...men’s violence and how both men and women survive it and don’t.” (transgender folks need to be included as well) Inspired by his words, I am reminded that I must remember and teach others to realize that survivors and victims of gender violence are *people*. They are people with lives, loved ones, and dreams. They are people who intimately know the price that we pay to live in a patriarchal society that demeans and dehumanizes anyone who is not male or who does not meet the status quo of what being male “should” entail.

Sometimes when I get caught up in day to day life—for me in teaching, research, and advocacy—I forget to hold the everyday pain of survivors close in memory. I forget to remember that gender violence is happening throughout the world every moment of everyday which is why forums like these are so important. I want to move forward more consciously aware of the implications that our discussions, programs, and conferences have for individual survivors. Meaning that if we don’t talk about the intersections we are literally overlooking people who need and deserve our help.

In thinking about consciousness in relation to the first question posed:

1. Are we identifying, acknowledging, and serving the traditionally underserved or marginalized populations on campus?

Generally speaking my sentiment is yes and no. In many ways, survivors who represent marginalized populations are served by programs that try to generalize across identity differences. We know that there are common experiences associated with gender violence that tend to appear across multiple groups such as feelings of powerlessness, fear, feelings of isolation, and struggling to heal. However, we also know that many groups are often marginalized in several ways.

For example, many of our college programs and advocacy services are exceptionally heterosexist. From my perspective, not only are instances of LGBTIQ gender violence rarely addressed in general programming but we often assume that those who ask for help are asking in the context of a heterosexual relationship which means that we are not prepared to help LGBTIQ survivors who struggle with fears such as being outed just by asking for help.

In addition, we know that race and ethnicity are rarely taken into account as well. Very rarely are we knowledgeable about the ways that a survivor’s ethnic identity can influence their experiences. For example, if a survivor identifies as Afghani and was sexually assaulted by someone who identifies as White, what are the contextual implications of that survivor coming forward given the racism directed at anyone who self-identifies or is identified as being of Middle Eastern descent in the United States?

Likewise, I don't think we are prepared to navigate the meanings of gender violence in different ethnic cultures. If a woman identifies with a culture that is more collectivistic in nature than it is likely that her being assaulted will reflect negatively on her family. In essence, I don't think that we are conscious enough about cultural differences to compassionately respond to survivors whose realities we are not aware of and don't understand.

Another area that I see us lacking across the board in is one of my own personal weaknesses – religion and spirituality. Religion and spirituality oftentimes play a major role in how survivors process their experiences in addition to a powerful role in the healing process as well and yet I struggle take religion and spirituality into account when working with survivors to whom religion and spirituality are important. Being transparent about who I am as an advocate means acknowledging that I don't identify with organized religion, acknowledging that most of what I have been taught about religion is rooted in denominations of Christianity and Catholicism, and acknowledging that I need to grow in these areas to do a better job of supporting survivors to whom religion is salient.

Overall, my struggle isn't that there easy answers to this issues but rather my struggle is that I don't hear us having conversations like the one we're having today often enough. Likewise, beyond male privilege – I don't hear many folks in the gender violence movement talking about other forms of privilege.

In response the second question:

2. If yes, how is it being done and if not how do we begin?

In terms of the yes I see positive shifts in the ways that we are educating folks on gender violence:

- I think we are helping women in particular understand that even if they are not a survivor of gender violence that sexist oppression is still a very tangible reality for many women. Allan Johnson has this great quote in response to women who indicate that they do not experience sexist oppression. He says, "It's like living in a rainy climate and somehow avoiding being rained on yourself. It's still a rainy place to be, and getting wet is something most people have to deal with" (Johnson, 2001, p.37).
- I also think we are doing a better job of learning and highlighting the ways that the ism's are interdependent. I think slowly but surely we are beginning to understand that to effectively confront sexism that we must simultaneously address ableism, ageism, sizism, etc. or at the minimum be transparent about the choices we are making.

- In addition, I feel quite hopeful around our efforts toward breaking down the hierarchies that are in place among which survivors are more or less important. Slowly but surely, I think we are doing a better job of advocating for those who don't meet the dominant notion of the "gender violence norm" – meaning heterosexual, male to female stranger rape in a dark alley.
- I also feel as though we are coming together across our differences and trying to teach ourselves and our students and community members that by considering identities at the intersections we are not detracting from the movement against gender violence but rather we are creating inroads to generate more momentum.

HOWEVER, I also see great potential in how we might build upon the ideas of others and perhaps take them in new directions:

- There is so much strength in recruiting at the intersections. We need peer advocates and educators who represent a variety of different identity groups on campus.
- We need to address issues of diversity among survivors throughout our advocacy trainings, outreach efforts, conferences, and programming. Not as "add ons" to "regular training" but rather as a foundational element of what we need to do to position ourselves to do our best work. In essence, our foundation needs to be rooted in multiple perspectives.
- We need to earn trust and generate buy in from campus organizations and community organizations dedicated to serving marginalized identity groups.
- We need to help people understand that sexual violence toward anyone should be positioned as an offense to the community, not just to the individual.
- I also want us to do a better job of highlighting the ways that cultural industries such as popular culture, pornography, prostitution, strip clubs, escort services, human trafficking, sex trafficking, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children all fuel sexual violence toward everyone in general and marginalized communities in particular. Highlighting the pervasive nature of these cultural industries – I believe, I HOPE will help folks understand how systemic gender violence is.
- We need to program all year round opposed to focusing so heavily on particular months. Let me clarify, I don't want to thin out the efforts made in, August (College Orientations), October (DV Awareness), and April (SA Awareness) but rather I want to add a fierce amount of attention to gender violence in the remaining months.

For me, I turn toward bell hook's notion of "talking back" to increase the dialogue. Describing the essence of "talking back", she says:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (p.9)

Inspired by her work, from my perspective what we need to do is to create more spaces and places on our campuses where people can "talk back" based upon who they are and their perceptions of their experiences. It needs to be a compassionate space, an unapologetic space, a space where people listen and bear witness to their pride and pain as survivors.

In closing, we need to "talk back" as leaders on our campus. Rather than shy away from difficult conversations, we need to be especially mindful of generating critical consciousness around gender violence at the intersections of identity. Contemporary cases that reflect our need to attend to the intersections:

- The Duke Lacrosse team
- Kobe Bryant's sexual assault charges and subsequent settlement
- The murder of Angie Zapata in Colorado
- Chris Brown's assault of Rihanna
- Mike Tyson's rape of Desiree Washington

All of these resent instances are difficult conversations to have but vital and full of the potential to have rich discussions around:

- LGBTIQ gender violence
- The intersections between sexism, racism, and heterosexism
- Gender violence within communities of color
- Interracial gender violence
- Sports and gender violence
- Role models and gender violence

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