



A Resource for
Rape Crisis Centers

What is Oppression?

By definition, “oppression” means “prolonged, unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.”¹ Oppression is exercised in multiple ways, ranging from subtle comments (often referred to as “micro-aggressions”) to murder. Oppression is a tool wielded throughout human history by those with power and authority to keep those with less power in a position of submission, and it continues today both in the United States and throughout the world.

Oppression is often thought of in terms of the many “isms” that are suffered by individuals and groups with less power and authority, such as racism and sexism (among others):

Matrix of Oppression

Social Identity Categories	Privileged Social Groups	Border Social Groups ↔	Targeted Social Groups	Ism
Race	White People	Biracial People (White/Latino, Black, Asian)	Asian, Black, Latino, Native People	Racism
Sex	Bio Men	Transsexual, Intersex People	Bio Women	Sexism
Gender	Gender Conforming Bio Men And Women	Gender Ambiguous Bio Men and Women	Transgender, Genderqueer, Intersex People	Transgender Oppression
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual People	Bisexual People	Lesbians, Gay Men	Heterosexism
Class	Rich, Upper Class People	Middle Class People	Working Class, Poor People	Classism
Ability/Disability	Temporarily Abled-Bodied People	People with Temporary Disabilities	People with Disabilities	Ableism
Religion	Protestants	Roman Catholic (historically)	Jews, Muslims, Hindus	Religious Oppression
Age	Adults	Young Adults	Elders, Young People	Ageism/Adultism

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¹ Merriam Webster (2016). Definition of “oppression.”

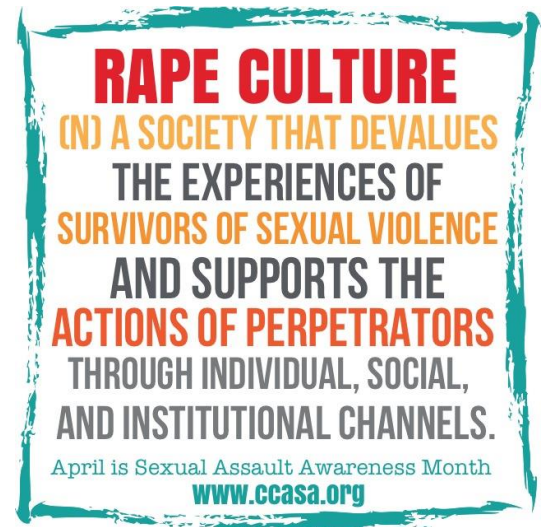
Oppression and Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a form of oppression because it is perpetrated by those with greater power and control over those with little or no power or control. Contrary to long-held myths, sexual violence is not motivated by uncontrollable physical or sexual desire; rather, it is an intentional act of violence meant to harm, demean, and silence those against whom it is perpetrated. Myths about sexual violence are themselves tools of oppression that keep targeted groups in a position of submission and silence, and keep oppressors in positions of power.

To that extent, “Rape Culture” – an environment in which rape is prevalent and violence against women is normalized and excused – is an extension of oppression. It is so commonplace that it is often tolerated or even unnoticed by the larger culture, thereby keeping targeted individuals and groups submissive to powerful and privileged individuals and groups.

*Examples of Rape Culture:*²

- Blaming the victim (“She asked for it!”)
- Trivializing sexual assault (“Boys will be boys!”)
- Sexually explicit jokes
- Tolerance of sexual harassment
- Inflating false rape report statistics
- Publicly scrutinizing a victim’s dress, mental state, motives, and history
- Gratuitous gendered violence in movies and television
- Defining “manhood” as dominant and sexually aggressive
- Defining “womanhood” as submissive and sexually passive
- Pressure on men to “score”
- Pressure on women to not appear “cold”
- Assuming only promiscuous women get raped
- Assuming that men don’t get raped or that only “weak” men get raped
- Refusing to take rape accusations seriously
- Teaching women to avoid getting raped instead of teaching men not to rape



The Continuum of Oppression

As a tool of oppression, sexual violence cannot be understood or adequately addressed without also understanding the “isms” listed above. Sexual violence is not a crime that is suffered just by women generally, but disproportionately by women of color, by individuals who identify as LGBTQI, by those with one or more disabilities, and by those living in poverty, among other characteristics. Consider the following:

- 58% of Multiracial women, 49% of Native women, and 41% of Black women have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime; 33%, 27%, and 22%, respectively, have experienced rape³
- Nearly half of all lesbians and nearly 75% of bisexual women have experienced some form of sexual violence⁴
- Half of all transgender people experience sexual violence, and half of people who die in violent hate crimes against LGBTQI individuals are transgender women – 82% of whom are Black women⁵

² Marshall University Women’s Center, “Rape Culture” webpage: <http://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/rape-culture/>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010). “National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.” Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/>

⁴ National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015). “Info and Stats for Journalists. Retrieved from: http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media_packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf

⁵ Office for Victims of Crime, “Responding to Transgender Victims of Sexual Assault.” Retrieved from: http://ovc.gov/pubs/forge/sexual_numbers.html

- 70% of women with developmental disabilities experience repeated sexual abuse⁶
- 92% of a racially diverse sample of homeless mothers had experienced severe physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives, with 43% reporting sexual abuse in childhood and 63% reporting intimate partner violence in adulthood⁷
- At 97%, the lifetime risk for violent victimization is so high for homeless women with severe mental illness as to amount to a normative experience for this population⁸

Oppression and the Rape Crisis Field

The Rape Crisis movement was begun by women (mostly survivors of sexual violence) in response to the various forms of oppression they were experiencing including sexism and racism. Read “A Brief History of the Anti-Rape Movement” here: <http://resource-sharing-project.org/brief-history-anti-rape-movement>

Today, the work of rape crisis centers and coalitions continue throughout the U.S. and significant positive changes have been made in the way that societies and institutions understand and respond to sexual violence. Although rape crisis centers are working to keep an anti-oppression framework as a guide for their mission and services, the rape crisis field has experienced some negative effects of institutionalization, including the fact that not as many women of color are serving in leadership positions within rape crisis centers, and some centers struggle to meet the needs of diverse populations due to a lack of diversity among their staff and/or boards of directors.

In a 2015 survey of Ohio rape crisis centers and dual rape crisis/domestic violence organizations, of 335 total paid staff positions indicated, only 65 positions (19%) were held by people of color. In the same survey, respondents were asked to what extent certain factors were barriers in their ability to serve survivors from diverse communities:

Barrier to serving survivors from diverse communities	% of respondents indicating this to be “somewhat” or “significant” barrier:
Underdeveloped relationships within specific communities	75%
Lack of understanding regarding the specific needs of a community	62.5%
Lack of knowledge regarding best practices in serving the community	62.5%
Reluctance by the community to access program services	81%
Limited staff capacity or not enough diversity among the staff	69%

In the same survey, 73% of respondents indicated they were “very interested” in receiving training and/or technical assistance on working with culturally diverse communities.⁹

As rape crisis centers throughout Ohio and beyond strive to meet the needs of all survivors in their communities, while simultaneously working to confront the societal conditions that enable sexual violence to exist and empower their communities to end it, a commitment to an anti-oppression framework has never been more important. As previously stated, efforts to understand and confront sexual violence must include efforts to understand and confront all forms of oppression. Sexual violence does not exist or persist in a vacuum; rather, it is part of a historical, deeply-entrenched and intertwined societal and institutional exercise of oppression. This requires individual and organizational commitment to recognizing privilege and dismantling oppression.

⁶ Spectrum Institute Disability and Abuse Project. “A Report on the 2012 National Survey of Abuse of People with Disabilities.” Retrieved from: <http://disability-abuse.com/survey/survey-report.pdf>

⁷ Browne A. & Bassuk S.S. (1997). Intimate violence in the lives of homeless and poor housed women: Prevalence and patterns in and ethnically diverse sample. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 67(2), p. 261–278.

⁸ Goodman, L., Fels, K., & Glenn, C. (2006). No Safe Place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women. Retrieved from: <http://www.vawnet.org>.

⁹ Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence (2015). *Victim Services Needs and Resources Assessment*.

Survivors from diverse communities

Just as advocates come to their work with their own individual and cultural beliefs, experiences, customs, and identities, so too do survivors of sexual violence when seeking support:

- **Diversity within communities:** Just as there are differences between and within communities of privilege, so too are there differences between and within marginalized populations. For example, not all Black women have the same beliefs, expectations or experiences by virtue of their race alone.
- **How sexual violence is understood:** How rape and other forms of sexual violence are understood can vary from one culture and community to the next, and may or may not coincide with legal definitions.
- **Cultural response to sexual violence:** Different cultures, communities, and individuals have different expectations and methods of responding to sexual violence. For example, some cultures view the rape of a woman to bring great shame to her family and surrounding community. Others are expected to keep sexual violence private or within the family/community.
- **Influences of family, community, and faith:** Any survivor's family, social, and faith community impact her recovery process, but this is especially true for survivors of color. These various forms of community can have a positive and/or negative impact on the survivor.
- **Legal status:** Some immigrant women are targeted for sexual violence based on their legal status and may fear reporting or seeking services. For example, an undocumented survivor may be reluctant to come forward for fear of being deported and may not trust claims of confidentiality.
- **Distrust of power structures and systems:** The majority of advocates, healthcare professionals, criminal justice officials, and mental health providers are white, and the larger systems in which these individuals operate are dominated by historically heterosexual, cisgender, and white-defined laws, policies, and practices. Individuals who do not conform to these labels who are sexually victimized have historically been ignored, devalued, or delegitimized by these systems.
- **Trauma and adverse economic and health outcomes:** There is significant historical trauma in the lives and histories of oppressed individuals, who are also more likely to suffer multiple traumas and adverse economic and health issues than those from privileged groups. All of these factors impact the individual survivor's experience of, and response to, an individual incident of sexual violence.
- **Barriers to access:** Survivors from diverse communities often face numerous barriers to access which prevent or discourage them from reporting sexual violence or receiving supportive services. Such barriers include language access issues, lack of diversity among victim services staff, transportation difficulties, and lack of service structures that honor their cultural identities, needs, beliefs, and styles of expression.
- **Resilience:** Individuals from diverse communities – as a whole, culturally, and individually – possess resilience from surviving historical trauma to managing present-day institutionalized racism, sexism, and other isms. Advocacy and support services should acknowledge how these individuals thrive in spite of their harsh realities and incorporate this resilience into service structures.



Adopting an effective anti-oppression framework

As individual advocates, rape crisis centers, and the anti-violence field as a whole, it is not possible to adopt an anti-oppression framework simply by aligning ourselves in theory with a particular philosophy, nor just by hiring diverse staff or recruiting diverse board members. To truly adopt an anti-oppression framework, we must commit to consistent analysis of individual and organizational biases and practices, and then actively and intentionally work to improve. This takes time, effort, and the meaningful participation of everyone associated with the organization.

Understanding Privilege

Since the majority of paid staff positions in Ohio's rape crisis centers are held by white people, mostly white women, it is imperative that we have an understanding of privilege and how it informs our work in the anti-violence field. At its most basic, privilege is an unearned benefit (or benefits) that a person gains by being part of a group that has greater power and authority than another. Privilege is the opposite of oppression. Most people experience a mixture of privilege and oppression. For example, someone who is born female, identifies as female, identifies as a lesbian, and is white experiences privilege from being white and from identifying with a gender expression that conforms to societal expectations, but experiences oppression from being female and identifying as a lesbian.

While we experience benefits based on individual indicators of privilege, the concept of privilege is best understood in the context of power systems:

"Privileged people are more likely to be in positions of power – for example, they're more likely to dominate politics, be economically well-off, have influence over the media, and hold executive positions in companies. Privileged people can use their positions to benefit people like themselves – in other words, other privileged people. In a patriarchal society, women do not have institutional power (at least, not based on their gender). In a white supremacist society, people of color don't have race-based institutional power. And so on. It's important to bear this in mind because privilege doesn't go both ways. Female privilege does not exist because women don't have institutional power. Similarly, black privilege, trans privilege, and poor privilege don't exist because those groups do not have institutional power."¹⁰

Why Privilege is Important

Those with privilege need not feel guilty about possessing that privilege, but neither must those with privilege be content to allow those without it to continue to struggle. Those with privilege have both an opportunity and a responsibility to be aspiring allies to those who are oppressed.

BEING AN ASPIRING ALLY IS...	BEING AN ASPIRING ALLY IS NOT...
Recognizing privilege and how it informs our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors	Touting our status as an ally; such status is earned, not assumed
Seeking knowledge and understanding about those who are different from us and those who are oppressed	Relying on others to provide that knowledge to us
Being willing to use privilege and relinquish it, to benefit those who are oppressed	Being a "savior" to an oppressed individual or group
Creating space for oppressed individuals and groups to safely voice their experiences	Filling that space with a pre-determined agenda that restricts those voices
Being willing to be vulnerable, to make mistakes, to learn from those mistakes, and to hold other aspiring allies accountable for theirs	Collapsing into guilt or defensiveness when confronted with misapplications of privilege
Recognizing that allyship is a lifelong, intentional process based on consistency and accountability	Simply hiring someone from an oppressed group, or checking off a box in a checklist

¹⁰ Ferguson, Sian (2014). "Privilege 101: A Quick and Dirty Guide." Everyday Feminism. Retrieved from: <http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/what-is-privilege/>

Adopting an effective anti-oppression framework (continued)

Source: SOA Watch, www.soaw.org

Principles of Anti-Oppression

- Power and privilege play out in our group dynamics and we must continually struggle with how we challenge power and privilege in our practice.
- We can only identify how power and privilege play out when we are conscious and committed to understanding how racism, sexism, homophobia, and all other forms of oppression affect each one of us.
- Until we are clearly committed to anti-oppression practice all forms of oppression will continue to divide our movements and weaken our power.
- Developing an anti-oppression practice is lifelong work and requires a lifelong commitment. No single workshop is sufficient for learning to change one's behaviors. We are all vulnerable to being oppressive and we need to continuously struggle with these issues.
- Dialogue and discussion are necessary and we need to learn how to listen non-defensively and communicate respectfully if we are going to have effective anti-oppression practice. Challenge yourself to be honest and open and take risks to address oppression head on.

Personal Anti-Oppression Practice

- When witnessing or experiencing racism, sexism, etc. interrupt the behavior and address it on the spot or later; either one on one, or with a few allies.
- Recognize the when someone offers criticism around oppressive behavior, to treat it as a gift that it is rather than challenging the person or invalidating their experience. Give people the benefit of the doubt and don't make assumptions. Think about ways to address behavior that will encourage change and try to encourage dialogue, not debate.
- Keep space open for anti-oppression discussions; try focusing on one form of oppression at a time - sexism, racism, classism, etc.
- Respect different styles of leadership and communication.
- White people need to take responsibility for holding other white people accountable.
- Try not to call people out because they are not speaking.
- Be conscious of how much space you take up or how much you speak.
- Be conscious of how your language may perpetuate oppression.
- Don't push people to do things just because of their race and gender, but base it on their word and experience and skills.
- Promote anti-oppression in everything you do, in and outside of activist space.
- Avoid generalizing feelings, thoughts, behaviors etc. to a whole group
- Set anti-oppression goals and continually evaluate whether or not you are meeting them.
- Don't feel guilty, feel motivated. Realizing that you are part of the problem doesn't mean you can't be an active part of the solution.

Organizational Anti-Oppression Practices

- Commit time for organizational discussions on discrimination and oppression: make these discussions a priority in staff meetings and trainings, not something "tacked on" at the end of a meeting.
- Set anti-oppression goals and continually evaluate whether or not you are meeting them.
- Promote an anti-racist, anti-heterosexist, anti-transphobic, anti-ableist message and analysis in everything we do, in and outside of activist space.
- Remember these are complex issues and they need adequate time and space.

- Create opportunities for people to develop skills to communicate about oppression.
- Promote egalitarian group development by prioritizing skill shares and being aware of who tends to do what work, who gets recognized/supported/solicited.
- Respect different styles of leadership and communication.
- Don't push historically marginalized people to do things because of their oppressed group (tokenism); base it on their work, experience, and skills.
- Make a collective commitment to hold people accountable for their behavior so that the organization can be a safe and nurturing place for all.

Developing a more diverse and inclusive organization

Rape crisis centers should strive to recruit, hire, and nurture individuals from diverse and oppressed communities, not simply as a means of demonstrating a commitment to anti-oppression, but because these individuals possess skills, talents, and value that rape crisis centers and the survivors they serve *need*. Most importantly, hiring an individual from a diverse or marginalized community alone does a disservice to that individual, to the program, and to survivors, if the organization is not fully committed to nurturing the growth, satisfaction, and productivity of that individual.

Recruitment and Hiring

- Develop and adhere to a clear, thorough, and effective hiring and orientation process prior to recruitment.
- Develop and revise position descriptions and qualifications that reflect the actual skills required to successfully perform the job duties.
- Advertise open positions in more places than just the program website, a newspaper, or an online job search site. Advertise within the communities your program serves. This might include community centers and groups, churches, schools, civic organizations, clubs, etc. Also advertise via culturally specific organizations locally, statewide, and even nationally.
- Create pathways to leadership in the organization, such as by enabling volunteers or interns to be promoted to paid staff positions, and part-time staff to be promoted to full-time staff.

Nurturing New Staff

- Ensure that the orientation process is paced, thorough, and involves the presence and active participation of the employee's supervisor. Also allow time for new staff and existing staff to get to know each other and their respective roles in the organization.
- Be committed to nurturing the unique talents, skills, and communication styles of the staff member. Schedule regular supervision and be available for support and to answer questions outside of supervision time.
- Do not ask or require the new staff person to provide all the direct service to or outreach with marginalized populations, nor to speak on behalf of all marginalized individuals or groups within the community.

For additional information, tips, and resources on staff development and anti-oppression practices, please access the Resource Sharing Project's Resource Directory: <http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/resource-directory>

**Diversity is when you count the people.
Inclusion is when the people count.**



Role of the State Coalition

As Ohio's statewide anti-sexual violence coalition, the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence (OAESV) advocates for comprehensive responses and rape crisis services for survivors, and empowers communities to prevent sexual violence. OAESV's objectives are to end isolation of survivors and agencies working on their behalf; improve services and responses to survivors and those impacted by sexual violence; increase public awareness about sexual violence; inform and shape public policy; and end sexual violence.

To further the mission and meet the objectives of the organization, OAESV must also be committed to an anti-oppression framework, particularly as rape crisis programs throughout the state are being asked to adopt such a framework. No organization that espouses an end to violence in any form can be successful unless it is fully committed to ending oppression in all its forms. Below are descriptions of caucuses, task forces, committees, and groups that OAESV co-chairs and/or is an active participant:

The Women of Color Caucus

The Women of Color Caucus (WOCC), which is a group of diverse women concerned about the violence against women of color. WOCC is committed to developing leadership in women, community education, and efforts that will influence policy and systems to more effectively respond to improving the lives of all women. The WOCC is open to all women who self-identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, Arab/Middle Eastern, Black/African American/West Indies, Native/Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latin descent.

The LGBTQI Task Force

The LGBTQI Task Force is a multidisciplinary collaborative of professionals and individuals dedicated to developing resources and best practices addressing domestic violence and sexual assault in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning communities. Goals of the task force are to provide information about domestic violence and sexual assault in LGBTQI communities; provide training to mainstream service providers and advocates; increase the capacity of advocates and service providers to effectively serve LGBTQI communities; and facilitate the networking process between task force members and appropriate agencies to form collaborative efforts to effectively serve LGBTQI survivors. The LGBTQI Task Force developed and implemented the Safe Zone project in Ohio, which is a comprehensive training program for advocacy organizations.

Abilities Task Force

The mission of the Abilities Task force is to create awareness about all forms of abuse including domestic, intimate partner, sexual violence, and oppression and to advocate for initiatives in upholding human rights and needs of all Ohio survivors/co-survivors with varying abilities through national, statewide, and multi-disciplinary collaboration. Goals of the Abilities Task Force include providing education, training, and technical assistance to advocacy organizations and allied professionals about the needs of survivors with varying abilities, and improving the accessibility of victim services for survivors with varying abilities.

The Anti-Oppression Committee

In 2013, OAESV was selected as one of several state coalitions to participate in the Women of Color Network's Call to Action Training and Technical Assistance Project, the purpose of which was to assist coalitions in understanding oppression in the anti-violence field and working to improve organizational practices and leadership opportunities for women of color in the coalition and affiliated rape crisis centers. OAESV participated in numerous trainings and meetings, ultimately developing a State Action Plan which included the creation of an Anti-Oppression Committee (AOC). The AOC is comprised of all OAESV staff members, in addition to advocates and activists from rape crisis programs and allied organizations in Ohio.

The Aspiring White Allies Group

In 2015, OAESV created an Aspiring White Allies group to allow space for aspiring white allies to discuss and do work on personal and organizational privilege, and to develop accountability goals and strategies to support the goals of the AOC. The Aspiring White Allies group is comprised of all white staff members of OAESV, in addition to white advocates and activists from rape crisis programs and allied organizations in Ohio. The Aspiring White Allies group meets quarterly, typically just prior to or following the AOC meeting, to harness the group's collective privilege to support the AOC in improving organizational practices and leadership opportunities for women of color in the rape crisis field.

For more information about any of the above committees, groups, caucuses, or task forces, please contact OAESV at 216-658-1381, or info@oaesv.org.

Moving forward together

As previously stated, a commitment to anti-oppression is lifelong and extends far beyond the scope of the individual organizations in which we work, and even beyond the rape crisis field as a whole. There are no "quick fixes" to the oppression that still exists within the anti-violence field and within our communities. To begin to confront this oppression requires the continual, thoughtful participation, commitment, and accountability of each individual and of each organization in Ohio and beyond. This process need not be viewed as daunting or insurmountable, but rather as a journey toward personal, organizational, and societal growth and improvement.

Additional Resources

Below are links to additional reading and resources on anti-oppression, organizational practices, and the needs of diverse and marginalized survivors. For additional resources, please contact OAESV at 216-658-1381 or info@oaesv.org.

Fact sheets on special populations of sexual assault survivors:

<http://www.oaesv.org/oaesv-fact-sheets/>

Women of Color Network:

<http://www.wocninc.org/>

Resource Sharing Project Anti-Racism Resources:

<http://resourcesharingproject.org/anti-racism-resource-round>

Resource Sharing Project Anti-Oppression Resources:

http://resourcesharingproject.org/resource-directory?combine=&field_topics_tid%5B%5D=5

North American Students of Cooperation comprehensive anti-oppression packet:

http://cultivate.coop/coop-wiki/images/f/f6/NASCO_Action_Camp_Reading_packet-final.pdf

Training for Change: activities, tools, and exercises for anti-oppression:

<https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools>

Organizing for Power: anti-oppression articles, tips, and training exercises:

<http://organizingforpower.org/anti-oppression-resources-exercises/>

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