FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Advancing Strategies to Address Racism and White Dominant Culture in U.S. Anti-Gender-Based Violence Non-Profit Organizations

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In this article, we detail a participatory action research project conducted by and for advocates of color working in anti-violence organizations in a state in the eastern part of the United States. When mainstream, white-led, anti-gender-based violence (anti-GBV) organizations were founded in the 1970s, they lacked intersectional and critical perspectives, a legacy that persists today. The toxic culture within white dominant culture (WDC)-oriented non-profits results in high burnout and turnover for employees of color and affects employees' ability to serve the community. Without addressing WDC in these organizations, we harm ourselves and our ability to make the social change our organizations were created to affect. Our project aims to challenge these practices by engaging with advocates of color in listening sessions to discuss their experiences of racism, workplace challenges, and visions for creating truly feminist, equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist organizations. Employing participatory action research, critical race feminist theory and an intersectional framework, we ensure that the people directly affected by implicit and explicit racism in the anti-GBV sector are the people who develop the solutions that will disrupt the manifestations of WDC in anti-GBV organizations and other social-change-oriented organizations within the non-profit sector.

Social-change-oriented organizations, no matter how progressive in mission, often have policies and practices that are ingrained in white dominant culture (WDC) (Jones & Okun, 2001). Jones and Okun (2001) argue that WDC includes expectations for perfectionism, a sense of urgency, resistance to new ideas, quantity over quality (i.e., reporting on number of clients served instead of more qualitative measures of client outcomes), paternalistic hierarchies, "white saviorism" among staff and toward "clients," binary thinking, power hoarding, avoidance of conflict and discomfort, and the centering of objectivity. In the anti-gender-based violence (anti-GBV) field, white women have predominantly occupied leadership roles, especially in the largest, most well-funded organizations (Nnawulezi & Vassell, 2023). Although this is starting to shift, the field has not moved quickly enough to have a meaningful representation of diverse identities and lived experiences among leadership teams. For many white leaders, WDC norms feel "natural" or "right" (Beckford, 2020). Employees who think or do their work differently can feel gaslighted — or worse, fear losing their jobs — when they object to, or merely question, the status quo (Beckford, 2020). Little attention has been given to the impact of WDC in anti-gender-based violence (anti-GBV) organizations.

When many of the early organizations were founded, they tended to be survivor-led and lacked hierarchy (Richie, 2012). Over time, the movement was "professionalized," in part due to the passage of the Violence Against

Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 (Kim, 2012; Nnawulezi & Vassell, 2023). As expectations for "professionalism" increased in anti-GBV organizations, they began to require employees to have advanced degrees, receive grants from funders that required clear hierarchies and organizational charts, and accept funding (such as VAWA grants) that mandated cooperation with police or prosecutors (Kim, 2012, 2020; Richie, 2012). This evolution changed the grassroots survivor-led focus of many early organizations and started to exclude many women who were poor or of color (Nnawulezi & Vassell, 2023).

Given the extent of WDC in anti-GBV organizations and other social-change-oriented organizations, this study uses participatory action research (PAR) methods to hear directly from the advocates of color employed by anti-GBV organizations in a state on the East Coast of the United States. Through this project, we highlight advocates of color's experiences of racism and WDC within their workplaces, while also offering actionable recommendations for leadership to foster equitable, inclusive, and antiracist practices in anti-GBV organizations and other social change-oriented non-profit organizations.

Theoretical Frameworks

Our approach to this PAR project is grounded in intersectionality, Black Feminist Thought (BFT), and Critical Race Feminist Theory (CRFT), as these frameworks provide insight into the challenges faced by advocates of color. CRFT, an extension of Critical Race Theory, critically examines the intersections of race, gender, and other identities. It emerged in response to mainstream feminism's tendency to marginalize or exclude the experiences of women of color (Wing, 2015). Although CRFT began as a legal theory focused on questions of law and legal status, it has been applied in multiple disciplines because CRFT "considers the law to be a necessary, but not sufficient, basis to formulate solutions to social justice dilemmas" (Wing, 2015, p. 162).

Crenshaw (1991) argued that women of color face multi-dimensional discrimination: not simply additive, but interlocking, intersectional forms of racism and sexism. Similarly, Hill-Collins (2000, 2002) emphasized the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender oppression, and advocated for centering the experiences of Black women and women of color. This is especially important due to the extensive neglect of women of color and the proliferation of deficit-based approaches by many white scholars (Hill-Collins, 2002).

Drawing upon the work of contemporary Black feminist theorists like Cooper's (2018) exploration of the interplay of race and gender in *Eloquent Rage,* we can understand that advocates who are women of color navigate a labyrinth of prejudices not just from dominant cultures but also within feminist spaces that might silence their unique experiences and voices. Gumbs (2016) talks about the concept of "spill" in her work, which is about the overflow of emotions, narratives, and truths that cannot be contained within traditional structures or are silenced by dominant discourses. It is also about the power and resilience of Black women's voices as they navigate and resist oppressive systems and places. In her work, she also writes that women of color

have historically "spilled out" of (or exited from) these oppressive confines, be it academia, media, or work, while dealing with the multiplicities of oppressions and microaggressions they face.

Wing (2015) argues that critical race feminism "is a race intervention with respect to feminism and uses its perspectives to expose the unique and varied experiences of women of color as distinct from white women or men of color" (p. 165). Participatory action research goes hand-in-hand with tenets of CRFT. That is, CRFT finds the sharing of people's stories as a way "to tell important truths affecting the lives of people of color" (Wing, 2015, p. 167). Understanding advocates of color's lived experiences working in anti-GBV organizations through the lenses of CRFT, Black Feminist Thought, and intersectionality emphasizes the need for a transformation of anti-GBV organizational practices. Only through a critical intersectional approach that recognizes the intricate dynamics of race and gender can organizations begin to foster environments that genuinely value and support advocates of color.

Method

The project used listening sessions as a primary method to gather data. Participants in these sessions were advocates of color who shared their experiences and insights. This method is reflective of PAR's emphasis on involving community members as active participants in the research process. The goal was to understand the emotional and mental burdens borne by advocates of color and the impact of white dominant culture within the nonprofit sector, while also being action-oriented toward gathering suggestions and strategies on how to change the sector to be more equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist.

Project Conceptualization and Implementation

This project was developed by advocates of color (Lead AOCs) who were employees of the statewide anti-GBV organization and who were formerly associated with community-based, anti-GBV organizations. During the winter and early spring of 2019, the Lead AOCs convened to strategize about addressing experiences of racism in the anti-GBV sector — both their own experiences and those of other advocates of color.

In late spring of 2019, the Lead AOCs extended invitations to other advocates of color (AOC participants) from the statewide organization's member programs to engage in one of four listening sessions. Advertised as "Holding Space: Advocates of Color Listening Session Series," these sessions took place in four different counties throughout the state, with an average attendance of 9 advocates per session (ranging from 6 to 16), totaling 37 AOC participants across all sessions.

The Partnership

The Lead AOCs conceptualized, planned, promoted, and co-facilitated the listening sessions. During the planning phase, they approached the second author to propose a collaborative PAR project between the sponsoring organization and American University's (AU) Community-Based Research

Scholars and certificate program for undergraduate students. The second author, a professor and past collaborator with the organization, welcomed the collaboration. According to the Memorandum of Understanding, the Lead AOCs, supported by a research assistant from AU, were responsible for implementing the listening sessions; the AU team (i.e., Palmer, Negrón, and Abreu) was tasked with data analysis; and representatives from the statewide organization and the university were charged with co-authoring and disseminating the report.

Qualitative Data Analysis

To identify themes from the listening session transcripts, inductive thematic analysis was utilized (Terry et al., 2017). Two research assistants (Negrón and Abreu) coded the transcripts independently and then convened with the second author to reach a consensus and address any discrepancies. This iterative process involved "repeated engagement with the data" (Terry et al., 2017, p. 20) to deepen the understanding of the AOC participants' experiences and accurately capture their recommendations.

Dissemination Process

In February 2022, the insights from the listening sessions were compiled into a report that was shared via listserves and social media. Post-release, the first and second authors engaged with local, statewide, and national groups to discuss the implementation of the report's recommendations. Additionally, we facilitated dialogues with executive directors, white advocates who identified as allies, and advocates of color to discuss the findings of the study and concrete implementation strategies within their organizations. Insights and suggestions from these discussions are also incorporated in this article. In May and June 2022, the first and second author presented the report findings to statewide and national audiences of anti-GBV organization professionals.

The Positionality and Role of Each Author

Lucane LaFortune, M.Ed., is Haitian-American, an intersectional feminist, and a fat activist with an extensive background in nonprofit management. Her expertise encompasses gender-based violence with a specific focus on program management, housing development, crisis intervention, and program evaluation. Her work is informed by her personal experiences as a survivor of sexual violence, anti-fatness, and anti-Blackness. In this project, she co-authored the report and co-facilitated discussions with advocates of color during the dissemination phase.

Jane Palmer, Ph.D., M.S.W., is a white queer woman with a decade of experience in direct service anti-violence programs and a decade of experience in community-based participatory research. As an activist, advocate, and non-profit manager since the mid-1990s, she has extensive professional experience in advancing anti-racist and anti-oppressive policies and practices in predominantly white environments. She played advisory and mentorship roles

in the research design and data analysis processes, co-authored the report, and co-facilitated discussions with white allies and executive directors during the dissemination phase.

Vanessa Negrón, M.A., came aboard as a research assistant once the data analysis process commenced, leveraging her graduate-level training in qualitative data analysis. As a woman of color interested in the anti-GBV field and employed by AU's Community-Based Research Scholars program, Negrón led the qualitative data analysis of the transcripts and co-authored the report alongside the first two authors and another colleague from the statewide organization.

Stephanie Abreu joined the project in spring of 2019 as a research assistant. Abreu is a woman of color and was an undergraduate community-based research certificate student at AU, aspiring to enter the anti-GBV field. She attended each listening session, took notes, and later transcribed the recordings with Institutional Review Board approval and informed consent from participants. She worked with the third author in the qualitative data analysis process.

From the Margin to the Center

The advocates of color who participated in the listening sessions shared their positive experiences and ongoing challenges. Advocates found the listening session experience to be cathartic and emotional because they had not had opportunities to say what they have experienced, and it was helpful (albeit disappointing) for them to hear they are not alone in their experiences. The findings highlighted the challenges faced by advocates of color, including the emotional burden, racial harassment, and the pervasive impacts of white dominant culture.

Therefore, the primary focus of this article is on the recommendations for creating a more anti-racist, equitable, and inclusive workplace environment that combats the status quo of WDC. The action steps described below are concrete ways anti-GBV organizations can disrupt the manifestations of WDC that are present in everyday organizational practices. These recommendations include fostering accountability among leadership, providing support and resources, promoting diversity and genuine inclusion, recognizing and acknowledging the expertise of advocates of color, addressing burnout through comprehensive and systemic support systems, and consciously creating cultures of care.

The themes identified from the listening sessions reflect the many emotional and other mental burdens borne by advocates of color, which align with the experiences expressed by many women of color in spaces dominated by white narratives. Hill-Collins (2000) discusses the concept of "outsider within," a vantage point of women of color who inhabit spaces yet feel marginalized within them. Much of Hill-Collins' writing focused on Black women's experiences in white male dominated spaces (see Hill-Collins, 2002). Our project seeks to demonstrate the impacts of the presence of white dominant culture within the nonprofit sector, specifically in domestic and sexual violence

services, which tend to be white female dominated spaces. The violence of white dominant culture appears in many forms: erasure of Black experiences, constant invalidation, trauma from microaggressions, and the undervaluing of the labor of people of color (Kendi, 2019).

As our data show, the marginality associated with being an "outsider within" anti-GBV spaces often means that advocates of colors' voices are silenced, opinions are dismissed, and their concerns are minimized. PAR methods are the perfect pairing with our intersectional, Black feminist orientation and critical race feminist theoretical framework. Since this project was conceptualized and implemented by advocates of color for advocates of color, PAR brings the "outsider" voices from the margins to the center (hooks, 2000). And, through our dissemination process, we hosted conversations among executive directors and advocates of color in the state to discuss the findings of the report and the feasibility of the recommendations. Meanwhile, these intentional conversations ensured that the white leadership in the community-based organizations in our state and country heard these voices and many committed to making the changes we recommended to challenge "how things are done" within anti-GBV organizations.

What We Learned

When discussing what we learned, we include many direct quotes from participants. We believe it is critical for the reader to hear from the advocates, and not solely read our summary of what they said. We briefly discuss what is already working within organizations, but primarily focus on what the issues are. Within current issues, there are seven subthemes: 1) white fragility and lack of accountability; 2) lack of support; 3) meaningless diversity trainings; 4) emotional burden/labor; 5) lack of diversity; 6) lack of recognition and acknowledgement; and 7) burnout. Some of these have additional subthemes, but each is discussed in depth with examples.

What is Working?

Theme 1: Supportive Examples of Leadership

Throughout the listening sessions, participants shared few examples of positive, supportive leadership. One participant described their understanding of leadership to be based on their culture, in which an individual is given a leadership role by the community to "be their voice when needed." In their experience, the best supervisors followed this ideal.

Listening session participants described how there are supervisors who "provide space and opportunity for everyone to voice their concerns, voice their opinions," and even those who welcome suggestions that they may not agree with at first but are open to trying. Further examples of support included how some supervisors understand that some spaces may not be safe for certain employees and are willing to support them by joining them in such spaces. One participant described how she was able to find support from leadership and

people of color from other organizations: "I can go talk to them and we can talk through things. We can sort of have a game plan of like how I can go back and make it through the day in the office."

Theme 2: Proactive Mentorship

Apart from examples of supportive or empathetic leadership, several participants also described the experience of having their supervisor — or other colleagues — act as a mentor, specifically by taking the time to "check in" and providing the space to speak openly and honestly, allowing space to talk about "real life events," "triggers that come up at work," and not only productivity.

By taking the time to "check in" and providing the space to be able to speak openly and honestly, they have the opportunity to discuss deeper conversations. One participant noted that she really appreciates her relationship with her supervisor where they can discuss questions like:

What do you need to be productive for yourself?; What do you need in order to get a project done?; Do you need to take a break?; Do you need to ask your coworkers for help? Because if you are having a hard time asking or saying no then I'll push you to say no if I see that you need to say no, you know?'

What are the Issues?

The following challenges were brought up most often by participants when describing their workplace environment. Each of these issues play a role in the untimely burnout experienced by advocates of color within the anti-violence field, or as Gumbs (2016) called it: spill out from white-dominated institutions.

Theme 1: White Fragility and Lack of Accountability

When asked whether white colleagues or white leadership are held accountable in addressing oppression or discrimination, participants described several scenarios in which the harm is dismissed, excuses are made (such as the person who caused harm is new to the field or not yet used to the program), or leadership is given the power to decide whether something is an issue. Ultimately, participants reported that there is no accountability, often due to white fragility, conflict avoidance, and the discomfort of having difficult conversations surrounding the topic of race. As one participant explained:

> I think what's lacking is accountability, I mean real accountability, you know? Something tangible, but I think that there's a lot of fragility in white leadership and discomfort in having hard conversations and having conversations that come from a place of accountability, and so what ends up happening is the burden gets placed on you know the folks of color who are doing direct services...

Participants described a cycle that is too common in spaces that are entrenched in WDC: an issue that is taken to white leadership is dismissed or minimized. The same issue is then taken to the person second-in-command, who is often a person of color. This person acts on the complaint, but in doing so the responsibility is no longer on white leadership.

Theme 2: Lack of Support

Participants also shared how often a lack of awareness and support on the part of white colleagues or leadership can end up making it seem as though advocates of color are not fulfilling their job requirements. For example, an advocate of color who does not feel comfortable traveling to a part of the state alone may be viewed as incapable by leadership, rather than having their concerns validated.

Participants also described several obstacles that make speaking out about oppression in the workplace more difficult. The decision to speak out about such injustices must be made with several considerations, such as the possibility of jeopardizing one's position, facing pushback from other advocates of color who are older and disagree with speaking out about race in the workplace, or other implications. As one advocate noted:

> I have been struggling a lot with this phase of my life without finding my voice because I tend to be the quieter one in group spaces, and I think that also has to do with, historically, [with my background], we're conditioned to be more quiet... so you kind of put your head down to be silent and move with whatever because of the dominant spaces you have to be in to survive.

Similarly, another advocate noted the barriers she faces to speaking up:

> It's hard because... we all want to survive in our workplace and some people may not take on certain actions because of their livelihood. I mean yeah, a single mom, I don't want to start no trouble because I need this job. Or it took me [X] years to get to this salary and the way that the climate is now, I would need a master's degree to make it. So, it's real-life decisions that are being made when you're confronted with these types of decisions.

Theme 3: Meaningless Diversity Trainings

While it could be assumed that this lack of support could be alleviated by training and other forms of education, participants discussed many issues with the workplace's attempts at such training:

> And even when you talk about diversity or diversity education, it is usually some new presentation somewhere or a two-hour workshop or something on the internet. So, it's something that we do for two hours but we don't practice it when the people that really need it [or those that] need to be practicing it, they aren't even there for the workshop...

Similarly, another participant expressed that such trainings must be emphasized in an ongoing and meaningful way. "There was no follow up conversation about [the diversity training]. There was no 'this is what we talked about during the retreat; let's expand on it let's try to work towards it.' It was nothing. It was as if the training never happened."

Theme 4: Emotional Burden/Labor

Working in the field of domestic violence bears a heavy emotional burden yet advocates of color expressed the additional emotional labor they are regularly subjected to through day-to-day inequalities.

- **Microaggressions.** The subtle, common-place indignities that advocates of color feel in the workplace are carried out by white advocates, whether knowingly or unknowingly (see Sue et al., 2008). These include situations such as comments on their professionalism, "cleaning up" their work areas, or colleagues looking at their phones when they begin speaking in a meeting. Participants shared how these regular occurrences are an additional stressor. For example:

> Some things I've heard in programs are like oh, they need to clean up they're so dirty. Or, you know, those people over there, just like language that's really coded even like conversations around what it means to be a professional gets really coded. Or like you don't look professional, or you don't sound professional. What are we really — what's the conversation we're really having?

- **Bringing your full self to work**. Many advocates felt that they were not able to be their full selves at work. Meanwhile, others shared that they cannot help but be 100% themselves; however, being themselves brings up issues with coworkers. The majority, however, seemed to prefer to "tone themselves down" for white ears and eyes to avoid being labeled or stereotyped for being too vocal. For example:

> Even if it's not overtly said, you can see it in their body language or the way they go to their phone right away once you start talking. It's honestly just, like, disrespectful because I think part of being human is being uncomfortable and pushing boundaries if they need to be pushed. Not human boundaries but like those conversational boundaries and so it's disrespectful because it's part of my authentic self to do that. So, it's like forcing me to shrink myself to be acceptable for you.

- **Emotional support to others**. The fact that people of color in leadership positions, specifically women of color, too often carry the burden of emotional support for their colleagues of color was a point

brought up often. While this is beneficial to many advocates of color, women of color in such leadership roles must then take on additional heavy emotional labor that leads to burnout. For example:

> I think it's important to recognize how frustrating it can be that women of color, people of color, are always the people that are doing that emotional labor across the board. Whether it's in the workplace or out in the world, why are we the only ones doing that emotional labor?

At one point in the final listening session, after several participants became emotional while answering interview questions, it was noted how these expressions of emotion in the listening session space simply showed how few chances advocates of color have to decompress through such conversations with others who understand and share the same experiences.

Theme 5: Lack of Diversity

A lack of diversity among staff was noted across all listening sessions, as well as a call to expand the definition of diversity to include differences in sexuality, religion, political stance, education, ethnicity, age, and color. For example:

> True diversity is people from all different walks of life and different backgrounds of beliefs to come together to form this melting pot and really deliver the services because our victims aren't middle-aged Americans. They come from everywhere... Just because I go around the room and there's different hues in the room doesn't mean it's diverse.

The lack of diversity among leadership was noted as problematic. While there are some people in leadership and in higher paying positions who are ethnically diverse, they tend to be of lighter complexions. Several participants touched upon this issue and described this as leadership wanting to be surrounded by others who look like them and creating an environment where they feel comfortable while disregarding the comfort of people of color. For example, one listening session discussed a situation in which a supervisor [who is a non-Black immigrant] tasked her Black employees with the burden of educating her on race issues. Then, the supervisor did not validate their feelings and was dismissive of what they had to share. It must be emphasized that white privilege is present for any white-passing person and it is important for them to understand that the way they look affects the way they walk in the world. However, most important was the need for leadership that takes note of their colleagues' input and is open to change, regardless of race. For example:

> Just because the color of their skin matches the color of my skin, or my experience doesn't mean that they understand or can validate... Like I'd rather have a really great white ally than someone who doesn't validate my experience, you know?

> Because then we can work with something. We can work with a supervisor who wants to see change. I don't want to work with someone who doesn't want to see change.

When asked whether the staff reflects the community served, one participant brought up how it is important for advocates of color to be aware of their own privileges. For example:

> We're primarily people of color in that [department], but we all have education privileges. So, it's complicated because even if you might have racial diversity, which I think our organization does, I don't think we have as much economic diversity or like we're a generation removed from it like maybe our parents struggled a lot, but [...] education privilege does create distance from the folks that we serve.

In response to the above quote, another participant agreed, sharing how the department has clients of color who distrust the staff as a result of this educational privilege.

Theme 6: Lack of Recognition and Acknowledgement

Several advocates highlighted inequities in how advocates of color are treated within organizations with respect to expertise, workload, and acknowledgement:

> I think it's also interesting when you think about who does the frontline service... we're asking folks to come in with Bachelor's degrees or higher and we're paying folks [minimum wage] so thinking about just power dynamics and [...] how things are structured, I think it's really interesting because you're having folks that do have the experience and expertise, who do have these degrees you're asking for, but they're still separated out from folks you think are more qualified.

- **Education & Experience.** Advocates of color described how certain positions within their organizations tend to be undervalued & undercompensated. Participants shared how advocates of color tend to be hired for lower-paid frontline work in which they face heavy emotional labor on a consistent basis. Frontline positions now require a bachelor's degree, yet other positions at a higher level require the same educational level and are paid a higher rate. Participants expressed how this is a clear issue in the structure of certain mainstream nonprofit organizations in which leadership will fairly compensate those they deem to be more qualified, and work alongside them, yet those in lower positions are deemed less deserving of equal pay.

- **Role within the organization.** Relatedly, it was noted how prevention work is often seen as inferior to crisis intervention services. That is, advocates of color in community outreach or prevention roles feel less valued and unseen. Participants also reported feeling as though their knowledge and life experiences are undervalued and not considered a credible asset in the organization. For example, one participant noted:

> If you don't have the license or degree you're not valued, but I have experience. Like I have worked in several places and so you have the experience that would help that counterpart. But because you don't have that license or certification, you're less valued.

Further, participants who have the required level of education reported that equal pay and respect are still not present. Many spoke to the fact that they have the same certifications, degrees, and experience (often more) as their white colleagues, yet they remain underpaid and find it nearly impossible to climb the bureaucratic ladder to higher paying positions. One participant shared how oftentimes, if two people are equally qualified, the white colleague will receive additional training to become *more* qualified for the open position. Another participant noted how they have extra unwritten job duties due to their race:

> They call me, …because they had a disgruntled parent at the front, and of course they were African American. And I'm sitting there like … What are you calling me for? But it's that whole, you know, kind of like I can handle these people, I can relate to [my] people. You know, and that clearly shows that the administration does not want to understand […] And it creates a lot of tension and then your work suffers.

- **Uneven Workload.** Often, advocates of color, especially Black advocates, are asked to work more cases and put in more hours without the appropriate compensation that they feel they deserve. Additionally, some clients will choose to go to advocates of color for specific help because they feel more comfortable and have a sense that they care about their case when their assigned case manager is not demonstrating enough effort. For example, one participant noted that clients share their experiences with staff and would say:

> 'You have to go to [this person] for case management because she's the only one that cares,' and it really got misconstrued and actually put a strain on our team because even when we're supposed to be allies, we're supposed to be working together, we're supposed to have equal caseloads, but half of somebody

> else's case load is coming to you... Looking to me for support because they feel like I'm more invested as another person of color.

- **Quality of Work and Dedication Unacknowledged.** Advocates shared experiences of a lack of acknowledgement or appreciation for work or ideas. For example, one participant shared:

> And I, personally, put on [an extensive training] for the entire [...] community and I didn't get any recognition after that happened except from my supervisor. [...] I put my whole heart into that and no one recognized it ... It seems so petty, but... it was just really honestly hurtful.

- **Having to Prove Oneself.** Participants described feeling as though they need to work twice as hard to feel that they are credible, valuable, and validated by others in the workplace. For example, a participant noted:

> I feel like there's this need to have to prove myself to other people and to prove that I deserve to be in this space.... I have to explain myself ten times and explain or prove why I have to have a conversation or the way that I'm having it. I need to prove that I deserve to be in this space and why I should be validated. I have to prove why I can take up the space that I want to take up and if I don't prove it then I feel judged.

- **Feeling Unheard.** Participants overwhelmingly shared feeling unheard, ignored, and dismissed. Many expressed a sense of powerlessness or voicelessness in the workplace. When they have ideas of how to improve the program they are often not taken seriously or simply not heard. Yet when a white advocate or an advocate of color with a lighter complexion suggests the same thing or something similar, they receive recognition and are actively acknowledged.

Theme 7: Burnout

While there is ample evidence that advocates in the fields of intimate partner and sexual violence experience compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious trauma (Voth Schrag et al., 2021), the participants in these listening sessions did not express these types of occupational stress due to the community. Instead, they expressed that their burnout stemmed from how they are treated by white counterparts and leadership within their organizations.

It was noted several times throughout each listening session that the rate at which advocates of color experience burnout, as well as how early on in their careers (often within the first year), is a clear indicator that the workplace environment issues take a severe toll. One participant described her expectations going into the field:

> I think I found myself being very, like, theoretically prepared to sort of experience my clients' history of violence, but I didn't feel necessarily prepared to experience violence myself in the work environment.

While burnout "can result in 'physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion' from providing services to vulnerable populations" (Newell & MacNeil, 2010, p. 58), it is clear from the topics discussed in these listening sessions that burnout among advocates of color is a result of the workplace rather than the work:

> I've talked to a lot of advocates that were newer to the field, like under a year in, and they were overwhelmingly talking about the burnout they were feeling and so I've had conversations a lot with leadership, in particular white leadership, about turnover and why is there so much turnover? Like we know in DV there's turnover in the field but it's not normal to have someone who's only been working the field for a year feel completely burnt out working at your program. That's obviously an indicator that something else is going on because working with survivors alone, like, yes, it can wear on you but usually it doesn't burn you out that fast.

Another participant noted:

> I've lost fantastic team members and it's not the work, it's not this level, it's who is running our organization that's not acceptable.

One additional factor associated with burnout among advocates is the burdens for those who are survivors of abuse. Participants discussed how there are no opportunities or resources in their organizations to be able to have discussions or counseling about their experiences. One advocate described how she feels triggered at times by the work, and she can talk to her supervisor. Yet, she also sees the toll it takes on her supervisor because she provides that support for all employees:

> There aren't ways to have conversations around like the impact of the job on individual people. Like we'll name drop vicarious trauma but what does that look like and then on a personal level, most of the people who are in this field have a personal relationship to gender and sexual violence and [despite my role]

> I still get disclosed to on a regular basis. I still have to be put into a situation where, you know, I'm being triggered by other things and like there isn't a space to discuss that.

Recommendations for Transforming Organizations

Participants overwhelmingly described the need for a transformational shift to address WDC within the organization and the movement. To institute a drastic cultural shift within the field, the following recommendations were identified based on our conversations. Each recommendation is followed by concrete action steps to directly address the issues. While a culture change may not happen quickly, it is important to view this as an ongoing, intentional process for there to be concrete changes over time. These recommendations can be adopted by any organization, and require prioritization by leadership.

Recommendation 1—Incorporate Cultural Principles into Daily Practices

Minoritized groups bring unique perspectives and experiences that can enrich organizations and the communities they serve. To create a more inclusive environment, it is beneficial for all organizations to incorporate various principles that are contrary to WDC into their day-to-day operations (Nnawulezi & Sullivan, 2014). Dr. Tricia Bent-Goodley, professor emeritus at Howard University School of Social Work, has suggested various cultural elements that domestic violence programs can adopt in their daily practices. These elements promote a more inclusive environment for all individuals and can directly combat the aspects of WDC identified by Jones and Okun (2001) and Okun (2021).

Some of these principles include recognition of fundamental goodness, encouraging self-reflection and understanding of one's own cultural biases, promoting communalism, fostering interconnectedness, acknowledging spirituality, supporting self-reliance, valuing oral tradition, and encouraging thought and practice. As Bent-Goodley (2005) emphasizes, it is crucial to move beyond mere knowledge of injustice and begin to engage actively in planned changes to eradicate problems. By embracing and incorporating various cultural principles, organizations can strive towards a more inclusive and equitable environment that respects and values the diverse experiences and perspectives of all individuals.

Action Steps

- Develop policies and practices that operationalize various cultural principles like Bent-Goodley's (2005) eight elements for the workplace culture of domestic violence programs.

- Consider how these practices could be incorporated into the work with clients (see Nnawulezi & Sullivan, 2014).

- Apply Jones and Okun's (2001) antidotes to WDC in daily organizational practices.

Recommendation 2—Acknowledge and Address White Dominant Culture in the Workplace

Diversity trainings often focus on including people of color in decision-making processes and promoting coexistence among advocates of different races and ethnicities in the workplace. However, advocates of color recommend shifting the focus towards discussing the impacts of whiteness, white dominant culture, and white privilege to create a more equitable environment. By decentering whiteness, space is created to meet individuals where they are, foster self-identification within the movement, and cultivate a caring community. It is important to prioritize individuals over productivity by providing necessary support (including time off) and respecting their autonomy.

White dominant culture can manifest as defensiveness, denial, fear of conflict, and power hoarding. To dismantle these patterns, leadership must embrace discomfort, openness, and power sharing (Jones & Okun, 2001). Encouraging "affinity groups" that are white-only spaces without conscious allies can hinder productive conversations and perpetuate unrecognized biases regarding the impact of privilege. Productive spaces for white advocates require facilitation by paid outside facilitators to create an inclusive and accountable environment. Mandatory trainings on the impact of white dominant culture and transparency in affinity group spaces are crucial. Addressing white supremacy in the workplace goes beyond buzzwords; it requires action and meaningful inclusion of co-workers of color. Proactive allyship involves stepping up despite personal loyalties or feelings, and leadership must lead by example, setting boundaries, holding each other accountable, and encouraging necessary time off.

Further, participants discussed the dangers of a supervisor who may seem supportive privately but remains silent or neutral to racial issues when it really matters. For example:

> I find that a lot of times white allies, in leadership positions in particular, try to play at neutrality. And you can't be neutral when you're doing anti-violence work. You can't be neutral when you're talking about racial issues. You can't be neutral when you're talking about power and control because there is nothing neutral about any of those things and so I think, because it's really uncomfortable or because maybe their resources aren't there, people just don't know how to respond to oppression even when they want to or think that they may really want to.

It is important to acknowledge that the power and responsibility to address injustices and initiate change primarily lie with white leadership and white advocates, as advocates of color often face consequences when interjecting. Taking action and uplifting co-workers of color, inviting difficult conversations without white fragility, and leading by example are essential aspects of dismantling white supremacy in the workplace.

Action Steps

- Shift focus from diversity and inclusion trainings to addressing the impacts of WDC and white privilege by identifying specific characteristics of the dominant culture and how they shape norms and standards within the organization.

- Challenge the assumption that one's values, beliefs, and experiences are universal and relevant to all situations by questioning the unwritten ways of being, including behaviors that are rewarded or unacceptable in the organization's culture.

- Analyze and understand how the "white gaze" is experienced by advocates of color within the organization, examining the systems and mechanisms that enforce whiteness and WDC (see Rabelo et al., 2021).

- Establish affinity spaces with strong allies and transparent mechanisms to provide a safe environment for individuals from marginalized identities to discuss issues that impact them, while relieving people of color from the burden of educating white colleagues.

- Practice allyship in various forms, such as supporting advocates of color by accompanying them to specific sites, checking in on their well-being, or swapping tasks to prioritize their mental health, ensuring a "plan instead of pity" approach when discussing steps for white allyship moving forward.

Recommendation 3—Develop Accountability Structures

To address racial injustices, accountability structures within the field must be reevaluated. It is crucial to recognize that racial issues should not be treated solely as interpersonal conflicts but rather as structural and organizational-level concerns. Complaints should be brought directly to leaders in top positions to ensure visibility and prevent them from being overlooked or disregarded as they move through organizational hierarchies.

While anti-violence spaces have specific protocols for dealing with certain types of harassment, such as gender-based violence, there is often a lack of guidance for employees who experience racial harassment— so the racism goes unaddressed. Staff of color bear the burden of reporting racial harassment and must consider the potential risks and consequences, including physical, emotional, and economic safety. This responsibility placed on advocates of color creates a dilemma where some may choose not to report incidents to protect themselves, resulting in regret and the perpetuation of silence. It is the responsibility of leadership to relieve these burdens.

When supervisors remain silent or neutral in response to reports of racism, advocates of color experience racial gaslighting, where their concerns are denied, minimized, or criticized. This can lead to labeling the person who

reported racism as racist, violent, or emotionally unstable. To cope with racial microaggressions, Black women in the workplace often seek validation from other African Americans through "sanity checks" to confirm the existence of these incidents. Speaking up about racism can have real consequences for staff, especially staff of color. Some supervisors showed unsupportive behavior towards staff participation in this project's listening sessions, requesting organizers to share session details, and reprimanding and labeling advocates of color as problematic for engaging in this project.

To foster accountability, organizations must prioritize creating safe spaces for reporting racial harassment, ensuring confidentiality, and implementing clear procedures for addressing racial injustices. Leadership should actively support advocates of color, address racial gaslighting, and dismantle systemic barriers that deter reporting and perpetuate silence. By taking these steps, organizations can cultivate an environment of trust, equity, safety, and empowerment for all employees.

Action Steps

- Establish and implement a reporting mechanism specifically designed for advocates of color to report instances of racial harassment and racism. Ensure measures are in place to protect their well-being and foster a culture of reporting.

- Encourage direct conversations where concerns can be brought directly to individuals in positions of power, minimizing the risk of information being lost or ignored as it travels through organizational hierarchies.

- Develop accountability structures modeled after restorative justice practices, prioritizing healing, and emphasizing that no staff member is disposable. Focus on repairing harm and building trust among community members from diverse backgrounds.

Recommendation 4—Acknowledge and Address the Additional Burdens on Women of Color in Leadership

Advocates across all listening sessions discussed how women of color in leadership positions are often the most attentive supervisors and provide the most emotional support for their employees. One observed that supervisors who are people of color tend to be highly supportive and empathetic, often shouldering a significant burden by understanding and addressing the challenges and emotions experienced by their employees, which potentially contributes to the higher burnout rates among supervisors of color.

Women of color in leadership roles often face the expectation of fulfilling a nurturing and caretaking role, while being cautious of not appearing too direct, particularly when supervising white employees, to avoid perpetuating stereotypes like the "angry black woman." However, navigating these stereotypes takes a toll on their mental health, leading women of color to develop protective barriers over time. This emotional labor, coupled with

microaggressions, gaslighting, and underpayment, adds an additional burden that contributes to burnout and highlights the need for better management support.

The first step in addressing this issue is open conversation. It is crucial to understand the needs of those providing support and acknowledge the overcompensation often practiced by women of color due to the fear of discrimination and the perception that they must work twice as hard to achieve half as much. Creating a culture of care requires providing support and assistance to those who carry the caregiving responsibilities, recognizing that the type of support needed may differ for each leader.

However, it is essential that acknowledgement and recognition from white leadership are not performative but are followed by concrete actions. When women of color in the organization share their experiences, it is crucial for white leadership to be prepared to provide the necessary assistance, which can range from additional staff and time off to equal sharing of supervision and external support. This shift towards tangible support will help alleviate the burden faced by women of color in leadership positions and promote a more equitable work environment.

Action Steps

- Understand the emotional burden faced by women of color in leadership positions and the need to address racial harassment. Recognize their role as a buffer for staff of color while navigating a dangerous system and work towards creating a safer and more supportive environment.

- Avoid performative acknowledgement and encourage white and non-white staff to use their privilege and resources to make tangible changes, going beyond virtue signaling and taking proactive steps to ensure equity in the workplace.

- Engage in individualized conversations to identify and alleviate specific needs, addressing burnout prevention and creating a culture of care by seeking input and asking questions to understand what support is required.

- Provide guidance on boundaries and self-care to new staff, striking a balance between preventing burnout and embracing communalism and interconnectedness, while avoiding the rigidity associated with WDC.

- Lead by example and promote a culture of meaningful self-care by openly discussing and practicing self-care, setting boundaries, being open about personal involvement in therapy, and taking true time off without expectation of being on call or responding to work-related matters when off the clock.

Recommendation 5—Engage in Intentional Hiring & Promotion Practices

Cultivating a culture of care starts with transforming the hiring and promotion processes within the organization, as participants emphasized. This may include asking candidates to articulate how interlocking systems of oppression affect survivors of GBV and what an anti-racist workplace must include. Implementing different interview tactics and following the examples of those who have successfully hired with a different mentality is crucial to driving meaningful change. It is also crucial to assess the diversity within the applicant pool and who is chosen for an interview vs. who is not chosen, for any patterns related to candidates' racial or other identities.

Barriers also exist for advocates of color who are negotiating initial offers and promotions, with privilege often determining who feels entitled to negotiate for higher wages and benefits. Studies have shown that Black job seekers are expected to negotiate less than their white counterparts and face salary penalties when they do negotiate. Addressing these disparities and biases is essential to creating a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

Action Steps

- Implement specific practices in job postings to address racism in hiring, such as including salary or salary range, removing barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, and conducting anonymous resume scans.

- Evaluate job advertisements to identify and remove unnecessary barriers, ensuring that requirements are truly essential for the job.

- Explore alternative recruitment strategies, including posting jobs on various platforms and leveraging different networks, while seeking guidance from community leaders to enhance diversity in recruitment.

- Commit to long-term changes and equity in hiring and human resources practices, eliminating racial disparities and offering equitable salaries to address historical underpayment and undervaluing of Black workers.

- Conduct an equity scan to assess wage gaps between frontline staff and supervisors, prioritizing equal pay to uphold the resistance-focused principles of domestic violence programs and avoid exploiting staff of color.

- Foster meaningful dialogue during interviews by focusing on culture change and explicitly asking about practical anti-racism actions in different roles and contexts.

- Provide tools, resources, and quality training to support staff success and combat high turnover rates, recognizing that underfunding and resource limitations contribute to burnout and hinder staff retention.

- Examine and address white gatekeeping practices, ensuring a fair and inclusive recruitment process by questioning preferences for certain majors or degrees that may unintentionally favor white candidates from prestigious institutions.

Recommendation 6—Provide Meaningful Access to Support Services for Staff

It is important for leadership in anti-GBV organizations to encourage self-care as an additional form of support in the workplace. This could look like allowing a certain number of hours of the work week to be set aside for a self-care activity. Yet, organizations must also recognize that individual coping strategies alone are insufficient. We must embrace a culture of care in the workplace by challenging harmful systems that prioritize self-sacrifice. By nurturing a culture of care, we can foster a sense of mutuality and collective well-being that benefits the entire community.

Those of us who live on the margin are expected to be submissive and to self-sacrifice. Centering ourselves through self-care means going against the harmful systems we have internalized. These systems, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism value labor—especially underpaid or unpaid labor. These systems do not value radical self-care and happiness.

Radical self-care cannot happen without a true culture of care. Killian (2008) found that individual self-care strategies were not associated with reductions in compassion fatigue, burnout, or symptoms of secondary traumatic stress among trauma therapists. Instead, it is important to implement strategies that involve interpersonal connections and reliance on social supports internal and external to the organization, spirituality, and time with family and friends.

A care-centered approach in non-profit management is one that prioritizes the needs of individuals, values emotion in decision making, respects differences, and nurtures relationships within the organization (Sandberg & Elliott, 2019). This shift requires flipping the pyramid structure and actively listening to staff members on the ground to understand their needs and provide support.

It is also important for leadership to recognize the need for counseling and other support to address the triggering nature of the work, especially for advocates who are survivors or may experience vicarious trauma. Organization leadership could consider establishing a separate department or entity dedicated to supporting advocates, acting as an outlet for conversations and advocacy on their behalf, while also holding leadership accountable.

Action Steps

- "Flip the pyramid": advocates of color recommend that leaders divest from the pyramid organizational structure. This is rooted in the fact that our movement was born out of radical feminist traditions that value equity. The current pyramid organizational structure is entrenched in WDC and should be reconsidered.

- Establish an "Employee Resource Group" to advocate for employees and hold leadership accountable, providing a platform for staff to voice concerns and address issues within a safe and supportive community.

- Create a culture of care where everyone feels comfortable addressing harm caused by staff members. In this safe community, it is the responsibility of all staff to point out when harm is done. White staff and staff of color have the responsibility—as community members—to confront racial harassment, racism, and microaggressions.

- Consciously incorporate self- and community-care practices into the workday and leave policies. Importantly, leadership must model these practices on a regular basis.

Conclusion

The impacts of WDC were clear as participants described their experiences. The presence of white dominant culture in anti-GBV organizations silences women of color. The presence of this violence inhibits the ability to express and heal from trauma. The need to express oneself in a safe space cannot be underestimated. The presence of white dominant culture, and by extension white dominant narratives, serves as an additional layer of violence that Black advocates and other advocates of color experience while attempting to support survivors. Our project highlights the need for women of color to be able to express themselves and their experiences as advocates in order to create a culture of care and disrupt white dominant culture.

Although the listening sessions were conducted in 2019, prior to the uprisings against systemic and interpersonal racism in the summer of 2020, the facilitated discussions about implementing the action steps happened after anti-racism became a household term in the U.S. In our conversations during the dissemination of the report, one white executive director said that the summer of 2020 inspired her to be more actively anti-racist, and she admitted she was much more open to hearing the results of this project after the 2020 uprisings.

Still, one participant mentioned that leadership often sees advocates of color as a source of problems, not as a source of solutions. This indicates a deep mistrust with the leadership of nonprofits. This mistrust could be attributed to the "outsider within" status of women of color in these spaces. By prioritizing

the voices of advocates of color in this project, we can begin to understand the depth of harm caused by white dominant culture within nonprofit organizations. This understanding can serve as a foundation for building a culture of care that genuinely supports the well-being of all staff, particularly those most affected by systemic inequalities. In this vein, it is our hope that the results of this study and, most importantly, the actionable recommendations based on the lived experiences of advocates of color working in the anti-GBV movement can help the non-profit sector move closer toward an explicitly anti-racist, equitable culture of care.

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