



addressing the Unique Challenges  
Facing Women of Color Since 1997



# Women of Color Network

## Reports from the Field

An Economic Policy & Leadership Series

### **Survivors of Violence & Economic Security: Focus on Strengthening Services By Challenging Institutional Biases**

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## **Introduction**

Economic security and violence against women are deeply connected across communities. Especially in our current challenged economy, we witness the disproportionate impact of economic inequities on survivors of color, Tribal survivors, and our communities. Along with access to food, housing, and safety, access to economic opportunity and security is necessary for self-sufficiency. Within this economic landscape, the Women of Color Network (WOCN) seeks to ensure that the economic security challenges facing women of color and Tribal survivors are examined and addressed so that all survivors can be supported and reached effectively.

In this time of economic crisis, many anti-violence programs have been forced to roll back services. The needs of under-represented communities may be unintentionally overlooked or even disregarded as too complex to address – leading to a further **need for a stronger safety net for survivors of color and Tribal communities.**

Simultaneously, we see that culturally specific organizations and Tribal programs continue to serve survivors with innovative responses that respond to economic security needs.

During this period of economic crisis, **WOCN aims to ensure a safety net for all survivors, leadership of advocates of color and Tribal advocates, and a voice for our communities.** From 2011-2013, through the Economic Policy & Leadership Project, WOCN documented how diverse survivors are affected by economic factors as well as promising methods of response. This series of five reports from the field emerges from WOCN forums where Tribal and women of color advocates from the fields of violence against women, social justice, and economic justice shared challenges and recommendations for survivor support in relation to economic security. Through these field reports, we give voice to the expertise of on-the-ground advocates to support Tribal advocates & advocates of color and their allies – including other advocates, local/state programs, and policy partners – in furthering more effective program development and response within domestic violence and sexual assault programs. Through understanding specific needs and advancing the recommendations in these field reports, advocates, programs, institutions, and policymakers can better remove barriers and improve access while building a better understanding of the intersection of communities of color and Tribal communities, domestic violence and sexual assault, and economic security. Furthermore, these reports can inform policy conversations and policymakers in shaping policies more effectively for our communities. Finally, these reports demonstrate the advocacy leadership of immigrant, Tribal, and women of color advocates – and the power of their voices.

## **Defining the Economic Needs of Diverse Survivors**

In 2011, WOCN convened the National Women of Color Economic Policy and Leadership Summit comprising participants from across the United States and Tribal sovereign nations to ask, **“What are the economic needs of survivors from our communities and how do we ensure a safety net and support?”** Based on advocate input from the 2011 National Summit, WOCN identified two overarching areas vital to the economic security of women of color and Tribal survivors: **(1), the need for [Strengthening Institutional Services](#)** to challenge external, systemic, and internal racism & bias to ensure inclusivity as well as **(2), the importance of [Policy Advocacy, development, and education](#)** to better reach and serve our communities. Moreover, the 2011 National Summit attendees delineated three policy issues requiring specific attention: **(3), [Reentry Populations](#)**; **(4) [Tribal Sexual Assault](#)**; and, **(5) access to [T- and U-Visas](#) for undocumented survivors.**

Subsequent to the 2011 National Summit, WOCN held three Women of Color Regional Forums in 2013 to gather information and recommendations to reduce economic marginalization in the above five arenas. These events were hosted by the Women of Color Network and funded by the Office on Violence Against Women.

**Reflecting the expertise of advocates, activists, and survivors, this issue report from the field examines the compounding economic challenges created by institutional biases and examines the impact those biases have on the economic security of Tribal women and survivors of color.** This field report provides recommendations to support the safety and economic security of Tribal survivors and survivors of color. Along with personal accounts and field advocacy, this valuable information can work alongside national data to build economic security and safety of ALL communities, families, and survivors.

## **Voices from the Field**

Given the on-the-ground expertise of advocates, we start with their powerful voices. Here are some of the key frameworks, barriers, and solutions in reference to institutional biases faced when attempting to access services **voiced by immigrant, Tribal, and women of color advocates who participated in our forums:**

- Advocates indicated that they often see a disconnect or separation between the services provided by the mainstream institutions/organizations they work with/for and the needs of the communities they live in and/or provide services to;
- Advocates on the Strengthening Institutional Services and Challenging Bias Working Group reported that more often than not, there still exists an overwhelming reluctance to provide outreach to un-served, underserved, and inadequately served populations in their states. This is especially true when there are a “low” percentage of people of color in the state or town. Advocates also stated that the mainstream organizations they work with do not possess adequate understanding of different cultures and this often hampers the survivor’s ability to obtain safety even when there is willingness to serve diverse communities. Additionally, organizations might be progressive in their approach but if they are in conservative states with public policies that do not support marginalized communities, their effectiveness may be hampered;
- One advocate from Florida reported that in her state, women, particularly women of color, who defend themselves are often not seen as victims by the criminal justice system or law enforcement. She pointed to Marissa Alexander’s case as just one example of a woman in her state criminalized for defending herself from an abusive partner;
- Survivors from underserved communities are reluctant to involve law enforcement and criminal justice agencies when they are abused; and

- Advocates stated that in their states, Black and Latino populations, undocumented populations, youth ages 16-24, and same sex couples experience higher levels of marginalization than their white heterosexual counterparts.

WOCN is grateful for the vital expertise shared by immigrant, Tribal, and women of color advocates – expertise that informs the following discussion of critical barriers and recommendations for change. In particular, it is the dedication of immigrant, Tribal, and women of color advocates that enables a focus on supporting populations often overlooked by mainstream providers.

## **Context and Scope of the Barriers to Economic Security**

Survivor experiences are textured by intersections or overlapping identities. These identities include, but are not limited to, immigration and economic status, limited English proficiency, and race.

As Marsha J. Tyson Darling from the Center for African-American and Ethnic Studies at Adelphi University states, “Imagine representing a state, its institutions and agents, and cultures as a large circle. Imagine that those standing at the center of a large circle are privileged by having access to the exercise of protections and immunities. The center of the circle is where one experiences the strongest exercise of rights, opportunities, rewards, etc. While all women have been subordinated, indigenous women, women of color, racialized women, disabled women, migrant, displaced, trafficked and refugee women, Dalit and Roma women, and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women have been pushed farthest from the center of the circle, that is farthest from the place where they could expect to be respected, protected, fulfilled and developed as human beings. The identities assigned to them, that is the historical and contemporary processes of labeling and distorting, stereotyping their identities in pejorative and negative ways, have served to ‘mark’ or target them for marginalizing treatment that is simultaneously based on multiple and interacting racial, gender, class, ethnic, linguistic, ancestral, economic, and sexual identities.”<sup>1</sup>

Discrimination from employers, law enforcement agencies, the criminal justice system, as well as child welfare agencies and other social service entities have historically contributed – and continue to contribute – to the economic instability experienced by survivors of color. With this in mind, it is not surprising that survivors from these communities that wish to leave the relationship can find themselves choosing between poverty and abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Marsha J. Tyson Darling. “Human Rights for All: Understanding and Applying Intersectionality to Confront Globalization.” prepared for the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) 9TH International Forum, October 5, 2002. <http://www.gjga.org/conference.asp?action=item&source=documents&id=69>

In “The State of Women of Color in the United States,” Sophia Kerby highlights the myriad factors that inhibit many survivors of color from attaining the economic security they so desperately need. She reports, “Women of color also experience lower median weekly earnings, higher rates of poverty, and greater unemployment. In comparison to white women, whose median usual weekly earnings are \$703, black women only earn \$595 and Latina women just \$518. Women of color also report living in poverty at much higher rates: In 2008 poverty rates among women were more than double for women of color compared to white women. The poverty rate of white, non-Hispanic women is 10.3 percent, compared to American Indian women and black women who had the highest poverty rates at 27.6 percent and 26.6 percent, respectively.”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, in “Survivors of Color & Economic Security,” Wider Opportunities for Women argues, “Those who are economically secure— who are able to meet their basic needs and find stability through savings and assets— are better able to insulate themselves from harm.”<sup>3</sup> If one accepts this fact, it is easy to see that the high levels of economic instability that survivors of color experience put them at increased risk for intimate partner violence and ensure that they remain “especially vulnerable.”<sup>4</sup>

Policymakers, advocates, and program leaders need to be invested in addressing bias because underserved communities are disproportionately affected by gender violence. A lack of economic security adds another layer of barriers faced by these marginalized populations. Advocates participating in the WOCN forums and National Economic Policy & Leadership Task Force stressed that many of the institutions survivors must navigate are directly linked to their economic security and their ability to provide for themselves and their children. Unfortunately, these institutions are often the spaces where survivors experience gender bias, racism, and discrimination that create additional barriers to their safety. As a result, survivors need policies that support their safety and economic security simultaneously.

In addition, many survivors may not know about social service agencies in their community. Therefore, it is imperative that national organizations, State, Territorial, and Tribal coalitions, and local programs provide viable resources and meaningful links to economic security for survivors of color.

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<sup>2</sup> Sophia Kerby. “The State of Women of Color in the United States.” Center for American Progress. July 17, 2012. p.2. [http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/07/pdf/women\\_of\\_color\\_brief.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/07/pdf/women_of_color_brief.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “Survivors of Color and Economic Security.” Washington, D.C. Wider Opportunities for Women, Economic Security for Survivors Project: Population Policy Series. February 2013. p. 1.

[http://www.wowonline.org/documents/WOWESSSurvivorsofColorBriefFINAL\\_000.pdf](http://www.wowonline.org/documents/WOWESSSurvivorsofColorBriefFINAL_000.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## **Systemic Barriers to Safety and Economic Security**

Anti-violence advocates and survivors alike perceive a persistent reluctance on the part of housing authorities, employers, as well as child welfare agencies and other social service providers to offer adequate services to underserved populations. This is especially true when there are a “low” percentage of people of color in the region, resulting in a separation between institutional or organizational practices and the communities they serve. Whether it is due to awareness, capacity, or budgets, too many programs fail to provide culturally specific services to survivors of color, Tribal women, and immigrants. As Alianza Latina en Contra La Agresión Sexual notes, “An organization’s willingness or lack thereof to bridge language and cultural obstacles will impact its ability to better serve this population as well as its reputation within the community.”<sup>5</sup>

Advocates participating in the Strengthening Institutional Services & Challenging Bias Working Group reported that within mainstream programs, even with a willingness to serve clients, there is not an adequate understanding of different cultures and this often leads to policies and procedures that further isolate survivors of color. For example, API survivors may have specific food restrictions or preferences and feel alienated in mainstream shelters.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, many organizations across the country do not have multilingual staff and are not providing adequate language access or are unaware of how to assist survivors with obtaining T- and U-visas, which are vital to the economic security of some immigrant survivors. An organization’s lack of cultural awareness renders them ineffective to survivors of color and leads to community distrust. This distrust ultimately prohibits survivors from seeking services that could greatly enhance their safety and economic security.

In addition to racial bias, there appears to be a palpable backlash to the advances made by the Battered Women’s Movement surfacing across the U.S. In Kansas, advocates report that survivors are often asked if they have gotten marriage counseling while they are in the process of asking for restraining orders in domestic violence hearings. In Florida, advocates observe that Latina and Black women are witnessing many domestic violence protections being blatantly disregarded: one domestic violence advocate stated that women are routinely told by law enforcement that “they are not a taxi service” when survivors request transportation to domestic violence shelters.

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<sup>5</sup> “Eliminating Barriers to Services for Latina/o Survivors of Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence.” A position statement of the Alianza Latina en Contra la Agresión Sexual (ALAS)/Latina Alliance Against Sexual Aggression. Adopted May 2004. p.2. [http://www.arte-sana.com/alas\\_position\\_statement\\_2004.pdf](http://www.arte-sana.com/alas_position_statement_2004.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “Domestic Violence in Communities of Color.” Women of Color Network Facts & Stats Collection. June 2006. p. 4. [http://womenofcolornetwork.org/docs/factsheets/fs\\_domestic-violence.pdf](http://womenofcolornetwork.org/docs/factsheets/fs_domestic-violence.pdf)



Advocates also report that some law enforcement officers in Florida continue to inform survivors that, “everybody is going to jail” if they have to visit the residence “one more time.” Advocates in the state also said that women of color receive little support from mainstream organizations and the criminal justice system and often go “underground” when their male partners return from prison.

The legacy of institutionalized racism still prevents many survivors from underserved communities from involving law enforcement and criminal justice agencies when they are abused. Moreover, the law enforcement response to gender violence is often colored by the individual’s ideas about survivor behavior and who is worthy of protection. These norms also determine who is likely to be perceived as a perpetrator. The result of such assumptions is women of color being arrested regardless of the actual circumstances in a gender violence situation. Therefore, women who defend themselves are often not seen as victims and are judged more harshly. As the “Survivors of Color & Economic Security” report notes, “Black and Latino women are both highly disproportionately incarcerated in the US, chiefly for nonviolent offenses. Women of color also risk being arrested with the abuser (dual arrest) more often than White survivors. Frequently these women are sexually assaulted in prison, either by guards or fellow inmates.”<sup>7</sup> The ability to protect oneself from harm is key to successfully negotiating child protective services involvement and securing other public benefits. An institutional barrier in any one of these systems greatly hinders any opportunities survivors might have to obtain protection and economic relief.

There is also a need for greater collaboration between mainstream and culturally specific organizations and religious institutions. A 2011 study, “Safety and Services: Women of color speak about their communities,” conducted by the Center For Family Policy and Practice indicated that in some cases domestic violence is seen as secondary to financial well-being – putting survivor safety in jeopardy. As the report states, “Many women experience extensive pressure—both explicit and tacit—to maintain relationships regardless of the presence of domestic violence. For example, in our discussions, some African American women said that family and friends encouraged them to stay with men who could contribute to the economic security of the family even though he may use violence. Some of the Latina women we heard from felt similar pressure from their families and communities to live in abusive situations for

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<sup>7</sup> “Survivors of Color and Economic Security.” Washington, D.C. Wider Opportunities for Women, Economic Security for Survivors Project: Population Policy Series. February 2013. p. 4. with citations to “Sexual Violence in Communities of Color.” Women of Color Network Facts & Stats Collection. June 2006. p. 2. [http://womenofcolornetwork.org/docs/factsheets/fs\\_sexual-violence.pdf](http://womenofcolornetwork.org/docs/factsheets/fs_sexual-violence.pdf) and “Women in Custody.” Amnesty International USA. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdf/custodyissues.pdf>

the sake of keeping families intact.”<sup>8</sup> However, with appropriate training and guidance from the field, religious institutions could be an important ally in ensuring economic safety and security for survivors of color. As the report suggests, “Because of its role both as a social and communal center—a place where people in their (African American) communities turn for emotional and moral support—the church could not be discounted or rejected as a site of support and advocacy for victims.”<sup>9</sup>

## **Recommendations for Advocates**

As advocates indicated, the following strategies can enhance service provision while also challenging institutional bias:

- Ensure your own ongoing education of diverse communities and strategies for response so as to mitigate bias; and
- Foster linkages across organizations and programs to ensure culturally relevant services.

## **Recommendations for Programs**

Providing culturally relevant services is key to the work of service providers and local programs if they are to ensure the economic security and safety of all survivors. Advocates indicated challenging bias and strengthening services begins with training, noting that domestic and sexual violence programs should:

- Receive and provide in-depth and ongoing training on non-racist, non-oppressive, and inclusive service provision for their staff; and
- Receive and provide training on trauma-informed care within the context of historical oppressions for their staff.

This set of trainings delivered through a series of webinars, online modules, and/or in-person meetings would provide agencies with an understanding of racist, sexist, and oppressive institutional practices and their impact on the response by underserved communities to gender violence and survivor economic security.

## **Recommendations for Institutions**

Advocates noted that providing culturally relevant services is also key to the work of State Coalitions and local institutions, which can employ the following strategies:

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<sup>8</sup> Bogges, Jacquelyn and Groblewski, Jill. “Safety and Services: Women of color speak about their communities.” Center for Family Policy and Practice. October 2011. pp. 9-10. [http://www.cffpp.org/publications/Safety\\_and\\_Services.pdf](http://www.cffpp.org/publications/Safety_and_Services.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



- Contract with culturally specific sexual assault and domestic violence organizations to provide ongoing anti-racist/anti-privilege training to local sexual assault and domestic violence agencies. They can provide mandatory training to advocates that extends beyond the initial 40-hour training that new advocates receive in order to include information on trauma-informed care within the context of historical oppressions and trauma;
- Ensure access to language services for limited English proficient survivors as well as training on effective language access provision for program staffs;
- Work with religious institutions to enable supportive survivor responses;
- Work with legislators to change mandatory arrest laws that disproportionately affect survivors from underserved communities and contract with outside organizations to provide training to law enforcement officers and child welfare agencies on the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault;
- Work with legislators to enable more options for affordable housing, transitional housing, and shelter;
- Work with legislators to enable sustainable employment opportunities; and
- Coordinate a campaign that would include an annual breakfast between policymakers, law enforcement, religious institutions, and service providers. A subgrantee could be contracted to coordinate the campaign's website and print materials to inform communities about ways to organize around economic security while all parties work to ensure the campaign is inclusive of disability, language, and other factors. Such a campaign could take place during Domestic Violence or Sexual Assault Awareness Month and include a *"We are the community"* walk that would culminate with speeches by various policymakers, community members, and domestic violence and sexual assault advocates. The event could also include a *"We are the community"* live community impact statement that features survivors, service providers, and youth speaking about the economic impact of institutional bias on the lives of survivors from underserved communities. The campaign would educate, raise awareness, and highlight the need for mobilizing communities around economic security. The impact statement could be videotaped and distributed via social media, which has proven to be a useful tool for organizing events and reaching elected officials.

## Recommendations for Policymakers

Advocates stressed that increased funding for interpreters, multilingual print materials, and training on remedies such as U & T-visas for agency staff is necessary and offered these recommendations:

- Provide more and better-informed funding for services in general, but especially for culturally-appropriate training, outreach, and language services as these are crucial to the economic security of survivors; and
- Increase funding and support for the creation of initiatives that foster cooperation and cross training among gender violence advocates, child welfare and law enforcement agencies, and the criminal justice system.

## Conclusion

Gaps to service in any institution result in major setbacks for all survivors and this is particularly true for those from marginalized communities. Through implementing these recommendations, we aim to promote and strengthen institutional services and reduce bias so that all survivors may experience an improved degree of economic security and safety.

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## WOCN Economic Policy and Leadership Reports Series

The WOCN policy reports (published 2014) emerged from advocate expertise during the 2011 National Economic Policy and Leadership Summit and a series of three regional convenings in 2013. The reports explore [Strengthening Institutional Services](#); the need for [Policy Advocacy](#); [Reentry Populations](#); [Tribal Sexual Assault](#); and [T- and U-Visas](#), and present the direct expertise of advocates working to end violence across the country. The reports provide background, a scope of the problem, and offer targeted recommendations for advocates, agencies, and policymakers. We look forward to your responses and to ensuring economic access for all survivors!

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