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POLICE MAY ADD OWN VIOLENCE WHEN CALLED TO HOMES

IN THE STATES

By Luchina Fisher - WeNews correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) --While much of the movement against domestic violence has largely focused on a more vigorous response by police, some women of color are now saying that the police are too often part of the problem.

Several participants last month in a New York forum on violence against women of color, for example, expressed their belief that domestic violence involving women of color is often exacerbated by the response from police and government agencies. At that forum, local and national female experts alike testified to the way women of color can not only be battered by their domestic partners, but can also become the targets of employees of other government agencies.

One measure of how in the United States women of color experience domestic violence is the number of "intimate" homicides per 100,000 persons between the ages of 20 to 44. The most recent Justice Department statistics indicate that slightly less than 1 "white" woman per 100,000 is murdered by her spouse or ex-spouse and slightly more than 2 per 100,000 are murdered by their boyfriends. In comparison, slightly more than 3 per 100,000 "black" women are murdered by their spouse or ex-spouse, while nearly 4 per 100,000 are murdered by their boyfriends.

One New York City domestic violence expert, Anannya Bhattacharjee, told the audience of 200 people gathered for the panel discussion on May 21 at Columbia University's School of Law that she recently was unable to help a South Asian woman in Queens who was pregnant and being beaten by her husband. The woman refused to call police. Without legal proof of residence, the woman explained, she feared deportation more than her husband.

Representatives of Sista II Sista, a Brooklyn-based organization by and for young women of color, said that local police have been sexually harassing and brutalizing local women. They cited the example of a young woman who, in 2001, was raped and killed by a police auxiliary officer she was dating. "That made it more clear," said Paula Rojas, one of the group's founders, "that cops are not the solution but also part of the problem."

"Issues of race, class, nationality, citizenship; these are the things people juggle when they think about whether they are going to tell anyone and the response they will get," said Barbara Schulman, a consultant to Amnesty International's Women's Human Right's Program, based in New York, which sponsored the panel discussion. "We need to recognize that if we are creating a movement that is seeking to solve the problem through institutions such as the police, then we're really not solving the problems of ending violence if those are institutions through which violence is being perpetrated. We need to look at a bigger picture."

Expanding Definition of Violence

Part of the bigger picture that Schulman mentioned includes expanding the definition of violence when it comes to women of color. Two participants cited examples of police mistakenly raiding the homes of black and Latin women. One of those women was 57-year-old Alberta Spruill, who died last month after New York City police burst into her Harlem home and detonated a concussion grenade. "These women faced violence in the home," Bhattacharjee said, "but it does not fit the current definition (of domestic violence)."

"We're so vulnerable to violence in our own homes even when the violence is not already there," added New York community organizer Shante T. Smalls.

Andrea Smith, a professor of Native American and women's studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, asserted that the voices of women of color have been marginalized in the women's anti-violence movement. In 2000, she organized the "The Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color," conference held in Santa Cruz, Calif., out of which grew the Minneapolis-based organization Incite! Women of Color against Violence, which seeks to mobilize activism against all forms of violence against women of color.

The organization targets not only domestic violence but violence by "the state" since, according to Smith, the two are related. She points out that in military homes, where men are trained to kill, domestic abuse is five times higher. Similarly, says Smith, the number of sexual assaults increases during wartime.

Community-Based Solutions Urged

Smith and the other panel members agreed that the way to end violence against women of color is not through the police, criminal justice system or social services but through local communities. "I think we have violence because the community says it's okay," she says. "You have to change community."

When an audience member asked how to address the problem at the community level,

Smith answered that people have to be creative. For instance, she said that the Pitt River Tribe in northern California banned a member after he raped his niece. But they also went further. Since he was a professor, tribal members showed up at his classes and held up signs calling him a child molester.

"This work has to be led at the local level," Bhattacharjee said. "It can't be top down. What is really important are grass-roots communities and bottom-up strategies." She suggested that communities could set up violence-free zones with moral consequences for violating the rules. For example, members of a community might join together to demonstrate in front of the home of an abuser.

Members of the Brooklyn group Sista II Sista described their own local, community action last summer, when they organized "You Have the Right to Break the Silence," an event staged across the street from a police precinct where they performed skits about police harassing young women and showed a 10-minute video, both designed to raise awareness about police harassment in their community.

"The local police have a sense of real ownership in the neighborhood," Rojas says. "Young women are being stopped in a real way and you don't know if it's official or not. The police will ask for your number, almost like they are trying to hit on you. It's just straight-up sexual harassment. And when there's a need to call the cops, you don't feel like you can trust them."

A spokesperson for the New York City Police Department says the department is unaware whether any complaints have been received. However, the spokesperson added if complaints were under investigation, the department would be unable to comment.

Smalls works with the New York-based Urban Justice Center to assist minority communities in Brooklyn and the Bronx find solutions to domestic and child abuse. She suggested that using human-rights laws and treaties could help re-frame the issue of violence against all women, including women of color. The United Nations' International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination declarations, for instance, are more comprehensive than local and civil-rights laws and could succeed in addressing the kinds of violations that slip through the holes of more local laws.

"While a civil-rights perspective might only look at denial of rights, it doesn't look at the attitudes and beliefs that create such an environment. In theory and practice, a human-rights perspective does examine from root to branch," she says.

Amnesty International, the Urban Justice Center and the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund have started a campaign to lobby city governments to adopt human-rights treaties banning racial discrimination and discrimination against women. So far, only San Francisco has adopted the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the human-rights treaty that bans discrimination against women.

Schulman is hopeful that the issues raised by women of color will encourage other organizations rethink their approach to violence against all women.

"There is a new language, new ideas, new terminology and those provide a platform for new strategies," she said.

Luchina Fisher is a freelance writer and television producer in the New York region.

For more information:

Amnesty International--Women's Human Rights - "Violence Against Women of Color and Human Rights A Panel and Discussion": -

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/events/northeastern/05212003nycwomen.html>

Urban Justice: - <http://www.urbanjustice.org>

Incite! Women of Color against Violence: - <http://www.incite-national.org>



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