

'Web of trauma' a burden for blacks, researcher says

Thursday, July 24, 2003

By ELAINE PORTERFIELD
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

TACOMA -- Many ask how she can research such a depressing topic. Others say she's only reinforcing stereotypes. And some ask why she's airing her own racial group's dirty linen.

But Carolyn West, a University of Washington-Tacoma psychology professor who examines domestic violence among African Americans, says it is a much-understudied area, one deserving close examination if families affected by the problem are to be healed.

"People sometimes get pretty offended, asking why I'm focusing on this one population, when we know domestic violence cuts across ethnic groups," West said. "(But) we need to know so much more about domestic violence in this particular population.

"I call it the political gag order. Sometimes there's pressure not to talk about these issues, people are so fearful about reinforcing stereotypes."

West, 39, tackles that topic along with the rich history of black feminism in a chapter she wrote for the "State of Black America," a scholarly assessment of the status of African Americans published annually by the Urban League since 1976.

This year's report, released this week, contains some sobering news. Teen pregnancy continues to destabilize many black families, with black teens about three times more likely than whites to have out-of-wedlock babies. Other factors challenging black families, according to the report, include urban renewal efforts that displace blacks, drug use and AIDS.

Also, a decline in manufacturing and the rise of service industries means that many black workers have gone from higher-paying blue-collar jobs to much lower-paying service jobs, the report asserts.

Those social and economic pressures, combined with other race, class and gender inequalities, can encourage domestic violence, West said. Some studies have shown that black women experienced domestic violence at a rate perhaps 35 percent higher than that of white women, she writes in the report.

The stakes are high, from the stifling of children's academic progress to the killing of women by their intimate partners, West said.

This "web of trauma" must be addressed by a critical discussion of gender and sexism in the black community, she said. That will benefit all of society, she said.

"We all know somebody or have been victims ourselves" of domestic violence, West said. "We pay for it in police protection, court costs, hospital costs, medical costs. A lot of women become homeless because they're fleeing domestic violence. If we can just deal with domestic violence, we can solve a lot of other problems."

West edited and contributed to a comprehensive overview of violence against black women in a book published this year entitled "Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black and Blue" (Haworth Press).

"Unfortunately, it's a difficult area to research because you really get into stereotyping," West said. "One stereotype is black people are by their nature more violent -- that's pretty deeply entrenched. Or that black women don't need the same assistance with domestic violence (as white women) because they're more likely to fight back or are mutual combatants."

In addition to a course on family violence that is among the most popular classes on the UW-Tacoma campus, West teaches courses on human sexuality and the psychology of women. It's not uncommon for students in her family violence course to take her aside and say they've either been victims or have abused others, she said.

She'd like to reach out beyond the campus to aid others injured by violence in their personal lives.

P-I reporter Elaine Porterfield can be reached at 206-870-7851 or elaineporterfield@seattlepi.com This report includes information from P-I news services.