Sexual Violence & Women of Color: A Fact Sheet

Historical perspective

Sexual violence against women of color has deep roots in U.S. history. The first White colonists to arrive in the Americas, considered Native Americans to be dirty and inhuman, and the rape of Native women was considered morally justified. During slavery, Black women were separated or isolated from their families, and their cultural and religious identities and customs were stripped. Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse/torture were frequently inflicted on slaves. The worth of enslaved Black women was often tied to their ability to produce offspring, which resulted in many women being raped and forced to bear children. For hundreds of years, the rape of enslaved Black women by white men and by enslaved Black men was common and legal. After slavery ended, violence (including sexual violence) was used to keep African-Americans from gaining legal or civil rights. For example, many Black women were raped by gangs of white men during the Jim Crow era as a way to instill fear and terror into the Black community. Further, many immigrant women faced discriminatory employment practices that forced them into prostitution and other manipulative practices, including human trafficking, in order to supplement their income or survive.

Modern-day perspective

Academic research and victimization surveys reveal that sexual violence is disproportionately targeted against women of color today, and that the violence they suffer is too often ignored. While this is a modern-day reality, it is based on historical sexism and racism that persists. For example, in Ohio, efforts to address the rape kit backlog have revealed systemic injustice regarding the rapes of Black women and girls over the years. Those injustices were most likely due to adherence to racial and gender-based stereotypes and rape myths which negatively impact women of color. The perceived promiscuity of Black and Hispanic women, and the perceived submissiveness of Native American and Asian-American women are among many stereotypes that devalue women of color and condone sexual violence committed against them. Women of color are often blamed for the sexual violence they suffer, and institutionalized racism and sexism among systems that respond to sexual violence discourage survivors of color from reporting their assaults and receiving the supportive services they deserve.

> **Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Violence by Race/Ethnicity-U.S. Women:**
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> **Rape:**
> Multiracial women: 33.5% (452,000 women)
> Native women: 26.9% (234,000 women)
> Black women: 22.0% (3.1 million women)
> Hispanic women: 14.6% (2.2 million women)
> White women: 18.8% (15.2 million women)
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> **Other sexual violence:**
> Multiracial women: 58.0% (786,000 women)
> Native women: 49.0% (424,000 women)
> Black women: 41.0% (5.9 million women)
> Hispanic women: 36.1% (5.4 million women)
> Asian or Pacific Islander women: 29.5%
>   (1.6 million women)*
> White women: 47.6% (38.6 million women)
> *Estimate was not reported for lifetime prevalence of rape among Asian or Pacific Islander women*
>
> Source: *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2010 Summary Report* (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention)

Women of color are most likely to be raped by someone from within their own race, and some individuals of color believe or promote stereotypes that negatively impact women of color who are sexually victimized. This is due in part to the internalization of racism and sexism. Many people of color fear challenging internalized racism or sexism for fear of being ostracized as betraying their own communities and/or contributing to racism practiced by white individuals and systems.

Supporting survivors who are women of color

There are many factors that individual service providers, agencies, and systems must consider when providing competent services to women of color who are sexually victimized. Below are just a few:

- **Diversity within communities of color**: Just as there are differences between and within white communities, so too are there differences between and within communities of color. For example, not all Black women have the same beliefs, expectations or experiences by virtue of their race alone.
- **How sexual violence is understood**: How rape and other forms of sexual violence are understood can vary from one culture and community to the next, and may or may not coincide with legal definitions.
- **Cultural response to sexual violence**: Different cultures, communities, and individuals have different expectations and methods of responding to sexual violence. For example, some cultures view the rape of a woman to bring great shame to her family and surrounding community. Others are expected to keep sexual violence private or within the family/community.
- **Influences of family, community, and faith**: Any survivor's family, social, and faith community impact her recovery process, but this is especially true for survivors of color. These various forms of community can have a positive and/or negative impact on the survivor.
- **Legal status**: Some immigrant women of color are targeted for sexual violence based on their legal status and may fear reporting or seeking services. For example, an undocumented survivor may be reluctant to come forward for fear of being deported and may not trust claims of confidentiality.
- **Distrust of white systems**: The majority of advocates, healthcare professionals, criminal justice officials, and mental health providers are white, and the larger systems in which these individuals operate are dominated by historically white-defined laws, policies, and practices. Women of color who are sexually victimized have historically been ignored, devalued, or delegitimized by these systems.
- **Trauma and adverse economic and health outcomes**: There is significant historical trauma in the lives and histories of women of color, who are also more likely to suffer multiple traumas and adverse economic and health issues than white women. All of these factors impact the individual survivor's experience of, and response to, an individual incident of sexual violence.
- **Barriers to access**: Women of color often face numerous barriers to access which prevent or discourage them from reporting sexual violence or receiving supportive services. Such barriers include language access issues, lack of diversity among victim services staff, transportation difficulties, and lack of service structures that honor their cultural identities, needs, beliefs, and styles of expression.
- **Resilience**: Women of color – as a whole, culturally, and individually – possess resilience from surviving historical trauma to managing present-day institutionalized racism, and sexism. Advocacy and support services should acknowledge how women of color thrive in spite of their harsh realities and incorporate this resilience into service structures.

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Note: This fact sheet is intended to be an overview and not a comprehensive resource on the issue of sexual violence against women of color. Please see the next page for a list of additional resources on this topic.

References, Resources & Additional Reading

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