

Domestic Violence: 'People Don't Talk About It'

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The Tampa Tribune

Published: Mar 23, 2007

THONOTOSASSA - No one talked to Sylvia Coleman about domestic violence.

Not when she married a man whose sweetness turned sour and left bruises on her skin. Not when he followed her to work to make sure she was there.

Not until he shot her three times.

"People don't talk about it like they need to," said Coleman, a 33-year-old mother of three who will travel to Thonotosassa next week for a women's conference on domestic violence.

Coleman wants to see more discussion, especially among black women.

"I think a lot of people in the black community - they're just too embarrassed to bring it up," said Delia Coleman, a ministry chaplain, radio show host and conference organizer who is no relation to Sylvia.

The problem crosses racial lines. White women have the highest rate of death at the hands of an intimate partner, according to figures released in December from the Bureau of Justice. With incidents that don't end in death, American Indian women experience the highest rate.

Black women seem to be bucking a trend toward a decline in domestic violence: Their rate of incidents not ending in death almost doubled from 2003 to 2004. It's too soon to tell whether that is a trend, bureau statistician Shannan Catalano said.

For Delia Coleman, the opportunity to do the most good lies in reaching out to black victims.

Coleman broached the subject of domestic violence a year ago on WTMP, 96.1 FM. She got plenty of responses during her 8 a.m.

program, but when she tried to move on, listeners continued to call in with stories.

"I just fell into the spirit," said Coleman, 55, whose Sunday radio show runs 15 minutes sandwiched between Gospel tunes. "I knew people were hurting."

In Tampa, about one in four people are black, census figures show. Yet more black women report being victims of domestic violence than white women - 1,214 compared with 1,054, according to 2006 police figures.

"The numbers speak for themselves," said Capt. Cherie Adkins, a 22-year veteran of the Tampa Police Department who sits on the board of The Spring of Tampa Bay, the largest domestic violence shelter in Florida.

Perhaps more black women report their abuse, Adkins said, but it doesn't mean domestic violence is more prevalent among them.

"Domestic violence can be anywhere. It's not an isolated issue with socioeconomics, class or race."

Grappling With Stereotypes

Domestic violence happens in every culture, agreed Tonya Lovelace, project manager for Women of Color, an arm of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence based in Harrisburg, Pa.

It's the way it happens and the access victims have to resources that are different.

Minority women have a history of discrimination in the criminal justice system, family services and law enforcement, Lovelace said. They often have less access to education and employment opportunities, and face language barriers and the fear of deportation when considering whether to report the violence.

For black women, in particular, grappling with stereotypes is a challenge, said Lovelace, who is black. Women are told they have to be strong and they may feel like they have to stand by black men.

Or they may worry about reporting abuse because their man will be targeted, she said. With a disproportionate number of black men behind bars, black women may feel the need to try to preserve them.

"They feel like black men are scarce," Lovelace said.

Black women also may worry more about how they are perceived by their church and families, she said.

In recent years, more churches have begun addressing domestic violence, said Linda Hess, a spokeswoman for The Spring.

"In the past it was, 'This is your business, keep it at home and figure it out,'" Hess said. "Now, there are a lot more ministries coming forward and telling people that domestic violence is not acceptable."

Sometimes, victims don't understand they're being abused.

"Most people know the physical abuse," Hess said. "But they never realized the mental abuse - the control issues."

Getting Stronger

Some victims think violence is just a part of life, Delia Coleman said. When she was a child in Selma, Ala., grown-ups around her would excuse husbands beating their wives with, "Oh, he's just being a man."

Coleman grew up thinking domestic violence meant black eyes or broken bones. Then she found out about people who weren't allowed to see their relatives, choose their clothing or leave their homes.

She organized a conference in October with about 25 women filling the pews at the Church of the Apostles. She invited police, The Spring, and the Family Justice Center, which helps victims get restraining orders and find shelter among other services.

She also invited women who lived to tell the tale.

Sylvia Coleman could barely speak then, her voice hoarse as her throat healed. She told the other women about how she almost died on May 2.

"I really ain't supposed to be here today, to be honest," she told the audience. "None of us talk about abuse. We just take it and think it's OK, when we really just want to be loved."

Sharing her story made her stronger, Coleman said recently. It made her feel like people cared. Next week, she will tell another group of women about the day she got shot.

But she also will tell them about the nursing classes she started at Pasco-Hernando Community College. And about filing for divorce from her husband, whose trial is set to begin this month.

This time, Coleman will talk about how she's living.