



# Violence Against Women



Prepared by Princeton Survey Research Associates International

*Prepared for*

Center for the Advancement of Women



**Violence Against Women:**  
**A Report of Findings from National Focus Groups**  
**with Women and Teen Girls**

**Prepared for**  
**The Center for the Advancement of Women**

**Prepared by**  
**Princeton Survey Research Associates International**

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## Introduction

In 2001, the Center for the Advancement of Women (CAW) surveyed 2,329 American women age 18 and older on a variety of issues, in an effort to better understand their experiences and attitudes. Among the more compelling findings were women's responses to a question asking them to rank twelve potential priorities for a revitalized women's movement in the United States. Nine in ten women (93%) said that "reducing domestic violence and sexual assault" should be a top priority, matching "equal pay for equal work" as the most important issue for American women. A follow-up survey with a fresh sample of 1,000 adult American women in 2003 confirmed these findings, with 92 percent saying that "reducing domestic violence and sexual assault" should be a top priority for a women's movement. Moreover, one in six women (16%) in 2001 said that this issue was *the most important priority* at that time.

These findings prompted the Center for the Advancement of Women to embark on a research initiative further exploring the salience of domestic and sexual violence in the lives of American women today. In August of 2006, CAW commissioned a series of fifteen focus groups with women and teen girls in five cities across the country: Hackensack, NJ; Houston, TX; Chicago, IL; Sacramento, CA; and Memphis, TN. The goal of the focus groups was to hear from American women and girls, in their own words, what they define as sexual and domestic violence, the impact it has had on their own lives and the lives of those closest to them, as well as their insights into how best to address this important public health issue. The main topic of the groups was violence as it occurs within intimate relationships, though participants were also asked about their general feelings of safety and their concerns about sexual assault.

Focus group sites were chosen to represent disparate geographic regions of the country; at each site, the Center conducted two groups with adult women and one group with teen girls. Participants were screened to meet varying age, racial/ethnic, and income parameters, in an effort to hear as many different viewpoints as possible on the issue of relationship violence. It is important to note that women and teens were *not* screened based on any past experience with domestic or sexual violence, and prior to the groups

were told only that they would be discussing “issues in personal relationships.” The goal of the research was to hear from *all* women and teens on this issue, not just those with personal experience. And while participants were encouraged to share personal stories and experiences if they felt comfortable doing so, it was not a requirement to participate in the discussions. Respondents were offered a small incentive to cover the cost of child care and transportation to and from the focus group facilities (\$75 for adult women, \$50-\$75 for teen girls depending on the location), and at the end of each group respondents were provided with the names and phone numbers of local organizations in case they or someone they knew wanted more information about domestic and sexual violence.

<u>Location</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Group composition</u>
Hackensack, NJ	August 1	Group 1: Women age 18-29, mixed race/income
	August 1	Group 2: Latina women age 18-64
	August 2	Teens: Girls ages 15-17, mixed race/income
Chicago, IL	August 7	Group 1: African-American women age 18-64
	August 7	Group 2: Women age 30 and older, mixed race/income
	August 8	Teens: African-American girls, age 15-17
Houston, TX	August 9	Teens: Latina girls, age 15-17
	August 10	Group 1: Women with incomes <\$40,000, mixed race
	August 10	Group 2: Latina women age 18-64
Sacramento, CA	August 16	Group 1: Asian women age 18-64
	August 16	Group 2: Women with incomes >\$40,000, mixed race
	August 17	Teens: Asian girls, age 15-17
Memphis, TN	August 23	Teens: Girls from households with incomes <\$40,000
	August 24	Group 1: African-American women, age 18-64
	August 24	Group 2: White women, age 18-64

In eliciting the thoughts and feelings of more than 100 women and teen girls of varying sociodemographic backgrounds across the country, the Center’s research garnered critical insights into how women and girls perceive and understand violence and abuse as they occur in intimate relationships, the degree to which they encounter these issues in their own lives, the broad social and cultural trends they see contributing to the problem of relationship violence, and the advocacy efforts they feel would be most effective. What emerged from the groups was a clear sense that relationship violence is widespread, yet women remain reluctant to talk about it or seek help due to the powerful stigma being a “victim” carries. Moreover, women and teen girls are most concerned

about the *emotional* and *psychological* dimensions of relationship violence; by and large, discussants felt these types of abuse are more prevalent and more damaging than physical and sexual abuse, yet also less tangible and therefore more difficult to confront.

Taken together, these findings not only reinforce and illuminate the Center's previous findings on the salience of sexual and domestic violence in the lives of American women and girls today, but underline the need for further national, quantitative research into both the psychological and physical manifestations of relationship violence. They also offer critical insight into women's and teens' willingness to discuss this sensitive topic in a research setting. Despite the powerful stigma surrounding this issue, many participants shared personal accounts of relationship violence. Generally, their stories were revealed gradually over the course of a 2-hour discussion, and full details were not disclosed until trust and rapport had been established within the group. In the end, however, most seemed relieved to find they were not alone in their experiences.

### ***Summary Findings***

- Education around the topic of violence and abuse in intimate relationships is reaching the intended audience. By and large, women and teens girls have a sophisticated understanding of the different forms violence and abuse can take, the risk factors involved, and the psychosocial dynamics underpinning abusive and violent intimate relationships.
- Women's and teen girls' definitions of abuse – and abusive relationships – are subtle and wide-ranging, including everything from psychological and emotional manipulation, social isolation and financial control, to verbal abuse, public humiliation, and physical violence. The various forms of verbal, emotional and psychological abuse are perceived as the most common, and most “scarring” forms of abuse. In contrast to physical wounds that heal over time, many say that verbal and emotional abuse “gets inside a woman's head,” makes her doubt herself, lowers her self-esteem, and stays with her long after a relationship ends.

- Most women and girls perceive the varying forms of abuse on a loose continuum from subtle manipulation and control to more overt verbal and physical abuse – crossing several key “thresholds” along that continuum – and recognize relationship violence as an escalating pattern of behavior that develops over time as opposed to a singular event or series of isolated events. Women are careful to distinguish between “normal,” “everyday” conflict that occurs in relationships, and abusive relationships in which critical lines of trust and respect are crossed.
- Significantly, participants rarely mentioned sexual violence in group discussions of what constitutes abuse in an intimate relationship. When probed, some say it is included under physical abuse or is simply taboo and difficult to talk about, while others question whether sexual violence can and does occur in the context of intimate relationships, particularly marriage. Several groups talked about discrete instances of sexual violence (e.g. “date rape”) later in their discussions, though it was outside the context of ongoing relationships.
- Large numbers of women and teen girls across groups report experiencing some form of violence or abuse in their own intimate relationships, or witnessing it in their families of origin, indicating it is widespread and cuts across all sociodemographic boundaries. Yet, as pervasive as personal experiences are, there is a clear distancing or disconnect between understanding the issue intellectually and *recognizing* and *acting on* this knowledge in one’s own life. Many teens and adult women state flatly, “I would never let that happen to me,” yet their personal accounts belie those assertions.
- Potentially driving this disconnect between education and personal action are several key dynamics women cite as barriers to recognizing and confronting abuse or violence in one’s own life. These include low self-esteem among women and girls (seen as both the cause and effect of abusive relationships), peer/familial/cultural pressure to maintain relationships, fear of “aloneness,” and economic dependence on abusers.
- Moreover, many women and teen girls “blame the victim” for relationship abuse and violence. Across groups, participants talked about women “letting this

happen,” “contributing to the problem,” “not drawing a line at the beginning of the relationship,” and even “liking it.” When asked what should be done to reduce relationship violence, most suggestions focus on the woman’s role in “allowing” it to happen as opposed to the man’s role as abuser.

- Perhaps because of pervasive victim blaming, there continues to be a conspiracy of silence around this issue. Women and teen girls talked at length about the powerful shame and stigma surrounding this issue, stemming from pressure to maintain an outward appearance of strength and “having it together.” Most say they would be reluctant to disclose violence or abuse to family and friends, instead preferring confidential services with outsiders who have had similar experiences.
- Women and teens repeatedly said that encouraging a woman to leave an abusive or violent relationship before she is ready is futile. Many feel a common barrier to seeking help is being advised to “just leave,” when the woman may not be ready to leave emotionally, may not be able to leave financially, or may want to salvage her relationship or keep her family intact because there are children involved.
- When asked what factors contribute to someone becoming an abuser, most feel that having witnessed or experienced violence or abuse as a child is a key risk factor, and that, in attempting to control others, abusers are acting out their own feelings of helplessness and inadequacy. Most groups also noted childhood abuse as a key risk factor in becoming a target of abuse or violence, and some suggest relationship violence is best addressed through parenting and relationship skills classes that “break the cycle of abuse.”
- Many women feel there is a lack of resources and support services, particularly for those experiencing verbal, mental, and psychological abuse. The perception exists that shelters, hotlines, and legal action are for the “truly abused” (i.e., the severely physically abused) and that these resources are not designed to address the more subtle forms of abuse that often accompany physical battering.

- Several important racial/ethnic dimensions underpin women's and teen girls' perceptions of this issue. The Latina women and teens we spoke with (largely Dominican, Puerto Rican and Cuban in Hackensack, largely Mexican in Houston) tended to focus on the disparate roles men and women play in relationships, pressure from family and church to maintain relationships, and ethnic identity as the source of "fiery" temperaments and combative relationships. Asian women and teens (mostly of Chinese, Laotian, and Phillipino descent) talked at length about the cultural importance of privacy, maintaining one's reputation within the community, and obeying one's partner. In contrast, African-American groups held in Chicago and Memphis tended to place the issue of relationship violence within broader historical and cultural contexts, locating it within the breakdown of family, neighborhood, and community structures.
- The most striking finding among teen girls is the absence of a support system among one's peers. Across groups, many teen girls said that they had few, if any, female friends because girls were "mean," "messy," "drama queens," and could not be trusted. Teen girls clearly feel isolated from one another and in competition with one another for male attention, both potential risk factors for becoming involved in, and remaining in, an abusive or violent relationship.
- Both adult women and teen girls express concern about portrayals of women in today's media, particularly in hip hop culture, music videos, and some popular movies. Many felt these images encourage young men to objectify women as "bitches" and "hos," labels that came up repeatedly in group discussions. Though most teen girls and young adult women recognize these images as problematic and say they do not let them influence their own behavior or feelings of self-worth, they talked at length about the pressure to conform to such images, both in terms of appearance and behavior.
- When asked about overall feelings of safety in their neighborhoods and communities, women and teen girls revealed a pervasive level of generalized fear, as well as a litany of protective behaviors they engage in on a regular basis (e.g. carry keys when approaching your car, look in your backseat before getting in,

don't go out alone, don't leave your drink unattended at a party, etc.). Most couch these behaviors in terms of "common sense," and participants had to be pressed to articulate what they fear would happen if they did not use "common sense." While teens and women in several groups said they "never feel safe," most seem to live their daily lives without consciously focusing on those feelings.

These are among the key findings of a series of 15 focus groups conducted in August 2006 in five cities with adult women and teenage girls. Detailed findings are outlined below. Unless otherwise noted, findings apply to both teens and women, and hold across different racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and age categories.

## **The Problem: The Nature of Violent and Abusive Relationships**

A key objective of the Center for the Advancement of Women's focus group initiative was to learn how women and girls around the country define and identify violence, particularly as it occurs in intimate relationships. Because women in the Center's national surveys cited "reducing domestic violence and sexual assault" as a top priority for a women's movement, it was imperative to understand what those terms meant to women and teen girls. To that end, each discussion began with open-ended questions about how conflict emerges and plays out in intimate relationships and what comprises healthy and unhealthy relationships, in an effort to elicit from women and teen girls—in their own words—what they believe constitutes relationship violence. Then, at some point early in each group, participants were asked directly what behaviors they think constitute abuse<sup>1</sup> in an intimate relationship. Once a list of behaviors was compiled, the moderator probed discussants about the relative severity and frequency of the various behaviors mentioned and whether abuse is by definition patterned and repetitive behavior.

Responses revealed that education around the topic of violence and abuse in intimate relationships is reaching the intended audience. By and large, women and teen girls have a sophisticated understanding of the different forms violence and abuse can take in a relationship, the risk factors involved, and the psychosocial dynamics underpinning violent intimate relationships. Yet, the notion that sexual violence can occur within a marriage or intimate relationship remains a fuzzy concept for many women, and one that is difficult to talk about.

### ***Unprompted definitions of relationship violence and abuse***

Responses to open-ended questions about the nature of violent relationships are remarkable in both their consistency and sophistication across groups. Women's and girls' spontaneous definitions of what constitutes abuse within a relationship are subtle

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<sup>1</sup> The term "abuse" was chosen by the research team because it was broad enough to include physical and sexual violence, but did not bias women toward those responses. A key question entering the groups was how women and teen girls conceive of physical and sexual violence vis-à-vis other forms of abuse that take place in intimate relationships (i.e. was it mentioned at all, where in the discussion did it come up, etc.).

and wide-ranging, including everything from psychological and emotional manipulation, social isolation and financial control, to verbal abuse and physical violence. Groups also mentioned behaviors like cheating and lying, and addictions such as gambling and drinking as abusive to one's partner. Behaviors consistently mentioned, loosely categorized, include:

- **VERBAL ABUSE** – name calling (bitch, whore, fat, ugly, stupid), cursing, criticizing
- **PHYSICAL ABUSE** – hitting, pushing, slapping, shoving
- **MENTAL/EMOTIONAL ABUSE** – manipulation, “mind games,” degradation, public humiliation, “guilt trips”
- **POSSESSIVENESS AND CONTROL** – jealousy, social isolation, stalking, telling someone how to dress
- **CHEATING AND ADDICTIONS** – substance abuse, gambling, adultery
- **THREATS** – threatening to harm oneself or others, threatening with weapons (including motor vehicles), general physical intimidation (punching walls, slamming doors, throwing things), destruction of property
- **FINANCIAL CONTROL** – giving inadequate allowances, withholding money, taking money from one's partner or spouse

Most women and girls place these varying forms of violence and abuse on a loose continuum from subtle manipulation and control to more overt verbal and physical abuse, with key thresholds along that continuum. One of these thresholds is the point where “bad behavior” crosses the line into “abuse.” Women and teens noted a difference between “normal, everyday” conflict in a relationship, which they characterized as “moments” of tension and lost tempers, and more patterned “abuse” that occurs repeatedly, escalates, is more harmful to the victim, and creates fear and discomfort.

***If you get into an argument, of course you are going to get into an argument because people have conflicts anyway. But if you just get into an argument one time and he calls her a bitch or she calls him a whatever, it happens that one time, it is not a consistent patterned behavior, so it is not abuse. Everybody says things that they regret at some point in time. If they are constantly arguing and he is constantly saying you are a bitch, she is constantly saying that he is a whatever, then there is a pattern there so it is consistent abuse. – NJ Group 1***

***I think the first few times; it is a lack of respect. Then it turns into abuse.***

***I think it is a repetitive thing. Once is not an abusive relationship. Everybody has arguments. Everybody has a certain amount of conflict within the relationship. But if it happens over and over and it gets worse, it is just going to get into an abusive relationship. If it is verbal that can go into the emotional stage and sooner or later physical will come into it as well. – NJ Group 1***

Yet women and teens also acknowledged that the line between “bad behavior” and “abuse” is not clear-cut. Based on one’s background and family of origin, people have different expectations of appropriate behavior in intimate relationships and different “tolerance levels.” Thus, many felt that the point at which a relationship is considered “abusive” depends in part on the people involved and the kinds of behaviors they are accustomed to and/or are willing to tolerate.

Moreover, the point where “occasional arguments” give way to patterned abuse is not always recognizable to the person in the relationship. Even if friends and family point out that one’s partner is being verbally or emotionally abusive, the woman often has trouble identifying the pattern in its earliest stages:

***My ex-boyfriend used to make me feel bad about...I don’t know what he would do, but he used to make me feel bad about hanging out with my friends and things like that. To the point of actually stopping my hanging out with my friends...I don’t think that when it is happening that you realize, but my mom was trying to tell me that he is emotionally abusing you. Of course I didn’t want to hear it. I think when you are out of the relationship and you look back on it, now I see what was happening. – NJ Group 1***

***I think most people don’t even realize what is a normal relationship? Even in normal, there is a wide range. Good and bad relationships, they are all different. I think a lot of these women think this happens to everyone, there is nothing wrong, this is normal. They don’t know where the line of normal changes. – Sacramento Group 2***

***I don’t think you really know when it starts, if you are in that situation. You are already in it and you don’t know it is even happening. Until you are going through the real bad. – Sacramento Group 2***

For most women and teens, the “real bad” is physical violence, particularly in the form of hitting. This was the second key threshold raised in most discussions, as it represented the point where abuse becomes tangible, and therefore undeniable. In the words of the women themselves:

***They are all bad, but I think when physical appears, I think that is the breaking point. You know earlier we talked about breaking points, I can see myself putting up with verbal, but for me when it gets to the point where you or your children could get physically hurt, then you are gone. – Sacramento Group 2***

***I'm sure everyone will say if a man hits you it is wrong. But some people will say if calls you a bitch it is okay. There are different opinions. You know, how many times has he done it, was he angry when he did it? – NJ Teen Group***

***I experienced some physical [abuse] – I got a phone thrown at me and a bowling ball thrown at me and a gun pointed at me and all that kind of stuff. He just had a real explosive temper. He never hit me, which is what I always justified it by. He had never hit me...it was pretty bad, I mean he would push and stuff like that, but he never actually slapped or punched me. – Memphis Group 2***

For most, once a relationship crosses this threshold and becomes physically violent, there is “no turning back” and it is time to leave the relationship. And as the last quote above reveals, unless they are being hit, many women will not define a relationship as “abusive.” Other forms of physical intimidation may be present, but being hit by one’s partner is the only behavior viewed almost universally as “abuse.”

### ***An Escalating Pattern of Behavior***

Women and teens recognize relationship violence as an escalating pattern of behavior that develops over time, as opposed to a singular event or isolated series of events. The pattern begins with a basic lack of respect for the woman and a desire on the part of the abuser to control her. This lack of respect and need for control expresses itself in possessive or jealous behavior and verbal abuse, which can then lead to mental and emotional abuse and ultimately physical violence. A relationship might start out positively, but then the abuser begins to control his partner, criticize her appearance, limit her time with family and friends, etc. The woman eventually finds herself isolated, questioning her own perception of the situation, and often the target of physical intimidation and violence.

***...It isn't like it starts when you start dating. It is very slow, very gradual. They start when you want to go out with your friends, and they are "Oh, I wanted to take you out to dinner that night." And they slowly segregate you away from your friends and your family until there is no one left but them. And then it starts. "You are fat, you are ugly, you are no good. I'm the only one that will stay with you." – Sacramento Group 2***

***'Cause I mean when it starts it's not like when your relationship first begins with the person that it's that way. It takes time. You know, you actually start trusting this person and you love this person. Then just one night it's a word, then a week or two later you know it's a slap across the face and then before you know it, 2 or 3 years has gone by and it's like it's a habit now. And I mean it happens without you realizing that it's really happening. Because I mean if I would have met this man, if***

***this man would have called me out the first night that I went out with him, I would have stopped it right then. But instead this man after a year, year and a half of being with him then it started coming out. And that's it...you're hooked. – Houston Group 1***

***I think it starts when there is a boyfriend and girlfriend and the guy starts calling her bad names. And she is thinking he is playing and but he really isn't. Like calling her b's [bitch] and h's [ho] and all that stuff. – Memphis Teen Group***

***It starts off I think as verbal, degrading and then it goes to ignoring and then to the physical aspect of it. To me I see a cycle, someone who has abuse in the past whether they were the abuser or the victim, it is somewhere in their past. – Sacramento Group 2***

***They start to break you down right from the beginning. They make you think that it is okay. They start to slowly break you down to the point where if they do hit you, you are not going to walk away. It could happen to anyone who doesn't catch it right off the bat. – NJ Group 1***

***I mean [controlling behavior] is like a sign. If you are dating someone and they're worried about how you look or what you've got on or don't say this or don't do this. It kind of goes to the other, you know, hitting. They're trying to dominate you and run you. – Chicago Group 1***

While not all abusive relationships run the gamut from control to physical violence, women and teens clearly feel that verbal abuse, control and isolation early in a relationship signals at least the potential for future physical violence and intimidation. Yet the escalation is so subtle, and so much is invested in the relationship by the time the threshold into “tangible abuse” is crossed, the woman will have a difficult time recognizing it and confronting the abuse.

### ***Verbal, Emotional and Psychological abuse causes the most damage***

While physical abuse in the form of hitting is an important threshold, the various forms of verbal, emotional and psychological control and manipulation were perceived by most women and teens as the more common forms of abuse in intimate relationships, and often as the most “scarring.” Many expressed the opinion that in contrast to physical wounds that can heal over time, verbal and emotional abuse “gets inside a woman’s head,” makes her doubt herself, lowers her self-esteem, and stays with her long after a relationship ends.

***I think mental abuse will stop you from doing anything. Because physical will heal – even though, you know, you may have scratches or black and blue bruises to show. Your mental and emotional abuse will hold you down. And I don't think that***

***will make you really go [get help], until you realize it's between life or death, that you have to move on. – Sacramento Group 1***

***Well, the physical, you know, actually physically hurts you. You can die from that. You can have broken bones from that. But broken bones can mend. Sometimes the mental and verbal abuse, emotional abuse, you know, can stay with you forever. So physical abuse is only worse when it gets to the point where you're really physically hurt, you cannot recover. – Houston Group 1***

***Actually, again like I said, [emotional abuse] is really hard to forget because it just keeps on haunting you, whether you're sitting alone or whatever, it's haunting you. You cannot clean it. – Houston Group 1***

***I think emotional is way worse. Physical, there's a clear-cut remedy. If you're scratched you put a Band-Aid on it. Emotional is abstract. – Houston Group 1***

***I think mental abuse is one of the worst. Because your mind is a powerful thing. If someone is constantly telling you negative about yourself or constantly putting you down, it will put your mind into a totally different place. And you begin to talk to yourself in your head and make yourself feel that this is who I'm supposed to be, I'm supposed to be obese, not pretty, unhappy, good for nothing. – Memphis Group 1***

***It could destroy a person. If a girl gets emotionally abused all the time they start to think "oh I must be doing something wrong. I need to do this better and this." – Memphis Teen Group***

It is safe to assume that many abusive relationships fail to reach the point of physical violence – if one of the partners leaves prior to that point – making mental and emotional abuse more common than physical violence and therefore more salient for most women and teens. Yet even those who had witnessed or experienced physical battering and sexual violence in their relationships described mental and psychological abuse as more damaging, because it prevents the woman from leaving the relationship.

### ***Sexual violence is in a category of its own***

One behavior notably absent from most women's and girls' spontaneous definitions of abuse in a relationship was sexual violence; in most groups, sexual abuse had to be introduced by the moderator as a potential form of relationship violence. In less than a third of groups did the women or girls themselves bring this topic into the discussion as a component of abusive relationships, and it was usually mentioned in passing and not the focus of extended discussion. Moreover, it was often raised hesitantly, in the form of a question. For instance, a woman in one NJ group asked, "What about touching, do you consider that physical [abuse]? When a man thinks that

because he lives with you and he's your boyfriend that he can just have the right to touch you?" In groups where sexual violence was discussed, it became clear that definitions and perceptions of sexual violence and abuse vary widely, and many women and teens are unsure how the behavior would play out in an ongoing intimate relationship. Some wondered aloud whether "sexual abuse" can and does occur in the context of an intimate relationship:

***I would think...if you are married you are going to touch each other because you are married....Because if you are married, then the person that you are with, you know him and you allow him to touch you or you engage in sexual activity or whatever, so I don't think it [sexual abuse] would happen as often unless it would be somebody you just met or married or something like that. – Chicago Teen Group***

***I could imagine it happening, but when you're married you are obviously somewhat attracted to who you married. But I think it could happen, like if the wife doesn't want to have sex and the husband makes her. – Chicago Teen Group***

***I think a lot of people have a hard time believing or agreeing that their husbands can rape wives. They just think they are in a marriage. They are married to each other that is a given. If the wife doesn't want to have sex and the husband forces himself on her it is rape. A lot of people don't consider that but it is a form of abuse. – NJ Group 1***

In the Asian women's group in Sacramento, many women questioned outright the idea that sexual abuse can occur within the context of a marriage. Several participants talked about the unique cultural dimensions surrounding this issue, and noted that what others define as "sexual abuse," Asian women might consider part of their "wifely duties":

***I think I don't know if I really would look at it as sexual abuse because as a wife I think you always just think okay, that's one of your wifely duties to have sex with your husband, especially in our culture. So I think a lot of women, even though they don't want to do it, I think they don't necessarily see it as sexual abuse because hey, you're a wife, you're supposed to do that. So I think a lot of people don't see it that way because you're married and that's just one aspect of marriage.***

***Yeah, it's one of your duties because if you're just boyfriend and girlfriend you can always say "no, I don't want to do it with you." But then you're married, you live in the same house, you sleep in the same bed of course, what options do you have? Go sleep in the other room?***

***Yeah, because you're married and you sleep in the same room, so you know it's bound to happen. But do you like it? Do you want to do it all the time? Of course there's going to be times when you don't want to do it, but it's just like you're the wife and you do it. – Sacramento Group 1***

Interestingly, immediately following this exchange, one woman in the group challenged the notion of “wifely duty,” sharing a personal experience from her first marriage as an example of behavior she saw as sexual abuse. She recounted that when she wanted to learn English so she could get a college degree and “better herself,” her husband would help her only in exchange for sex. As she put it, “You can be the judge of whether that’s abusive or not.”

For most women and teens, sexual abuse in an intimate relationship is conceived of as “forced sex” or “sex when you’re not in the mood.” In a mixed-race adult group in Chicago, as discussants completed handouts asking about “sexual abuse in a marriage,” one young Latina woman asked what that phrase meant. Several responded that that was when “you say no and the husband still wants it.” When the moderator asked group members to expand on that definition, one shared a personal experience she termed “rape,” while others recounted moments they felt pressured to have sex with their husbands and made a conscious choice to “give in” to that pressure:

***I have to say something, it is kind of embarrassing. I am a very heavy, heavy sleeper. I have woken up and he [her husband] is about to finish. I have told him that that is rape. I am asleep. I don’t know. I have had a dream of somebody chasing me and I have gotten up screaming and he is right there in my face. I am asleep. That is rape. There is one example for you.***

***When he is performing a sexual act that you don’t want to do then it is abuse...***

***When a woman is tired, you don’t want any. Especially after kids...but you know what? There are times also that, even though I don’t like it, you just pretend—to avoid the argument.***

***It is like Saturday night and I am going to do this so he leaves me alone the rest of the week...***

***Men sometimes don’t understand it. They have to have it. Okay, let’s do it. – Chicago Group 1***

The above exchange highlights not only the mixed feelings women have about the concept of sexual abuse in a relationship, but also their widely ranging perceptions or, and responses to, unwanted sexual attention from a spouse or partner.

The failure of most groups to spontaneously mention sexual abuse as a form of relationship violence is striking, given that many discussants then related their own experiences of being pressured into unwanted sexual activity. Moreover, many women expressed concern over the issue of “date rape,” which they clearly perceive as a discrete

event occurring *outside* of an ongoing intimate relationship. When probed why they had not mentioned sexual abuse as part of violent or abusive intimate relationships, some said they felt it was included under “physical abuse.” As an African-American woman in Chicago put it, when asked about sexual abuse in a relationship, “That’s with the physical. People who beat on you will do that...The two go hand-in-hand because they are both violent acts.” In other groups, participants said that while sexual abuse can and does happen in intimate relationships, it remains taboo and is therefore difficult to talk about. In the words of several African-American women in Memphis:

***When you do have sexual abuse that's more like a private abuse. Because you're not going to let anybody know what's going on. So that's one of those hush hush abuses... That's more like a hush, private abuse. The unspeakable abuse I would say.***

***I guess they say it's more private, because you're actually doing it behind closed doors, and no one is there but you and that person... So that's why it's more kind of a hush hush. And then a lot of times if it's not – going back to the physical – where they're leaving scars or showing some kind of struggle, then you won't know. Because it's like inside of the home, it's not something that you see outside of the home. So that's why it's more of a hush hush type thing. Because if there's no marks or no bruises, it's not like they say “rape.” Then you won't know. Unless some of them open up and actually tell you “Well look, my husband, he forces himself on me, or vice versa. And even when I tell him no, no, no, he still wants to engage in having sex.” But it's pretty much hush hush because there's no bruises, no outer scars or anything where you see it.***

***I think it's the stigma that's attached to sexual abuse. It's like you're unclean, you're dirty, you've been violated in a totally different way. You get a black eye, you have a black eye, it's going to go away. But that's sexual abuse, that's something that you can't get back, that's something that's not going to go away...It's just the stigma attached to it. – Memphis Group 1***

## **The Disconnect: Widespread Personal Accounts, Barriers to Getting Help**

Women and teen girls *in every group* reported experiencing some form of violence or abuse in their own relationships, or witnessing it in their families of origin, indicating it is widespread and cuts across all sociodemographic boundaries. Yet, as pervasive as their personal experiences were, there seemed to be a disconnect between conceptualizing relationship violence in the abstract and recognizing and acting on this knowledge base in one's own relationships. Many teens and adult women stated flatly, "I know better," or "I would never let that happen to me," yet their personal accounts belie those assertions. In recounting their own experiences, many said that they did not really see or fully accept what was happening until after they had left the relationship.

Over the course of the groups, several key barriers to recognizing and confronting violence in one's own relationship began to emerge, which may explain this disconnect between education and efficacy. Foremost among these were low self-esteem among women and girls (seen as both the cause and effect of violent relationships), pressure to maintain relationships and keep families intact, fear of "aloneness," economic dependence on abusers, and victim blaming. There continues to be a conspiracy of silence around relationship violence, which is not surprising given the powerful shame and stigma women said they felt at having "allowed this to happen to them" and "having failed at their relationships."

### ***Personal accounts reveal widespread relationship violence***

In every group, in every city, women and teen girls recounted personal experiences with relationship violence and abuse, and in more than one group, a participant revealed that a current relationship was violent or abusive. In some cases, abuse took the form of isolation and control, verbal battering, and intimidation. In other cases, women endured physical battering and sexual assault. Some said they had made a conscious choice to end an abusive relationship, while others stayed in their relationships

for many years out of fear, financial dependence, a desire to “fix” the abuser, or a desire to keep their families intact.

Among the personal accounts of abuse and violence experienced at the hands of a boyfriend, partner or spouse:

- A young Latina woman in NJ describes a current relationship in which her boyfriend is controlling and sexually abusive, but worries about leaving because her children like him.
- Two young women in NJ relate stories of boyfriends intimidating them by running over their possessions with a vehicle, and another woman in the same group tells of her boyfriend stopping their car in the middle of traffic on a busy highway in order to frighten her during an argument.
- An Asian teen in Sacramento tells of a boyfriend engaging her in a “high-speed chase,” following her home, and then threatening her with a knife. She now has a restraining order against him.
- A Latina woman in NJ tells of having four abusive marriages. The first ended when she took her children in the middle of the night and left the country. In her current relationship, her grown sons intervene when her husband becomes physically threatening.
- A young African-American woman in Chicago recounts becoming involved in an abusive relationship while away at college, describing how being far from friends and family left her feeling isolated and vulnerable.
- A Latina woman in NJ fears for her sister-in-law, who is currently in an abusive relationship and is afraid to leave because the husband has threatened to kill her and her children.
- An older white woman in Houston tells of staying in an abusive relationship for eight years, feeling she could help her alcoholic boyfriend change his behavior.
- A woman in Chicago has recently returned to an abusive husband, saying she does not understand why she keeps going back to him because he “brings her down” and makes her feel unloved and unattractive. Her two older children have encouraged her to divorce him, but she says she is “not ready” to do so.

These accounts reveal not only how pervasive relationship abuse and violence are in the lives of American women today, but also how complex and varied their experiences can be. The women and teens in these focus groups were not recruited based on prior experiences with violent or abusive relationships, yet virtually every one had a personal account to share or had witnessed violence or abuse in their families of origin. The few

participants who had not experienced abusive or violent relationships were clearly the exception, not the rule.

Still, in relating their own stories and those of people they knew, women and teens repeatedly talked about how hard it is to “truly see” abuse while in a relationship, even if friends and family point it out. For many, it was only looking back that they could see the relationship for what it was. In the words of one young woman:

***My mom was abused by my real dad, and she was young like you too, she was 15...And growing up she always warned me about that, don't let a man hit on you, don't let a man control you. Lo and behold, I fell into the same trap though, I was 27 years-old...I got into a relationship, I was vulnerable, I felt alone, and he came in and took advantage of that. And just started controlling my friends, little by little he started isolating me from everybody I knew and I didn't even realize it was going on. And after all those years that my mom had warned about it, and I was like "oh it's not going to happen to me, I'm stronger than that, I know better." No it happened. It started with the mind control and the isolating me from my friends and my family where he made me think I didn't have anybody but him. – Houston Group 2***

Unfortunately, such stories were common. Women said repeatedly that they thought they “knew better,” that they thought “it could never happen to them,” and yet it did.

### ***Low self-esteem as cause and effect***

To probe the disconnect between education and efficacy, groups were asked how women end up in abusive relationships and why they might remain in them. The first response in nearly every group was “low self-esteem.” Asked what that meant, women and teens generally mentioned “feeling like you don’t deserve better” or “needing attention.”

***I think if you are insecure with yourself, you might feel like you don't deserve better. I am not saying that if you are insecure you are going to get abused. I think it is more likely to happen if you are not happy with yourself and you don't think that you deserve someone better. You might think that you deserve to be treated like that. – NJ Group 1***

***She figures who wants her? She gained a lot of weight, so she figures at least he wants me. She'd rather have him than no one. Which is really sad because a lot of women I know do that. They just go with a man just to have someone. – Memphis Group 1***

***If the girl is insecure then it will go far and she feels she needs that. Like if she doesn't get that security from her family then I think they feel like they need that, but really it's controlling. – NJ Teen Group***

Low-self-esteem was seen by most as both a cause and effect of relationship violence. The general sentiment was that women and girls with low self-esteem are more easily drawn into abusive relationships because they enjoy the excessive attention and affection of a controlling partner. As that attention develops into more isolating and abusive behavior, the woman does not recognize the situation for what it is and/or does not have the confidence in her own perceptions to define it as abuse. Over the course of the relationship, her self-esteem diminishes even further, until she no longer has the strength or ability to confront the abuser or leave the situation.

Many discussants felt that those most at risk for abusive relationships were girls or women who had witnessed or experienced abuse as a child, those who had little or no support structure, and those who had poor relationships with their own fathers. For these women and girls, the abuser may treat them in ways that feel familiar and comfortable, or may represent an escape from a difficult family situation. Typical of such concerns were those expressed in the African-American women's group in Chicago. Some participants in this group felt strongly that girls who lack a strong, positive relationship with their fathers are much more likely to enter into, and stay in, abusive relationships because they are seeking approval from a male figure and tend to seek out relationships with older, controlling men.

***...some of the girls in my neighborhood who do get abused they like usually leave the home at 14 and 15 when they're real young and then they don't want to go back there. So they just stay with this guy and they think they don't have anybody to go to...They usually be like 15 and 16 and be with men 25, 30 and it's like no one can do anything about it because if she's left the home nobody knows where to find her. Her mother doesn't know where she is. And it's like she don't want to go back home and you really can't call the police, but then you don't want to call the police because you don't want to be in nobody's business. It's like all you can do is tell them what's right but if they don't listen I don't think you can make nobody listen. Especially the young girls anyway...You're with the wrong man and can't leave him and he's taking care of you probably. You've probably got a child and it's like they think...if they think their family doesn't care about them they don't think anybody cares about them. – Chicago Group 1***

Others disagreed strongly that a woman enters into an abusive relationship with low self-esteem or seeking male approval or attention. Some felt that the woman may

have very high self-esteem and confidence in the beginning of the relationship, but that the abuser undermines her belief in herself. Many of these women were speaking from personal experience.

***I just think it is the abuser. You can be most powerful person in your company, have high self-esteem, but once you get with this person, they make you feel like all this love and then they start playing the mind games. They start bringing your self-esteem down. I think this is what the abuser saw growing up, so this is all they know. I think a lot of abuse starts when the abuser is a child, which then leads into their relationships. – NJ Group 1***

***If a woman is being abused, she can have the highest self-esteem. Every single person is insecure about something. If they get with an abuser who recognizes or picks up on it, or is told what that insecurity is, that person will work that insecurity into a level of abuse. Whether it is physical, mental, emotional, whatever. I think it's not if you have a low self-esteem you are going to be abused. If you have a high self-esteem or moderate and you go into a situation and they find that one little thing, they can work it to a point that you are beaten down. You are insecure all of a sudden or more so than before. – NJ Group 1***

***Just comes out of nowhere. Because I was independent, I worked at a hospital, I had my own transportation, my own friends, a social life. And when he came into the picture and my family had just recently left, I felt so lonely and so vulnerable. Because they were gone and that's all I ever knew my entire life, my sisters and my parents, they were gone. And all of a sudden I'm left by myself to deal with everything on my own – I guess actually grow up and be a grown up. And he came in out of nowhere and just made me believe that he was all I had. And he was my knight in shining armor, to the rescue you know. And it just escalated from the isolating me, and the mind control. These men know what they're doing, they know how to control a woman, they know all the aspects. – Houston Group 2***

***I am 30 and I've experienced the verbal abuse. I got to a point where I forgot about my own self-worth. I started out being this very confident young lady and I let this one person tell me I wasn't all of those things. Believe it or not you will start to believe it. I would have never thought me. But I let one person take me to that point. It definitely can happen even to the best. – Memphis Group 1***

***I had a relative where she's a college graduate and everything, and she was okay but she married someone from this country and he has his own ways. And what he would do is put her down and put her down and eventually, I think, she didn't really get any physical but mostly verbal and mental abuse. So after awhile she kind of believed it. So to this day she still does. I mean he would do things to her in front of other people, not so much...physical, just to embarrass her so she wouldn't know how to react. So... it's like a prison for her. – Sacramento Group 1***

These women clearly see low self-esteem as the effect, more than the cause, of abusive relationships. A woman may enter a relationship aware of what abuse is and having the self-confidence to say she would not want someone to treat her that way, but the abuser undermines her confidence over the course of the relationship until she is no longer able to stand up for herself. By the time she realizes what is happening, it is too late. As a woman in Chicago who had experienced abuse put it, by then, “You lose yourself. You

don't have a face to that body anymore....It is like the person disappears. You are physically in front of somebody but you are a non-person.”

It is important to note that low self-esteem was also cited as a main reason someone becomes an abuser, along with having witnessed abuse as a child. When asked specifically why someone becomes an abuser, women and teen girls across groups cited four main reasons: 1) low self-esteem; 2) having witnessed or experienced abuse as a child; 3) a need for power and control; 4) mental illness or substance abuse. And to many women, these four factors are closely linked and reinforce one another.

***I think that partially it is because you don't want to get hurt. You don't want to be the one on the wrong side of a discussion or the relationship. So you eventually learn from past experiences how to control the other person so that you don't end up on the wrong side. – NJ Group 1***

***I have always been raised to believe if someone puts someone else down that they have insecurities about themselves. So in my opinion if a boy hits you or calls you names or disrespects you then he is insecure about his feelings and tries to make himself feel better about himself. He tries to make himself feel superior to her. – Memphis Teen Group***

***I think also how guys have seen other relationships, like how does his dad treat his mom. Or how does his older brother treat his relationships? Have they seen good role modeled relationships or have they only seen relationships that haven't worked? – Memphis Teen Group***

***Superiority. They feel like they have the strength over this person, maybe in their job they're nothing...maybe they feel inferior to other people, but when they get into this relationship they have the power over this person, they can abuse them, mentally, physically, verbally. I totally believe that's why men do it. – NJ Group 2***

***It sometimes is a power struggle, like I don't think any man wants his partner to have more power than him. So if he finds one thing that can break her down then he has the power. – NJ Teen Group***

***Yes, if they feel powerless and small in their youth, it is going to come out when they are older. They are going to have more say in their lives when they are older although they won't feel like they do. So in order to feel like it they need some kind of sick relationship to confirm it. – NJ Teen Group***

### ***Pressure to maintain relationships, keep families intact***

Across groups, when asked why a woman might stay in an abusive or violent relationship, participants cited pressure to maintain marriages and keep families intact. This pressure took many forms and came from many sources. For some, the pressure

came from friends and family, who would encourage the woman to stay and “work it out,” particularly if the abuser was a good provider or someone they admired and respected. Several women recounted being encouraged by their own parents or their in-laws to stay in an abusive relationship, usually being told that “all relationships have problems.”

For many women, the pressure to stay in an abusive relationship stems from religious or cultural beliefs. Women in several cities mentioned the stigma surrounding divorce in the Catholic Church, which can discourage a woman from leaving a relationship or make her feel like a “failure” if she does choose to leave:

***My sister in law...was completely in an abusive relationship but she was Catholic and you know what you don't get divorced. So her husband was beating on her, he was a drug addict but you know what you don't get divorced. There really are a lot of factors that play into it. That person feels like a failure to, like I screwed this up somehow. – Sacramento Group 2***

***My sister talked to the priest at church and her priest told her that she needed to be patient...He was hitting her and the priest knew this and he was still telling her to be patient. –Chicago Group 2***

For others, the pressure to stay in an abusive relationship stems more from cultural beliefs. This was particularly true for many of the Asian women we spoke with, who mentioned repeatedly the taboo against divorce in traditional Asian cultures:

***I have a very supportive family and the reason I think I stayed so long was because, not that I felt that I deserved it or that I wasn't good enough, but because of my pride. You know our family and religion don't condone divorce and I had made this decision and gotten into this relationship and I now am sticking to it. – Sacramento Group 1***

***One of my parent's friends—there's a couple and he beats her really bad all the time—but like nobody would ever [intervene]...because in our culture you don't just say “oh leave your husband” you know? “He's beating you.” You would never dare say that, so whenever he gets really angry people will go, “oh it's time to go home now, it's time to leave.” – Sacramento Group 1***

For these women, the shame and stigma surrounding relationship abuse and violence is only magnified by their religious and cultural beliefs.

When discussing why a woman might stay in an abusive relationship, women in several groups noted pressure to try to “help” the abuser overcome “his problem.” As one woman in Houston recounted, she spent eight years with an alcoholic, physically

threatening and verbally abusive boyfriend but felt tremendous pressure to stay in the relationship and support him. In her own words:

***I've had a boyfriend of 7 years that, he's got an alcohol problem... I mean he worked, I mean he's never hit me, I mean he swung but you know I'm bigger than him. I can beat him up. He knows better. But the words sometimes hurt more than being hit. It scars you. But he hurts himself and that's what hurt me the most is watching him hurt himself. You know, put himself down...it took almost 8 years before I said that's enough...But that's the way it is. You're going to lash out the person that you think is the closest one to you....And the way I was raised was when I go into doing something I can't give up. You know, I can't give up on them. You've got a problem, let's talk, let's get help, you know that's the way I am. But he was like "well, I don't want it." But I loved him so I didn't turn my back on him, not until 8 years later and I'm sitting back 8 years later like "it's been 8 years." – Houston Group 1***

One can hear in this woman's words the strong sense of guilt and shame she continues to feel for leaving the relationship. Her sentiments reflect those of many women and teens we heard from—that loving someone means sacrificing her own well-being and physical safety, or else she has “failed” her partner.

Finally, the most often mentioned source of external pressure to maintain relationships and keep families intact was children. More than any other concern, women who had personal experience with violent or abusive relationships cited their children as the main reason they stayed:

***When they were little I was afraid to leave because I thought they need a father. You know what I was stupid. I should have left then. I think then I had more of a shot. Now they are older. – Chicago Group 2***

***Ashley was born, I decided then that 18 years I was going to commit myself to the marriage. And after she graduated from high school, or got a scholarship or whatever then I was going to get out of the marriage. Because my primary goal was to see, and make sure that my daughters went to college. – Houston Group 2***

Yet every group acknowledged what a difficult situation this is, and that the choice of whether to stay or leave when children are present is perhaps the most difficult a woman can face. While most said they understood “staying for the children,” others said that the potential psychological and physical harm to the child would make them leave. And in fact, many women told us that their children were the reason they *left* a relationship, as opposed to the reason they stayed:

***I put up with it because I grew up with it. I could handle it. One on one, I would get in his face. When it came to him starting and my little girl was starting to witness it. She was starting to take a stand at the age of seven. That is when I said I am just taking the clothes on my back and my two kids and I am breaking the cycle right now. – Chicago Group 2***

***When it comes to your children how are they going to know how to have a healthy relationship when they haven't seen one? Because me, as coming up, I don't remember seeing a healthy relationship. So, I didn't know what to look for in a healthy relationship. Nobody told me "hey, you're supposed to look for this and you're not supposed to accept that". And then you get married and you look at your children and you try to stay there. But they're looking at all of this going on and you're trying to protect them. Then when they get older they don't have a clue about what a healthy relationship is all about. So that's where you're getting your abuse from and your problems because they see mom or dad accepts so much that they actually mentally has not clicked "hey, this is what a healthy relationship is all about". And that's why you're having all these bad relationships because in most relationships how many percentage of children actually in their lifetime see healthy relationship from a child up? It's very few. – Memphis Group 1***

### ***Fear of being alone***

For some women and teens in the groups, the main barrier they perceived to leaving abusive or violent relationships is a fear of being alone. Repeatedly, participants spoke of the pressure to “have someone in your life,” and said that many women and girls grow up feeling that having someone in their lives who does not treat them well is better than having no one. Many framed this fear of being alone in terms of the individual woman’s or girl’s “self-esteem,” but the multitude of comments on this topic revealed a powerful cultural message that women who are not in relationships are somehow flawed. As the women and teens themselves put it:

***I just think a lot of times the reasons why we get stuck into unhappy relationships, we don't teach our girls their worth. We don't teach them that they're worth more...And a lot of people feel like they're nothing without a man, they don't want to be single, they have to have a man. That's how we get stuck in that stuff. You'd rather have a man than do it on your own? You'd rather have a man that's treating you bad or you're in a bad relationship than have to do stuff on your own or pay bills by yourself or struggle by yourself? But, you can do better by yourself. – Memphis Group 1***

***Some women, they'd just rather not be alone. If having a man with them whether they're treating them good, bad or just treating them, they'd rather be with that man because they're not alone. – Memphis Group 1***

***My mom was in a relationship that was abusive. And she was never married. That was when she was like 45, and she never found anybody before, so she just dealt***

***with it...she kind of needed someone, so she just tolerated it. – Sacramento Teen Group***

***Seeing younger girls or teenagers and what they put up with their boyfriends. It is interesting because it is like...I have to be with a guy so that I can say I have a guy or a boyfriend? I am okay because I have a boyfriend. All girls my age should have a boyfriend. But the other part of it is, you have a boyfriend but do you need to be treated in that way? There were a lot of girls that were just, they didn't care how they are treated and you could tell them...it didn't matter because "I have to maintain this guy." – Chicago Group 2***

***Low self-esteem. You have got to have a man next to you. It could be the wrong man. It is always the wrong man unfortunately, but they have to have a man next to them. It takes a long time for them to figure out what they are doing wrong. That they don't really need a man. – Chicago Group 2***

***The need to not be alone is a contributing factor to a lot of women. Like, I've heard of girlfriends of mine who say "You [think you] could do it on your own because you're married so many years. But really, if you were to go home alone every night, you would see how good you have it." – NJ Group 2***

According to the women and girls we spoke with, the pressure to “not be alone” drives some women into abusive and violent relationships, and prevents them from leaving a relationship where abuse or violence is present. And while most women talked about this pressure in terms of “other women”—i.e. other women feel that way, other women feel that pressure—they were keenly aware of this powerful cultural message. Over the course of the groups, it became clear that for many women, having no one in one’s life could feel just as stigmatizing as being in an abusive or violent relationship.

### ***Economic dependence on abusers***

Sometimes interwoven with this fear of being alone, yet conceptually distinct from it, was another perceived barrier to leaving an abusive or violent relationship—economic dependence on one’s partner. Especially when children are present, the decision to leave an abusive or violent relationship often rests on a woman’s ability to support herself and her children without the assistance of her partner. Many women who had personal experiences with violent or abusive relationships said that they stayed because they felt “they could not make it on their own.” Most of these women had young children, and many had not worked outside the home or had little education or work experience.

The story of a woman in Chicago, who was currently in an abusive relationship, was typical of those we heard:

***I don't want to have to work two jobs, and have [my kids] roaming the streets. So that is my only thing. The funny thing is that my whole life, I said that I would never do that. Yet here I am in the boat and I keep swallowing and swallowing. I would like to walk away and know that I could put a roof over my kids' heads and put food on the table. If I could do that tomorrow, I would be gone. The sad thing is my whole life I have always been not wishy washy. I have always had strong opinions. I knew what I liked and didn't like. If you turned to me twenty years ago, and said this is the situation you are in, what would you do? I would be out that door like that. – Chicago Group 2***

For this woman and many others, the reality of raising and supporting children on their own keeps them from leaving their spouses, even though they may feel they are in an unhealthy and potentially dangerous situation.

Other women were not entirely sympathetic to those who choose to stay in abusive or violent relationships because they are financially dependent on their partners or spouses. To some women, this reflected an unwillingness to “give up a lifestyle” to which the woman had grown accustomed, more so than a sacrifice made for her children’s future. This antipathy was often very subtle, as in the quote below:

***You may have been in a relationship where you didn't have to work. And you have been with him since you were in high school. You never had to go to college. You didn't have to work and you got everything you wanted...All the money was his, you have no education, and you didn't need it before. You may be in a relationship where you have no friends so you don't have anybody to go to help. You are just stuck. – NJ Group 1***

### ***Blaming the victim***

Across groups, despite a sophisticated understanding of relationship violence and extensive personal experience, women and teens engaged in both subtle and overt victim blaming. Women were quick to hold other women accountable for “not putting their foot down in the beginning” and “contributing to the problem,” despite stating at other points in the discussion that abuse escalates slowly in a relationship and is often very difficult to recognize until the woman is emotionally committed to the relationship.

Participants in several groups expressed the belief that it is up to the woman to recognize and stop abuse early in a relationship, before it begins to escalate. The assumption seems to be that, if challenged early, the abuser will respect the woman and alter his behavior.

***If you keep allowing it to happen, if you don't stop it the first time, maybe the person thinks they can get away with it. Maybe the next step it could be physical. She doesn't say anything when I am insulting her. Next time I am going to hit her in the face. – NJ Group 1***

***I hate to blame the victim, but I think a lot of the women enable their behaviors a lot, and it could be again a lack of self-confidence, it could be whatever. They are letting them get away with it and so they do. It is kind of like children – they [abusers] are going to do what they can get away with, they are going to push as far as they can. – Sacramento Group 2***

***I'm thinking it's like childhood bullies...My relationship was somewhat physical, mostly verbal and emotional. I think the physical part of it could have gotten a lot worse but I didn't allow it. I pushed back and so the physical part of it stopped. But I think had I allowed it, or if I weren't as strong of a person and had just let it happen, if I had been frightened or scared, then I think like I said that physical part would have continued and gotten much worse. – Sacramento Group 1***

Implied in these statements is the belief that women who are “strong enough” or “smart enough” could and would prevent this from happening in their relationships, again indicating that while most have a very sophisticated, intellectual understanding of relationship violence, there is still a desire to distance themselves from the possibility that it could happen to anyone and/or might happen to them.

Other women and teens were more overt in their judgments of women who are abused. Several felt that if a woman is in an abusive relationship, and does not leave, she must be “getting something from it.” In the words of African-American teens in Chicago, a woman who stays in an abusive relationship “likes it,” “is asking for it,” is “obviously okay with it,” and “is just weak.”

### ***Overwhelming Shame and Stigma***

When combined, these various outside pressures take a toll on many women. Some perceive intense expectations where their families and relationships are concerned—expectations they feel they must live up to no matter what the cost. Women and teens repeatedly spoke about the overwhelming sense of “shame” and “failure” they

felt at having become involved in an abusive or violent relationship and not being able to “fix it.” These admissions were profoundly personal and often startling in their depth.

***That's why I think I stayed in my relationship so long...I felt if I didn't stay in the relationship and take the abuse, whether it was for my children or for myself, I felt like I had failed. I had failed in some way. Even if it wasn't my fault, I felt like I had failed as a wife, as a mother, as a woman, and I had not contributed. And that's what I think over and over again. – Houston Group 2***

***Just...the fear of failure. Who personally likes to fail people? No, everybody wants to succeed and do well. So it's a very hurtful thing that people put a lot of time and effort and energy and action into a relationship. When it fails...you know, you don't want everybody to know you failed a class. So that fear of failure would also cause a woman to keep it under wraps. – Memphis Group 1***

***You made a bad choice. Ultimately you failed, you couldn't make it work, you thought you could fix him and you failed. – Sacramento Group 2***

***I would like to say, honestly in my opinion, women really don't have anyone to go to, in my opinion. Because friends, a lot of times like you said, they tend to be judgmental. Especially depending on the type of woman you are, you may be afraid to tell anybody your situation. Because using myself, people see me as, Miss T., teacher, in church, teacher. And how can I go to someone and say "all those things you look up to in me, I have failed." Because I'm allowing these same things to happen in my household that I'm telling you not to do, be strong, don't be that type of person. But I have allowed these things to happen in my household. So who do I go to? I'm pretty sure that's true for a lot of women in this room. Who do we go to? We don't really have anyone to go to. – Memphis Group 1***

***Yes, you don't realize it when you're going through it. So I mean even looking back, it's like there's still this shame, like you know, how could I, you know, be such a wimp, so stupid not to realize it. And you know, looking back and you see just...it just goes up and up and up. So, you either fall off the cliff or you just run away. And falling off the cliff is not an option. – Houston Group 1***

***I think I would probably be ashamed of it. I pretty much wouldn't want to talk about it...Because I let him...I let him, and it happened and I didn't do anything about it and I didn't say anything about it. – Houston Teen Group***

The “failure” of which women spoke was multi-faceted; they were failing themselves, failing their children and families, and failing those who looked up to them and depended on them. They were ashamed that they had not able to maintain the ideal of a happy relationship and family life.

Perhaps most importantly, many women we spoke with felt they were failing other women. In not being “strong,” in “allowing this to happen,” they had become one of “those women” who let abuse and violence happen in their own lives. Several participants remarked on this pressure to be “strong” and to maintain the appearance of strength even at the expense of one’s own well-being. The first quote below comes from

a young Latina woman who participated in the first night of focus groups in NJ. The second quote comes from an older African-American woman who participated in the last night of groups in Memphis. In some ways, these women were very different, yet each worried aloud that in becoming involved in an abusive relationship, they had failed those around them by not being the strong person everyone had come to depend on.

***You don't want everyone to look at you differently. You say you don't care but you do...People, your neighbors, your family...maybe you're the one people looked up to but then you got into this relationship and it's all screwed up and how can I get out of it because everybody always came to me. I guess the way you feel and the way you feel people perceive you could be very different...You want to live up to certain expectations sometimes, and sometimes you create expectations that are just unrealistic and you do it in your own head and you don't realize that some people don't...that's not the same expectation they have of you, you're human, so...you just don't want to burst anyone's bubble, especially if your mother and family looks up to you. – NJ Group 2***

***The mind is a powerful thing for me, because I can listen to all of your problems, help you, and you come back. But I've got a few problems of my own. But I'm your rock. But sometimes this rock, I got tired. I had nobody to rest my rock on like what you were talking about. So...you just start telling your problems to yourself and saying it'll be all right. Next time, you'll be all right, you've got to move on, because I've got to be strong for all of these women. So I didn't have anybody where, okay if I let them know that I'm breaking, then what's going to happen to them? – Memphis Group 1***

## **The Context: Broader Cultural and Subcultural Influences, and Feelings of Personal Safety in Today's World**

Women's and teen girls' perceptions of and attitudes toward the issue of relationship violence cannot be fully understood without knowledge of broader cultural and subcultural influences, including those stemming from racial/ethnic identities, modern teen culture, broader media portrayals of women and girls, and overall feelings of personal safety in their neighborhoods and communities.

### ***Latina cultural influences***

For many of the Latina women and teens who participated in the focus groups (largely Dominican, Puerto Rican and Cuban in Hackensack, largely Mexican in Houston), the issue of relationship violence is understood in terms of the disparate roles men and women play in relationships, pressure from family and church to maintain relationships, and ethnicity as a source of "fiery" temperaments and combative relationships.

In both Houston and New Jersey, Latina women talked at length about how the "traditional" gender roles embraced in Latina culture shape both men's and women's expectations in a relationship. These beliefs are passed on from generation to generation and, in the eyes of many Latina women, contribute to an imbalance of power and respect between husbands and wives. As women in Houston explained:

***Because the Hispanic women are always like, like these young ladies are saying, you know catering to the man. Baby, you want a glass of water, you want me to open your beer, you want me to wear a wet t-shirt or what?***

***Just kind of pampering, catering to him. Not only that, but because you love them.***

***You think he's your king.***

***That's it, "you have to do anything and everything to please me." It's crazy.***

***It's like "can you bring me my clothes?" I'm like "they're in the drawer." Just stuff like that.***

***M: So they expect it, and the girls and women are brought up to...***

***Yeah, because you see your mom or your grandmother doing stuff like that.***

***Do the same thing. From generation to generation it's passed on....***

***That's part of the culture, the chauvinistic mentality. – Houston Group 2***

Moreover, Latina women in both Houston and New Jersey gave examples of how they see these disparate gender roles contributing to abusive behavior in relationship:

***I just have two small kids, I work full time, and I am trying to cook for you and I am trying to have a clean home and I am trying to manage everything and you get "this is what's for dinner? You couldn't do anything else?"...but those are just little things. Like, it just becomes where you have to defend yourself and at that point it's so verbally wrong to talk to anyone that way that it's not good. It's not good. And I think we've stayed together because of the kids. If there was no kids involved I know I would never in my life put up with nonsense like that. To me, again, it's a cultural thing and if I had to do it all over again, I would definitely end up in a different culture with a man. I am very proud of my background but I think I would have ended up differently. – NJ Group 2***

***When I was with my son's dad I was 16. He used to bring the girls [girlfriends] to the apartment where we lived, and I was pregnant. So it was hard. I used to cook, get up at 4:30 in the morning, cook his breakfast, have his lunch ready. He'd come home, I didn't have no TV, no stereo, no telephone, nothing at home. So I was just looking out the window, that's what I used to do. I was pregnant. So the girls used to come to the apartment looking for him. And I was like "no, he's not home, if you want to wait downstairs go ahead." I just took it because I didn't have nowhere to go. I wasn't speaking to my mom, stuff like that. But there was rape involved. He used to just take me when he wanted to. I would not want to. – Houston Group 2***

***I did have some physical abuse in my relationship of 15 years. Early on in the beginning of my relationship my husband would get to drinking, smack me up a couple of times. And I'd grab my children and leave, come back and try to make things [work]. And I was much of a sacrificer, like her. Try to keep him at home, try to keep food on the table, make good meals, keep the house clean, the children all good. It didn't do any good, he was a womanizer. He had 3 or 4 affairs... I told [my mother] I'm going to divorce this man. "You cannot divorce him, think of the kids." If the kids are unhappy, I mean I'm going to be unhappy because they're unhappy, and vice versa. – Houston Group 2***

In addition to the impact of what they called a “chauvinistic” or “macho” mentality in their culture, Latina women also noted the pressure they felt from families to maintain relationships and keep marriages and families intact. Several women explained how, in their culture, young women are expected to live at home with their parents until they are married—but once they are married and have children of their own, they are not really “allowed” to come back to their parents. When they did attempt to talk with family members about what was going on in their marriages, they were usually told to “work it out.”

***It's also the way you're raised. And it's your personality that has a lot to do with [why you stay], your upbringing and stuff. Like she didn't have anybody, she had her parents, but because of their strict ways she couldn't go back to them. Or tell them "hey, look he's beating me up, I need your help." Back then they say "hey, you lay in your bed, that's it. If you come back then you're leaving him, but you're not going to be coming back and forth with those babies." – Houston Group 2***

***I remember the first three years we were married, they were the rough years. Seventeen years later, it's a different story, but I used to tell my grandmother "I don't want to be married and I don't like the way he talks, I'm not his maid and if this is the way its going to be, and if he doesn't like it, too bad," and she would tell me, "he's made out of gold...are you kidding me? The way that man loves you and the way he provides and he doesn't even talk back." He doesn't talk back, he just tells me everything I did wrong on a list from 1 to 10. – NJ Group 2***

Combined with the stigma of divorce in the Catholic church, pressure from family to stay married left many Latina women feeling like leaving an abusive or violent relationship was not an option.

Interestingly, many of the women in our Latina groups also spoke about distinct ethnic identities as the source of “fiery” temperaments and “bad tempers.” Particularly in the Latina group in New Jersey, which was comprised of women of varying backgrounds (mostly Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban), ethnic identities were a shorthanded way of explaining someone’s behavior or temperament:

***I think it is a cultural thing. It's just, really it is. Because I am Cuban myself, but I actually didn't marry a Cuban and I married a Dominican, and talk about bad tempers, you just like, it's like oil and water and that's the issue I have all the time. – NJ Group 2***

***[My husband] will react, he is a crazy Cuban. – NJ Group 2***

***My best friend, she's Puerto Rican. I'm Dominican, and I always compromise. She'll say something and I will say nothing to her about what I really feel. So I compromise a lot. – NJ Group 2***

By and large, the Latina women we spoke with in New Jersey seemed to agree with these perceptions. The general consensus seemed to be that people of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent are more aggressive and confrontational, while people of Dominican descent tend to be more submissive and placating. And thus, when these different ethnicities mix in a relationship, the result might be conflict, escalating tension, and an imbalance of power.

### ***Asian cultural influences***

Similar to what we heard from Latina women in New Jersey and Houston, many Asian women and teens we spoke with in Sacramento (mostly of Chinese, Laotian, and Filipino descent) talked about the importance of obeying one’s partner in traditional

Asian cultures. Some saw this belief system as directly contributing to relationship violence:

***I think I would say [domestic violence] is more prevalent in Asian culture...only because of the way we were raised. Because as we say we are raised that women are supposed to be submissive, you're always supposed to follow your husband or obey your husband...Do as you are told. – Sacramento Group 1***

***He knows if he threatens me I'll just keep quiet. I'm not a fighter, coming from a culture where you're not supposed to say anything. So every time he gets upset with me I just keep quiet. – Sacramento Group 1***

As discussed earlier, this powerful norm to obey one's husband also contributes to the belief that a wife cannot refuse a husband's sexual desires—sex is part of her “wifely duty,” even if it is unwanted.

Asked whether this belief system is changing over time, some of the younger women in the group said they believed it was:

***It's a little different now because we're getting older here in the states so I think little by little people are opening up and people are only accepting certain things. But it's also up to individuals, like you said, you follow your father, I didn't, I didn't want to marry someone like my father.***

***I think slowly it is getting better because my grandma's generation she was just kind of like “you stick to your husband no matter what” you know? And my mom she's changed so much she's just kind of like “I'm not going to do what he says if I don't want to do it.” And then with me I'm just kind of like I'm taking even less than her so I think that slowly we adopt the American women's culture where you are independent and you can only take so much in a relationship and you have to draw the line somewhere. And I think the line is getting less and less for the generations. – Sacramento Group 1***

Just as keenly felt among Asian women was the cultural norm of privacy and maintaining one's reputation within the community. Whereas all women we spoke with acknowledged the shame and stigma surrounding relationship violence, for Asian women this shame was felt even more intensely because of the importance of keeping a low profile in the community and not bringing negative attention to one's family.

***And I think too when it comes to Asian culture even though there may be help out there they won't look for it because they feel like it's shameful. It should never go out beyond the family unit and you just have to work it out and hope for the best—that's how it is mainly in Asian culture. And even though it shouldn't be tolerated, it's not right, but a lot of them do. – Sacramento Group 1***

***Right, you'd rather suffer than lose face, it's in our culture I think it's just embedded in our culture that not just Asian but if you look in the Arab culture they***

***even kill their own daughter if the family was shamed. And for our culture the only way to salvage the shame that this daughter has caused them is to kill their daughter so it's a fact, it's a fact. So it's just in a lot of people who are from overseas they just have this thing about shame, you cannot shame your family so you'd rather suffer in silence than you know bring shame to your family. That's just what it is, bottom line. – Sacramento Group 1***

***You don't go telling people about your problems.***

***You keep it within yourself, keep it behind closed doors. You don't air it out.***

***I always think because our culture is so humble you always play down you never say "oh I have a kid who's doing really well" you say "oh yes he's doing OK." And because you're so humble you don't want to be the talk of the town you know, you don't want "so and so's kid is doing this or that" that's bad, you know. Or "their marriage didn't work" or "they're having a bad relationship," you don't want to be the center of attention and the gossip and the talk of the town, you know. – Asian Teen Group***

### ***African-American cultural influences***

In contrast to Latina and Asian women and teens, those in the African-American groups held in Chicago and Memphis tended to frame relationship violence as part of broader historical and cultural patterns, locating this issue within the breakdown of family, neighborhood, and community structures more so than particular norms. Women and teens in these groups talked extensively about the need for stronger neighborhood ties to combat a number of social ills, relationship violence included. In Chicago in particular, African-American women talked about the changes they have seen in their neighborhoods and communities, and the impact these changes have had on families and young people.

***You know, none of these issues are new things but the change in the communities and the world as a whole – everything is more of it... You've always had a 14 year-old who was going to run off with a 30 year-old man. Now you have community filled with 14 year-olds...I see it. I have a big porch, a house built in 1896 and I'm sitting on my porch and I'm looking at this mess. You didn't have that before. You didn't have 20 or 30 girls on a two-block period. And you know one thing I find, too – no more grandparents. Everybody is young, want to be young, nobody want to stay home and take care of the babies, you know. You've got kids raising kids now. That's very true. But there was always a big momma on my block you could go to, you know. She'd ask you "how you doing, baby" and you'd sit up on the porch and tell her what's going on. You know, in your house or anywhere else. But kids today...they don't tell you. I've got my grandkids. They don't tell you what's going on in their house. No. – Chicago Group 1***

***I think that's true too because my grandmother lived in Gary, Indiana and...until I was about five or six years old it was a really good neighborhood and my mother***

***grew up there too and the trend that I saw was that the elderly were dying off and there was nobody stable in their family to, you know what I'm saying. Set the example. Keep the yard clean. Prevent certain things from happening. And then particularly in Gary, Indiana the jobs left. And that brought in the drugs and alcohol and...there's not a stable economy in the neighborhood and that's when you start getting the robberies and people start needing this to provide for that and that's what happened to that neighborhood. – Chicago Group 1***

***We remember when times were different in the neighborhood, when Chicago was officially segregated and everyone had to live and work together. Everyone had a job. Everyone knew each other. There were certain standards in the neighborhood and everyone met those standards. You knew everyone because even if you didn't, the people across the street did...You had to work together....The neighborhood took care of itself. Things didn't get out of hand...You had the numbers and the lottery men back then. They sold lotteries and they sold numbers. Those people financed the businesses in the neighborhood. They weren't gangbangers and gangsters. They were businessmen and they weren't ignorant. This was all, you know, it was the neighborhood business. And there were certain standards that the neighborhood clung to. – Chicago Group 1***

For these women, relationship violence is understood as part of a larger pattern of community breakdown, which has negatively impacted African-American neighborhoods and families. In their view, gone are the strong social ties and neighborhood “honor systems” which kept each new generation “on the right path.” These women see today’s young people as lost and isolated, lacking a strong support system to help guide them and shape their choices.

Most of the African-American women we spoke with seemed to believe that because the root of the problem lies in the breakdown of community and neighborhood support structures, the solution lies in building stronger community networks, for women and young girls in particular. Those we spoke with in Memphis felt strongly that this is best achieved by bringing women in the community back in touch with young people.

***That's where I think it should start, in the school system. I teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade and you guys would be amazed at some of the notes I find. They know about stuff I don't know as an adult. They do stuff that I don't do as an adult. We have this new thing we're starting at our school called Links. It's a lot of women in the community, well-known faces, coming together and taking a set of young ladies and teaching them. Not only on how to be successful, they're teaching them about their bodies, they're involving the parents, they're having classes for the parents. Not only are the kids getting it, the parents are getting it. I think that's what we need to start. If we want make a change start in the schools. Because starting with the parents at this point I think we're going to be at a loss. We need to start with those children in schools. Then we work on the parents from that point. – Memphis Group 1***

***I think we as women, as a society, need to be more involved in our communities. I think if they..."oh, I know her that's Shirley she works with the kids up here". You begin to know my face, you begin to know I'm just not passing by. Then you begin to gradually ease into the community activities as well. Then people start to let their guards down when you start to talk. – Memphis Group 1***

Clearly, for most of the African-American women we spoke with, the solution to relationship violence lies outside the home, in stronger community structures and youth intervention programs through which young people can be mentored by older adults and taught to believe in themselves.

Interestingly, when asked what role the church might play in providing support services to women and girls in abusive or violent relationships, there was mixed reaction. While some said they would turn to church services, others questioned whether today's "mega churches" could provide the personal, *confidential* services women need. In the eyes of some women, these new, larger church structures have only contributed to the problem:

***See now when I grew up I had a pastor who was an older man with a lot of wisdom and we all respected him. Now today in these mega churches the pastor hardly knows you and you hardly know him. But there was a time when the pastor would make house calls, come see about you and your family and that's the kind of leadership I grew up in with my pastor. And then when he died I was like – you know, everybody starts to try to be their own, everybody shut up in their house and stop talking. But I grew up in a neighborhood like she said – where everybody knew everybody, everybody knew everybody's children. You could whoop somebody else's child. There was no problem. But that's not the way it is now. No. – Chicago Group 1***

### ***Isolation and competition among teen girls***

In addition to the important subcultural influences noted above, the most striking finding among teen girls was the absence of a support system among one's peers. Across groups, many teen girls said that they had few, if any, female friends because girls were "mean," "messy," "drama queens," and could not be trusted. Teen girls clearly feel isolated from one another and in competition with one another for male attention, both potential risk factors for becoming involved in, and remaining in, an abusive or violent relationship. Their feelings and experiences were amazingly consistent across groups:

- Among teen girls in New Jersey:

***I really don't hang out with girls anymore, I don't know why. I go to a boarding school and most of my friends there are guys...***

***Most of the time it is girls that are catty or think they are better than you. If they don't like you they will find a way to hurt you.***

***Jealousy and they try to find a way to make you feel bad about yourself.***

***Try to get with your boyfriend.***

***Girls talk a lot. If they don't like you they will try everything in the book to get you mad, jealous to get you to fight them. They get jealous so fast.***

***Girls are just mean.***

- Among African-American teens in Chicago:

***I have close friends, but I just call them associates. I don't call them friends because they are always turning their back on you so...I just have associates. Really I have no friends, but my mom, she is like my biggest friend...***

***Well, I go to an all girls' school... I don't get along with girls at all.***

***I don't really like to deal with them, so I mean, like I have friends who are girls, but like, just a couple...it's just the drama that they bring and how they like to talk, so...I just don't deal with it... how they like to take what you do and twist it, if you do something.***

- Among Latina teen girls in Houston:

***I hang out with guys because girls are too messy for me, like I have like one girlfriend that hangs out with us, like in our little clique, but like, girls can be trouble.***

***Some girls that aren't your friends, but I love my friends and there are girls out there that you know who not to talk to because you know they will gossip about you. So you just know, the girls who are in school, you just know that you don't need to talk about those girls.***

***A lot of my friends are girls but like the ones I am closest to are the guys. It just feels like I can be more open with them than I can the girls.***

***Like sometimes at school, girls will hate on you because you are with a certain boy. They will stop being your friend and they will be talking this because you are with a certain boy.***

- Among Asian teen girls in Sacramento:

***I don't want to say all girls, but a lot of girls that I used to hang out with end up taking advantage of me or backstab.***

***Girls are insecure.***

***All girls have been backstabbed by a friend.***

***Most girls are catty and there is always more drama with girls. You can't help it, you can't fix it, there is nothing you can really do except not be friends with them.***

- Among low-income teen girls in Memphis:

***There are a lot of girl haters.***

***Girls that hate other girls and will start rumors about you.***

***Yeah, like the girl likes the guy that likes you, so she will just start all this stuff about you.***

While teen girls' relationships with their female peers was not a main topic of the groups going in, those we spoke with were vehement and consistent in their general dislike and distrust of one another. Most said they only had one or two close girlfriends, if that, and many said they had no friends who were girls. Moreover, most clearly felt in competition with one another for male attention, and saw that as the source of much of the "meanness" among girls their age.

### ***Portrayals of women in the media***

Both adult women and teen girls expressed concern about portrayals of women in today's media, particularly in hip hop culture, music videos, and some popular movies. Many felt these images encourage young men to objectify women as "bitches" and "hos," labels that came up repeatedly in group discussions. In general, women and teens found these portrayals "degrading" and "depersonalizing."

***I guess it's mainly with the videos. The things that they wear, body language, body movements. It's just not what we're about. I think we're portrayed as whores now. It seems like they're making it where it's okay to be that way, and it's not. – Memphis Group 1***

***I think they're viewed as objects. Women are now objects, service of goods, something that you can reuse. And, these women are people. We have feelings, we have emotions, but we're portrayed on music videos as just objects. You don't sensitize, you just go "oh, she's just another girl and she's showing her body". And it takes away from the fact that that is someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's grandchild, that's someone's mother being portrayed on TV that way. – Memphis Group 1***

***I think the music videos are degrading to women and make it look like they are just objects more so than people. – Sacramento Teen Group***

Though most teen girls and young adult women recognize these images as problematic and say they do not let it affect their own behavior or feelings of self-worth, they talked at length about the pressure to conform to such images, both in terms of appearance and

behavior. Particularly among the teen girls we spoke with, there was much discussion of “other girls” who imitate these images and “give boys what they want,” making it more difficult for those who choose not to mirror these images.

Asked whether these images affect how men and boys perceive women and how they treat them in relationships, most women and teen girls felt there was a direct correlation between listening to certain kinds of music or consuming certain types of media, and treating women in ways they considered disrespectful. Many felt that men and boys who consume these images come to believe that this is what women really are, and how women really want to be treated.

***That that's how we really are and that's why they come at us like that. It's about the self-worth, they don't really give women much worth. That's why a lot of women don't have self-esteem. – Houston Group 2***

***It is just degrading to women, all the music videos with the women dancing around with anything on and guys now think that is okay. They have this mindset they can get away with whatever. – NJ Teen Group***

***...They do seem to portray women as not having any self-respect and that gives a negative viewpoint on women. And I think it gives teenage boys a different view and they see those rappers and they want to be like them. And they are rapping about how women are this and women are that and how they treat their women and they have their gold and diamonds. So the boys come to school with this attitude and frame of mind. – Memphis Teen Group***

***I think for the influence it does have on guys, I think it does completely change them. I have a friend who is going through a hard time right now. She says she is so deeply in love with this guy and I feel so bad for her because we found out this summer that he hit her. And left a huge bruise on her. He cusses her out and demands so much of her. It is one of those things, like it could be all types of media, that he thinks it is OK. I know in some songs they talk about how they treat their women and some songs talk about how they can just slap them around and it doesn't matter, they are just something to have for a moment. And I have seen firsthand what this is putting the girl through. She is messed up right now and it is very upsetting. She is one of the sweetest girls in our high school. – Memphis Teen Group***

Participants' concerns about portrayals of women in the media went beyond simply their objectification as sexual objects. Many groups discussed the broader impact of an American culture of consumption, in which women in particular strive to attain unrealistic ideals rather than develop their own strengths and character. Unrealistic images of women's bodies make “regular women” feel inadequate and contribute to the low self-worth and low self-esteem many saw plaguing American women and girls today.

***I think I don't pressure myself to look like the people on TV but it is a standard that I can't meet. Like the music video girls I don't think I could look like that even if I work out everyday. It does set a standard. I could never look like that unless I got plastic surgery. – Sacramento Teen Group***

***Like in those Hanes commercials it's not what it really is, but America is obsessed with a body of a woman that does not even exist. Every picture is airbrushed, that's not even her face, you see her face? That's not her face. So they're giving us...low self-esteem with our children that are coming up. You know anorexia, and trying to be something that they can never be, and they're never satisfied when they look in the mirror. You know those makeover shows on TV, people want to look like a star, or be something else that they're not. Well what's wrong with trying to pull out the gifts in yourselves? – Memphis Group 1***

***The things they say, the things they do and even on the advertising itself, "oh it's time for your botox"... And to me that's like saying if you're not happy with yourself change it in some physical way when actually if that's the case it should be the inside, your self-esteem, is what you have to work for. – Sacramento Group 1***

### ***General fear for personal safety***

Group participants were asked about their overall feelings of safety in their neighborhoods and communities, in an attempt to gauge whether sexual assault from a stranger was something they thought could happen in their own lives. Responses were interesting, in that while there was little conscious fear of sexual assault articulated in any of the groups, women and teen girls clearly live with a more generalized fear that shapes their daily behaviors.

Women and teens often began by saying they felt fairly safe, but when pressed to reflect on different situations, said they generally do not feel comfortable when out alone at night, when riding a bus alone, when leaving a mall or shopping center, and at parties where they do not know everyone. Most described a litany of protective behaviors they engage in on a regular basis (e.g. carrying keys when approaching their cars, looking in their backseats before getting in, always traveling in groups and preferably with a male friend or family member, not leaving their drink unattended at a party, etc.). Many couched these behaviors in terms of "common sense," and participants had to be pressed to articulate what they feared would happen if they did not use "common sense." Sexual assault was not usually mentioned, and instead women talked vaguely about being "robbed," "approached from behind" or having someone "come up on" them.

While most had trouble articulating specific fears, or were simply unwilling to imagine what might happen in certain situations, many women and teens used language indicating their constant vigilance as a woman in today's world. Among the phrases used repeatedly were "anything can happen," "women are never safe," "you have to be on your toes," "you always have to watch your back," "the possibility is always there," and "it's always in the back of my mind." Thus, while most told us they live their daily lives without consciously feeling *unsafe*, it seemed as if women and teens did fear for their personal safety, but had learned to push those fears out of their minds as they went about their daily lives.

A handful of women had personal experiences with sexual violence which they shared with the groups. Among those were an African-American teen in Memphis who was sexually assaulted by a friend of her family and is now afraid to leave the house alone, and a Latina woman in Houston, who revealed at the end of the group discussion that both of her now grown daughters had been sexually assaulted—one by a family member when she was a child, the other by an acquaintance at college. Others shared sometimes harrowing experiences of being followed or approached by strangers, being chased by unknown vehicles, and being sexually harassed on the street, at school, and at work.

## **Conclusions**

In eliciting the thoughts and feelings of more than 100 women and teen girls of varying sociodemographic backgrounds across the country, the current study garnered critical insights into how women and girls perceive and understand violence and abuse as they occur in intimate relationships, the degree to which they encounter these issues in their own lives, the broad social and cultural trends they see contributing to the problem of relationship violence, and the advocacy efforts they feel would be most effective in addressing this important public health issue. What emerged from the groups was a clear sense that relationship violence is widespread, yet women remain reluctant to talk about it or seek help due to the powerful stigma being a “victim” carries. Moreover, women and teen girls are most concerned about the *emotional* and *psychological* components of relationship violence; by and large, discussants felt this type of abuse was more prevalent and more damaging than physical and sexual abuse, yet also less tangible and therefore more difficult to confront.

Following are key recommendations—for both advocates in the field and researchers—that emerged from our discussions with women and teen girls.

### ***Recommendations for advocates in the field***

While the main goal of this research initiative was to build a base of understanding from which future qualitative and quantitative research could be launched, we also gave women and teen girls the opportunity to tell us—based on their own experiences and perceptions—what real-world solutions would be most beneficial to women in abusive or violent relationships. Participants had four main recommendations: 1) provide outreach targeted specifically to women who are experiencing verbal, emotional and psychological abuse; 2) reduce the stigma of relationship violence through broad-based programs and peer counseling; 3) teach relationship skills to young people, both male and female; and perhaps most important, 4) provide support to women who are not ready to leave their relationship.

- Provide outreach for verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse

As mentioned earlier, women and teens across groups expressed the belief that until there is physical violence in a relationship, it is difficult for a woman to come forward because she cannot “prove” that she is being abused. Thus, while most women feel that emotional abuse is more damaging, they would be reluctant to take action or tell anyone it is occurring until the abuse had escalated to physical violence. Unfortunately, at that point, the emotional abuse would have already taken a severe toll on the woman’s mental and physical health. The women and teens we spoke with were all too familiar with this pattern, and felt strongly that advocates must find a way to target outreach programs specifically to women who are experiencing verbal, emotional and psychological abuse, programs that could identify and aid at-risk women before a relationship reaches the point of physical violence.

Further, the perception among most of the women and teens we spoke with was that domestic violence shelters are for the “worst case scenario” and that most women do not think of themselves that way. Many felt that not only does a woman have to be physically abused in order to seek the services of a shelter, but that the abuse must be life-threatening. Further, shelters require so much of women, in terms of uprooting herself and her children, that women who are not being severely physically abused and who do not feel their lives are in danger, would be reluctant to “take such a big step.” As some women told us:

***There are abuse shelters. But I think people think of that as being for the physically abused. So where do people go when you have all of these things, and you are getting down on yourself, they don’t realize they’re being abused? – NJ Group 1***

***I know there are women’s shelters but going to a shelter and relocating my family there? I would almost feel homeless. That would be the absolute last resort. I can’t imagine doing that. I know that is what is out there. – Chicago Group 2***

***I don’t think the shelters would give you much attention if he only punched you once, or yelled at you once. I think you are better off going to a friend or family. – NJ Teen Group***

And again, groups noted that until abuse becomes physical and therefore tangible, a woman may not “realize” the gravity of the situation. By that point in the relationship, she would be so fearful, isolated and broken down, that it is unlikely she would seek help.

Police and emergency hotlines are also generally perceived as meant for women who are suffering from severe physical abuse and who feel their life is in danger. Several women in the groups who had been in abusive relationships said that they did not take advantage of these types of resources because they felt their situation did not warrant emergency intervention and/or feared they would not be taken seriously if they did not have obvious physical injuries. Moreover, across groups, there was an obvious mistrust of police where domestic violence calls are concerned. Some women felt the police did not always handle such calls compassionately, usually telling couples to “just work it out” or failing to take action because they think the woman will not press charges. Others felt that since abuse is so widespread they could not trust that the law enforcement personnel themselves were not abusers. And for many, calling the police would bring too much attention to the situation, “humiliating” or “embarrassing” themselves or their children in front of friends and neighbors and potentially increasing the threat of harm from their partners.

For all of these reasons, women perceive a serious lack of services in the field aimed at assisting women in the earliest stages of abusive relationships. Ideally, such services would treat verbal, emotional and psychological abuse as their main priority, would not require a woman to “prove” she is being abused, and would not label what she is experiencing as “abuse” or “violence,” as the woman herself may not perceive the situation that way. She may only sense that something feels wrong in her relationship, and may wonder if what she is experiencing is normal. Yet, she may not be comfortable discussing her concerns with friends and family.

➤ Reduce the stigma of relationship violence

Women and teens talked at length about the strong sense of personal shame and failure that comes with being in an abusive or violent relationship. Across groups, women feared they would be perceived as “weak” or “stupid” for “having gotten themselves into this situation” and not being able to “find their way out.” Because of these fears, most said they would be reluctant to disclose violence or abuse to family and friends, and would even be hesitant to use confidential services for fear that others would

find out. In discussing this dilemma, women and teens offered two remedies for reducing the stigma that women in abusive relationships feel: 1) sharing their experiences with others who have survived violent relationships, and 2) offering broad-based outreach programs that provide a wide range of family counseling services, so that women who utilize these programs are not labeled “domestic violence victims.”

Women and teens across groups said that they would be extremely reluctant to tell those close to them about abuse and violence in an intimate relationship because of not wanting to “disappoint” those around them or “burst the bubble.” Rather, they would be much more likely to use confidential services with outsiders *who have had similar experiences*. Women in several groups said that their personal sense of shame and failure might be alleviated if they could talk with someone who had experienced something similar and therefore would not “judge them” as others might.

***I think it's a lot easier for somebody who's going through that to talk to somebody that they can relate to. Because if they see it, then they're like that's what they're going through and similar to what I'm going through. Maybe I can talk to this person and they'll understand...I've never really talked to people about me and my husband's problems much. We're really intimate about our problems, we don't like letting the family know, friends or anything. But once it hits you, or you see something that you can relate to, it's so much easier to talk about it. Because other people are going through the same thing, or similar experiences. And it's so much easier to open up. – Houston Group 2***

Others spoke eloquently about the need for women who have survived a violent relationship to tell their stories publicly, so that others would have the courage to come forward:

***I think what helps a lot is as a woman, is we as women we need to stop making it seem like and nothing happens to us. And we're all goody goody. “And you know what, I'm going to help you out with this situation, this is what I think you should do.” Instead of saying “you know 2 years ago I went through the same thing.” We need to get away from that, and we need to tell the truth. And then others will be willing to say “okay I can get by. I can feel her, because she's been through the same thing, and look at her now.” – Memphis Group 1***

Across groups, it was clear that the stigma of abusive and violent relationships can be at least partly alleviated simply by knowing that one is not alone in her experiences, that she can share her story with others, and that she will not be judged negatively by those around her.

Another important recommendation for advocates in the field came directly from the Asian women's group held in Sacramento. As noted earlier, women and teens in the Asian focus groups discussed their reluctance to talk openly about violence and abuse because of strong cultural beliefs concerning privacy and maintaining one's own reputation and that of one's family. And, they noted that Asian women in particular would be reluctant to utilize services and organizations that were known to the community as "domestic violence" shelters or programs. One program in their local community has overcome that stigma by creating outreach programs that provide broad-based family and counseling services, including child care, employment services, and domestic violence and abuse programs. Women and teens in Sacramento felt this program had been successful in reaching Asian women because they could visit the organization and utilize its services without being labeled in the community as a "domestic violence victim." Since the organization offered such varied services, women could say they were using it for other reasons and thereby protect their privacy.

➤ Teach relationship skills to young people

When asked how and why women end up in abusive relationships, and conversely what causes someone to become an abuser, women and teens consistently told us that, in their view, having witnessed or experienced violence or abuse as a child, in one's family of origin, was a major contributing factor. Further, many felt that the incidence of having experienced or witnessed abuse or violence as a child was very high, and that many people grow up not knowing what a healthy relationship looks like. A potential remedy mentioned in several groups was incorporating relationship skills classes into schools and targeting them to young children, both male and female.

***When you look at it only 5% [of children] maybe see a healthy relationship at home. So, if you can come to school and they can tell you...I don't think you can ever tell someone this is how your relationship should be, these are the things you should have in it. But I mean just giving them the ideas of things that you shouldn't have in your relationship and things that aren't acceptable. It's like teaching them anything else. They learn at an early age what they need to...what's more productive and what they should do as young ladies. Even young men need it too because if they don't see a healthy relationship at home. "Well, my dad***

***always cussed my mom out so when I get a girlfriend I'm going to cuss my girlfriend out because I don't know the difference." – Memphis Group 1***

***I think even if they could have a class once every semester. You know how they have a sex education class for a couple of days or weeks out of the year. They could have a class like that, one for girls and one for boys. About boys how to treat women and what to expect from women. For girls, about self-esteem and knowing yourself and knowing your worth. – Memphis Group 1***

***I think they should teach both the guys and the young kids, male and female about their relationships. Not just the boyfriend and girlfriend relationship but all relationships, with family members, with their parents, with their grandparents, they should teach that in school. I think. – Chicago Group 2***

- Provide support to women who are not ready to leave their relationship

Women and teens repeatedly told us that encouraging a woman to leave an abusive or violent relationship before she is ready is futile. Many told stories of damaged relationships when friends or family tried to intervene in a relationship before the woman had acknowledged that something was wrong or had asked for help. Their feeling is that she must reach the realization on her own that something is wrong, and prior to that point, assistance from loved ones or outsiders is not going to be welcomed or accepted.

Moreover, that point of realization will be different for each woman:

***I think you can only tell someone so much then you become a broken record. They have to realize it in their own mind that this is what is going on. I don't think anyone can make someone see that. I think those support groups are wonderful but they have to be willing to know that is going on for them to take that initial step. – Sacramento Group 2***

***I think an organization or a support group doesn't help until the woman realized there is something wrong with this relationship and I need some type of help. I don't think someone coming in and telling them they need some kind of help will work. I think until they realize it and want to seek help. – Sacramento Group 2***

***I think every woman's breaking point is different and for me it was my daughter...she was seeing things and old enough to remember and talk about them. And so I knew it was going to have a lasting effect on her. Other women, it's when they're beaten to hospitalization that they finally can't take anymore. I think it just depends on the individual woman and I know abuse is more prevalent in some cultures than others, but I think it all boils down to the woman and what her breaking point is and what she can take. And her friends can talk to her and her family can talk to her or not talk to her...and these groups can reach out and educate. But until the person is ready to leave they will not make that decision no matter how many resources are out there. – Sacramento Group 1***

***We can all sit here on the high horse and say as soon as it happens, I am out. But who is to say that that is really going to happen? There is not one clear defining***

***incident situation that will say okay this is the one. I am going. I think it is a matter of build up over time. If you can't take the verbal abuse anymore, the emotional abuse anymore, if you just can't take it anymore at some point you are going to make a decision, but there is not one thing that you could say if he hit me on my left cheek on Tuesday I am leaving. There are too many variables with that. – NJ Group 1***

Moreover, many felt that a common barrier to seeking help is being advised to “just leave,” when the woman may not be ready to leave emotionally, may not be able to leave financially, or may want to salvage her relationship or keep her family intact because there are children involved. If a woman is looking for emotional support, but is not ready to leave her relationship, pressure to leave her partner may make her reluctant to talk openly with those around her. As women in Sacramento told us:

***Well with one of our friends she noticed that we all were like when are you going to leave him already? So she started to stop telling us, we obviously think they everything is OK because she stopped sharing and it wasn't that is wasn't happening she stopped sharing. She became secluded from us and then she started having problems with her job. She got on probation at work because she started to miss a lot of work. So something happened in her brain that said it is time so she walked away.***

***Then again [if you told family members] it would be the pressure from your family to leave that person. And if you aren't ready to take that step then you definitely don't want to hear that from anybody else.***

***That is true. That is what my sister does. She will tell you and then she regrets that she told you because then you are like leave him. And she doesn't want to hear it because he is back and he is wonderful and there is a dozen roses on her desk and they are going to a concert and out to dinner and stuff. So she is happy again and we are like when are you going to leave him? She doesn't want to hear it because she is happy now. So then she is thinking why did I tell them? – Sacramento Group 2***

Many women and teens felt strongly that the woman must be allowed to make the choice to leave on her own, and until she does so, she needs the continuing encouragement of those around her. There are many complicating factors that might prevent a woman from leaving, yet she still needs a support structure to lean on while she is in the relationship.

To that end, many of the women and teens in the groups said that while a woman is still in the relationship, it is important to help her begin to build her self-esteem, so that she will feel strong enough to leave the situation.

***We were talking earlier, and how women's self esteem has a lot to do with it, taking what they take. So I think if you would start building them from the inside out first, and then tell them "this is what I see looking in." Because it's really hard when***

***you're in it to look at what's happening around you. I think that would be a good way, just to try to build them up and let them know that they are worth more, and that they don't have to put up with that. – Houston Group 2***

***I think the focus is about women. I am not abused but I think like you said when you hit rock bottom that is when the women will go up and say I don't want this. So if the purpose of this survey is to say what can we do? Focus more on women. How could you elevate the self-esteem? How could they get out of that relationship? – Chicago Group 2***

***There has to be some way to build their confidence and for them to believe in themselves. Because if you have the strength to believe in yourself then you can do anything. I don't know how you do that. That is an underlying factor across the board that they don't have that confidence to stand up to that person and/or to leave that person and/or to get help. – Sacramento Group 2***

### ***Recommendations for researchers***

➤ **Include racial/ethnic subgroups**

Focus groups revealed significant racial/ethnic dimensions to this issue, indicating that all qualitative and quantitative research on the topic should make a concerted effort to include subgroups of African-American, Latina, and Asian women. And while the current study made a concerted effort to include a broad range of women and teens within each of those racial/ethnic subgroups, even more could be done. While two groups of Latina and African-American women were held in geographically diverse cities, only one Asian adult women's group was held due to the tremendous cost and effort involved in recruiting this population for focus group discussions. This group was made up almost entirely of women of Chinese, Filipino, and Laotian descent, and therefore presents only a partial picture of Asian women's experiences and attitudes on this subject.

➤ **Consider the full spectrum of violence and abuse**

Measures of relationship violence must capture the full spectrum of behaviors that comprise abusive relationships. While physical battering is the most tangible aspect of relationship violence, the women and teens we spoke to were most concerned with the psychological and emotional abuse that accompanies physical violence. For most women and teens, therein lies their experience and therein lie their concerns for themselves and

other women. Thus, quantitative studies in particular must be careful to construct items that explicitly acknowledge these more subtle components of abusive relationships.

➤ Sexual violence in a relationship is a difficult concept to operationalize

Sexual violence within intimate relationships is a difficult concept for most women and teens to grasp and to discuss, and therefore difficult to operationalize in a research setting. For most women and girls, the term “sexual violence” does not ring true within the context of a marriage or dating relationship. Neither does “rape” or “date rape,” both of which are still largely perceived as stranger assaults. “Sexual abuse” is viewed by some as strictly adult-on-child assault, thus that terminology does not crossover well into consensual adult relationships. In most groups, the preferred language among participants for sexual assault within an ongoing intimate relationship was “forced sex.” This term delineates what is presumably a common, accepted element of intimate relationships (consensual sex) from instances where one partner forces another to engage in behavior they do not want to engage in *at that moment*.

➤ Women are open about their experiences—once trust is established

Adult women and teen girls (15 to 17 year-olds) are willing and able to discuss relationship violence in a research setting, including their own personal experiences, once trust and rapport have been established and as long as they are able to volunteer information gradually and at their own discretion. Many women and teens in this study shared personal accounts, though many limited their accounts to *past* experiences, to only partial information, and/or to the experiences of “people they knew.”