



From #MeToo to #BlaseyFord to #SurvivingRKelly: Connecting Rape Crisis Centers to Black Survivors in this Moment

Within the sexual violence movement, there are moments in time that bring sexual violence and its survivors to the forefront. In 2018, we saw the popularization of the #MeToo movement. Started by Tarana Burke years prior to center the needs of Black girl survivors from low-wealth community, a tweet by a Hollywood actress pushed the phrase and pieces of the concept of making survivors not feel alone to the forefront of public consciousness. In that moment, groups of women felt empowered to share their own stories of victimization. Calls to rape crisis centers increased exponentially and those within those systems found themselves in a place where they were being asked to educate the larger community about sexual violence. We were being inundated with women who were now ready to address traumas that some had been masking for decades. It was a time for which no one was prepared, yet, we did the work. Later in 2018, Dr. Blasey-Ford picked up the mantle of addressing her own victimization, and many of us rallied around her as she faced one of the biggest fears survivors have---not being believed, and even moreso, being blamed for their own victimization. Again, we responded. We tweeted our support for Dr. Blasey-Ford. We normalized the fears of not being believed. We reminded survivors that our rape crisis centers were a place where they would be believed and supported. We again opened our doors, spoke out, and identified ways that those who love survivors could support them.

It is only January of 2019, and another watershed moment has happened. Lifetime Television recently aired the documentary series “Surviving R. Kelly” which brought us the stories of several women of color who reported that they had been sexually, physically, and emotionally victimized by “the Pied Piper of R & B”---with many reporting their victimization starting in adolescence. We listened as others interviewed admitted seeing the victimization, enabling it, covering it up, and at other times being co-conspirators in the sexual perpetration. We heard one of the speakers talk about “nobody cares, because they are black girls”. Yet, our response has not been as swift. We sit in this space of finally recognizing the intersectional nature of Black survivors, but we seem to not know where we should step in. How do we navigate this space of (1) admitting that society does have this hierarchy of victimization and we know that in it, black survivors are not given the same attention within systems or the media (2) knowing that the interplay of the black community not trusting systems coupled with the push to protect black men from such systems (even though they are the primary abusers of black girls/women) (3) admitting that our claims to culturally-informed care does not fully extend to really knowing how to handle items 1 and 2.

Yet, we must act. This is yet another moment where we have the opportunity to support survivors, and even more specifically, a segment of survivors who do not always speak up. A group of survivors whom we have had difficulty reaching. What does action look like?

1. Amplify the discussion on the victimization of black girls. In the #MeToo Moment and with Dr. Blaséy-Ford, media outlets came to us for comment. That may not be the case in the #SurvivingRKelly moment because the victims are “black girls nobody cares about.” Prove the survivors from the black community wrong. Develop your own press releases acknowledging some of the ways that those within the documentary stated that the abuse was able to continue---from issues of silence within the black community, valuing of black males over black girls, hierarchy of victimization, and failure of bystanders to intervene. Twitter did not stop after the #MeToo and #BlaseyFord hashtags. Consult Women of Color within your organizations to craft the language or at a minimum consult on it to avoid missteps that could further alienate black survivors
2. Do not limit your media outreach to mainstream media (although it is imperative that we require they acknowledge the victimization of black girls). Seek out media outlets within your community that focus on the black community and discuss resources available at your rape crisis center for those triggered by the documentary
3. Provide resource sheets to community organizations educating them on themes within the documentary and how they impact the disclosure and healing of black girls and women
4. Collaborate with and seek advice from organizations that specifically focus on survivors of color. Go in with an open mind and a readiness to be challenged vs. expecting to have your current practices affirmed. Organizations such as the National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault, Black Women’s Blueprint, and SASHA Center are a few of the organizations centering Survivors of Color.
5. Utilize resources that have been developed that are culturally-informed. Black Women’s Blueprint has a free toolkit addressing ways to process Surviving R. Kelly . https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/f0223e_a8a07bd525ef4ce0922f6b898be837c3.pdf

Explore the use of the SASHA Center’s Black Women’s Triangulation of Rape model to identify unique aspects and challenges of Black female survivors (www.sashacenter.org)

6. Do outreach to the Black community using the Surviving R Kelly documentary as a starting point for having a more in-depth conversation about sexual assault in the black community
7. Identify how you can support movements such as #MuteRKelly which seeks to hold him accountable (www.muterkelly.org)

We are at another moment in the movement of ending sexual violence. In this moment, we have the opportunity to bring awareness and support to survivors of sexual assault in the black community. We have to do the work to make sure that the black community does not just “Survive R Kelly”, but that sexual victimization within that community is addressed and black survivors feel supported---by us.