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Intersectionality and Accessibility to Social Services

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Intersectionality and Accessibility to Social Services

University of Southern Maine

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Introduction to the Study

In times of a crisis, the intersectionality of sex, class, and ability creates a vulnerable population. Many available “resources” are exhausted, due to high demand. What are the specific barriers that survivors of domestic violence face when they require legal services? Also, how does the intersectionality of sex, class, and ability affect their access to these services? This research paper will analyze the activism of the Volunteer Lawyers project, using intersectional feminist theory. As part of the Volunteer Lawyers project, I will apply my feminist learning by practicing advocacy skills to help survivors in finding the right legal representation and services. In summary, the VLP internship will provide me with the necessary tools to provide survivors of domestic violence and lower-class women access to legal services.

Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project

In 1983, Pine Tree Legal partnered with the Maine Justice Foundation to help start a program with volunteer lawyers who could assist in providing legal aid. In 2017 the Volunteer Lawyers Project became its separate organization. The VLP provides training that helps members of the community prepare intakes, provide legal information, and work on the intake line over the phone. The VLP’s mission is to grant people with low incomes access to legal aid in different areas of law such as small claims, family, worker’s rights, and other services. The Volunteer Lawyers Project eligibility requirements are income-based, but staff and volunteers work tirelessly to connect populations such as survivors of domestic violence to volunteer attorneys, domestic violence agencies, and other legal resources.

One of the VLP’s challenges they anticipate overcoming is being more accessible to the Native American population in the state of Maine. As a non-profit

organization, and as an organization that works to provide people in rural areas access to these resources, the VLP faces unique obstacles. It is very challenging to reach clients living in many rural areas of Maine. As a program that operates mostly online or through the phone (given the fact that the in-person clinics are closed due to COVID-19) unique obstacles are experienced daily with staff members and intake interviewers when trying to get a hold of clients.

To increase access to services during the pandemic, the VLP created a public-facing email address that clients can reach out to at any time. Staff also reached out to local social service agencies to encourage service providers to refer clients directly, sometimes using interpreters when needed. The VLP is starting to collaborate with other organizations to fill in gaps that other legal aid groups couldn't help with. This includes pre-hearing consultation for survivors of domestic violence in every county.

Current resources are limited due to the lack of representative data. Although many studies have been conducted, many researchers have failed to capture the need for the assistance of women in rural areas. Few states, “According to the U.S Census Bureau (2000), more than 24% of U.S residents live in rural areas. However, despite an increasing body of research on domestic violence, few research studies focus on domestic violence in rural settings (Van Hightower, Gorton, & DeMoss, 2000)” (1). This quote suggests that there is a high demand for resources in rural areas, however, research has continued to show a bias in making these services available to people living in rural places. Likewise, the need for programs such as the VLP in Maine is important to better the community's accessibility, and in ensuring that survivors are getting the help they need in adequate timing.

The Correlation of Sex and Gender to Domestic Violence

Reclaiming women's voices in society meant collaboratively coming together to exemplify shared experiences. Crenshaw (1991) highlights,

Over the last two decades, women have organized against the almost routine violence that shapes their lives. Drawing from the strength of shared experiences, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices (P. 1241).

Crenshaw's argument pinpoints the importance of collectively coming together as women; the normalization of a patriarchal society keeps men in power and oppresses women. Women reclaiming their voices and exemplifying their shared experiences with the world gives the pedestal to women who will speak to a matter as their own, not allowing for men to define what it means to be a survivor or a victim by male perpetrated violence.

Sex and gender are two contrasting words. Sex is physiological. Examples of sex are the penis, vagina, hair, chromosomes, and breasts. Gender on the other hand is a social construct. First, what is a social construct? A social construct is the creation of an idea that society reinforces through practice and normalization. For example, skirts being labeled as a women's article of clothing is a social construct. Why? Society has attached the meaning of femininity to items of clothing. Women are meant to wear skirts, and men are supposed to wear suits. However, free from society's expectations and norms, a skirt is simply an article of clothing, but through the reinforcement and the way we act and interact with things around us, society has defined who is supposed to wear a skirt.

It's important to define sex and gender, because of their correlation to domestic violence. Society continues to treat women as second-class citizens. Why? For men to remain in power, society must oppress women. The inequality between men and women is a direct result of social construction. Historically, the roles of the home were constructed around people's everyday needs and realities. Most jobs consisted of physical labor that required a man's physical ability. On the other hand, the labor of the home was placed on women. Other necessities that created this reality required that women become nurturers, as men were tired after long days of physical labor. It's also important to recognize that this reality is heteronormative, and based on heterosexual relationships.

Gender-based violence has not changed over the years, although more women are empowered to speak up now more than ever, the number of unreported cases remains a dilemma. According to the World Health Organization (2021),

Violence against women remains devastatingly pervasive and starts alarmingly young, shows new data from WHO and partners. Across their lifetime, 1 in 3 women, around 736 million, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner – a number that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade (p. 1).

Domestic violence is oftentimes done by someone the survivor or the victim knows, because the institution of "home" is viewed as private, the abuse that occurs inside the home remains difficult to seek help for outside.

Survivor Story

Twenty-six-year-old Nicole Farmer explains that there are specific added barriers in same-sex relationships. Nicole states, "People are much less likely to suspect those experiencing same-sex violence because power is perceived to be equalized". While women remain to be the "ideal victim" Nicole explains that power in her previous relationship was always overlooked and undermined because her abuser was also female. Furthermore, that access to a shelter was extremely difficult; "Being poor was the main obstacle in my way of attaining freedom from them. I lived with them. It is hard to afford another place right away". Nicole became homeless after leaving her abusive partner.

For the next part of this paper please be aware of graphic descriptions of domestic violence. The 26-year-old recent graduate shares that she was abused not by a romantic partner, but by a friend. The urge to control and have power over her turned into physical and psychological abuse. She was constantly kept awake at night, and abuse would happen as she tried to complete her online school work. She planned an escape plan with a local domestic violence institution. She escaped very early in the morning and left the house never to return.

Furthermore, due to the fear of homophobia she endured from her mother as a teenager, she was afraid to ask her mother for help. As a last resort, Nicole reached out to her mother and slept on the floor of her living room for several weeks before being able to find shelter. Nicole explains that she was in an abusive relationship for years: "People just don't understand the obstacles in the way of victims leaving their abusers. Abusers are excellent manipulators and apologize very well. It's hard not to fall into a

cycle of leaving and returning”. Nicole shares that it’s “very difficult to leave, but it is very important to do so if you’re in danger”.

Nicole’s main escape was an older friend who offered her shelter for a price she could afford as a homeless university student. Nicole informed her school after leaving the relationship, and she explained that someone called her every day to check up. One thing that she highlights is the emotional trauma in any relationship. When asked what effect it had on her, she responded with, “Emotionally, I suppose the same as leaving an abuser in a relationship. Similar to any abusive relationship.” Nicole also emphasizes that her biggest obstacle was money.

Nicole currently lives with her older sister, and asked to emphasize that she’s very happy and stable in her new home. She shared her name and story to help other women in similar situations. Nicole hopes to inspire other women to seek help, and let them know there are available resources.

People who experience same-sex intimate partner violence face multiple barriers such as access to shelter services, fear of being outed, and homophobia. Shelters can refuse to offer services to a homosexual client. Besides, shelters are given to the majority of women who are seen as a priority. According to The National Coalition for Homeless (2020),

LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) individuals face a particular set of challenges, both in becoming homeless as well as when they are trying to avoid homelessness. LGBT persons face social stigma, discrimination, and often rejection by their families, which adds to the physical and mental strains/challenges that all homeless persons must struggle with (p.1).

Homosexual clients can be turned away at the door or before they ever reach those services. Research shows only 40% of homeless shelters accept homosexual clients. The intersection of social stigma and discrimination further works to oppress people in same-sex relationships.

In addition, outing in same-sex relationships is used as a fear tactic to control or oppress a lesbian, gay, or bi person. Due to the fear or danger of outing, the dominant person in the relationship will often threaten their partner to gain control of them. Outing is dangerous for several reasons. First, the person will find it mentally challenging to address their sexuality if they're not yet ready to do so. Furthermore, physical harm can be the direct outcome of outing someone who doesn't own safe space for self and identity expression. Moreover, personal preference and respecting a person's boundaries should never not be used as a way to harm them.

Outing in the LGB community affects intimate partner violence. For example, Goldenburg (2016) explains

Participants also described dyadic differences in outness about sexual identities as contributing to intimate partner violence (i.e. if one partner is "out" and the other is not). When discussing this dyadic difference, there was some disagreement among participants regarding which partner (the in partner versus the out partner) would be more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence (p. 10).

While the majority defined the dominant partner to be more likely to out the other there's no denying that anyone in the relationship is capable of outing their partner.

In addition, homophobia can be an extension of a set of beliefs, normalized, or even internalized. Religion, cultures, and beliefs illustrate same-sex relationships as “sinful” or wrong, and therefore cause backlash from within the community. Other types of homophobia are seen as the “norm” according to societal expectations. In conjunction with religious and normalized homophobia, persons in the LGB community can further extend that hate into internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia as defined by Meyer and Dean (1998) is, the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self” (p. 161) The feeling of needing to fit in as a heterosexual is often described as mentally draining. Internalized homophobia stems from heterosexual societal expectations and the over-representation of heterosexual relationships.

The Correlation of Class to Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is one of the world’s most important matters. People all over the world experience domestic violence. Domestic violence can happen to anyone and everyone. Due to the social stigma of “what happens inside the home stays inside the home” the number of undocumented and unreported cases of abuse are extremely alarming. According to Stockman (2015) , “Male violence is a problem for women of all income, race, and ethnic groups and affects an estimated three to four million women in the United States every year” (p.383). The substantial amount of people affected by domestic violence remains a priority in current research.

In addition to the unique challenges that women experience, class is also a contributing factor. The exploitation of the lower class creates added challenges. Kurz (1998) explains,

Recent studies have reported that women on welfare experience high rates of male violence. In a study based on a random sample of welfare recipients in Massachusetts, researchers found that 20% of current welfare recipients had been abused by a former or current boyfriend or husband within the last 12 months (McCormack Institute and Center for Survey Research, 1997) and 65% had been victims of abuse at the hands of a current or former husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives (p. 107).

Marginalized lower-class women are oftentimes dependent on their male partners. Added barriers of women who are lower class include financial dependency, fear of becoming homeless, and fear of losing other basic needs essential to survival.

Women are less likely to receive positions of power, or promotions in their career making it harder for them to advance and be financially independent. To demonstrate, women who are dependent on their male partners are subject to becoming homeless, as oftentimes lower-class women are only seen as caregivers for their family and children. Although poverty does not cause violence, poverty adds unique challenges to survivors. The Safe House Center notes, “intersection of poverty and domestic violence can 1) exacerbate the impact of the abuse, 2) cause an exceptional loss of resources for the survivor and 3) lessen positive outcomes for a survivor” (p. 4). Previous research has shown us that abuse is about power and control. Poverty can exacerbate the impact of the abuse, because of the added stress and demand to make ends meet. Second, the loss of resources for the survivor is an important point to address. Being financially dependent automatically places survivors at risk of homelessness. In addition, staying connected to services is nearly impossible without a stable address

and commitment to showing up to receive these services. Last but not least, if a survivor does not have a solid foundation, the processes of receiving help will be prolonged and daunting, not to mention extremely impactful on the survivors' mental wellbeing.

Currently available resources can prepare to help survivors who are a lower class by advocating for a women's right to work, advocating for systemic change that recognizes gender and class intersectionality, and educating members of the community to become more compassionate and better allies. Change is overdue, systemic change needs to happen for services to better serve marginalized populations. Systemic change, such as introducing a new bill that supports housing for all, gives lower class people the foundation to a new start.

The Correlation of Ability to Domestic Violence

Oftentimes research available is biased towards minority groups. Resources are designed based on research that excludes women with disabilities. Disabled women are viewed as dependent asexual making it easy for researchers to erase a population of women from their research. Although representative research including women with disabilities is limited according to Plummer & Findley (2012), "women with disabilities experience abuse at similar or increased rates compared to the general population" (p. 15). Also, different types of abilities require different resources. For example, perhaps women who are bound to a wheelchair will possibly have a harder time getting to and from services, because they require a special type of transportation and support.

Moreover, a person's disability alters their way of living. Being dependent on an individual also means added limitations to services and available resources. Dependability is also tied to isolation. Plummer & Findley's (2012) state, "In a study of

415 women with physical disabilities, Nosek et al. (2006) found participants who were less mobile and more socially isolated had a higher likelihood of having experienced abuse” (p. 23). Social services are constantly underfunded and overworked, making meaningful changes in these services long overdue. However, social services helping marginalized women in society have yet to research and offer equitable salutations to women with disabilities.

Beneficial changes to programs assisting disabled populations include: disability training, improving access to services, and partnering with disability programs. Survivors with mental disabilities will have triggers that need to be handled with patience and care. Disregarding a person's emotional needs after experiencing trauma can further harm the survivor or willingness to continue seeking support. As past research has shown us, people with disabilities are more likely going to be underrepresented and misunderstood due to a lack of knowledge. Meaningful change can begin by educating responders.

Intersectional Feminist Theory

For this paper, Intersectional feminist theory will be used to illustrate and explain how intersecting identities affect accessibility to services. According to Crenshaw (1991), “The term intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s to describe a method of analysis that considers how discrimination can vary depending on “multiple dimensions” (such as race, sex, and class)” (1244). Intersectionality signifies the impact of multiple intersecting identities in society as a direct correlation to the specific and unique barriers of people (or survivors). Intersectional feminist theory is also known as Race, Class, and Gender Theory. Hattery and Smith (2016) explain, “RCG assumes

that every system of domination has a counter system of privilege. In other words, oppression is a system of both disadvantage and advantages' (p. 60). To deconstruct systemic oppression is to define and acknowledge the oppressor/oppression and its motive. For every input there's an output, therefore, for every oppression, there's an oppressed. For example, to operate a big company there need to be employees, and by oppressing workers and exploiting them, in return the company is maximizing their profit. Multiple systems of oppression can work together to exploit people in society. A lower-class person of color with limited abilities will challenge all parts, or some parts of their identity to exist in systems that will further harm them later on (for example not giving them a promotion, because they're not able-bodied, and giving that promotion to a white person because they're a majority.).

Justifications, Limitations, and Operational Definitions of the Study

Justifications

While financial and emotional obstacles remain similar, the effort to highlight accessibility to services remains limited. Change can be prolonged and daunting, but change is still possible with crucially important research, such as research on the specific barriers of survivors of domestic violence, that provides hard data and evidence that will aid prevention programs. While there is lots of current research and literature, the amount of peer-reviewed research on same-sex partners, people with different abilities, races, and genders, are factors that are not considered and are extremely scarce, making this research proposal even more crucial of a study in addition to currently available research.

Limitations

There are many limitations to the study of Intersectionality and Accessibility to Social Services. Accessibility to resources in rural areas is understudied because most research focuses on white women in larger populated cities. Research suggests that black women are also less likely to seek help. In addition, current and available research fails to highlight unreported Domestic violence. While figures such as 1 in 3 and 1 in 4 survivors are common, the various obstacles faced by victims and survivors make figures much more complex and in need of thorough research that one might not always have resources or the ability to study.

Operational Definitions

According to the United Nations (2020), domestic violence is defined as, A pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone (p. 1).

Ethical Considerations

The intersectionality of sex, class, and ability creates unique hurdles and experiences, one ethical consideration would be the use of language. It is important to use language that isn't triggering to prevent the potential revictimization of the victim/survivor. Preventative measures to ensure the well-being of survivors can include framing questions in the following ways: get informed consent, address assumptions, describe steps moving forward, and be a sensitive researcher, worker, or responder.

Receiving informed consent from a survivor is essential to establish comfort, and get better reliability in the answers given. Furthermore, addressing assumptions, in general, will help ease anxiety, and debunk false potentially recorded data. Addressing assumptions such as who's viewing answers and confidentiality will institute trust that information used is valued and tacit.

Call to Action

In summary, although some might argue, there are sufficient resources to help victims and survivors of domestic violence; due to the overlapping obstacles of sex, class, and ability survivors of domestic violence will have added barriers. Besides, resources remain limited, and with the capacity to improve the accessibility of their services to marginalized populations.

Sex, class, and ability can lower the success rate of receiving equitable change promptly. Patriarchal structures and beliefs further oppress victims and survivors of domestic violence. The start of this paper examined how social status and class affect both victims and survivors. Second, deconstructing stereotypes and expectations of sex and gender is impactful in recognizing the overarching number of survivors who identify as women. Also, people with different abilities need to be recognized in research, and included in conversations that are designed to serve the disabled community. By failing to acknowledge the intersectionality of survivors deprives them of resources, acceptance, and meaningful research that acts as representation. Instead, domestic violence remains understudied, underreported, and specified to benefit white upper and middle-class individuals.

Change is possible, but change starts with a conversation. Openly talking about issues that harm communities is important to ensure that a support network is available beyond private institutions but in the community and existing social services. Intersectionality is important because it's non-exclusive to a specific community or experience, but multiple complex experiences on a micro and macro level.

As a volunteer Intake interviewer for the Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project, I have used my wisdom gained from survivors; by amplifying their needs and voices through this project. People are almost always desperate for a solution. Added barriers to services are morally wrong, our job is to create change through collective action. We must work together to acknowledge these unique barriers, and help create a safe community through systemic change.

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