Women of Color and Leadership at Sexual Assault
Coalitions: Pulse Check Report 2010

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The National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault
(SCESA) for the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing
Project (RSP)
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Introduction
It has been over 8 years since SCESA compiled the Women of Color and Leadership at Sexual Assault Coalitions: Addressing the Gap Report in 2002. Since then, we have been asked several times by Women of Color to conduct another assessment of coalitions. While SCESA could not devote the same 2 year long comprehensive process that it did to develop the 2002 Report, the RSP was able to support SCESA’s work on this intermediate “pulse check” report.

In our soft scan, what we found is that although there has been some progress made, Women of Color continue to face numerous challenges during their tenure at coalitions across the country.

Racism continues to be at the center of the concerns for many Women of Color. Many coalitions are struggling with supporting staff (Women of Color and other staff) and sustaining the work. While this is a challenge for all staff, the continued institutionalized racism at many sexual assault coalitions creates an even more challenging workplace for Women of Color which often leads to short job tenures.

It is important to note that addressing issues of individual and institutionalized racism is long term work with no shortcut. Therefore, we expect that addressing the support and leadership of Women of Color at coalitions is a long term endeavor. This pulse check is intended to remind us all that as coalitions continue to develop and improve advocacy and services addressing sexual assault, there must be continued efforts to be inclusive of the voices and leadership of Women of Color. The network of sexual assault providers and services is expanding, and with it our capacity to build leadership opportunities for Women of Color must grow too.

While coalitions are at very different levels of development on this issue, the report will provide information for all sexual assault coalitions on tools for supporting Women of Color and strategies for engaging and supporting Communities of Color organizations.

About SCESA
The National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault (SCESA) is a Women of Color led non-profit dedicated to working with our communities to create a just society in which Women of Color are able to live healthy lives free of violence.

As a national advocacy organization, we utilize a multi-strategy approach of leadership development and support for Women of Color as well as technical assistance, training and systems advocacy regarding sexual assault in Communities of Color. Our organization helps to provide resources and access to historically underserved and disenfranchised Communities of Color, as well as ensuring the concerns of our communities inform decisions made at the highest levels of authority.
Background

In 1997, the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project (RSP) was formed by the collaboration of the following State Sexual Assault Coalitions: Connecticut, New York, Illinois, Washington and Minnesota, in an effort to build local, state and national presence as a sexual assault movement. It was during the inception of the RSP, that we as Women of Color leaders, in our role as staff with the initial coalition partners, began the discussion of including Women of Color in all processes of these efforts.

Women of Color had been addressing violence against women in their communities for years. With the advent of RSP, it became even more evident that despite the incredible and important work done by many Women of Color leaders long before us, there still was a significant absence of Women of Color leadership at the statewide and national level. By 2000, we created the National Women of Color Leadership Project (WOC Leadership Project) to continue the legacy passed on to us and assist in establishing a more coordinated, comprehensive and culturally appropriate response to sexual assault throughout the country. This project later gave life to the National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault (SCESA), to reflect a long-term goal, beyond the WOC Leadership Project to ensure that Women of Color are given an opportunity to influence and affect system-wide responses and social change and policy initiatives related to sexual assault.

It was also during this time of growth and transition that SCESA authored the “Women of Color and Leadership at Sexual Assault Coalitions: Addressing the Gap Report 2002”.

Overview of the Women of Color and Leadership at Sexual Assault Coalitions: Addressing the Gap Report 2002

Women of Color have been providing leadership in the anti-sexual assault movement since the very beginning. However, the number of Women of Color in leadership and their access to influence policy decisions and social change has been limited. This limitation in Women of Color leadership within this movement serves to stall the movement’s ability to respond to victims of sexual assault in a culturally and linguistically competent manner.

In the 2002 report it was noted that there were approximately 390 total staff at sexual assault coalitions across the country; approximately 79 of those staff were Women of Color. During this time period there were 21 states that had no Women of Color on staff at coalitions, and there were 5 States which had Women of Color who were Executive Directors. The report also noted five key issues that were evident as common themes across sexual assault coalitions at that time:

- Recruiting Women of Color
- Providing Support for Women of Color
- Ensuring Professional Development and Skills Training for Women of Color
- Ensuring that Women of Color Maintain Leadership Positions
- Being An Effective Ally for Women of Color
The themes noted above were identified as critical initial steps to move coalitions forward. The 2002 report illustrated issues that existed under each theme and recommendations to consider when addressing each one. The 2002 report was shared with all Executive Directors of sexual assault coalitions across the country to utilize in their strategic planning process and to share with the Board of Directors. It was also shared with Women of Color staff at each coalition and then presented at a general session during a national Resource Sharing Project meeting of all coalitions in 2003.

There was a clear message given in the 2002 report that should be reiterated for this current report as well. That is, that we must recognize that there is no quick fix to addressing the comprehensive issue of Women of Color support and leadership. Rather, each coalition should commit to a long-term strategic plan that addresses not only individual and institutional racism but also enhancing and supporting Women of Color leadership.

“What’s race got to do with it?”

Some sexual assault coalitions may ask “Why focus on race, why not just focus on sexism?” While we recognize that the existence of sexism is an underlying cause of violence against women; racism exists and is the underlying cause that has been used to take away land, language, privilege, power and culture from many People of Color in this country. These issues are often further complicated by classism, and ableism to name a few.

Race is a complex issue and discussions of race often cause people to feel uncomfortable. But how can we expect men to examine their behaviors that reinforce violence against women and sit in the uncomfortable seat of stopping another man from sexualizing a young girl or woman when we refuse to sit in the uncomfortable seat about race?

Racism is at the core of many societal issues. However, our movement, and many other movements only operate from the premise to end one of these injustices or a singular “ism” while reinforcing the other to thrive.

At worst, Victims of Color often experience negative discriminatory attitudes from the very organizations set-up to assist them: while attempting to access the sexual assault center, during the forensic exam, from the police officer and in the court room, if the case even gets this far. Racism is also experienced on a daily basis by those of us Women of Color (WOC) who work in the movement as advocates to end sexual assault. Many are tokenized - in positions without any training, or with unreasonable expectations or at worst, both.

Racism exists in every sexual assault coalition as it does in every other gender specific or social justice movement and in our overall society; this is a fact that cannot be ignored. As we know, all too clearly, silence on an issue does not make it go away. Silence on sexual assault will not make sexual assault go away, and similarly; silence on the issue of racism will not make racism go away.

In the 2002 report, it was noted that if the anti-sexual assault movement is truly to create and facilitate change, it must first look to changing personal beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and
assumptions. This was recently restated by a participant who said; “Process, Process! We have to deal with white privilege and push through it”.

**Methodology**

When SCESA was asked by Women of Color at sexual assault coalitions, to take a pulse check on coalitions and Women of Color leadership, we turned to our collaborative partners at the National Sexual Assault Resource Sharing Project (RSP).

As mentioned previously, while we did not have the capacity to conduct a full assessment in the same scope of the 2002 report, we did want to do a “pulse check” to explore what progress has been made. In conjunction with the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault, in their capacity as a current partner of the RSP, we held focus groups and critical conversations with Women of Color and other staff at coalitions during national meetings and other gatherings.

We formed a small steering committee of Women of Color. The committee included women who currently work at sexual assault coalitions and those who worked at coalitions at the time of the 2002 Report. The committee assisted with the development of an assessment tool and gathered information for the report.

While we were not able to interview Executive Director’s from each sexual assault coalition, we were able to speak to a small group of director’s representing each region of the country.

**Findings**

In gathering information for this report, we gained further insights about the realities of WOC at sexual assault coalitions as well as the struggles facing Communities of Color across the country.

It was also realized that while we had learned in the previous report that WOC have a 2 year term at coalitions, currently many are leaving before this 2 year time. We learned that while we now have an increase of WOC in leadership (middle management positions) that many struggle with making critical improvements pertaining to the coalition’s responsibility of engaging Communities of Color-led organizations.

In interviews with Executive Directors, a common theme emerged and we found that many struggle with organizational issues, such as Board development, policy development, funding and sustainability issues, while also struggling with anti-racism issues. Many wanted assistance in addressing racism as an organization, but acknowledged that their basic needs often take precedence over anti-racism trainings and activities.

WOC at coalitions noted that although some progress has been made regarding support and opportunities for leadership, challenges continue to exist. “Racism is still intact”; “We work harder than everyone else; can’t make mistakes, we are second guessed all the time”. Furthermore, “Our dress attire is in question as our cultural ethnic clothing is not viewed as professional enough”. WOC as well as other staff at coalitions noted that training and professional development opportunities are lacking for all staff; WOC only spaces are being
challenged, on a statewide level coalitions are failing to engage with statewide or local level Communities of Color organizations; and WOC noted that within their state, local providers are struggling with service provision to Communities of Color.

Below are the key issues identified in the completed pulse check:

- Professional Development and Training for Women of Color
- Retention and Sustainability for Women of Color
- Utilizing Women of Color Only Caucus Spaces
- Support for Local Communities of Color Organizations

**Issue: Professional Development and Training for Women of Color**

For everyone who comes to this work, obtaining comprehensive job orientations, professional development opportunities, and ongoing training can be a significant challenge. As organizational resources diminish, too often opportunities for training and professional development get cut. This is an ongoing issue for all coalition staff, but an even more significant problem for Women of Color.

At some coalitions, Women of Color have to work harder than their white counterparts in order to receive the same recognition and/or credit. Yet these same coalitions often offer limited or no access to ongoing professional development opportunities for Women of Color. The combination of increased expectations and a continued lack of educational opportunities create an environment in which Women of Color do not thrive. They are too often expected to do more with less, thereby creating a set up for failure. Coalitions can make commitments to Women of Color that will help increase staff proficiency and retention over time – often without a dramatic increase in required resources.

It is incredibly important to ensure that Women of Color have the training, support, and access to information to help them do their jobs well. Building a strong, diverse staffing base will help enrich coalitions and support Women of Color in countless ways. Put clearly: ensuring that Women of Color receive adequate job orientations and ongoing training is not expensive to do, but can be quite costly if omitted.

**Recommendations:**

- Coalitions should provide, regardless of staff position, an orientation that includes information about the coalition’s history, operations, funding sources (in particular the funding source associated with the position) as well as new job responsibilities, expectations, and an overview of national movement history and resources.

- Coalitions should provide access to ongoing professional development opportunities, including opportunities to attend conferences and training events, and opportunities to expand job knowledge inside the coalition and within the movement.
Women of Color should have the opportunity to serve a primary role in identifying their professional development goals and potential development opportunities that are revisited throughout the year.

**Issue: Retention and Sustainability for Women of Color**

Retaining and sustaining Women of Color throughout the anti-sexual assault field is an ongoing struggle. There are many factors that influence retention and sustainability of staff, and Women of Color are affected by those factors at an increased level, as they are often already marginalized inside their organizations, burdened by higher expectations than their counterparts, and not supported adequately in their day-to-day work. Within the movement, many organizations, even those organizations with a feminist philosophy, do not have policies that model how best to support women in the workplace. In order to retain and sustain Women of Color, it’s imperative that coalitions take affirmative steps to provide ongoing support inside their organizations.

**Recommendations:**

- Coalitions should develop supportive policies and practices to support all coalition staff. Supportive practices that would be useful include: family leave, flexible workday schedules, fair pay, options for earned sabbaticals, life insurance coverage, retirement benefits, options for self-care, and health/mental health benefits. These policies are critical for all staff but for some Women of Color they are vital to ensuring that they are economically self-sufficient.

- Coalitions should provide clear expectations with ongoing support, supervision, and growth opportunities. After speaking to several Coalitions it is clear that ongoing organizational and managerial support is needed in order to raise the bar as an organization.

- Coalitions should provide or require anti-racism training at all levels of the organization.

**Issue: Utilizing Women of Color Caucus Only Spaces**

Caucus space is a process used to allow individuals from groups that have something in common, such as gender, race or sexual orientation to connect with each other. Women of Color and other individuals from historically marginalized groups, such as survivors of sexual assault, benefit from being able to gather in groups to discuss their shared experiences, challenges, and opportunities. Women of Color at coalitions noted that they value the time they can spend together in shared experiences. As such, it’s important, to both the growth of the organization and Women of Color staff, that coalitions find ways to support caucus spaces, without viewing them as separatist.

As we know all too well from our work to end sexual assault, survivors of sexual assault are able to build support for themselves via survivor only spaces. Similarly, for WOC, caucusing is the support needed to sustain them in this challenging work while also addressing issues of racism.
Women of Color caucus space can be provided in a variety of ways, depending on the needs of the WOC at the coalition. In any of its forms, Women of Color-only space or caucus should be supported at all levels of the coalition.

**Recommendations:**

- Coalitions should include caucus space in their personnel policies as an option for staff support. This caucus policy should incorporate, to the degree possible, funding to support caucus meetings and activities.

- The Coalition should set the culture of the organization that strives to support the importance of caucus or community-specific space.

- White women and men in the movement should be more intentional about caucusing to educate each other about racism, address ally work and dismantle other issues of privilege.

**Issue: Support for Local Communities of Color Organizations**

We know all too well that in order to end sexual assault we need every community engaged in the process. At the State and local level, sexual assault coalitions continue to struggle with supporting and or challenging their member centers as it relates to service delivery for Communities of Color; including building alliances with Communities of Color organizations.

On the local level, sexual assault services are often provided to Communities of Color by organizations other than rape crisis centers. Coalitions need to broaden the scope of the organizations with whom they work to include community-based Communities of Color organizations. For example, sexual assault services to the Latina community may not be best provided by the local rape crisis center, but instead could be provided through the local Latina Community or Counseling Center. Such expansion is about creating options for all victims. In communities where these services are provided through community-specific organizations, coalitions can be tremendous resources, while at the same time building state efforts and momentum to end sexual assault.

In order to build and sustain services for all survivors of sexual assault, coalitions must recognize the expertise in Communities of Color organizations. Retaining and supporting Women of Color in the field broadly can be increased by partnering and supporting local Communities of Color organizations within each State.

**Recommendations:**

- Coalitions should expand their membership beyond the traditionally-funded rape crisis centers. Membership should be available on a sliding fee scale or waiver programs to prevent excluding community based organizations that typically do not have the state funded resources to be a member of the coalition.
- Coalitions should develop meaningful partnerships with State and local Communities of Color community-based organizations, which exist throughout the Country and struggle to provide violence against women services.

- Utilize the State STOP planning process as an opportunity to enhance and expand the participation of Communities of Color leadership.

Addressing issues of support and providing opportunities for growth are important tools to sustain quality staff who are committed to the mission of the organization. Fair pay is a significant motivator but even more so is a work environment that values each staff member and their contribution to the overall goals of the organization.

We encourage you to consider the issues and recommendations noted in this report. Be intentional about doing a self-assessment of your organization and its policies for supporting Women of Color and Communities of Color organizations. Engage in conversations within your coalition and your community - while recognizing that is not incumbent solely upon Women of Color, but should be led and supported from the highest levels of the organization.

It is imperative that as coalitions continue to develop and improve advocacy and services addressing sexual assault, intentional efforts and strategies are embraced that are inclusive of the voices and leadership of Women of Color and Communities of Color.