Cultural Differences and Interpersonal Violence in the United States

Sex is a powerful force in our lives. In addition to providing us with pleasure, it allows us to become more intimate with people we care about. Unfortunately, we can abuse its power and use it as a tool for expressing anger and domination in violent ways. This misuse and abuse are evident in all cultures and socio-economic classes, although certain myths and stereotypes falsely argue that poor and working class men, especially men of color, perpetrate most rapes and incidents of battery.

Culture and class differences do exist, however, in situations involving sexual violence. A knowledge of these differences will help all of us work better at ending sexual violence.

Project SURVIVE believes that all forms of violence originate from power imbalances and abuses. As we fight to end sexism (against women), we know we must also struggle against racism (against people of color), homophobia (against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals), transphobia (against transgender people) classism (against poor and working class people), anti-Semitism/anti-Arabism (against Jews and Arabs), xenophobia (against immigrants), ableism (against people with disabilities), ageism (against youth and elderly), and other forms of discrimination.

THERE ARE NO "BAD" CULTURES
Sometimes when we give presentations, a person in the audience will talk about how battery or rape is especially a problem in that person’s culture. We always explain that interpersonal violence is a problem in all cultures and in every socio-economic class and that each of us is most familiar with how it expresses itself in our own culture and class. To the extent that sexual violence and intimate partner abuse is cultural, we would describe it as a part of patriarchal, hierarchical cultural systems. We view interpersonal violence as a problem in all of our cultures, not a cultural value in any of them.

AFRICAN AMERICAN, LATINO, and AMERICAN INDIAN MALES ARE NOT MORE VIOLENT THAN EURO-AMERICAN MALES
As we stated earlier, the dominant culture perpetuates a myth that African American men and Latinos are more violent than Euro-American men. In fact, if we go back in United States history, we discover the institutionalized raping of black women by white men during slavery times. Routine sexual abuse was a documented tool of slavery. After slavery ended, during the Reconstruction period, white men raped black women as part of their terror tactics. Lynch mobs, angry at the growing prosperity of some African American males, accused black men of rape in order to kill them. Early African American anti-rape activists such as Ida B. Wells fought against rape, which targeted black women, and against lynching, which targeted black men.

The term "macho" which derives from “machismo” has been used by the mainstream feminist movement in the United States to describe any kind of male chauvinism or misogyny. It can be offensive for outsiders to use a Latino expression to describe a form of oppression, sexism, which exists in all of our cultures.

American Indians have been historically stereotyped as “savage” and “uncivilized” by dominant white culture. These stereotypes target American Indian men as “more violent” than white men and American Indian women as “sexually violable and ‘rapeable’. “ (See Smith in references.)

* Project SURVIVE can provide you with statistics that disprove these myths. Please refer to our handout "What do you think?" (www.ccsf.edu/survive) and/or call our City College of San Francisco office at 415-239-3899.
ALTHOUGH SEXUAL VIOLENCE OCCURS IN ALL OF OUR CULTURES, MEMBERS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES EXPERIENCE IT DIFFERENTLY

Remember, however, that no one experience can ever define any particular culture. It can be misleading to generalize about cultural differences even though it’s important to examine their role in our lives.

• In communities of color where police brutality has damaged trust, victims of sexual violence and battery in intimate relationships are often reluctant to call on police for protection.

• Euro-American culture has stereotyped African American women as both “promiscuous” and “strong” and so often does not take the rape of black women nearly as seriously as it does the rape of white women.

• In general, Euro-American culture exoticizes and objectifies women of color of African, Latino/a, and Asian/Pacific Islander descent and from indigenous cultures, so they receive less sympathy and attention if they are raped.

• In addition to causing violence and pain in intimate relationships, rape has been used as a weapon of slavery, colonization, genocide, and war, along with torture, starvation, physical and psychological abuse. Intergenerational trauma persists in cultures that have experienced these forms of violence, such as the system of abusive boarding schools in the United States, Canada, and other countries where indigenous children suffered routine physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Although the schools met with resistance, they also tried to destroy the practice of cultural traditions. Some of them are still in operation.

• The Catholic Church is powerful in many Latino cultures. The emphasis on virginity before marriage and monogamy within it may compound the emotional pain a Latina rape victim suffers. While a supportive extended family can help in the victim’s healing, it may also be a cause of concern if its male members seek revenge for the “dishonor” done to the family. A Latina may also fear hurting the family name if she reports marital abuse.

• In many Asian American communities the topic of sex is not part of public discussion, which makes it harder for a victim of sexual violence to come forward. She may worry that if she discloses abuse, she will humiliate her family. Also, due to cultural norms, some Asian American rape survivors experience intense feelings of shame and guilt.

• Like Asian American women, Jewish American women have to work against the myth that claims “there’s no sexual violence or battery in our community.” Arab American women and Muslim women have to contend with the stereotype that they are more oppressed than other women, which results in silencing their voices of resistance.

• Undocumented immigrant victims of domestic violence worry about deportation if they make their abuse public. Special visas can help them remain in the country, but they need legal assistance to obtain them.

• Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have to confront the myth that says “sexual violence and battery do not occur in same sex relationships.” Also, people of various sexual orientations and people of various gender identities, such as transgender people, may experience heterosexism, homophobia, and/or transphobia when they contact community and law enforcement agencies. This is similar to people of color experiencing racism in agencies and institutions. Finally, LGBT victims may not want to make their abuse public, because they may be forced to “come out.”

• Working class white women, like working class women of color, are more likely to fight back than middle class white women, which makes them subject to erroneous arrests for “mutual combat.” The victim in a same sex relationship is also more likely to participate in this form of “secondary aggression,” which is different than actual self-defense.

• To counter the notion that the United States, and the “West” in general, is more advanced than other parts of the world, we need only remember that it wasn’t until 1993 that all 50 states had marital rape laws. (Oregon was the first state to pass a marital rape law in 1978, and North Carolina, the last, in 1993.)

REFERENCES: