

Systemic/Institutional Oppression is:

Systemic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by society and its institutions, solely based on a person's membership in a social group.

Systemically oppressed survivors face tremendous, overwhelming barriers to seeking advocacy and justice. A victim-centered response to sexual violence thus requires advocates to recognize the strengths, challenges, and the history of institutional oppression of those seeking support. These historical underpinnings include events that took place in the past which impact how an individual or community perceives events or reacts to issues in the present. Additionally, mainstream organizations are not designed for or by systemically oppressed peoples. Thus, it is critical that advocates understand historical trauma and its impacts as systemically oppressed peoples are particularly vulnerable to offenders and more likely to be victims of sexual violence because they are least likely to report a sexual assault due to institutionalized racism and discrimination. When they do report, they are often re-victimized by not being believed or lack safety within the system as well as not receiving culturally-relevant support.

It's important for advocates to recognize that the impacts of racism, homophobia, transphobia, prejudice, discrimination, sexism, enslavement, and oppression experienced by ones ancestors is passed on to descendants. This experience is defined as trans generational trauma and manifests itself in the form of mental and physical health disparities, depression, violence, silence, mistrust of each other and systems, PTSD, suicide, self-harm, feelings of worthlessness, and more. Internalized oppression as well as overt forms of oppression directly impacts a victim's responses and choices regarding safety and healing as well as distorts a victim's self-image and shapes continued behaviors. Thus, in order to ensure the health and well-being of a systemically oppressed survivor, the advocate must understand how these dynamics interface with each other.

We must use knowledge as a lens to provide a holistic approach to service provision, knowing that even if you address the presenting needs of the victim, there is still pain and trauma present that relates to the oppression the individual faces in daily life. Culturally relevant responses require a deep understanding of each individual story and how different every context is, paying close attention to where each victim has been and what they have survived (Shades of Change Guide).

Remember: Maintaining an inclusive and accessible agency is an ongoing process.