Intimate Partner Violence Against Black Women: Trauma Informed Responses

There are challenges to incorporating a contextualized understanding of intimate partner violence into everyday practice for practitioners; however, attention to the context of the human experience, particularly when serving criminalized Black women, is essential to enhancing service response and provision. Indeed, it is important for system players to acknowledge that Black women are disproportionately represented within the criminal legal system and that many of them have endured histories of trauma and oppression. System actors must also be sensitive to the specific cultural needs of this population. This fact sheet provides specific trauma-informed and culturally-responsive strategies for system actors to improve their current practices to meet the needs of criminalized Black women.

Intimate Partner Violence and Black Women

- More than four in 10 Black women experience physical violence from an intimate partner during their lifetimes, which is higher than that of women of most other racial groups, including White, Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islander women.[1]

- Black women experience significantly higher rates of psychological abuse than other women, including humiliation, insults, name-calling, and coercive control.[2]

- Black women face a particularly high risk of being killed at the hands of a man. A 2015 Violence Policy Center study found that Black women were two and a half times more likely to be murdered by men than their White counterparts.[3] Additionally, more than nine in ten Black female victims knew their attacker.[4]

- At least 40-60 percent of Black women nationwide report coercive sexual assault by their eighteenth birthday.[5]

- Many women who commit violent or aggressive acts within an intimate partner relationship often do so in self-defense (e.g., as a result of their own exposure to intimate partner violence), rather than in a calculated manner.[6] This trauma response can be misinterpreted, leading victims to become defendants in criminal cases.

Trauma-Informed Framework
Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual and/or community as physically or emotionally **harmful** or **threatening** and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's and/or community's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.[7]

Upholding a trauma-informed framework helps practitioners empathize with how individuals feel and provides context for the behavior and treatment of individuals and their communities. It requires re-envisioning service engagement as human-informed care and employing a comprehensive approach that considers much of an individual's lived experiences. While a trauma-informed response seeks to repair harm and strengthen the well-being of individuals and communities, it also recognizes the many ways in which histories of systemic and structural oppression impact trauma.

Survivors of intimate partner violence receive varied levels of support and engagement from community and legal system practitioners. The following guiding principles highlight programmatic enhancements that can improve trauma-informed service provision:

- **Understand the prevalence of intimate partner violence and impact of trauma**: Acknowledge the complexities surrounding victim-defendants, such as the criminalization of trauma responses, and the challenges of intersectional identities that include race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, mental health, and spirituality.

- **Promote safety**: Improve direct services through staff training that enlists staff as agents of prevention, intervention, and support. Meet clients where they are and promote safety as they define it.

- **Earn trust**: Encourage hope at all entry and access points to systems.

- **Provide holistic care**: Improve access to services by ensuring that services and agency partners are culturally relevant, language accessible, and trauma informed. Services should include, among other things, programming that supports healthy relationships with children and increases opportunities for economic empowerment through education and employment training. Additionally, collaborate with faith-based organizations to better meet the spiritual

needs of clients, as well as organizations based in the communities in which clients live.

- **Respect human rights**: Treat clients with dignity and respect and learn about the specific needs of the target population to inform programmatic strategies.

- **Believe the narrative**: Centering the experiences of women, particularly women of color, helps reestablish healthy relationship dynamics.

- **Share power**: Recognize that clients are the experts in their own lives. Afford them the opportunity to make decisions, where possible, and acknowledge the complexities and challenges they face while avoiding judgment and pathology.

- **Communicate with compassion**: Understand that individual's feelings and behaviors are adaptations to survive and are normal reactions to abnormal experiences, such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

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