

Trying to Break A 'Culture of Silence' on Rape

Group Part of Movement Tailoring Recovery Efforts to Minority Women

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As Kathy Ferguson followed the story of rape allegations at Duke University, one fact struck her: not that the black woman hired to perform a striptease accused lacrosse players of assault or that the white men proclaimed their innocence.

Rather, it was that the woman had reported the alleged incident at all: Thirteen out of 14 black women who are sexually assaulted do not tell police, federal statistics show.

Ferguson, who leads Maryland's Women of Color Network, is part of a growing movement that tailors rape recovery efforts to minority women, who often receive less support in the aftermath of sexual violence.

"We're talking about a culture of silence," said Ferguson, 37, a founding member who lives in Prince George's County. "It's not only because of the fear and the embarrassment and shame that you find among all races. Black women historically have had to carry the burden of the community. You don't necessarily want to report because you don't want the community viewed negatively."

The reluctance to speak extends to law enforcement and to institutions. Seven percent of black women who are sexually assaulted report the crime to the police, according to the most recent crime data analyzed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, released in 2005.

The rate in the overall population is 42 percent, according to the bureau. Government-sponsored studies are limited and reveal only slivers of information. The only Justice Department-funded study to evaluate black women's experiences with sexual assault is to be finished this month at the University of Maryland.

Since 2000, the Women of Color Network has worked to support Maryland victims of sexual assault and to shape policy on the issue. Ferguson is the first paid coordinator of the network. And the network was funded for the first time, last year, through the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, a nonprofit organization for the state's 18 crisis centers.

To get the conversation going, Ferguson and the network's dozen or so volunteers staged a conference last month at Prince George's Community College in Largo. The turnout was about 150 counselors, sexual assault specialists and survivors from Prince George's, the District and neighboring states.

That day, the Duke case was on the front pages of newspapers again. Two members of the men's lacrosse team had been arrested and charged with raping a woman the team hired to do a striptease at an off-campus party. The woman, who is black, alleges that she was raped, sodomized and choked. Attorneys for the athletes, who are white, have said their clients are innocent.

Ferguson's conference, months in the planning, did not include a specific session on the Duke case. It came up informally as Ferguson reviewed the day with keynote speaker Carolyn West, a psychologist and author of "Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue."

In some ways, West said, the Duke case provides an opening into conversations that might not happen otherwise. She said it has encouraged people to talk about the background, including the history behind black women's reluctance to disclose assaults, dating to the era of slavery. An enslaved woman who had been raped rarely confided in anyone, West said, because no one could help her.

"There was that belief that black women were unrapable," West said. "Legally, it wasn't a crime to rape black women, literally for hundreds of years."

Raegen Lawrence, a rape survivor in Baltimore, discovered the Women of Color Network while searching online for a place to volunteer and immediately knew she had found the right fit.

"It needs to be talked about more, especially in the African American community," said Lawrence, 27, who says she was raped off campus by a classmate at Florida A&M University. "I've been going through this mostly on my own, and I mainly just want to speak out. I want others to know that it's okay."

The Washington Post typically does not identify sexual assault victims, but Lawrence allowed her name to be used.

Lawrence said she found no support after her rape in 1999 despite reporting it to the Tallahassee police. "It was kind of like no one cared, like this is no big deal," said Lawrence, a retail executive. "It was very strange."

A few weeks after the conference, she called Ferguson to volunteer.

"I told her what we're about," Ferguson said, recalling the conversation. "We want women of color to take up the mantle. We don't want to stay where it's a culture of silence."

The Maryland coalition, from which the network receives money, filed a joint grant application with the University of Maryland to secure funds for the soon-to-be-completed study of rape survivors in Maryland. It will report on black women and their experiences with, among other things, calls to hotlines, counseling and other rape recovery services, said Jennifer Pollitt-Hill, executive director of the coalition.

Hotlines are often the first place rapes are disclosed, she said. In 2004, 1,316 forcible rapes were reported to law enforcement agencies in Maryland. The same year, 12,604 calls were placed to the 18 hotlines, Pollitt-Hill said. People call the hotlines anonymously, so a breakdown of first-time calls vs. repeat calls is not available.

Preliminary findings of the University of Maryland study show that black women report less satisfaction than white women in their experience using a hotline at one of the Maryland crisis centers, Pollitt-Hill said. The final report will be out this summer.

Ferguson said the findings about hotline calls reflect a degree of wariness that may influence whether women continue to reach out for support. "From a historical perspective, there is the internalization that if you're a minority, you're not going to be treated as well," she said.

One night last month, after her conference, Ferguson called her mother and had the conversation she had been meaning to have since, well, forever. She finally asked about a 60-year-old secret her mom refers to occasionally. Giggling, speaking in shorthand, her mother tells the story the same way every time -- start to finish in a few seconds.

But Ferguson pressed.

"I basically told her how it came up, and we were talking about the culture of silence and women that don't share their stories and [how] children kind of pick up on that," Ferguson recalls telling her mother. "And so it went from there."

What followed was an hour-long conversation about a grocery delivery boy, a teenager who would come by when Ferguson's mother was 7 or 8 years old.

"For a while, he'd come over, and he'd sit next to her with a box on their legs, and he'd be fondling her," Ferguson said.

And the women talked about the laughter that always comes when her mother tells the short version on the story. "She didn't really have a reason," Ferguson said. "It was because it felt guilty and shameful, because she sort of knew it was wrong. But what could she do? Who could she tell?"

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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A May 30 Metro article incorrectly identified the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics as the source of a statistic on the percentage of black female rape victims who report the crime to police. The statistic was provided by the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault.