



HAWAI'I STATE
COALITION AGAINST
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

MAID

Discussion Guide



Maid (2021)

CAST - Margaret Qualley, Nick Robinson, Anika Noni Rose, Andie MacDowell, Tracy Vilar, Billy Burke

INSPIRED BY - "Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive" by Stephanie Land

DISTRIBUTOR - Netflix

How to use this discussion guide

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If you're not sure how to start a conversation about domestic violence with friends or family, it can help to use media as a launch pad for discussion. When Netflix released *Maid* in October 2021, HSCADV engaged in informal conversations with those in the community about the show and the dynamics of domestic violence portrayed. Many shared that the show was an eye-opening account of the difficult nature of experiencing and surviving domestic violence.

Inspired by Stephanie Land's memoir, *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive*, Netflix's *Maid* is a 10-part miniseries that focuses on a survivor (Alex)'s life after trying to leave an abusive relationship, with flashbacks to her childhood and relationship with ex-boyfriend, Sean.

HSCADV's *Maid* Discussion Guide is free to use (simply credit HSCADV) in your education efforts, whether formally in a classroom, or as a conversation guide for a "book club" style conversation.

1) Throughout the series, Alex has numerous encounters with the legal and social services systems. How would you describe her experience with these systems and how they serve domestic violence survivors?

SAMPLE ANSWERS

Domestic Violence Shelter:

The shelter director, Denise, understands what domestic violence survivors are going through and we see her support survivors by empowering them to make choices, rather than telling them what to do (e.g., reminding Alex she is welcome to come to the therapy group, but does not demand or require her to do so). The shelter advocates also work to connect Alex with legal consultations and transportation to and from court.

Social Services & Benefits:

When Alex first meets the social worker, Jody, Alex believes that Jody will make various assumptions about her due to the societal stigma of utilizing government benefits. (In Alex's mind, Jody says, "So you're looking for a big, fat government handout because you are a jobless, white trash piece of s***.") Alex's interaction with Jody also shows the paradoxical nature of accessing benefits: Alex cannot get subsidized housing without a job; she cannot get a job without childcare; and she cannot get childcare without a job.

When Alex finally receives SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, a.k.a. "food stamps"), she receives condescending looks from the grocery store cashier and other customers, and realizes that she doesn't receive enough assistance to cover the groceries she needed. Additionally, Alex's employer, Value Maids, refuses to allow employees to work more than 30 hours a week to avoid providing employees benefits. We also see Alex struggling to find a landlord which will accept rental assistance, which is unfortunately the experience of many individuals in the U.S.

Family Court:

Alex was unprepared for her first court appearance and did not have any legal support, unlike Sean who had an attorney. It was clear Alex felt overwhelmed and didn't understand the legal system or jargon being used in the courtroom. When Alex shares that she is living at a domestic violence shelter, she is questioned if she has proof of abuse or if she has reported anything to police.

Because she did not have any evidence to present to the court and did not have stable housing or employment (although she was staying at a shelter), the court sided with Sean and gave him temporary custody of Maddy. At the end of Alex's first hearing, the court commissioner tells Alex that she only has seven days to prepare for the next custody hearing.



2) We often hear people ask why victims and survivors of domestic violence don't "just leave" the relationship if it's so bad. Alex was shocked when Danielle returned to her partner even though he had strangled her and caused her immense harm, and Denise explained that it takes the average domestic violence victim seven attempts to finally leave. Based on Alex's experiences, what might be some reasons that leaving is more challenging than it may seem?

SAMPLE ANSWERS

Financial:

Alex flees home with \$18 in her pocket, which is nowhere near enough to house and feed herself and her daughter. We learn that she also hasn't been allowed to handle the household's finances, which can make financial independence even more daunting.

Legal:

The social worker informed Alex that she would need at least \$1,500 to retain an attorney to get custody of Maddy. Some custody cases are so challenging and time-consuming to the point where some survivors can be in legal debt for years. In addition to that, survivors often fear that they may lose custody if they try to fight their abusers in court and sometimes, staying in the relationships mean they get to be close to their children.

Love:

Many survivors want to believe that the person abusing them is not the person they fell in love with. Throughout *Maid*, Alex often reveals flashbacks showing happier moments with Sean where he is lively, loving, and carefree. After the first attempt at leaving, Sean appears back in Alex's life and "love bombs" by helping her with her mother.

Housing:

Upon leaving Sean's trailer, Alex doesn't have many options available to her for housing that night and ends up sleeping in her car. The following night, she slept with Maddy at the ferry terminal. When you consider external factors, such as weather, location, etc., it could be dangerous or impossible to sleep anywhere but in your home. Many survivors of abuse also fear that their inability to secure stable housing will cause them to lose custody of their child(ren).

Lack of supportive network:

Unfortunately, Alex does not have family to support her in challenging times: her mom is unreliable and minimizes Alex's abuse, having experienced abuse herself by numerous partners. In addition to previously abusing Alex's mom, Alex's father takes Sean's side by making excuses for him, and completely overlooking his abusive behavior. Alex and Sean's friend group chose not to believe Alex's experiences of abuse and none of them offer her support and belief.



3) When Alex's takes her daughter, Maddy, to the pediatrician, the doctor tells Alex that Maddy has two ear infections and that the only solution is to move to a home without mold. When Alex says that she cannot afford to live anywhere else, the pediatrician tells Alex that she has to "do better." Many domestic violence victims, especially lower-income individuals, are often blamed for being at the receiving end of their abuse or being in their situations. What are some examples of victim blaming that came up in *Maid*?

SAMPLE ANSWERS

"If you worked more or planned everything out better, you wouldn't be in this situation."

While the parenting classes that Alex attends are well-intentioned, the instructor sends many messages which further Alex's concerns of failing her daughter. While what the instructor says is true about stability being important for a young person, it's not Alex's fault that Sean chose to be abusive and frighten their daughter. Studies show that it's far healthier for a child to grow up in a safe, loving, single-parent home, than in a household filled with abuse and fear.

In the final episode, Alex asks her biological father, Hank, to testify in her custody case because he witnessed Sean's emotionally abusive behavior towards her. Hank, who abused Alex's mother years earlier, blames Alex for being in her own situation and refuses to testify against Sean, who has become his mentee in their AA meetings.



4) How might shows like *Maid* influence our societal understanding of domestic violence? In what ways can it be helpful or harmful?

SAMPLE ANSWERS

Helpful:

The show brings awareness to domestic violence as an issue, portrays various forms of abuse, and depicts many realistic obstacles that survivors of domestic violence may experience in leaving a relationship such as challenges stemming from providing for a child as a single parent and navigating the various government systems. Since we are able to see Alex and Sean over time, viewers are able to see the pattern of abusive behaviors that we may not see in real-life abusive relationships around us. The show also provides perspective on how unintentionally harmful the friends and family members of a survivor can be, which can help us to think about how we can best support the victims and survivors in our lives.

Harmful:

Entertainment such as television shows can be seen as just “drama” rather than a real issue that impacts millions of people globally.

It may also perpetuate some incorrect myths surrounding domestic violence such as drug use or alcoholism causing abuse or that people can change easily. In the final episode, Sean suddenly relinquishes custody to Alex, giving her and Maddy the freedom to move and for Alex to pursue college out of state. In the majority of cases, abusive partners do not easily relinquish their control and survivors often have to attend to lengthy legal battles.



5) While Alex is staying with Nate, he asks her out on a date, to which she declines and tells him that “it’s not equal between us.” What do you think she means by that? Based on what we know about domestic violence and power, what is the role of equality in a relationship?

SAMPLE ANSWERS

In this conversation, Alex explains that she feels like Nate’s “charity case” since he’s providing her, her mom, and her daughter with a car, a roof over their head, food, childcare, and other supports (like connections for daycare), in exchange for nothing, yet on several occasions, we see that Nate is hoping for a romantic relationship with Alex.

We know that Alex hasn’t been able to feel safe and independent in her relationship with Sean, and most likely understands that in order to be in a healthy relationship, equality between both parties is essential. She knows that dependence on Nate makes their relationship too one-sided and does not want to replicate that dynamic in another relationship.



The day after that conversation, Nate finds out that Alex had sex with Sean and tells her to leave his house. This reaction shows that he envisioned having some control over her behavior in exchange for all of the help he was providing her.



6) Throughout the show, we see a variety of different abusive actions that both Alex and her mother, Paula, experience, at the hands of their partners and ex-partners. Alex did not realize she was a victim of abuse because she was not physically hurt but comes to learn that abuse can take many forms. Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of behavior used to gain or maintain control over a partner, and includes tactics that are physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and sexual. What behaviors did we see Sean use to have control over Alex?

BEHAVIOR	MAID EXAMPLE	DISCUSSION
Physical threats, intimidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sean throws objects (such as plates, a pitcher) near Alex's head. • Sean shoves Alex against the wall. • On several occasions, we see Sean aggressively tell Alex what to do (get Maddy dressed, sit down and eat dinner, get in the car, etc.). 	<p>As Danielle says in Episode 2, "They bite before they bark. They hit near you before they hit you."</p> <p>Although not physically hurting someone, using threats and intimidation is still a form of abusive behavior that is used to control another person.</p>
Economic, financial control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sean discourages Alex from working so she can instead focus on childcare and taking care of the household. • Alex shares that in the past, Sean has taken her ATM card and told her that he'd handle the finances for the family. 	<p>Sean perpetuates very traditional gender roles in encouraging Alex to be a stay at home mother while he's the "breadwinner" for the family, but this limits her access to employment and financial independence. He also uses the fact that he houses and feeds her and Maddy against her.</p>



BEHAVIOR	MAID EXAMPLE	DISCUSSION
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sean discouraged Alex from getting a job and returned Alex’s car. • Sean refused to help Alex load minutes onto her cell phone, suggesting that they could just share a phone. 	<p>Abusive partners want to limit their victims’ contact with the outside world, including access to loved ones and a support system. When Sean refuses to help Alex pay for a phone line and gets rid of Alex’s car, it forces Alex to stay at home 24/7 and not leave the trailer she shares with her abusive partner.</p> <p>Sharing a phone line is a common tactic that abusive partners use to monitor who their partner is contacting and when they have access to reaching other people.</p>
Blaming, Minimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sean blames his behavior on his drug and alcohol abuse. • When Alex finds out that she is pregnant with Maddy, Sean tells her that she’s ruining his life, and that he would never forgive her. • Hank, despite trying to make amends with Alex, often blamed his past behavior on his alcoholism. Hank also turned a blind eye and didn’t intervene when he witnessed Sean abusing Alex. 	<p>Contrary to popular belief, drugs and alcohol do NOT cause domestic violence. Domestic violence is a choice that an individual makes to gain complete power and control over someone else—abusive partners are aware of their actions.</p>



BEHAVIOR	MAID EXAMPLE	DISCUSSION
Emotional abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sean is disrespectful to Alex, and doesn't treat her as an equal partner. • Alex shares that when she told Sean that she was pregnant, he threw all of her stuff in the yard and called her a "whore." • We see several manipulative actions from him, such as telling Alex that he's getting sober just for her, and is nice and caring to friends and family, making it even more difficult for others to accept that he could be abusive towards Alex. • Sean also suggests that Alex is "crazy" at times, knowing that she is sensitive to her mother's mental illness. 	<p>Emotional abuse is prevalent but rarely discussed, as many imagine abuse to be purely physical. Initially, Alex insists she isn't abused, that she's not "Abused for real...Beaten up, hurt," but comes to learn from her time at the domestic violence shelter that emotional abuse is extremely harmful, even if it's not apparent to others that you've been hurt.</p> <p>When Sean implies that Alex is the "crazy" one in the relationship, he is gaslighting her into reconsidering her reality and she begins to believe that the reason she is in her situation is because she is "stupid."</p> <p>Many survivors also report that their abusers have great personalities in public but act completely different and negative towards their victims in private. This is seen whenever Sean appears personable with friends and calm in court but whenever he is alone with Alex, viewers see his darker side.</p>

To learn more about domestic violence, visit hscadv.org.



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