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Congress should be ashamed of its economic violence against women

Mariam Williams | Oct. 7, 2013 At the Intersection

Violence isn't always physical.

I've said this recently in a work context, though I can't remember the exact circumstances. My full-time job is in social justice research, and violence comes up frequently. It could be about hate crimes, homicides in under-resourced communities as a byproduct of the economic violence imposed on these communities, or a number of other things.

I thought of violence last week when I heard a story on NPR about the government shutdown's effect on low-income women and children. Funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, known as WIC, is so low in some states that money could run out in a week. Hearing a woman on the radio talk about her need to feed her children as the prices of basic nutritional food items like fruit, eggs, oatmeal, milk and baby formula keep increasing made me think about how ironic it is that the shutdown started Oct. 1, the first day of National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. I shared the story on Facebook, pointed out the date and added my own commentary: "Denying food to women and children is an act of violence against women. Congress should be ashamed."

It's not the beaten woman's black eye, swollen cheek or inexplicable bruises we think of when hear the term "domestic violence" or even the psychological bullying some may think of when they hear "intimate partner abuse," but it's violence all the same, and not just for the obvious reason that willfully starving someone -- over a health care law, no less -- is cruel. It's also economic violence. It is people with money and power withholding access to funds from those who most need it. It's a public, grand-scale version of the same type of behavior abusive partners perpetrate in private, the violence that keeps some women tied to partners who abuse them physically. If he controls the household finances, where can she go? What does it matter what he does to her? How can she feed her children without him? The $45 a month that may be allowing some women to escape such a life-threatening situation could be cut off in exchange for brownie points with conservative constituents.

Whenever stories come out about government assistance programs in danger of being cut off or about the people these cutbacks affect, there's always plenty of commentary about who to blame. Fingers point to irresponsible women; absentee fathers; lazy adults who won't work; one political party for being too generous, another for being greedy; all of government for too much bureaucracy; hypocrites who claim to follow Jesus but don't believe in feeding the poor. While I've come to find the arguments exhausting, unchanging and pointless, I have chosen men as the most responsible culprit. The majority of perpetrators in intimate partner abuse cases are male. And a Congress that is 80 percent male happens to be behind the case I've presented about economic violence against women.

Around this time last year, I moderated a panel discussion called, "Men Respond to the War on Women." Four men who work at organizations that support survivors of domestic violence and rape, peace and justice, or reproductive freedom shared their experiences with violence against women in their fields or in their personal lives. They agreed that they, as men, had to take a leading role in stopping violence against women. It was up to them to teach other men. They had to make other men aware of the misogyny, patriarchy and sexism deeply

embedded in our culture that we so easily absorb. Just as the shaming of women's sexuality perpetuates squabbles about access to birth control, it leads commentators to blame low-income women for needing assistance when they find themselves with children.

This National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, men have the power and the opportunity to stop violence against women. It's my hope that a woman doesn't have to return to a life-threatening situation before Congress acts.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com [1]. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw [2].]

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