

Consent, Slavery, and Sexual Violence in the Black Community

A Quick Fact Sheet by Kyra Jones

Definitions

- *Sexual Assault* - Sexual assault is a crime of power and control. The term sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim. Some forms of sexual assault include: Penetration of the victim's body (also known as rape), attempted rape, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex or penetrating the perpetrator's body, fondling or unwanted sexual touching. (RAINN)
- *Consent* - When each person involved in a sexual act have agreed to participate. It is clear, unambiguous, and given freely. Consent cannot be given under pressure, force, or threat of force. At any point, consent can be taken away and any person can decide that they want to stop sexual activity. Consent must be given every time you engage in sexual activity, even if you have had sex with that person before. Consent must also be given for each separate sexual act. Consent to one act does not mean consent to everything. **In the case of slavery, consent CANNOT be present between slaves and their masters due to power dynamics, the use of force/threat of force, and the fact that slaves did not have human or legal rights. All sex with slaves is rape.**
- *Rape Culture* - A culture in which rape and sexual assault are normalized within a society. Sexual violence is condoned, excused, and even encouraged by dominating attitudes, day-to-day-practices, and popular media. Women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, and other marginalized groups are dehumanized by rape culture and thus blamed for the sexual violence perpetrated against them. Men are held to rigid standards of masculinity that often encourage rape. Rape culture is rooted in patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. One affect of rape culture is the harmful stereotypes of black women that are used to justify sexual violence against them, including the myth that enslaved black women seduced their white slave owners.

Sexual Violence During Slavery

- The normalization of discrimination and violence toward black women, like all violence toward African Americans, started with the Atlantic slave trade.
- According to bell hooks, even before African slaves hit American soil, female slaves were raped on slave ships as a form of torture. They were often impregnated and sometimes forced to kill their children and throw them off-board.
- Rape was used as a tactic to dehumanize slave women and repress their awareness of free people and their sense of control over their own bodies. Since black women worked more closely with white families than black men, it was more important that they were thoroughly terrorized so that they would be passive enough to bend to every will of the master, mistress and children.
- In addition, the rape of slaves was a cheap way of creating a larger workforce for plantation owners, since any children who resulted from the rape would be born into slavery.

- As a survival tactic, some black women began “romantic” relationships with their slaveowners, feigning affection for their rapists in order to avoid more forceful, physically violent rape, whippings or other punishments. Slave masters who developed feelings for the women they were assaulting often gave those slaves better treatment. For many victims of slave rape who maintained a relationship with their slaveowners, the ultimate hope was that they or any children that may have resulted from the rapes may be freed at some point. **Evidence of a seemingly romantic relationship between a slave and their owner does not delegitimize the fact that those slaves were raped.**
- Slavery was also where the origin of the Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes, in which black women were framed as being impossible to rape, either because they wanted were hypersexual and wanted sex all the time, or because they were a matriarchal figure that no one would want to have sex with. This dichotomous view of black female sexuality is still culturally prevalent today. It affects how black women are portrayed in the media and how they are perceived when they report sexual violence.

The After-Effects of Slavery: Sexual Violence in the Antebellum Period and Beyond

- Even after slavery was abolished, the dehumanization of black women through sexual assaulted continued. Though most historical discourses focus on violence against black men, particularly through lynching, black women were frequently raped by white men as a form of white domination.
- While black men were lynched or given the death penalty for accusations of raping white women, white men had impunity for raping black women and were almost never punished by law for their crimes.
- However, some women did fight back against the horrific crimes perpetrated against them by mobilizing for their right to speak out in court against their attackers. One of the best examples of this was the case of Recy Taylor. In 1944, while returning from church in Abbeville, Alabama, 24-year old Taylor was brutally raped by six white men at gun point. After they raped her, they blindfolded her and dropped her in the middle of town. Outraged, an anti-rape movement called The Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor was formed and led by Rosa Parks. The committee along with other civil rights groups demanded that the governor order an immediate investigation in Recy’s case, which eventually led to two grand jury trials, which was unheard of in such cases. Though both juries failed to indict the men who raped her, Recy’s testimony and the campaign were still incredibly important, and Recy became a symbol of hope for black rape victims.
- Despite its prevalence, stories of rape and sexual violence against women played little to no role in the larger civil rights movement. The history of the movement is characterized by acts of violence against black men, such as Emmitt Till. Concerns specific to black women were often pushed to the side. This is why even though Rosa Parks was an anti-rape activist for almost a decade before she didn’t get out of her seat on the bus, this aspect of her activism is not prevalent in historical discourses.
- Today, black women still have a higher incidence of rape and sexual violence compared to women of other races. Though it is hard to determine the exact rate due to differences in definition and sampling methods, as well as the fact that self-report data are underreported,

the estimate is that 30-60% black women have been raped, as opposed to 25% of the general population of women. (RAINN)

- Theatre and other media that perpetuate stereotypes and misinformation about sexual violence only contributes to these rates and the stigma that black survivors face when they come forward about their experiences.

Sources and Additional Reading

Scholarly Articles

- *Rape among African American Women: Sexual, Psychological and Social Correlates Predisposing Survivors to risk of STD/HIV* - Wingwood & DiClemente
- *Agreement on Reporting of Physical, Psychological, and Sexual Violence Among White, Black, and Hispanic Couples in the United States* - Caerano et al
- *“It was Like All of Us Had Been Raped”: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle* - McGuire
- *Examining Patterns of Vulnerability to Domestic Violence Among African American Women* - Wyatt, Axelrod, et al.
- *“They Didn’t Treat Me Good”: African American Rape Victims and Chicago Courtroom Strategies during the 1950s* - Dawn Rae Flood

Books

- *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation* by Beth E. Richie
- *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Y. Davis
- *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence
- *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* by Danielle L. McGuire.

Documentary Films

- *No! The Rape Documentary* - dir. Aishah Shahidah Simmons
- *The Rape of Recy Taylor* - dir. Nancy Buirski

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