



CIRCLES OF PEACE: centering the victim in domestic violence justice¹³¹

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1 INTRODUCTION

For decades, domestic violence cases have been addressed primarily through a punitive legal framework. Arrest, prosecution, conviction, and incarceration have been considered the principal mechanisms of accountability. While criminal enforcement remains essential, experience and empirical evidence demonstrate that punishment alone is insufficient to ensure victim safety, interrupt cycles of violence, or promote long-term behavioral change.

Through my judicial experience in Santa Cruz County, Arizona—particularly in the city of Nogales—I have observed the development and implementation of the Circles of Peace program, a structured restorative justice intervention integrated into the criminal justice system. This model does not replace accountability; rather, it deepens and humanizes it. Most importantly, it re-centers the justice process on the victim.

¹³¹ **Como citar este texto:** MALEY, Mary Helen; BITTENCOURT, Isabella Luiza Alonso. Circles of peace: centering the victim in domestic violence justice. **Revista COCEVID**, v. 3, n. 1, p. 348–351, 2026.

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2 THE LIMITS OF A PUNISHMENT-ONLY RESPONSE

Domestic violence cases are inherently complex. They involve trauma, economic dependence, emotional attachment, children, immigration concerns, and community dynamics. Traditional court procedures, although necessary, often reduce this complexity to legal charges and procedural milestones.

Victims frequently report feeling unheard within the adversarial process. They may serve as witnesses, but not as active subjects of protection and restoration. A system that measures success only by conviction rates risks overlooking whether the victim feels safer, supported, or empowered.

3 THE CENTRALITY OF THE VICTIM

The Circles of Peace model begins from a fundamental premise: a justice system that does not prioritize the victim may inadvertently perpetuate harm.

Participation in restorative processes is voluntary and informed. Victims are offered advocacy services, trauma-informed support, and structured opportunities for voice. The goal is not forced reconciliation, nor coerced forgiveness. Rather, the objective is safety, dignity, and meaningful acknowledgment of harm.

4 STRUCTURED AND SUPERVISED ACCOUNTABILITY

A common misconception is that restorative justice is lenient. In reality, Circles of Peace impose structured, consistent obligations on offenders. Participants must attend regular sessions, engage in facilitated dialogue, accept responsibility for their conduct, and commit to behavioral change.

The program operates under judicial supervision and in coordination with probation and community-based services. Case screening protocols, facilitator training, and safety safeguards are rigorously implemented to prevent re-victimization.



5 EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND THE STUDY OF CIRCLES OF PEACE

Scholarly evaluations of restorative justice interventions in domestic violence cases have been conducted by researchers affiliated with New York University and partner institutions. Notably, Linda Mills and Briana Barocas have examined the Circles of Peace program implemented in Santa Cruz County, Arizona, through mixed-methods research assessing recidivism, victim experience, compliance rates, and procedural justice outcomes.

Findings indicate that participants in the Circles of Peace program demonstrate lower rates of reoffending when compared to similarly situated defendants processed exclusively through conventional court procedures. The research also highlights increased victim satisfaction, improved perceptions of fairness, and stronger community engagement. Importantly, the studies emphasize trauma-informed design and structured judicial oversight as critical safeguards in domestic violence restorative interventions.

These evaluations contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting carefully screened, victim-centered restorative models as complementary—not substitutive—to criminal accountability.

6 COMMUNITY AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR

Domestic violence is sustained by silence and social isolation. Circles of Peace incorporate trained community members, reinforcing collective norms against violence. This approach redistributes responsibility, signaling that domestic abuse is not a private matter but a violation of shared community values.

7 REIMAGINING JUSTICE

Criminal accountability remains indispensable. However, if justice is measured only by punishment, it may fail to produce safety or transformation.

Circles of Peace propose a complementary paradigm—one that combines legal enforcement with structured restoration, trauma-informed practice, and



victim-centered design. Centering the victim does not weaken justice; it strengthens it.

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