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Domestic Violence and Women: A Critical Analysis of US Help & Support Websites and Traditional News Media Representation

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND WOMEN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF US HELP &
SUPPORT WEBSITES AND TRADITIONAL NEWS MEDIA REPRESENTATION

By

JESSICA OSWALD, Bachelor of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the ways in which US government organizations that provide help for domestic violence victims and traditional news media, specifically *The New York Times*, communicate the various factors of domestic violence and its victims. The author provides a focused literature review of gender, sexism, race, power, and voice, related to the idea of domestic violence in the US society and culture today. The literature review also demonstrates the need to investigate this issue as represented through mediated forums in the backdrop of the 2016 Trump Presidential campaign. The analysis reveals that communication about domestic violence encompasses the larger cultural undertones propagated during the 2016 Presidential election - those of sexism, racism, and exclusionary practices against certain ethnicities and religions.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Violence against women is rampant in American society today despite efforts from the United States (US) government, non-profit organizations and media coverage to thwart the rise or continuance of such violence. These efforts are, of course, governed by systems set up by institutional, social, political and economic cultures prevalent in the US. Although the goal of these various forms of organizations are to inform, protect, and prevent violence against women, the results are far from satisfactory as at least 500 women are sexually assaulted every day, 53 percent of all American women who are murdered with guns are killed by intimate partners or family members, and one in four women experiences domestic violence in their lifetime in the US (www.ywcacolumbus.org).

The issue of violence against women can be identified within the larger issue of women's rights and status in the US. During the months leading up to, during, and after the recent Presidential election cycle of 2016, the issue of how women are, and were, discussed and treated in our society has repeatedly come up. Donald Trump, the elected President of the US, pushed an agenda of sexism, racism, stereotype and prejudice that seems to have won over his supporters and is now affecting how most Americans view their fellow citizens and own environments. Under these circumstances, it is important to

gauge how the issue of violence against women is being tackled at the local, state and national levels through various organizations that are at the forefront of this issue. 1) In what ways are organizations and institutions communicating assistance to victims of domestic violence? 2) What communication strategies are used to represent domestic violence in mass media? 3) How are policies that are created to help victims of violence being communicated? We see the reports of violent acts on a continual stream through the media, the news, and even our social networking sites. Chouliaraki (2008) asks “can the spectacles of suffering, most common on our home screens, go beyond wishful thinking and lead to forms of public actions towards these distant others?” (p. 831). This question leads to another aspect of the larger issue of violence against women. 5) In our fast-evolving technological society, which victims of violence are able to navigate the help that comes through the local, state and national organizations? 6) What kind of help is available and who is this help most directed towards?

In order to provide a thorough examination of these issues, the author strives to analyze the website content of one local, one non-government and one federal government organization geared towards halting violence against women in the US. The paper also analyzes articles from *The New York Times* (NYT) that provides coverage of violence against women to compare how organizations and traditional media communicate this issue. This thesis will begin by delving into a review of extant literature on gender, race, media and culture in the US that directs the reader to understand the theoretical importance of asking the research questions, provides an

explanation of the method of analysis, demonstrates the necessity and appropriateness of the data collected, implements the method to analyze the data and, finally, provides a thorough discussion and conclusion from the findings of the analysis.

Domestic Violence Definitions and Power in Relationships

For the purpose of this thesis the author will be relying on many definitions of terms regarding domestic violence against women. The United States Department of Justice defines domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over the other intimate partner. This can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that could influence someone else. Safehorizon reminds us that in addition to the definition above, domestic violence can include violence or abuse from a family member. In addition, the National Institute of Justice states that intimate partner violence can include physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner.

“It has been said that insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, and it is difficult to imagine a situation that is more insane than the phenomenon of domestic violence in this country” (Wright, 2009, p. 29). Domestic violence against women continues because there are a lot of casual viewpoints on this topic such as; all is well, if it’s not happening to me it’s not my problem; if I don’t see it - it can’t exist, or someone else is taking care of it, etc. Like Vincent & Eveline (2008) write, “let us dispense with the notion that there is or can be, a unitary definition

of family violence and explore the construct in its diversity” (p.330). Since people are inherently different based on their identities, we should strive to create policies, talk about and treat these domestic violence victims as specifically as possible.

As domestic violence obviously has gendered power relationships in personal spaces, there are layers of power that influence the outcome of the situation. Babcock et al. (1993) discussed the way that power plays into marital relationships and how this affects the reporting of violence. “Moreover, the literature suggests that there are almost as many definitions of power in intimate relationships as there are people who have studied it” (Babcock et al., 1993, p. 40). Domestic violence in the United States is not a strictly a women’s problem, though it is often treated through the various avenues society has created, as a singular problem with a singular source and a singular solution.

Domestic violence incorporates so many aspects of our communities and involves so many types of people. The focus is women who are victims of domestic violence. This is the chosen focus because women are more often victims of domestic violence and such research focus could serve as a starting point to examine issues of communication about domestic violence. As is, many may suffer from this problem, but it still disproportionately affects women. Though this should incorporate many stakeholders in the conversation, it is avoided by those other interested parties. Automatically accusations of domestic violence become a sticky situation to outside viewers who are more likely to want to refrain from discussing it than to bring it up, causing a level of shame if the harmed person wants to seek legal support. Domestic violence was viewed

as a family matter and, thus, created a system of disenfranchising those being abused and writing the abuse off as something to be silenced rather than discussed. To gain access to justice, women would have to air their private situations in a public space in order to stop the abuse from happening. This airing of issues creates exposure for the victim and adds the burden of emotional trauma. Having to go against their family, reliving the situation, and dealing with their own internal struggle affects primarily the victim as she continues to experience her trauma.

Domestic Violence Statistics

YWCA Columbus (2017) offers statistics regarding the vast number of women that are subjected to forms of domestic violence or sexual assault. The CDC (2017) also adds that one in four women will experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. In their 2017 report, the CDC asserted the following staggering statistics: 45.1% of non-Hispanic black women, 37.3% of non-Hispanic white women, and 34.4% of Hispanic women in the United States will experience contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. In their 2010 report, the CDC cites that one in 10 women in the United States will be raped by an intimate partner in her lifetime. Just under 17% of women will experience sexual violence other than rape by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime.

Texas is no exception to the data regarding these occurrences. The Texas Council on Family Violence (2017) reports that 146 Texas women were killed by a male intimate partner in 2016 and one in three Texas women will experience domestic violence

(slightly above the national percentage). The Texas Department of Public Safety (2017) cited specific data on reported instances of domestic violence in Texas that about 14% of victims were classified as a wife, followed by just under 14% being classified as a common law wife. In addition, 72% of reported family violence victims in Texas in 2015 were female. Of that 72%, 27% were black and 72% were white. These data are a stark reminder that the issue of domestic violence against women is current, relevant and needs analysis from the communicative standpoint in order to make critical recommendations to help formulate communication about this issue both in traditional media and in mediated website contents.

“Once considered a taboo subject, domestic violence has become a subject for public and political attention, with the World Health Organization estimating that between 15% and 71% of women have experienced physical or sexual assault from an intimate partner” (Vincent and Eveline, 2008, p. 323). This topic becomes more and more normalized by society as we discuss it in all areas as an expected or usual occurrence. As Wright (2009) articulates, “domestic violence does not occur as the result of a failed relationship; rather, a relationship fails because of domestic violence”, and it does not occur overnight, these dynamics are being created and sustained in our relationships and communication with those around us (p. 24). As a society, we have come a long way in protecting those who reveal they have been assaulted, and we have moved away from the blaming that was done previously. “The U.S. legal system’s treatment of domestic violence has evolved a long way from the ‘rule of thumb’” (Wright, 2009, p. 21) that

once allowed the paternal partner custody of the children regardless of violence perpetrated by them, to now supporting those who are female victims. Originally, custody was given to the paternal figure as children were considered property. This shift has come with time and patience, but we are in a better place as a community to support those in need. There is now a more urgent need to understand what kind of support is being offered and in what communicative form. This thesis strives to gain more critical knowledge in this area by analyzing the different media platforms.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Identities are vital to the understanding of domestic violence against women. “Women experience more intimate partner violence than do men...” which is why the development of academic literature on the subject is valuable (Cooper-White, 2011, p. 811). There may be violence against genders other than women, but the significant majority of the crimes are made against women, and arguably, against different types of women. An intimate partner can use many different ways of attacking their loved one. Straus & Gozjko (2014) introduce the concept of Intimate Terrorism, which they define as the repeated attack on various aspects of the intimate partner involving physical, emotional, or mental assault causing reoccurring fear and trauma. While developing that idea of Intimate Terrorism, Straus & Gozjko (2014) also make note of the impact the patriarchy may have on the way in which men develop. As our discussion of intimate partner violence develops, there must also be a discussion of the various identities and cultural make up of women in the interactions that result in domestic violence. Such an approach is vital to providing the solutions necessary to combat this social malaise.

Gendered approach and domestic violence

American society today continues to suffer an imbalance when it comes to gender and sex-based issues especially with regard to physical and sexual violence. Gender, and

the basis of gender “is a fundamental phenomenon that affects virtually every aspect of people’s daily lives (Bussey et al., 1999, p. 676). In addition, Bruni et al. (1999) states that the ability to “do gender” in predominately masculine environments is socially and culturally embedded to the extent that every individual performs these roles communicatively since they are born. Although “gender is a social construction rather than a biological given” (Bussey et al., 1999, p. 683), gender can be seen as a spectrum and people can, and do, travel, place themselves, and change based on where in the spectrum they identify themselves to be. Our society communicates to us how to live life as the biological sex we were born with, or else, we would not know what the expectations were, and would therefore not buy into the social “rules” that govern gender behavior. “The exaggeration of the nature and extent of gender differences, the theorists argue, promotes the social ordering of gender relations and serves to justify gender inequality, occupational stratification and segregation, and the situation of women in positions of predominately lower status” (Bussey et al., 1999, pp. 683). This socially constructed and perceived difference in gender is the basis on which much violence against women occurs in the US.

Though the focus of this paper is violence against women particularly by men, there are many instances in society when those violent acts are perpetrated by women against men, or by women against other women. As Bussey states (1999) “Many sociologists reject the dichotomous view of gender, in that the similarities between men and women in how they think and behave far exceed the difference between them” (p.

683). Along with the idea of gender, there are intersectionalities with race and sexuality that also need to be discussed when talking about the issue of violence.

Intersectionality, “refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). This is a relatively new concept for most people outside the academic world, but the idea is that one identity does not encompass a whole experience. It is impossible to understand the holistic experience without combining the experiences of all the identities of a person. Davis (2008) also mentions “interdisciplinarity has since been heralded as the most important contribution that women’s studies has made so far” (p. 68). Gender is now rarely the sole topic of an academic discussion so definitive the shift has been from single topic to webbed interconnection. The issue of violence against women then transcends simply the gender-based arguments that men are stronger than women or men are more powerful than women. This issue needs to be discussed cutting across issues of women’s race, sexuality, power-differential, media portrayal and more, in order to identify the areas that are most important to the solutions of this issue.

Domestic violence through the lens of sexism

Women in the United States have been living in a patriarchal system, although it is less overtly visible in the new millennium as compared to the previous centuries. Feminism in definition is the advocating for women’s rights in various facets of social life including politics, economics, and culture. The fight to end this patriarchal society, in

the form of second wave feminism, was an attempt to provide some progressive change for “all women”. This started in the 1960s when, “US women began to organize a political movement to improve their economic, political, and social status and the opportunities available to them” (Valk, 2002, p. 306). Despite the progress made in arenas such as voting rights for women in the 1920s, feminism was not inclusive of all women, specifically, the needs of women of color. Generally, legally, politically, and/or socially, women, who claimed to be feminists, gradually fell into an established pyramid of power with White women occupying the tip of the pyramid.

The first issue within feminism is that “most people do not understand sexism, or if they do, they think it is not a problem.” (hooks, 2000, p. 1). bell hooks goes on to explain that there is a falsehood in thinking that being feminist is being anti-male. Per hooks (2000), the media portrays feminists as committing almost exclusively towards equal work and equal household and child rearing chores by members of both sex. These concerns of equal work and distribution of work are mainly attributed to women who are white, middle class, and privileged through marriage. Views against feminism frequently stem from the religious rules that a Christian culture should prepare women for serving in a subordinate manner to the man of the household, and willingly follow all rules provided by her husband (hooks, 2000).

According to hooks (2000) our society has a deeply seeded religious backbone that prescribes the patriarchal rules that seem to be permanent in our social expectations. Though women have been living and working, providing for their families without any

need for assistance from a partner, the picture of a household includes a male/female partnership in which the female participants follow the guidance of the male lead. “Male domination is intact, whether men are present in the home or not” since the effect of their domination is inherently withheld in expectations of leadership in multiple facets of society (hooks, 2000, p. 2). Women in American society have been expected to sit on the sidelines in all avenues where men would have wanted to lead. “Whether it was white women working on behalf of socialism, black women working on behalf of the civil rights and black liberation, or Native American women working for indigenous rights, it was clear that men wanted to lead, and they wanted women to follow” (hooks, 2000, p. 2).

Though feminism is a concept that can seem to unite the concerns of all women, it is overwhelmingly obvious that the experiences of women are wildly different based on the idea of intersectionality. “Western feminist theory tells its own story as a developmental narrative, where we move from a preoccupation with unity and sameness, through identity and diversity, and on to difference and fragmentation” (Hemmings, 2005, p. 116). This fragmentation is a direct result of the push against a “one size fits all” approach to feminist and feminist representation. “The fact of women’s differences from each other challenged the notion of a common oppression” (Valk, 2002, p. 307). Within feminism many of the historical gains that were won by, and for women did not include the concerns of all women. Thus, feminist theorists have now begun to acknowledge that

many of the concerns they espouse do not speak on behalf of all women. It is mostly representative of the white feminist perspective.

bell hooks also states “Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another” (hooks, 2000, p. 3). Many women groups identifying in different racial categories “criticized white feminists’ lack of attention to racial oppression and difference”, while they instead focused on the single issue of women’s rights (Valk, 202, p. 306). Women cannot be discussed as a singular group with a shared identity and experience. All women have access to intersectional identities. And these intersectionalities were called into question during the rhetoric of the 2016 Presidential election cycle. Feminist theory is unable to contend with the growing need to identify and acknowledge these intersectional identities. Specifically, feminist theory needs to intersect with critical race theory in order to fully delve into the issue of the ways in which domestic violence against women is portrayed in the media in the US.

Intersection of race and domestic violence

Just like gender, race is also socially constructed in a way that benefits those in positions of power and allows them to dominate people based on their skin color. The foundations of race theory are succinctly captured by Delgado and Stefancic (2006): racism is ordinary, there is a purpose in society to whiteness being prioritized over color, the tension of racialization raises its head when there is a need to benefit those in power. This very idea is the reason the intersection of race and gender is so valuable for this study. The power dynamic captured within the concept of gender - that between men and

women - works as a uniting factor amongst women. However, race creates another system of social hierarchy within the minority status that women already straddle. When it comes to domestic violence experiences, women of different races have different stories to tell. Victims are treated differently based on their racial makeup, and the discussions of victims are done differently based on the race of the person who has been attacked, and the person reporting the attack.

Dyer in his article (1988) discusses whiteness as the subject matter and plays into an interesting section as being white does not create anything for people except absence of color. White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular and therefore must be the normalized identity. This then becomes the normalized version in a White dominant society. There is something so peaceful and secure about knowing the identity you hold is not questioned in historical texts, political discussions, and social conversations while others must fight to be taken seriously. It is the white experience that is taught and supported in the education systems, in the legal system, and certainly the political sphere. Just as there was forced assimilation of people of color in practices of colonization, there is a tendency in institutionalized organizations and programs to assume that all people, women in this case, experience domestic violence and receive information about it in the same way. While all women, regardless of race, could be subjected to domestic violence, the racial category that one finds herself in has an influence on how people perceive that racial culture and how those perceptions dictate them to communicate and act about the issue of domestic violence.

As Dyer (1988) asserts, there is undeniable power in being white. The historical rhetoric of being white and black is the linkage to being right or wrong, and, at the very least, at being desirable and undesirable in certain social, legal, and political situations. In addition, as Dyer articulates, it is nearly impossible for white people and those in positions of power within institutions such as the government or the media, to truly see whiteness as something specific, so it is left alone without discussion. This is the definition of unacknowledged privilege in whiteness. Whites “benefit greatly from the embrace of colorblind and post-racial discourse to expose the vested interest that racially unconscious whites have in maintaining the status quo to protect the worth of their whiteness as valuable property” (Griffin, 2000, p. 4). White people do not know what it means to be white, but they do know, without a shadow of a doubt, what it means to be black; they know they cannot identify with blackness. The implication of how people who are white see themselves in society and how they have the power to create policies that affect people of other races and ethnicities, creates an even more divisive society, more and more removed from understanding the nuances and complexities of situated experiences of domestic violence among women of different races and ethnicities.

Another aspect of race theory is the rhetoric used to facilitate conversations in both academic and social settings. Olmstead (1998) writes that race theorists say that speech causes racism and to solve the racial issues in society, the solution needs to come from a change in language used in public spheres. Through discussion both verbal and via mediated sources, there can be either a perpetuation of racism, or a solution to racism.

There are three major stages that Olmstead (1998) cites when it comes to the treatment by society and social structures of those not identified in the majority as: naming, instituting, and enforcing. We look at how society has shaped the institutions that interact with minorities, and the difference is blatant. There is always a group suffering and then a group benefiting from the suffering of others. This aspect will be a valuable theoretical tool to analyze the mediated representation of domestic violence in policy and help websites and in traditional media.

Within the social system, there is an intractable race prejudice and within “racism.... a complex rhetorical system” so immersed that if a person does not know how to combat that system they will not be able to create effective lasting change (Olmstead, 1998, p. 324). Since our society has such strict guidelines and parameters around what it means to have power, it has the same types of guidelines, unwritten but acknowledged, on how a group may attempt to take ownership of power for themselves. These types of influence and control play an important role in the discussion of violence against women, especially connected to racial differences. People who are in positions of power may be so entrenched in racialized systems and institutions that their policies may reflect racism even without their overt intention. The analysis undertaken in this thesis aims to identify such rhetoric in the mediated representation of domestic violence against women with specific focus on women of different races.

Power

Media Power. In the discussion of how domestic violence is represented in the media in the US, the discussion of various intersections of power is vital. “Throughout history communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and counter-power, of domination and social change.” (Castells, 2007, p. 238). With reference to this quote, Castell’s conceptualization is ideal for the discussion of media power.

“The news media play a substantial role in shaping society’s perception of social issues, including domestic violence” (Gillespie et al., 2013, p. 222). This comes with a lot of responsibility to represent issues purposefully and incorporate all sides of the story. Decisions the public makes can be intrinsically linked to the media and the portrayal of the issue in question. Moreover, “Media frames are prepackaged social constructions that function as fully developed templates for understanding a given social phenomenon” (Gillespie et al, 2013, p. 226).

Additionally, there is a substantial amount of power embedded in the institutions and people who have the means to distribute the information, and to whom. Information is power, and those who control the distribution of the information, also control the messages being disseminated. Those in charge of distribution may not be aware of the “symbolic form, meaning, and action as it is with structures of power and institutions” (Mansell, 2004, p. 4). Mansell (2004) also mentions, “If resources are scarce and if power is unequally distributed in society, then the key issue is how these scarce resources are

allocated and controlled and with what consequences for human action” (p. 18). Castell’s point helps the author to identify a local, national, and a non-government organization website that disseminates information and policies about domestic violence and compare and contrast them critically.

Violence against women has reached a public health issue, and should be considered as such, but the topic is sensationalized in the media narratives and a status quo is maintained about the topic to placate people currently in positions of power. The male perspective is sought for reasoning and experience while being taken as more important than the female perspective. Unintentional as it may be, the systems in place do their work to maintain the current balance of abilities and access. One of the primary purposes of news media are to increase the success for their business - to sell the story. Sensationalized versions of the truth hold an audience’s attention. If not, media outlets lose money in the form of advertising. In addition, this sensationalized version of the story then affects the policy makers since those they represent are influenced by these stories. These stories may sell but fail to provide solutions for domestic violence.

Domestic violence happens so often and affects so many people, but our society has created a space that discusses domestic violence in very specific ways. Nettleton (2011) addresses this purposeful discourse in an effort to acknowledge how we victim blame causing the focus to be shifted from who has committed the offense, to who was affected by the offense. This victim blaming distracts both from who is committing the crime and how to engage with domestic violence in order to alleviate some of the

staggering realities. Addressing this discourse of victim blaming, Nettleton (2011) identifies certain themes and commonalities such as: “women being held responsible for the action instead of men being held responsible, domestic violence is terrifying to women and can be seen as amusing to men, statistics overly advertise the abuser as male, and a lack of connection between patriarchy and domestic violence” (p. 62).

The United States is a patriarchal society that tends to forgive male mistakes over those of women, promotes male agenda over those of women, and identifies male needs over those of women. Mirkin (1984) writes “males are seen as controlling access to institutional power, and it is argued that they mold ideology, philosophy, art and religion to suit their needs” (p. 41). Control is vital to the continuation of the system Mirkin describes. The “mass media plays an important role in producing hegemonic masculinity” in our society which identifies the space where masculine voices are more important to community members than feminine voices (Nettleton, 2011, p. 7). This is not something that seems purposeful, and yet multiple stakeholders hegemonically buy into this idea of masculinity. These systems protect the truth that benefits the power structure in place, because there is not an alternative story to be told. Since the majority already accepts these ideas of male dominance as fact, there is no convincing needed since the point of view that matters comes from white males in positions of authority. These discourses of male power through the media then assert that the individual women are responsible for what happened to them during the violence. There is so much power in the messages articulated by the media, and these messages are crafted in a way that continually

maintains the current status quo. When reported in the media, the stories become just that - a story. The stories usually focus on the victim and what has been done to her instead of the abuser and what they have done and, time and again, justice eludes the victims systematically.

Racial Power. Since the beginnings of American society certain members of society have been treated differently, and this difference can be seen in racial classifications. Caucasian/Euro-American members of American society have imposed racial superiority and power on Blacks and Native Americans for generations. This continues to be the case when discussing how society views domestic violence in Black families as opposed to when it occurs in Caucasian families.

Specifically, for black people in America, their 400 years of struggle are rarely acknowledged in public history and memory. The history of injustice suffered by African Americans as a result of slavery continues to be dismissed in the political and policy sector of society. Though there are times in history where there is a push for acknowledgement through movements and change, the underlying issues are consistent. As a result of slavery, Black people had to create new identities since their African ethnicities were no longer theirs to practice. They have a long history of creating new traditions although the African American culture came as a result of culture blending, assimilation, and relying on race instead of nationality of their origin. There is also a long history of systemic racism within public education for people of color and this is perpetuated by rezoning of schools in many states that lead to poorer people attending

schools with less resources. There is strategic and institutionalized racism in the criminal justice and public safety sector. “Incidents and patterns of violence that black allies decry as examples of black lives being devalued and terrorized are justified by dominant (i.e., white supremacist) norms and institutions of power in the name of self-defense” (Karkazam, 2016, p. 25). Although the Black population in the US is about 13% of the total population, about 40% of the prison population is currently Black, which is a demonstration of systematic disproportionate (in)justice against Blacks. Finally, there is an assumption that Black families have largely absent male parents that give rise to the perception of unstable and illegitimate Black children in the US. In the face of these assumptions, people and institutions in positions of power easily dismiss violence in Black families as a cultural anomaly. As a result, Black women are three times more likely to die from domestic violence.

According to YWCA (2017), over 84% of Native American women experience violence during their lifetimes. They are three times more likely to experience sexual violence than any other racial group. Over half of Native American women report having experienced sexual assault. Tribal lands have had issues with regard to lack of resources, high poverty rate, and alcohol and drug use for the longest time not to mention the weight of domestic violence hanging over their communities.

In addition, there is a significantly large ethnic group of Hispanics, Latinos and Latinas in the US. Even within this “group”, there is immense diversity of cultures. Within this group, there are US born Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans (YWCA,

2017). Most of the women coming from these cultures are less help-seeking and underutilize formal resources. As immigrants, some documented and some undocumented, there is a pervasive and constant internal and external fear in their lives. Reporting domestic violence then becomes secondary to their very existence in this country. Women from these cultures are more likely to face higher rates of intimate partner violence according to National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2017). 21% experience physical assault and 23.4% report intimate partner violence. Current politics of a country pertaining to gender, race, immigration, religion, etc., usually tend to dictate who deserves help and assistance.

Though the racial power distance is shorter than in most other countries, it is still significant and affects great many lives. Under these circumstances, “Addressing systemic racial disadvantage requires understanding that the maintenance and exercise of power relies on race, racism, and racist violence as embedded in our system, frameworks, foundations, everyday practices, and methodologies, and how individuals and groups differentially benefit from these” (Karkaza et.al, 2016, p. 25). This understanding will come especially handy as a theoretical lens in the analysis of the website content and the news representation of domestic violence.

Political Power. Continued racial and ethnic inequality and power differential can be seen currently with renewed vigor as a new President openly uses racist and discriminatory rhetoric. Moreover, it is important to note that news media sources depicted the sexual assault allegations against Donald Trump during his Presidential

campaign in 2016 very differently. Media institutions that have an ideological bent towards the issues championed by Donald Trump, such as Fox News Network, *The Wall Street Journal*, etc. (Smillie, 2009), framed these accusations by the women as lies and painted the women as pawns in an intricate political game. Those media institutions that were against the Donald Trump ideology instead reached out to the women directly or shared their stories repeatedly on their multiple platforms. Social media also allowed the abused women a space to take control of the message themselves. There is a direct link to public opinion when people are bombarded with different media messages about the victims and such opinions and perceptions drive the policies that are then represented in mediated websites.

Islamophobia is another political tool currently being used to discriminate against Muslims in the US. There are approximately 3.3million Muslims in the US and about 63% of them are immigrants from 50 countries in the world. A Peaceful Families Project (2017) survey estimates that about 56% of Us-Muslim women experience domestic violence and 31% from intimate partners. These female Muslim victims are rarely heard about. Their voices are lost because of the current political rhetoric against immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants and their characterization as terrorists.

Thus, it is of great value to analyze the similarities and differences between news depiction of domestic violence and depiction by different state, national institutions which are set up to provide help to the victims of such violence no matter what their racial, ethnic or religious background may be.

Economic Power. Just as all other aspects of power, economic power plays a significant role in how women's issues are represented in the US. According to Simmons (2016),

Perhaps the most important determinant of the amount of political power women wield in a society is the extent of their participation in the workforce. Two complementary arguments tell us why this is so. First, work endows women with politically significant assets. Second, working women subvert the traditional values that often hinder them from playing a more active role in public life. (p. 118)

This idea is important because when women are economically disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts, they have less strength in their voices and less legitimacy in their depiction of experiences of domestic violence.

Poverty is a plague that affects many women. "Economic inequality and politics are interrelated" (Jacobs & Dirlam, 2016, p. 471). Those without funds have less political impact, and they are less likely to impact their future or policies. Jacobs & Dirlam (2016) also state "variations in the differences in power resources between the classes can be assumed to have significant consequences for distributive policies...", and how these policies do not favor those who are economically disadvantaged. Even the media representation of domestic violence relies on what sells more than how to bring about justice for the victims.

People have different ways of thinking about how power plays out in their interactions. Castells (2007) notes that power is “the structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actors” (p. 239). Every time we engage in communication with others there is the ability to impose one point of view or perspective over another. Americans have created a society where the media’s framing of issues powerfully influences public opinion. Add to that the layers of power dynamics of politics, race, and gender and one would begin to see the depth and complexity of issues such as domestic violence being used for political, economic, and cultural purposes by people in positions of power.

Mediated Voices and Witnessing

Since there is significant voice and power in the representation of social issues, analyzing the media’s portrayal of domestic violence incidents will provide insight into how society views domestic violence. Gillespie et al. (2013) state, “research indicates that the media paid little attention to the abuse of women by their male counterparts until the latter part of the 1970s. Prior to this time domestic violence was sectioned off as terrorism” (p. 223). There was limited, if any, conversation regarding domestic violence that was focused on the home or how this affected women in their own spaces.

Ultimately, the help for victims of domestic violence and the “stories” being told about them in the media can make a difference, victims’ voices can be made prominent. Violence against women yields an unspeakable truth in history that has a direct impact. Being able to access these stories, and to tune into these voices will “help to present the

views of the marginal whose perspectives often remain unheard and unimportant within the mainstream discussions and debates” giving tangibility to previously identified abstract concepts (Mitra, 2001 p. 34).

Geographical location becomes obsolete when it pertains to what can be accessed online. The voices of those with less power, such as, women, victims, people of color, are no longer held to a localized area, but can be shared across any boundary, making these voices examples of the realities of others. When there is more than one option provided for the expression of the central, or focused voice, people can choose what they listen to or hear. Meaning “...the center and the margin will not be distinguishable by the strength of their voices but the responsibility of drawing that distinction will remain in the hands of the reader who now has greater choice in selecting what he or she would consider the central voice” (Mitra, 2001, p. 36). This is the great ability and responsibility found in mediated sources. And the ability to have access to the situations that people are going through creates the option to become a witness to the tragedies of violence against women.

To witness is intricate – the concept and the word’s definition itself has multiple meanings. Witnessing something to most people would mean being there to literally see what is going on - becoming a primary source of information. Peters (2008) describes it as “the notion of the witness as a privileged source of information” (p. 708). Witnessing can also arouse in individuals a special way of experiencing what the victims experience. That makes them the person of interest- the central voice. In a situation like domestic

violence against women, the individual experiencing the violence has a unique perspective that includes what has happened in specific and general, and the aftermath of what has happened. Their witnessing is invaluable to the follow up and follow through of what should happen next. “Witnessing is also the discursive act of stating one’s experience for the benefit of an audience that was not present at the event and yet make some sort of judgment about it” (Peters, 2008, p. 709). There is, thus, a need to analyze how mediated information about domestic violence through websites and traditional news allows the viewer/audience/reader to *witness* the victim’s experiences that takes into consideration the nuances of intersectional identities of these women.

CHAPTER 3

Method

The study was done in part to analyze the ways in which organizations that have a stated purpose of outreach and support to women who are victims of domestic violence, represent support through their websites. Another aspect of this analysis is to unpack the effectiveness of such mediated outreach on the target populations. The intersectionality of race, gender, and socio-economic identities need to be analyzed in order to determine who is being targeted in the information presented, how the optics of the website contribute to the understanding of support and help by the victims, and the presentation of support compared to the domestic violence data about women of color, religion and cultures, provided in this thesis. The author has chosen to focus on two websites that are meant to help victims of domestic violence - Justice.Gov for a national level organization and Texas Council for Family Violence (tcfv.org) for a regional organization. The above listed websites are then compared with an influential print medium, the *NYT* (source: www.nytimes.com), for the national and international portrayal, perspective and representation of domestic violence against women.

Websites have been studied to analyze discursive representations and communication that is both obvious and underlying. Focusing on women for the study is purposeful to these specific victims, since “the use of the internet by girls and women has

be characterized in terms of ‘social comfort’” (Day & Keys, 2008, p.5). Knowing this about women, and identifying this specific subgroup, website discourse analysis was the best method to truly grasp the influence and effectiveness of such communication. As Park et al. (2011) suggests, “One way to explore this question is to perform content analysis ...” (p. 8). The author goes beyond content analysis and employs critical discourse analysis since it allows the author to perform the analysis based on historical and contextual elements of power and privilege, a viewpoint in alignment with the theme of this thesis on lack of focus on domestic violence against women.

The method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows the author to investigate intersectionalities, or the lack of it, in both the websites and the newspaper. CDA is useful for the identification of the reproduction of ideology in language use. It enables the author to analyze the discourse of the websites and the newspaper within the larger contextual, political and historical background of this inquiry.

The data is qualitative in nature and certainly carries some difficulties in discourse analysis, but there are significant patterns and themes that were noticed in looking through mediated sources (Teddie & Tasakkori, 2012). As Mills (2015) discusses, significant cultural capital is at stake when focusing on mediated exposure websites provide. Cultural capital “includes such things as acquired knowledge (educational and otherwise), cultural codes, manner of speaking and consumption practices and so forth...” and this cultural capital has a huge impact on this study (Mills, 2012, p.149). This capital was used to analyze the discourse and impact of the visual and written

communication in the websites, and is, therefore, vital to the methodological discussion. Cultural capital comes into play, and there are layers of expendable influence obvious in the discourse analysis. In many ways the discourse of the mediated sources analyzed, perpetuates the systems of privilege and further communicates the disenfranchisement of minority voices.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Website Analysis

	Technical		Public		Victims		
<u>Website</u>	<u>About</u>	<u>Member</u>	<u>Policy</u>	<u>Social Media</u>	<u>Testimonials</u>	<u>Resources</u>	<u>Articles</u>
Federal	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes- local	Yes-administration
State	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes-local	No

Table 1: Summary of sections of the two websites analyzed

The website analysis revealed interesting themes that appear under the subsections, lack of minority voices, male perspective, and prioritizing economic well-being of the websites. The data in these websites is summarized in Table 1 above. This Table provides an overview of the sections that appear in both the websites analyzed in this section, namely The Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women (federal) and the Texas Council on Family Violence (state). The sections that are present or absent in the two websites appear in the first row of the Table.

Next, the following two figures provide a visual of the websites being analyzed in this section. They are screenshots of the national and the state organization's front pages.

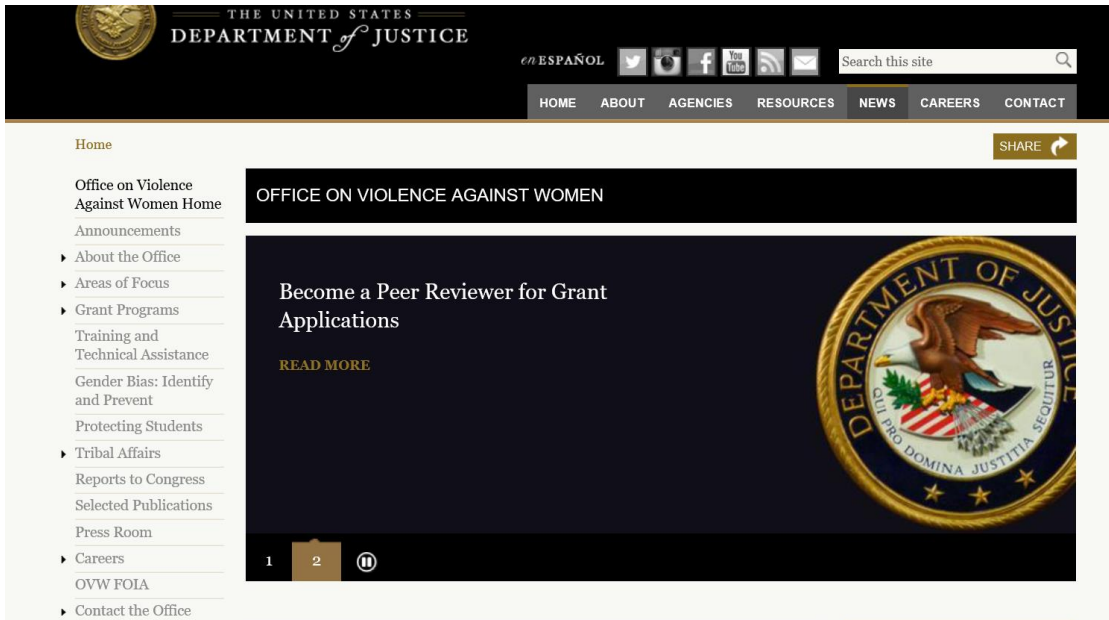


Figure 1: Front page of Department of Justice through which one can reach Office on Violence Against Women. The United States Department of Justice. (2018, April 14). Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/ovw>.

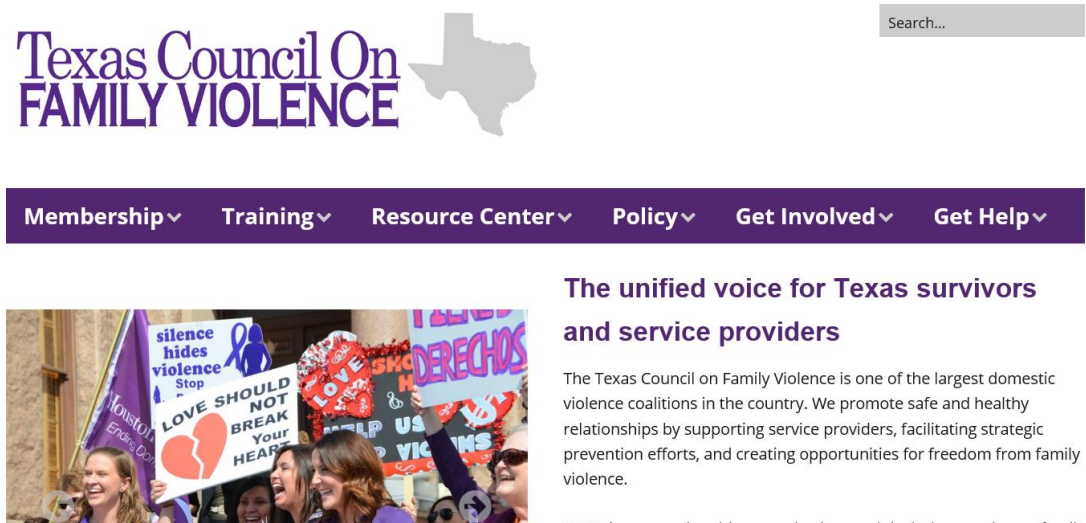


Figure 2: Front page of Texas Council on Family Violence through which one can reach all services and resources. Texas Council On Family Violence. (2017, December 1). Retrieved from <http://tcfv.staging.wpengine.com/>

Lack of Minority Voices. Within each of the websites analyzed there were themes that continuously appeared. These organizations, which are created in efforts to aide women in situations of domestic violence, are lacking in recognizing or providing minority perspectives in the displayed information. None of the websites have provided a space for testimonials of those who have been in the same situation, or any personal touch of comfort as women navigate these uncharted waters. If women are looking for potential leadership or motivation in their search for help, not one of the organizations provides clean access to these resources. This lack of connectivity transfers throughout the website. As such a traumatizing time in a victim's life, victims would require emotional, psychological, physical, and financial support, and yet the websites are lacking in providing an aligned message amongst people from different backgrounds. Many cultures have different values on relationship building, so stories and narratives from victims may be necessary in reaching the audience. If the website does not acknowledge different backgrounds, then they will not be able to serve the entire population. Often the websites feel like it does not acknowledge the different ways in which people can live their lives, which leads to not acknowledging the different accounts of what it means to be a victim. An individual's identity plays a vital role in the cultural, emotional, and personal way of handling such sensitive issues such as domestic violence. Falling short of these supports, minority voices are silenced on these websites. Though there are opportunities to change language occasionally on certain pages of the

Department of Justice website, the language change does not include all sections and subsections of the website.

The author used a Spanish speaking person to go through the websites and this is what that person reported the many issues that the website would have with Spanish speakers. Not only was the information simpler than what was displayed in English, but the information was not applied to victims. The website displayed the information about the historical process of the Department of Justice and provided information on different subsections of the DOJ but did not address specifically violence against women. She noted the formatting was difficult to understand, stating her mother, who speaks only Spanish, often avoids websites and situations where she is unfamiliar with the way in which information would be displayed. She mentioned that anything relevant to Spanish speaking women who are in need, was not included in the displayed information. In addition, on the subsections that it does include, none of them are related to domestic violence victims or services for victims. As she flipped back and forth between the English and Spanish pages, she mentioned that none of the information included in the Spanish page would be helpful if a Spanish speaking woman was in need. All the material does not appear equitably across the two languages. If the goal is to reach all women with the same messages, same material which provides vital information to the victims is not distributed. America has many different communities of women in our society that we must address and work with and for to see results.

Each of the websites, no matter the sponsor, contain similar items and themes of information about the organization, history of organization influence, opportunities to participate in the organization in some way, and a space to reach out for assistance whether that be through hotline, law, or shelter. Though this is positive in that there are services available to viewers, the spaces providing services do not acknowledge the needs of the victims. On each website, though maybe in different pages with different levels of linking and connection, there is a page for help. In some websites this is titled “services”, some identify this area as “get help”, but no matter which way, there is a space for assistance. Similarly, each of the websites representing different governmental or not for profit organizations, provide resources that are not of their own. They direct the victim to other organizations, hotlines, or shelters outside of their control. This communicates two things to the victim. The first is that they will continue to have to search for assistance. This could be dangerous depending on the depth of the situation the victim is in and traumatizing for the victim to a point that she may stop searching for assistance. The second is a feeling of responsibility for finding their own information and support. Although this is something that society feels individuals should be able to do, in a time of crisis these women are traumatized, and could be unfamiliar with the method of figuring out these websites. This filtering alludes to a middle man mentality instead of a mentality of purposeful assistance and readily available care.

Women in general are disenfranchised in the American society, but women of color and women of differing backgrounds are left even further from the conversation

(Valk, 2002). In the websites, there is very rare representation of minority women in the layout, even when looking at the resources provided. While women who identify as part of a minority group are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, they are not given a space for representation in the websites they may be looking for assistance. The governmental website had no pictorial representation of women and does not acknowledge the difference in experience by allowing space for sharing of details or stories.

Male Perspective. Since the research is focused on domestic violence against women, there must be a feminist perspective looking at the websites to assess their effectiveness. Unfortunately, the theme of the page is not focused on the women involved, and instead focused on a discussion of the issue, history of the successful changes in policies, and/or the ability of the organization to assist in these parameters. There is less of an effort put in place to ensure that the female victims are taken care of regarding seeking out help and an end to the situation. The emphasis is placed on relaying information that is applicable to a very small percentage of victims seeking immediate assistance. The websites do not focus on examining the needs of a victim. A feminist perspective would provide this missing link in respecting and providing the feedback and experiences of victims, who are mostly female.

It is not just a female perspective that is required. These websites need to incorporate the perspectives of females coming from a variety of ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. The look and feel of the website is very technical and dry. This

appeals more to male members of society (Merchant, 2012). Men and women communicate differently, and, while gender is a spectrum of alignment with identities, there are realms of agreed upon norms that apply to people who identify as men, and people who identify as women. Women and men interact in a communicative environment in different ways. This look and feel lacks a female perspective conducive to someone who is emotionally, psychologically, and physically battered. The websites are overwhelmingly technical, lacking personality, and without the testimonies of any of the female victims.

Prioritizing Economic Well Being of the Websites. Each of these websites focus on the benefits of the organization and what it has done for society in general. It takes, on an average, four to five clicks on links, subsections, and additional readings to find services for victims. This means that victims need to have certain expertise in maneuvering of a predominately English language website in order to receive assistance. For example, in order to find the service providers that could help against domestic violence, a person would need to go to the DOJ homepage, then the link for office on violence against women, then the left tab labeled areas of focus, then the link to domestic violence, finally they could click the link to local help or use the hotlines. Such expertise can only be acquired from people that have a certain socioeconomic background. The assumption is that victims, who research help and assistance sources, have prior knowledge of the Internet and the design of websites. Women who are living in poverty, may not have the knowledge of internet usage. If these victims approach the websites

without prior knowledge of the internet they will walk away without being able to access the services. However, if one wishes to donate money, it is the easiest thing to do.

Within each organization’s website, there is only one subsection regarding assistance specifically for the victims. In contrast, there are 30 subsections pertaining to organizational information. Each organization has a “join us” section. Although, the websites provide opportunities for people to join the organization by providing funding, attending events or following social media accounts, the victim assistance areas are given less priority upfront. Raising funds and raising awareness are important aspects of the organizations. However, it is clear that the website design demonstrates prioritizing of economic benefit as compared to victim assistance resources in the layout of the website.

The Office of Violence Against Women clearly states that it does not provide service directly to the public but the lack of representation of victims, especially victims from various backgrounds, makes the issue of domestic violence distant from the public and leadership organizations. The websites lack a balance offered between technical, public, and victim information.

Newspaper Analysis

Number of Articles Total	Number of Articles After Cut	Number of Articles Critical Discourse Analysis	Number Authored by Women	Editorial Board for New York Times
45 with key word: Domestic Violence	36- eliminating duplicates and repetition	21- eliminated ones with no connection to topic	6/21	Men-7 Women-3 Men of Color-1 Women of Color-0

Table 2: Explanation of NYT articles used in the data analysis

The public assumes the news media's purpose is to inform them of current issues and problems, providing an opportunity for the general population to gain knowledge and take action. The *NYT* representation of domestic violence during the 2016 Presidential campaign is an important yardstick for the public knowledge generation about domestic violence and women's issues. The *NYT* is a newspaper of record not only for the US but, for the rest of the world. The 2016 Presidential campaign was being followed religiously at home mainly because this campaign represented a class of ideologies like never before. Donald Trump brought a brand of rhetoric to the campaign that undermined the value of women's issues. As one of the burning topics of this Presidential campaign, the *NYT*'s representation of this issue matters for the shaping of public opinion, resource allocation, and cultural bent. Overall, during this search, there are some common themes that became prevalent. During the first level of analysis, there were many accounts of discussion regarding domestic violence or violence against women. However, the second level of analysis yielded the underlying problems such as, dominant racial undertones, strategic power of Trump's political discourse, overwhelming male point of view, and diversion from domestic violence. Some of the analysis aligns with the themes identified in the analysis of the websites, and some themes are specific to the newspaper.

Dominant Racial Undertones. Based on the percentage of domestic violence victims categorized by race discussed in the literature review, the analysis of the newspaper articles yielded a disproportionate alignment with the racial percentages. When reading the articles in question, there was a thought that the reader would find

articles signifying the extreme number of women of color who are exposed to and threatened with domestic violence. For example, the total number of female domestic violence victims identifying as African American in the United States is 45.1% followed by 37% identifying as Hispanic women. However, in the articles the vagueness of the racial identity of the victims would lead the reader to assume that the women are all white. In the case of this specific search, there was only one article that alluded to women of color and their experience with domestic violence in the United States. However, this article, also goes on to reference gun laws not applying equally to all those who use the “stand your ground law” for defense. Thus, in effect, the one article that actually identifies the race of the victim is diluted with talk of gun policy instead of victim’s story and her immediate circumstances. In this article (Light, 2017), the author does refer to aspects of lack of inclusivity and equality in application of gun laws whereas a white male and black female (the victim in this case) cannot use the “stand your ground policy” to equal effect. The focus on the policy is important but it is not equally represented as the victim’s story and the actual domestic violence situation. The article only mentions domestic violence in an effort to discuss the perception of women as it applies to the courtroom and does not focus on how society perceives victims or how the victimization has a negative impact specifically for black women. The article goes on to exert that the “stand your ground law” could make it more dangerous for domestic violence victims as their abusers could have “more legal leeway to ‘shoot first, ask questions later,’ knowing that if prosecutors didn’t prove that they did not act in response

to a reasonable fear, they would not face a trial” (Light, 2017). Though there are some legal restrictions on *how* information regarding domestic violence victims is reported, there is still a large scope to report such information from a personal and passionate stance.

In another *NYT* article (Barrett, 2016), there is a description of female victims and their appearance in courts as witnesses. This description is used to highlight the plight of women who are expected to tow their gender stereotypes when it comes to emotional communication. This article is an example of how female victim’s perspective is skewed to a white female victims perspective within the practices of news reporting. This article was in relation to Hillary Clinton’s facial expressions during the presidential campaign, but it had deep association with domestic violence victims as in how female victims can get more sympathy in the courtroom if they were to emote as per their female gender stereotype. “As researchers have shown, if a woman expresses grief on the witness stand, consistent with stereotypes about female emotionality, the judge is more likely to hand down a harsher sentence to the defendant” (Barrett, 2016). In this quote, the women’s identity is whitewashed. Consistent with such quotes, victimhood and the female experience is almost always viewed through the lens of race.

Women of color are more likely to be victims of domestic violence but were not provided an avenue to discuss their positions or experiences in these articles. None of the articles are relating to or responding to the needs of women of color in cases of domestic violence reportage. While there is a lack of discussion of any victim experience in these

articles, it is important to realize that, although women in general are the victims of domestic violence, there is a disproportionate number of those women who are women of color. Just as there is the muted group effect on women of color within feminism, there is a lack of discussion on behalf of or with women of color when it comes to their lived experiences as represented in the *NYT*.

Strategic Power of Trump's Political Discourse. Trump's political discourse during the Presidential election had a tremendous subliminal effect on the general rhetoric of right-wing, conservative American citizens. The rhetoric became more and more pronounced against liberal ideologies such as female empowerment, racial injustice, economic equity, etc. Thus, the newspapers also had several instances of reporting domestic violence that somehow reflected this strategic rhetorical power. The *NYT* is known for its liberal reporting, but even in its pages the reporting of domestic violence was being driven by focus on Trump's rhetoric and not on the strength of the domestic violence cases themselves.

The newspaper articles consistently mentioned the campaign rhetoric of Donald Trump in terms of political, economic, and influential power, all of which are intimately involved with the evolution of domestic violence as an issue in this country. Donald Trump came up in the articles regarding domestic violence twelve times separately. In an article from the *NYT* (Kristof, 2016), the author discusses the ways in which the rhetoric on women matches the actions of the members of Donald Trump's Presidential campaign. The article references domestic violence, but only in relation to the

accusations against Trump and his campaign personnel. When exposed to consistently sexist language, the public becomes accustomed and immune to the shock that would normally accompany the comments against women. Though the article was specifically about Trump's actions and words coinciding, there was mention of domestic violence as Trump himself and his campaign C.E.O, Steve Bannon, had been accused of domestic violence at that time. These accusations, though causing some pause in the public memory, did nothing to halt derogatory rhetoric towards women throughout the rest of the campaign. The rhetoric of his campaign speeches, previously recorded conversations and interviews, changed what was acceptable behavior for a presidential candidate. This change, while being critiqued in the newspaper articles, also reinforced the rhetoric just by dint of being reported over and over again in the context of women, domestic violence, and attitude towards women, etc. Since news media is a powerful medium that shapes public opinion, what once was believed to be right-wing rhetoric became mainstream and was adopted by the public consciousness and accepted into everyday communication.

The reinforcement of anti-women rhetoric influencing policy for women is demonstrated in the article quote "Jeff Sessions, ...; Tom Price, ...; and Mike Pompeo, ..., all voted against reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act in 2013, which funds shelters and services for victims of domestic violence, because of amendments extending protections to L.G.B.T. victims" (Chira, 2016). Although such policy issues need to be exposed and critiqued in a/n inter/national newspaper of the repute of *NYT*, it

also simultaneously exposes people to ideas that are anti-women. While this is a situation that cannot be helped if our news media is to execute the duties of the fourth estate, there is something to be said about how reporting language needs to be adjusted in order to showcase the critique aspect and not so much the idea generation aspect. To people who are easily influenced, such repetition of rhetoric can be just as harmful as useful.

Overwhelming Male Point of View. There was an overwhelming male tone, opinion and perspective, in the *NYT* articles that were analyzed. In this case, the topic of domestic violence seems to be one that would need to be discussed with certain positions. Such a sensitive and personal topic which overwhelmingly affects women, would ideally be one led by women. The *NYT* has authorized and produced articles on this topic for a significant amount of time, and there is still a lack of perspective from survivors, specialists, and other interested parties directly connected to the issues of domestic violence against women. In these articles women are completely left out as contributors to the conversation unless they are being directly interviewed or somehow part of the story itself. For example, there is an article in which a male reporter interviews female victims of domestic violence, who voted for Trump. “So she is aghast that one of Trump's first proposals is to cut federal funds that sustain the organization. ‘My prayer is that Congress will step in’ to protect domestic violence programs, she said” (Kristof, 2016). The victim’s contribution to the story is valuable to the author in making the point that Trump has tricked his supporters, but not in maintaining the services that she is referring to in her commentary. Instead of using a female perspective as a lens through which to

write and discuss about domestic violence in an effort to provide a level of comfort and understanding, the *NYT* chooses to continue the cycle of male voices.

While the male perspective is quite predominant throughout the coverage, the *NYT* also mounts a scathing critique of Donald Trump's views on women and women's policies. Even if this critique is well intentioned, it is written by male authors and journalists for the most part. The *NYT* Editorial Board consists of ten members, seven of whom are men. The twenty-one articles that were analyzed in depth for this thesis had six written by female authors or journalists. This is a telling statistic specifically when it comes to portraying and representing domestic violence. For example, Kristof (2016) writes "If only his troglodyte views on gender could be a springboard to discuss women's issues that rarely get explored, such as domestic violence that strikes one woman in four, or human trafficking, channeling some 10,000 underage Americans into the sex trade each year." The rattling of statistics does impact the reader in a more objective kind of way, but it does not include any victim statements or narratives to put a female face to the issue. It works more to critique Trump than to promote awareness about domestic violence.

The lack of empathy, the female point of view, the experiential aspect is completely lacking in the national conversation that the *NYT* is trying to facilitate. This is not an intentional projection of ideals, but it is subtly created in the dynamics of how the articles are presented, the methods that are used to discuss domestic violence, and the purpose of mentioning domestic violence in the article. Since the male voice dominates

the realms of law enforcement, government, media, and American leadership regardless of what other event is occurring, women end up continuously being the subject of discussion instead of leading the discussion. As a result, women's agency is obfuscated.

Diversion from Domestic Violence. During the analysis of the articles the most significant discovery, though underwhelmingly so, was the lack of articles regarding the staggering statistics about domestic violence. The most prevalent topic of discussion in the articles was gun violence and gun control and expansion of gun ownership. Most of the articles end up critiquing how there is an effort in some states to, ignore domestic violence statistics, resort to the *protecting of the 2nd amendment*, and allow for less gun control, even though violence against women occur often with their intimate partners and guns or weapons. In an article (The Shoot-Me State, 2016), that mentions such lax laws like stripping "law enforcement of its current authority to deny firearms to those guilty of domestic violence," the focus is entirely on issues of gun ownership by perpetrators of domestic violence and its impact on law enforcement. The article goes on to critique how law makers are adamant about taking away oversight from local law enforcement, something repeatedly mentioned in Trump's campaign speeches

In another article (The One-Sided, 2016), there is a reference to polls that indicate how "... Republicans as well as Democrats -- think it common sense to require gun owners to surrender their firearms upon a first arrest for domestic violence or a court order protecting fearful partners." The polls are a statistical means to gauge public opinion about issues. The article does not talk about public opinion of how to deal with

domestic violence but goes on to indicate in a roundabout way that people across the political divide support gun laws that *may* help victims of domestic violence. The focus is again diluted from domestic violence to gun violence although they are not always correlated.

Kristof (2017) writes in his article that we should be worried about husbands with guns more than other forms of terrorism which was a key point being made in the Trump campaign. He points out that in some states, husbands and intimate partners, can have access to weapons even when they have a history of violence and have ended up permanently harming their loved ones. In fact, the article includes the quote, “In other countries, brutish husbands put wives in hospitals; in America, they put them in graves.” Even though this article, and others like it, mention the problem of domestic violence and the negative effects of lack of gun control, the article does not address the issue of domestic violence itself. Other gun laws to which there are allusions in other articles, ultimately skirt the human issues of domestic violence from the female perspective. For example, Downes’ (2017) article, addresses immigration reform, and notes “ICE stakes out a courthouse to grab a survivor of domestic violence”, not in an effort to discuss the wrong-doing of domestic violence, but in an effort to focus the reader on the negative effects of the Trump administration’s immigration plan. Domestic violence is not the focal point for 90% of the articles and is a point being made as a peripheral issue.

Substantial information regarding the most important aspects applicable to domestic violence victims are often missing in the national news media as demonstrated

in the analysis of the *NYT*. Subjects such as resources, victim led discussion or interviews, victim narratives, and ways to be involved in the solution, are mostly missing. In each of the articles that were analyzed, none took the time to identify locations for domestic violence victims to seek assistance or identified any area of need for victims. In addition, there are statistics that show domestic violence occurs often and harms thousands, but the reporting was limited from a personal standpoint, but is plentiful from the policy standpoint. Considering the epidemic that domestic violence is in America, one would think that there would be active reporting to bring attention to the current data, education on the needs of victims, and solutions to end violence against women. The analysis does not support this assumption. Even in articles where the title and theme assure the reader that the focus would be on domestic violence, the article delves off into some logistical conversation or idea that is ultimately unrelated. The racial perspective of people of color is completely missing. The overall male perspective is predominant. There is a lack of sensitivity towards who is being harmed, and an emphasis on objective value of those harmed. Unfortunately, these articles provide less of a concentration on the victims, and more focused on the institutionalized way the victims impact the economic and political systems as a reaction to the underlying rhetoric of the Trump Presidential campaign.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The data analysis revealed four primary areas of discussion overall. They appear under four subsections titled, embedded discursive sexism, White makes the most noise, domestic violence against women at the mercy of politics, and peripheral issues distracting from narratives of domestic violence. These four areas of discussion encompass a wholistic understanding of what the author has uncovered through the analysis of the data. The ensuing discussion, thus, weaves together critical issues emerging from this analysis with what has already been established in the literature review section and what could be further possibilities in the areas of communicating domestic violence in the media, policies related to domestic violence, as well as, implications for social work organizations.

Embedded Discursive Sexism

The websites and the NYT articles both had predominantly strong elements associated with male orientation, concerns, and perspectives. The literature review pointed towards how domestic violence is prevalent because there is a definite culture of women's oppression in our society (hooks, 2000). In alignment with this feminist understanding of domestic violence, the data in this inquiry also points towards representation of this issue in a way that does not entirely express the female victims'

perspective. Ultimately, it could be relatable that this is a more subtle and discursive form of oppression that is hard to distinguish when one were to view these websites and articles at a first glance. Based on hooks' (2000) groundbreaking work, a key tenet of feminism that helps fight male oppression is the fight against sexism. In the data analysis, sexism is present in ways that are different from how it is expressed in policies and physical spaces around us. In the data, it is expressed in the form of female perspectives being omitted, victims' statements being absent, lack of female visuals, lack of easy access to victim help resources, lack of female authorship for articles about domestic violence, etc. Female domestic violence victims viewing these websites will notice a lack of empathy, their own voice, and visual representations of themselves, among other things. Noticeably, in the websites the various subsections were not only lacking design, visual, language, orientation directed towards female victims, they were specifically lacking any racial or ethnic representation. Similarly, if they were to read the articles, they will be struck by how dispassionate the articles are, lacking narratives from victims, and an overwhelming focus on and critique of politics. As a result, female victims are less likely to be assured of, comforted, and empowered to seek help about their situation. The data suggests that women are objects of discussion, policy making, and pity, as well as represented as people who need protection. Women do not seem to be included in the conversation about solution for domestic violence on an equal footing.

The literature review suggests that feminists who identify themselves as Christians understood male oppression in terms of wage imbalance, equal power in the

household, distribution of parenting responsibility, etc. Based on the literature, these concerns were attributed in the feminist movement to middle class, white women. These concerns are mainly overtly absent in the data analyzed for this inquiry. There is no direct mention of any religious affiliation within the websites or the articles analyzed. However, the middle class, white ideology is still very much present in the data. It just does not come through as an overtly religious representation. The websites and the articles overall have a severe lack of representation from lower socioeconomic strata or more diverse populations in the country.

Another important aspect of this discussion is that the websites and the articles seem to be countering actions by male perpetrators. There is very little space and time spent on providing a solution to domestic violence. Ideally, there needs to be equal or more space, time and resources spent in curbing domestic violence in the first place. By approaching the website content as well as the newspaper reporting from the point when domestic violence has already occurred, the data suggests that there is an underlying gendered acceptance of domestic violence as part and parcel of our daily lives. Specifically, during the Trump political campaign, reports of his overt and covert sexism and derisive attitude towards women were taken-for-granted, not adequately criticized, and even supported by evangelical Christians. This created an environment in which approach to domestic violence was more of a reaction rather than a step towards solution. We can see this trend being emulated in the data.

If the male members of our society are already significantly less likely to be harmed in realms of domestic violence, opinions, policies and positions generated from the male-oriented perspective then strongly reifies the power of sexism. Instead of focusing on the female victims and what they need, the focus is on what policies the male-majority administration is undertaking, how male journalists are reporting on domestic violence, and how male-dominated institutions discuss, work through, and handle issues of domestic violence. hooks (2000) suggests that we think of feminism as a cause for all members of our society. If we approach media representation of domestic violence against women from this perspective, all members of society should be working to end domestic violence. Male members are certainly a very important part of the conversation and solution. In that respect, if the websites are created by men or if male journalists are reporting on these issues, it is an indicator of an inclusive approach to the issue. However, the data analysis for this inquiry suggests that, in most cases, the media representation is exclusively or most of the time being undertaken by male members. This is a gross underrepresentation of the female voice that should be at the core of issue. When women are left out of the conversation regarding domestic violence, purposefully or not, it promotes a culture of male power creating more distance between male and female members of society. Feminism works as a counter measure to the ideology of male domination in our society. A feminist approach to representing domestic violence lends itself to storytelling and listening to the accounts of what female victims have experienced, something that is totally lacking in our data. Sensitive topics involving

emotional and psychological hurt and pain, needs to find space in the media representation of national and regional administrations, as well as, national news media. There are many reasons that women do not notify authorities of domestic violence. These include cultural, familial, or other personal beliefs. If the media representation also focuses on more male domination and viewpoint, it becomes more difficult for female victims to relate to such content. Thus, the data demonstrates that a male-oriented representation of domestic violence results in subtle maintenance of status quo in society with regard to male-female power imbalance within the backdrop of the 2016 Trump political campaign.

White Makes the Most Noise

Another major strain of discussion that requires careful consideration is how issues of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity were largely absent in the data analyzed. Our literature suggests that female victims of domestic violence cannot be approached as a singularly conceptualized idea of a woman. Women, according to Davis (2008), identify themselves in multiple ways that intersect and diverge depending on the contexts of their communicative interactions. These intersectionalities can include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. In the data for this inquiry, the author found an alarming lack of intersectional elements. First and foremost, throughout the data there are very few instances of deliberate attempt of representation of different types of women with regard to race, ethnicity, and religion. Although, women of color are disproportionately more likely to be victims of domestic violence, there is no separation or additional information

in the websites analyzed. Similarly, the NYT articles gravely lacks specific mention of women of color or policies related to them within the realm of domestic violence.

Moreover, Native American women are even less likely to be represented overall unless directed to a website run for and by Native women.

Not only is the lack of intersectionality an issue in this data, the lack of representation of women of color also speaks of inherent, underlying, and institutional racism. The websites, for example, do not demonstrate women of color perspective. Overall, women of color often feel a cultural responsibility to protect and maintain the status of their loved ones over protecting and maintaining a safe and secure environment for themselves. Specifically, the websites fail to take into account that since African American women often feel an allegiance to family and their children, they feel the weight of responsibility and, ultimately, they are unable to break a cycle of domestic violence situation they might face (YWCA Columbus, 2017). In addition to the websites, in one of the NYT articles, African American women were represented as angry or aggressive when they were seeking justice in the courtroom. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to perceive African American women's perspective as legitimate and important in the representational process. The discursive barring of the African American female perspective is a great disservice from representational politics, policy, and social perspectives. The White woman is present to a certain extent, but the Black woman is absent to a large extent. This juxtaposition of presence and absence is an example of discursive racism. The situation is the same with other ethnic representations such as

Hispanic women and other religious representations of women who do not follow Christianity.

An utter lack of cultural understanding can also be evidenced in the way Native Americans, immigrants, and other women in minority communities, are portrayed in the data. Historical and social oppression has contributed to Native American/Alaskan Indian women's deep mistrust for national/white agencies and service providers. In most cases, there is a fear of failure and a fear of letting the family unit down. This trend in the Native American community, can also be seen in other racial minority groups discussed. Though these women are experiencing more acts of violence, the data analyzed in this inquiry shows that they hardly have any voice on the matter whether through the websites or in the news reporting. The anti-immigrant discourse of the Trump campaign also adds to the climate of backlash against immigrants and minorities, which in turn, affect female domestic violence victims in cultural groups who need the most support from society. There is no consistent outreach observed in these websites or articles for women who come from diverse cultural background with different social and familial values. Overall, there are significant traces of lack of diversity in both websites and news articles in this analysis. Understanding of intersectionality of women's identities, race issues and cultural diversity, are critical elements of mediated communication about domestic violence against women. The data suggests that much of the content fails to address these issues through discursive representation and, in some cases, complete absence of representation.

Domestic Violence Against Women at the Mercy of Politics

The third most important issue found in the data is the large shadow of the political discourse propagated by Donald Trump during the 2016 Presidential campaign on the content of the website as well as the newspapers. The election of Donald Trump brought many public opinions to light. The United States public saw the rebirth or revival of what many would consider conservative and extreme points of view during this campaign. From alt-right activists to the KKK, supporters of these views became well known, and thus, more important. With the power of these ideologies brought to the forefront by the Trump campaign discourse, the rest of the country saw an increase in hateful comments towards women, minorities, religions, immigrants, etc. Trump's ideology is first and foremost sexist, but, more importantly, there is an overt focus on power, influence, and money. Trump was accused of sexual battery against women during the campaign as many women came forward to report his abuses. Despite that, the American public ignored their stories and elected him anyway. The tide of American ideology of inclusion, diversity, empathy, and tolerance, shifted during this campaign, and this shift can be witnessed in the data analyzed for this inquiry. The websites for domestic violence resources are not inclusive of all types of women. This translates to the organizational structure, policies, and services represented in the websites. Most of the articles associated with domestic violence were focused on criticism of Trump's rhetoric rather than the victims and/or solution for domestic violence. Trump's rhetoric distracted from the very grave issue of domestic violence even if it was being reported in the *NYT*.

For example, in the article analysis, Donald Trump was mentioned a significant amount of times in the key word search for domestic violence, though being referenced did not turn out to be an indicator of his positive involvement in aiding domestic violence victims.

Trump's rhetoric normalized assault of varying degrees from statements like "grab her by the pussy" to bragging about his many sexually based attempts and successes with women. The lack of victim stories in the government websites, takes away from the personal connection one could form with victims of domestic violence or victim experiences when they fail to find their own stories and voices represented. The juxtaposition of the political rhetoric of insensitivity towards women with exclusionary and sexist practices on display in the websites, provides a stark picture of how political rhetoric has a tremendous influence on the public face of domestic violence and policies related to it. Moreover, the obsession with criticism of Trump's rhetoric in the newspaper articles, also robbed critical focus on the issue of domestic violence and women.

Peripheral Issues Distracting from Narratives of Domestic Violence

The final major strain that permeates all the data is how there is a profound and visible stress on representing policies and politics rather than the issues of domestic violence as it pertained to personal, or even collective experiences of women. In both websites that were analyzed for this inquiry, it was easy to see how any attachment to the lives of the people involved had been removed from the functionality and visuality of the websites. Of the articles searched that showed up under the key words domestic violence

only two were written directly informing about domestic violence victims. Those two articles mainly talked about data regarding crimes recorded, and the irony of an anti-terrorism push when Americans have local terror that affects one out of four women. These two, though mentioning domestic violence in the most straightforward and serious way of all the collected newspaper data, are still not enough to connect the readers with the real plight of the victims. Media in general play a significant part in how people shape their opinions on issues, so displaying information regarding something so serious certainly changes the perspectives of readers/viewers. Overall, the websites and the articles together have strategically moved away from talking about personal cases. This strategy has two unwanted consequences. First, readers do not get to see the personal pain and suffering of the victims making them less likely to relate to the difficult issue of domestic violence. Second, for the victims themselves, the lack of direct representation creates a sense of hopelessness because representation matters.

Another aspect that comes through in the data is that the politics of the time becomes the main focus and the issues play second fiddle at best. This is demonstrated time and time again in the websites in the form of focus on policies, budgeting, the people in administration, the history of the organization – all of this, while helpful, creates an aura of dispassion towards the victims. Similarly, in the *NYT* data corpus, articles repeatedly steer clear of language that closes the gap between the reader and the victim and, instead, focus on criticism of Trump politics, policy related issues, and even issues that are far removed from the arena of domestic violence. For example, in one of

the articles, there is a discussion of the way in which the public sees and receives messages from women who are in domestic violence situations. The journalist alludes to such women as, “women (who) accuse men of rape or domestic violence” (Barrett, 2016). Barrett does not refer to the women as victims of domestic violence, but instead as “women who accuse men.” The article goes on to say that women receive more sympathy when appearing emotional in the form of grief versus anger. Sadness yields more success in the courtroom because it supports stereotypes of how women are supposed to behave even if they are the ones who are suffering. Here is an example of general, social norms displacing the real problems being faced by women in the media. Then there are other examples of articles where domestic violence and the victims are merely a sideshow to the power of cynical politics that played out in the country during the 2016 Presidential campaign.

The face of domestic violence is hidden behind all the messages about policies and all the criticism of Trump’s politics. The real victims suffer twice over since their stories get lost once through the mechanism of the justice system and second time through the disparate communication strategies used to reach out to or represent them. This aspect is the perfect example of how mass media can portray hegemonic masculinity (Nattleton, 2011) in the form of the power to change the focus of the messages about domestic violence against women. Women’s lack of equal socio-economic and other social powers compared to men also comes through as a point in this discussion as well. Women are not equally represented in these government departments or in the ranks of

journalists in prestigious news organizations such as the *NYT*. Thus, it is difficult to represent the experiences of women by the male majority members of these organizations, people more interested in representing the politics rather than the narratives of women victims of domestic violence.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Based on the findings and the discussion, there are two critical issues that are plaguing representation of domestic violence against women in mass media as well as mediated messages in organizations helping victims of domestic violence. The first issue being that communication about domestic violence encompasses the larger cultural undertones propagated during the 2016 Presidential election - those of sexism, racism, exclusionary practices against certain ethnicities and religions. Both the websites and the newspaper articles do have a larger goal of communicating about policies relating to domestic violence. The author freely acknowledges this in conducting the analysis. However, the manner in which personal stories are absent, victims faces are unseen, victims voices, cultures, and familial backgrounds are silenced, provides a deeply troubling and continuing picture of a society that views domestic violence through the lens of race, sex, and authoritative power.

The critical issue has to do with how the websites and the newspaper articles appear to be an attempt to react to instances of domestic violence that has already occurred. Orientation to solution from a female perspective is gravely lacking. The *NYT* being a national newspaper of record could incorporate a more nuanced approach to representing domestic violence that is inclusive of both personal stories and policies that

could solve this issue in the long term. Instead the *NYT* is deeply engaged in proving its liberal bent by critiquing Trump's Presidential campaign politics and loosing vital space and audience attention that could have gone towards creative solution and resources for victims of domestic violence and empathizing with cases of female domestic violence.

Communication that affirms the position of women as equal in society, that creates equal space for different types of women in society and that acknowledges economic, social, and political power to be a tool for supporting all types of social causes and not just those that are prioritized by men, is severely lacking from the data analyzed for this inquiry. Domestic violence seems to be a taken for granted aspect of society throughout the data. There are very few resources allocated towards educating men and women about how to prevent domestic violence or providing training in schools about the balance of respect and power between male, female, and all other members of society. The websites could easily incorporate information about such initiatives and resources. The newspaper articles could easily provide social commentary about the relationship between different members of society based on gender, sex, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, etc. when writing about domestic violence. However, such practices are absent.

The Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women, in theory, would be working towards providing stories, services, resources, and statistical data regarding domestic violence and its victims. However, the issue is so broad, so heavy, that instead of representations that would lead to people participating in the solution, the representations prove that there is underlying resistance to even own the problem.

Choosing not to work through the causes of domestic violence is considered an accepted communicative stance. Administrative priorities are decided by the people who “own” the organization, meaning the political party in power at the time. The websites portrayed several layers of information before displaying services for victims. This layout provides insight to the level of concern from the organizations themselves regarding what information is valuable. If the organization cannot run the different avenues of service, then the organization will cease to exist. Therefore, the focus is on issues such as, fundraising and membership, especially for the not-for-profit organizations or non-governmental agencies. Economics drives much of the messaging when it comes to organizations and the administration promotes functional conversation over personal, inclusive services for the victims.

The communicative approach is the same in the articles analyzed as the issue of domestic violence is used as a supporting actor to the larger political issues instead of leading the focus of the articles. Victim representation in the form of interviews or other direct communication continue to elude either the websites or the articles. Women were only interviewed in order to support the preferred political topics of the time and none of the articles mention the victims’ physical or emotional experience

Overall, the American public needs to demand more to be done to fix and remedy the issue of domestic violence particularly against women, as it continues to affect women from all walks of life. Dating back hundreds of years, it was acceptable for men to beat their wives, even encouraged as punishment for women who demonstrated “bad”

behavior or disobeyed male authority. Women have endured through this time period but have yet to experience a society where violence against women is a distant reality. Based on the analysis in this inquiry, domestic violence is only as big a problem as those in positions of power choose to represent it as such. Instead of relying on women to seek assistance, women to leave the unsafe place, women to judge their environment, society should be the one to step in and speak up through communicative measures undertaken through the powerful mass media, as well as the government organizations that have a responsibility towards these women that they aim to serve.

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