

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Letter To The Editor | There Is No Hierarchy Of Oppressions: Giving Voice To The Voiceless

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Staff **March 24, 2019**



Dear Editor,

Audre Lorde said: ' As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and a member of an interracial couple I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism and heterosexism both arise from the same source as racism.'

In reflecting on these words of wisdom, the V.I. Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Council (DVSAC) is seeking balance not only in the work that we do but in 'how' we do the work - from our language to our activities and from our training to our messaging. On Monday, March 25th on St. Croix and Wednesday, March 27th on St. Thomas, DVSAC will host a screening of 'The Voiceless' - a documentary on male sexual violence which highlights the stories of five men who were sexually violated and the challenges that they faced in naming the violation, seeking help and overcoming trauma.

1 in 6 men have experienced sexual abuse or assault, whether in childhood or as adults and being that male childhood sexual abuse is common yet under-reported, under-recognized, and under-treated, this is probably a low estimate, which doesn't even include noncontact experiences (1 in 6, 2019). In order to have a balanced conversation about sexual violence - especially as Sexual Assault Awareness Month comes upon us in April - we must include the voices of voiceless; and when it comes to men and sexual violence, they are acutely underrepresented.

'There can be no hierarchies of oppression' is not a statement that negates the fact that while male sexual violence exists, that women are predominantly and alarmingly victimized with One in five women being raped at some point in their lives compared to one in 71 men (NSVRC, 2019). It is a statement, however, that calls us to recognize that there can be 'two truths and no lie' and in this case the truths are women are sexually violated and men are sexually violated too; and while we can acknowledge that there are disparities in the rate at which this occurs, the fact that it happens to one at all is simply not okay.

Answering the question of 'why don't men report?' is equally complex as attempting to answer the question of 'why don't women report?' but their experiences are not created equal and require an examination of socio ecological influences - individual perceptions of oneself, relationships in the home, influences from the community and socialization in society. While a daunting task, we can begin by addressing the simple yet not so simple language and attitudes that we employ in the Virgin Islands which perpetuate gender disparity and inequality. For example, how many times have we witnessed a young boy cry and in response, an adult says with annoyance in their tone 'Why are you crying?' or as we say in our dialects 'Wah wrang wid you big man?'; yet, in the same instance when a young girl cries, an adult jumps to her rescue and says 'What's wrong sweetheart?' or as we say in our dialects 'Wah happen mama?'. In this common scenario, why is it that we assume that something is 'wrong' with a young boy because he cries and further, why do we project 'manhood' on him with our words when indeed he is a child?; Yet when a young girl cries it's not because something is wrong with her but because something happened to her and further, we use terms of endearment (i.e.: mama, baby girl, sweetheart, etc.) to offer comfort? You see, although this example may appear simple, the reality is that over time, as our young boys continue to internalize these messages that suggest that something is 'wrong' with them for expressing emotions, particularly those that represent vulnerability, pain or hurt, they will develop coping mechanisms, create outlets and write mental narratives that feed into the very expectations that were established for them; and oftentimes, this appears in forms of anger, disconnectedness, indecisiveness and in some cases when these boys become adults, this even manifests as domestic and sexual violence.

The reality of male socialization is that boys and men are often challenged for behaviors that don't match society's definition of a "real man" or manhood and this forces them to make a choice between adhering to stereotypical male roles, even if they don't agree with them; or pushing back against the rules and running the risk of being ostracized for it (Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education, 2019). Organizations such as a Call to Men, however, educates men all over the world on healthy, respectful manhood as a mechanism for preventing violence against women, sexual assault and harassment, bullying and many other social ills (A Call to Men, 2019). We encourage boys and men in our community to do the same by holding other men accountable but also through healthy communication and expression. We ask this of you because we hear, we see you and we value your role in our community and in our work. Men like Amaziah George who have shared their stories of victimization right here at 'home' in the Virgin Islands speak truth to a reality that exists but is often unspoken. To Amaziah and others who choose to share at the risk of adversity but in the hopes for change - DVSAC applauds you and appreciates you.

As DVSAC builds upon our Territory-wide 'Engaging Men' campaign, we urge men and boys to assume a leadership role in advocating against violence of all forms and in the same breath, we

urge men and boys to engage with us to advocate for equality in a manner that is indeed equal in how we advocate for ALL who are violated. Whether you identify as male, female, transgender male, transgender female, gender fluid, pangender or otherwise, you do not deserve sexual violence - no one does.

In essence, embracing healthy masculinity (and femininity) requires one to reflect on their personal trauma, accept the things that they cannot change and be accountable for healing oneself. 'The Voiceless' is an opportunity for men in the Virgin Islands as well as parents of boys and youth mentors, to start a conversation on how this can be done. As such, the V.I. Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Council (DVSAC) invites you to join us this week on St. Croix and St. Thomas for screenings of The Voiceless as well as other activities in April for Sexual Assault Awareness Month and Child Abuse Prevention Month. To reserve your tickets, please visit our website at www.vidvsac.org and click on 'Events'. We look forward to working with you and our community for YOU, US and OUR community!

Submitted on Saturday by: Khnuma Simmonds, DVSAC executive director