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Race divides advocates

Minorities say white activists ignoring inequities in system

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"What if it is rape and racism? I don't think that because the system treated a man of color in a racist way, that excuses, once proven, a crime of violence. But I also think it requires us to recognize that the system we place so much trust in — the criminal justice system — has taken away more from communities of color than it has provided," says Lisa Calderón, spokeswoman for the local chapter of INCITE Women of Color Against Violence. The group held a forum to discuss racial issues with other domestic violence awareness groups, which allowed minority advocates to express concerns to a group of predominantly white advocates.

Story by Sarah Huntley

Photos by Linda McConnell

For more than two decades, Colorado's victims advocates have been united in a single goal: protecting the rights of abused and sexually assaulted women.

They've fought side by side for tougher laws, more police intervention and longer jail sentences.

But now, in a debate that threatens to split the movement, some activists are calling for a shift in focus.

Lisa Calderón, spokeswoman for the local chapter of INCITE Women of Color Against Violence, said she and others are fed up by what they see as racial disparities in how

Saturday

An overview

Two decades of fighting domestic violence have not produced the hoped-for results, and many victims advocates say it's time to rethink the criminal justice system's strategies.

▪ [Anti-domestic violence efforts stall despite aggressive tactics »](#)

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Monday

victims and offenders are treated.

Calderón says mainstream advocates are reluctant to acknowledge what many advocates of color see - that more minorities are swept up by the system the movement has helped create. Once they are, minority offenders are treated more harshly and minority victims get less support, she said.

"It's a huge debate and controversy between advocates of color and mainstream advocates, who are primarily white women," Calderón said.

The tensions played out most recently not in the domestic violence arena but in two high-profile sexual assault cases. The first was the scandal that rocked the University of Colorado at Boulder after three students alleged they were gang-raped by football players and recruits at or after a 2001 off-campus party.

The second was the case of NBA star Kobe Bryant, who was charged with sexually assaulting a female employee of a ritzy Eagle County lodge and spa. Bryant said the sex was consensual. The charges eventually were dismissed.

In both cases, some advocates found themselves in a quandary: They wanted to support the young women thrust into the unforgiving public eye, but they thought there was a rush to judgment against the suspects, all of whom were black.

Calderón says it may not be an either-or scenario.

"What if it is rape and racism?" she asked. "I don't think that because the system treated a man of color in a racist way, that excuses, once proven, a crime of violence. But I also think it requires us to recognize that the system we place so much trust in - the criminal justice system - has taken away more from communities of color than it has provided."

The disagreements over the two cases threatened to tear apart the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault. Six of nine staff members resigned, protesting in part what they say was a ban on talking publicly about their concerns. The executive director left in the aftermath.

Anpeytu Raben, chairwoman of the CCASA board, said recently that the agency has filled most of the vacancies and is looking forward to "a healthy future."

Raben argues it is important to strike a balance between the Fifth and Sixth Amendment rights of defendants and the rights of crime victims, as outlined in Colorado's constitution.

"We want to see those rights upheld in the best way possible," Raben said.

The debate has spilled over to the domestic violence movement, largely because the two groups share office space and exemplify some of the same philosophies.

"They are two sides of the same coin. They belong to the larger coalition of a victim's rights industry," said Calderón, who works as legal and social policy director for the Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence in Boulder.

"We don't have discussions about the laws and how they are unevenly applied. We are called traitors to the movement for simply asking these questions," Calderón said.

Trish Thibodo, who heads the state's domestic violence coalition, said she agrees with the criticisms.

"I think they are right on the mark," she said.

The coalition is striving to bring different voices, including those of victims and people of color, "to the center of the table and have them be that equal partner," Thibodo said.

Arrests

Mandatory-arrest laws are putting more women in jail and raising concerns that victims aren't calling police for fear of losing control in the system.

- [Dialing 911 means giving up control »](#)
- [Mom struggles to stand up for self »](#)
- [Race divides advocates »](#)
- [When to arrest perplexes cops »](#)
- [Officers discount self-defense claim in stabbing »](#)

Tuesday

Prosecution

Aggressive prosecution and "fast-track" courts are designed to give offenders swift, sure justice, but some worry the system is snagging the wrong people.

- [Critics: Fast-track courts too speedy »](#)
- [Making life a memorial »](#)
- [Ruling ties prosecutors' hands »](#)
- [Aftermath overwhelming »](#)

Wednesday

Treatment

Court-ordered treatment for batterers has not proved effective in studies, but critics say the state won't consider changing its approach. Coloradans and others are looking for solutions.

- [Colorado called resistant to change »](#)
- [State standard seen as lengthy, costly »](#)
- [Success story ends in question »](#)
- [Domestic violence experts speak out »](#)
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- [Bringing victims, abusers together »](#)
- [From failure to opportunity »](#)
- ['I'm looking at this as my last hump' »](#)

"The challenge, as a state coalition, is trying to do that on a statewide level. Sometimes change is slower than what people want it to be. For others, we are moving too fast."

Cheryle Clarke, former director of development for the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence and a member of the Women of Color Network, said the victim's rights movement has failed to provide leadership opportunities for minority women.

"I think it is one thing to say, 'Yeah, we've got women of color working here.' But there's a difference between that and real power sharing," she said.

The advocates say their concerns have ramifications for victims searching for support.

"I am 56 years old. If I were a victim, I would probably go to a domestic violence shelter where the staff is primarily white, probably young and not familiar with a lot of my issues," Clarke said. "Women of color are torn by wanting the relief offered by the criminal justice system but also understanding who is in prison and why."

The critics point to national studies that show people of color make up more than 70 percent of the population in state and federal prisons. Many are serving time for drug and other offenses unrelated to domestic violence.

Carol Hollomon, executive director of Alternatives to Family Violence in Adams County, said she believes more progress could be made by asking communities of color what the movement can do to help them, instead of continually stressing jail.

"For minority folks, calling the police is the last thing you do because the police don't help you. As Caucasians, we need to be more cognizant of what women of color are saying to us," she said.

J.T. Garcia, CCASA's former office manager, agreed that emphasizing the use of the criminal justice system alienates communities that are fearful of law enforcement.

She thinks prevention, education and more resources for shelters and housing would be more effective in reducing violence.

Traditional advocates "have done good things with the laws to protect victims," Calderón said. "But we are at a place where we should be critiquing the last 25 years in our movement. We should be asking the hard questions of who is being left behind and why?"

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Online extras



Video stories

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Audio slide shows

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[Day one: A very complicated issue »](#)

[Day two: Swept up in the system »](#)

[Day three: One size fits all »](#)

[Day four: Keeping the victim safe »](#)



Ask a question

- [Domestic violence experts are answering questions about the mindset of offenders, the judicial system and which types of therapy work best.](#)

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"For minority folks, calling the police is the last thing you do because the police don't help you. As Caucasians, we need to be more cognizant of what women of color are saying to us," says Carol Hollomon, left, executive director of Alternatives to Family Violence in Adams County. At right is Ana Soler, director of Victim Services Network.

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