

A. One of America's Most Lethal Intersections: To be a Black, Trans, Adolescent, and experience Domestic Violence

In the United States, there are multiple identities and perceived labels that can make life exceedingly more difficult for some than others. Some of the most common are: if someone is a woman or female presenting person; a person color especially if they are Black or Indigenous; and socioeconomic status; are all identities that can drastically affect one's life experience. When brought together in one person they create what are commonly referred to as intersections, which are essentially US social co-morbidities in terms how they affect someone's life. One of the most dangerous and in many cases fatal intersections is where Black, Trans, and youth intersect with experiences of domestic violence. There are multiple ways and reasons why these identities and experiences can be so dangerous for the people who inhabit them, but those dangers cannot be understood or solved as a collective without being examined separately.

I. Being Trans and experiencing Domestic Violence

Gender and gender expression are some of the most powerful tools of social understanding, cultural and self expression, and social control that we have in the United States. In some many ways, gender shapes and forms how we move through life and which doors in life are open to us and which are closed. This fact combined with the deep and complex history of gender in the United States has created a certain societal

expectation and understanding of who is what gender and how that gender should look and exist in the world. One of the most dangerous expectations is that gender is a fixed trait that cannot and should not be changed.¹ This expectation comes into clear contradiction with the existence of transgender individuals, who are born as one gender but do not identify as that gender.² This automatically puts them at odds with a key societal gender expectation. Additionally due to the binary gender and sex system that currently dominates society, transgender people especially those amidst transition are often caught in a grey area when it comes to healthcare, social services, financial opportunities, and policy that is meant to keep people safe. These issues are all compounded by patriarchal expectations of gender, sexism, and religiosity, and become even more problematic when a trans person is a victim of domestic violence.³ Being trans may bar a person from being able to be admitted to a women's shelter, or prevent them from being believed by the police or court system, or they may have to express themselves as a different gender in order to access services which may cause them immense harm in other ways.

II. Being Black and Trans while experiencing DV

As stated above, being a trans person in the United States carries with it an inherent danger both to their physical safety and mental health. These dangers are compounded exponentially if the trans person also identifies as Black and even more so if they are easily identifiable as Black. Race colors any and all interactions that people have in the United States, with racism having a gruesome history of lighting forest fires of violence

¹ Rogers, Michaela. "Challenging cisgenderism through trans people's narratives of domestic violence and abuse." *Sexualities* 22.5-6 (2019): 803-820.

² Id

³ Id

and brutality that continue to burn to this day. This makes being a Black trans person who has or is experiencing domestic violence a herculean survival task every single day.⁴ They have to reckon with the inequalities of the healthcare system heavily restricting their access to reasonable care; the court system limiting or downright denying their access to victimhood, the racism and misogyny combo making violence against them exponentially more common, and the fact that violence against black trans people is more likely to be fatal than violence against their white trans counterparts.⁵ Then there is also the federal and state legislation that historically has excluded trans people altogether that has heightened effects against black trans folks.⁶

III. Black, Trans, Adolescence and Domestic Violence

Regardless of what intersections a person may exist at, a child or adolescent being exposed to domestic violence even just as a witness can have detrimental long term effects. Some of those effects include but are not limited to: negative mental health outcomes, decreased ability to create and maintain healthy relationships, and lowered ability to properly adjust to healthy environments. These effects and others can make a child exponentially more likely to develop serious mental health conditions, which leads to higher risks of being victims of violence and abuse.⁷ They are also much more likely to not have much or any agency or autonomy in what they need or how the situation is

⁴ West, Carolyn M. "Widening the lens: Expanding the research on intimate partner violence in Black communities." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 30.6 (2021): 749-760.a

⁵ Stotzer, Rebecca L. "Violence against transgender people: A review of United States data." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14.3 (2009): 170-179.

⁶ Ijoma, Samone. "False promises of protection: Black women, trans people & the struggle for visibility as victims of intimate partner and gendered violence." *U. Md. LJ Race, Religion, Gender & Class* 18 (2018): 255.

⁷ Lang, Jason M., and Carla Smith Stover. "Symptom patterns among youth exposed to intimate partner violence." *Journal of Family Violence* 23.7 (2008): 619-629.

handled due to their status as an adolescent or minor. All of this is then further exacerbated by the above factors if this child adolescent is black and trans, which leads to this intersection being exceptionally dangerous. The intersection sits at a blind spot in terms of both proper social understanding and policy that actively protects them, which is a huge problem.

B. Research and Literature

There was a survey done in 2008 by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (the Task Force) that collected information about experiences of discrimination by trans people in various settings. Kristie L. Seelman did a secondary analysis of this survey that focused only on the individuals in who accessed either domestic violence shelters (n= 2,438) or rape crisis centers (n=2,424).⁸ Seelman's study found that only 6% of those who tried to access domestic violence shelters or programs and 5% of those who tried to access rape crisis centers experienced discrimination.⁹ However, Seelman does state "This may indicate that although respondents are only being asked to indicate unequal treatment based upon gender, some of their experiences may in fact be related to others' perceptions of other identities that they hold."¹⁰

This important point is fleshed out at some of those other interceptions in a paper from Samone Ijoma. In this paper, she speaks amongst other things about institutional transphobia and barriers that prevent trans people of color from asserting their full legal rights in cases of intimate

⁸ Seelman, Kristie L. "Unequal treatment of transgender individuals in domestic violence and rape crisis programs." *Journal of Social Service Research* 41.3 (2015): 307-325.

⁹ *Ibid*, at 24

¹⁰ *Id*

partner violence. Ijoma mentions the following as a major one “battered trans people are portrayed as being inherently deceitful and deceptive because of their inability to conform to socially constructed gender norms. As a result of these biases, laws that would allow victims of intimate partner violence to concealed-carry would not protect trans victims when they act in self-defense.”¹¹ This social reality that trans people are inherently deceitful then creates an environment where they are seen no longer the victim but a perpetrator in their own abuse, which prevents them from accessing so many services and avenues of social reprieve. The perception shift that occurs is then aggravated if they are Black due to the lack of victimhood afforded to Black people.

All of the above factors plus some greatly impact black trans youth as well and at critical stages of their development. Tamar Goldenberg and others did a study on the connections between transgender and gender non-conforming youth(TGNC) and intimate partner violence (IPV). Collecting data they found from 131 TGNC youth from 14 different cities with about half identifying as Black, they found that structurally TGNC youth that experience extreme victimization, a history of incarceration, or participated in sex work were much more likely to report intimate partner violence.¹² Additionally, 45% of the sample reported lifetime experiences of physical or sexual intimate partner violence, nearly have experiencing gender-related violence in the past year, and about 75% of the sample experiencing victimization in that same timeframe.¹³ This one study shoes that there are multiple structural variables that will magnify

¹¹ Ijoma, at 283

¹² Goldenberg, Tamar, Laura Jadwin-Cakmak, and Gary W. Harper. "Intimate partner violence among transgender youth: Associations with intrapersonal and structural factors." *Violence and gender* 5.1 (2018): 19-25.

¹³ Id

the possibility of IPV and discrimination against trans people of color especially when young people and children arrive at that intersection.

C. Policy Possibilities

All of these problems are results of generations of structural and social design meant to purposefully ostracize and dampen people who do not fit into rigid social constructs. Thusly, a combination of social and structural policies and shifts are necessary to fix it. Socially, there needs to be a paradigm and pedagogy shift in how we talk about, teach, and encourage the performance and living of gender. This would look like more social science influenced sex and gender education in schools, overt and subliminal messages about gender as a spectrum in media, and more education for adults about what trans children go through socially and culturally and how to support those children. Structurally, there needs to be more intentional trans protections in statutes like the Violence Against Women Act. There also needs to be more policies that explicitly deal with the discrimination and violence that trans people experience beyond the current anti-discrimination laws that exist because currently those laws are ineffective. Additionally, state and federal funding needs to be allocated to the creation of TNGC specific domestic violence shelters and support services so that TNGC people are not required to choose between living their life as something they don't identify as and being homeless and more vulnerable than they already are.

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