

# BLACK WOMEN & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The statistics on U.S. women and violence are staggering. On average, one in three women are victims of intimate partner violence and one in five women are survivors of sexual assault. These numbers underscore the epidemic of sexual violence in the U.S., which disproportionately impact women of color, immigrant women, LGBTQIA+ women, and disabled women.

For African American women, sexual assault and violence are incredibly pervasive issues that routinely go unreported and under-addressed. **Over eighteen percent of African American women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime.** And, unfortunately, this percentage only accounts for the number of women who report their abuse. In order to address the issue of sexual violence against Black women, it is imperative that we look at the unique barriers faced by African American women on a political, economic, and cultural level.

## Social Stigmas & Sexual Violence

When addressing sexual violence faced by Black women, it is important to understand the unfair stereotypes and destructive misrepresentations of Black women that perpetuate crimes against women of color. Hypersexualized depictions of women of color, particularly Black women, have **functioned since the early 1400s and have manifested themselves through our political and cultural landscape for centuries.** The myth that Black women were vessels for sexual desire were used to justify enslavement, rape, forced reproduction, and other forms of sexual coercion in the early onset of Western colonization. The function of this process was crafted to further dehumanize women of color, making it “culturally acceptable” for European imperialist to abuse Black women and other women of color such as American Indian women.



This same rhetoric continued after the abolishment of American slavery through a system of cultural imperialism such as Jim Crow that continued to uplift the myth that Black women--and women of color overall--were sexual objects and not fully fleshed human beings. Throughout the 20th century, hoards of Black women were sexually abused and assaulted--by men of all races--with the perpetrators of these crimes going largely unpunished. One of these stories, recently unearthed through the work of Black historians and brought to light by prominent Black activists and writers, is that of Recy Taylor. In 1944, Recy Taylor was abducted by six white men while walking home from church and raped at gunpoint. Taylor's case was tried by an all white, all

male jury and dismissed within five minutes of deliberation despite physical evidence and multiple witnesses of her abduction. The story of Taylor is just one of thousands. Her story, however, identifies a trend that we continue to see today: sexual violence against Black women is often dismissed or ignored.

For African American women, sexual assault and violence often functions under the space of misogynoir, or discrimination and abuse based on both race and gender. Patriarchy is not simply about gender, it also reaffirms hegemonic racial structures, thereby disadvantaging women of color on multiple levels. In 2016, researcher Akeia Benard **aptly defined** the different ways race and sexuality intertwine when discussing sexual violence and sexual liberation,

*“We live in a culture where to an extent, White women—especially white middle-class women—are able to define, “play with,” and explore their sexuality in ways women of color are not (e.g., the “Slutwalk” movement) and Black women are defined by their sexuality and as their sexuality.”*

The results of this unfortunate stereotyping of Black women as hypersexualized beings has had disastrous consequences for their safety. For example, statistics show that Black women who report crimes of sexual assault or violence are less likely to be believed than their white counterparts. Even more egregious, **recent study** found that men found guilty of raping Black women receive shorter sentences than men found guilty of raping White women.

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## Black Women and Reporting Crimes of Sexual Violence



Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement

As we have addressed, sexual violence perpetrated against Black women is often ignored or dismissed due to untrue biases regarding their sexuality. However this myth and other very real issues have influenced the number of Black women who report sexual assault. **For every 15 Black women who are raped, only one reports her assault.** In recent years, there has been an outcry on many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) on the system of silence that has existed around rape for many of their female students.

**For women of color, reporting crimes of sexual assault are rooted in relationships to institutions of power and commitments to community.**

Similar to other communities of color such as Latinx and American Indian women, African American women are less likely to seek out help from law officials and law enforcement. The relationship between the African American community and law enforcement is fraught with abuse, mistrust, and neglect. Women of color do not live in a silo solely defined by gender, therefore issues of mass incarceration, police brutality, unfair drug policies, and the over-policing of minority neighborhoods affect them in the same way they affect men of color. Law enforcement and the legal system are not seen as viable avenues of recourse, as these systems continue to oppress and discriminate against people of color. What this creates however, is a severe lack of distrust in the legal system to protect Black women.

When addressing issues of community, Black women are often placed in an unfair position being forced to reinforce notions of solidarity within their own racial group...even when their perpetrators are also men of color. A national study found that ninety-one percent of Black women are sexually assaulted by Black men and seventy-five percent of those attacks are by men they know--family members, friends, trusted advisors, or neighbors. In these instances, Black women are faced with an impossible task, asked to "betray" a member of their own community to report their assault. Although this betrayal is imagined, the idea of collective unification and solidarity is one that has been reinforced to Black women for decades.

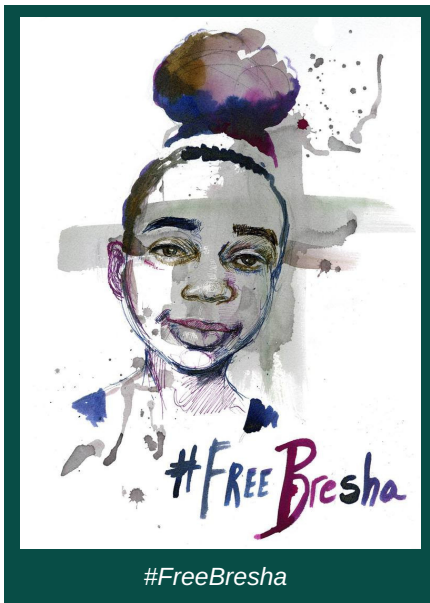
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## Invisible Black Women: The Sex Abuse to Prison Pipeline

One of the most prevailing issues with sexual assault in the African American community are 1) the high frequency of sexual assault on young women of color and 2) the absence of adequate resources to deal with the sexual assault of young women of color. In 2012, Rights 4 Girls, a social justice reform organization released a report entitled "The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girl's Story." **Within this report, researchers found an intrinsic link between the incarceration of young women of color and sexual assault. For example, in a study done on the Oregon justice system, 67% of the young women were survivors of sexual abuse by the age of 13. This same trend held in South Carolina, with over 81% percent of girls reporting a history of sexual violence.**

**Numerous studies** have found that there is a lack of resources available for young girls in the juvenile justice system that address the physical and psychological scars of sexual assault. This is further exacerbated when acknowledging the unique cultural nuances of girls of color. What's more, Rights 4 Girls' study found that many of the young women who are in juvenile detention facilities are there because of behaviors or actions stemming from the untreated emotional ramifications of their abuse. This means that their prior abuse-related trauma is unaddressed and, worse still, leaves them vulnerable to further abuse. This system is referred to as the **Sex Abuse to Prison Pipeline**.

**The Sex Abuse to Prison Pipeline has a disproportionate effect on young girls of color from beginning to end.** For example, the Department of Education reports that black girls are disciplined six times as often as white girls. Disciplinary policies are subjectively doled out, with Black and Brown girls receiving harsher punishments for the same crimes. Moreover, counseling services and Title IX coordinators are a rarity in most schools, meaning that girls who are survivors of trauma are pushed out of school without insight into the reasons for their behavior. Victims of sexual abuse are often left with unresolved trauma, leading them to “act out” at school, and this can be disastrous for girls when combined with zero-tolerance policies. Girls may be suspended, expelled, or even arrested at school- all paths to involvement with the justice system.



The fundamental failures of this system for young girls of color has played itself out in the media in recent years. In late 2017, a campaign was established to **help 14-year old Bresha Meadows** initially charged with aggravated murder, Meadows was **sentenced to involuntary manslaughter** after she fatally shot her father who had been verbally and physically abusive to Bresha, her siblings, and her mother since her infancy. Bresha had run away from home on multiple occasions, only to be subsequently returned when law enforcement officials told her they could not help unless her mother filed a police report.

## **Black Women, Sexual Assault, and Resources**

One of the trends to acknowledge when looking at a number of concerns for Black women in addressing sexual abuse is a fundamental lack of resources. On institutional, economic, and personal levels, Black women have less access to the resources needed to help combat sexual assault. **African American women are 2.5 times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence from a partner or spouse.** However, they are just as likely to lack access to mental health and physical services. Organizations that deal with the specific needs of Black women are few and far between. Those that do exist are often underfunded or do not have the capacity to address the vast number of women who need their services.

Another issue is the major wealth disparity that exists for Black women. The #MeToo movement has become a watershed moment for women to discuss sexual assault and violence in the workplace, however the industries where these issues are most rampant are largely dominated by low-paid, low-wage women of color. For example, a **workplace harassment study** of the fast food industry found that Black and Latina women experienced sexual harassment at a higher rate than their White female counterparts. Other industries such as **domestic labor, farm workers and health-care workers** are heavily dominated by women of color, and also have high reports of harassment towards female workers. In all, women of color **are more likely to be the breadwinners or sole earners in their household.** Unfortunately, women of color are also **making 63 cents to every dollar earned by White men.**

# WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Addressing sexual violence for African American women is a critical part of addressing systems of sexism and racism within our society. Here are a few things that you can do to help:

## ***Support Organizations That Focus on Black Women.***

As we expressed earlier, there are a number of organizations that specifically focus on sexual violence and harassment in the Black community, however many of these organizations are not well-known or are underfunded. Below are a few organizations you support:

- ***Black Women's Blueprint***
- ***Rights 4 Girls***
- ***Sister Love***
- ***Incite National***
- ***YWCA***
- ***A Long Walk Home***
- ***Trans Women of Color Collective\****

*\* please note, trans women of color face both sexual and physical violence at an alarmingly high rate.*

## ***Educate Yourself.***

We can't help unless we understand. One of the most important things any activist can do is educate themselves on issues of sexual violence for Black women past, present, and future.

Here are a few to begin with:

- ***Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology by Incite***
- ***Sister Outsider by Audre Lorde***
- ***Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color by Andrea Ritchie***
- ***But Some Of Us Are Brave: A Collection***
- ***Crunk Feminist Collection by Brittney Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn***
- ***At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance by Danielle McGuire***
- ***Unbossed and Unbought by Shirley Chisholm***
- ***Women, Race, and Class by Angela Y. Davis***
- ***Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs***

## ***Start At The Beginning.***

One of the biggest spaces advocates can help is in the schools. Counseling services and Title IX coordinators for most districts are absent or over capacity. Lobby at school districts in your community (or neighboring communities) for a Title IX coordinator who is trained in services for survivors of sexual trauma. Here's a **little push to get you started.**

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