Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women: Risk, Resilience, and Response
Dr. Carolyn M. West

Award-winning author and Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington. With more than two decades of teaching experience, she writes, trains, consults, and lectures internationally on intimate partner violence and sexual assault.

• [www.DrCarolynWest.com](http://www.DrCarolynWest.com)
Contact Information

Dr. Carolyn West
University of Washington
Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences, Box 358436
1900 Commerce Street
Tacoma, WA 98402
253.692.5652
www.DrCarolynWest.com
carwest@uw.edu
Objectives
• Brief **historical overview** of sexual assault and how it shapes the contemporary experiences of Black women.
• Discuss the **characteristics of Black rape survivors** and the environments in which the assaults occur.
• Identify **risk factors** that make Black women vulnerable.
• Review **physical and health** consequences.
• Offer **culturally sensitive treatment**.
• Resources
1. Historical Overview
Why consider history?

“History would become all that men during the day, but nothing of what they did during the night”

--Barbara Omolade
Auction block

Stripped naked
Sold to highest bidder
Family’s divided
“Breeders” were valuable
Rape of enslaved women

According to historians, at least 58% of enslaved Black women between the ages of 15 and 30 had been sexually assaulted by White men.

The crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves...
The regulations of law, as to the white race, on the subject of sexual intercourse, do not and cannot, for obvious reasons, apply to slaves; their intercourse is promiscuous, and the violence of a female slave by a male slave would be a mere assault and battery.
—Mississippi Court (1859)
Medical experiments on enslave women

Dr. J. Marion Sims
Father of Gynecology”
Speculum, 1845
Fistula repair on enslaved women
Culture of Silence

“Slaves could either go silently to the grave or go to the grave for breaking the silence.”

“Although we don't often discuss it, we carry this legacy in our cultural DNA. For me, to think about rape culture is to think about enslaved African women who bore the brunt of this horror. It's a dimension that belongs in the modern conversation just as surely as alcohol and victim-blaming, slut-shaming and rape do.”

--Akiba Solomon

http://www.colorlines.com/articles/how-12-years-slave-exposes-early-rape-culture
How has this history influence Black women TODAY?

- Media influences
- Internalization of the Jezebel image
- Culture of silence/Political Gag Order
- Expectation of strength
- Racial loyalty
Contemporary Images/Jezebel

Have their roots in historical images and sexual stereotypes
2. BLACK RAPE SURVIVORS
National Studies

• In adulthood, **1 in 5** African American women had been raped at some point in their lifetime.

• Estimated **3.1 million** Black rape victims and **5.9 million** Black survivors of other forms of sexual violence.

*National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS, 2011)*
http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6308.pdf
Why consider racial differences?

*Similarities in the prevalence and traumatic aftermath of sexual assault conceal unique racial experiences.*
Challenges

• How do we talk about racial similarities without being “color blind?”

• How do we talk about racial differences without reinforcing stereotypes?
Diversity among Black Women

• Race/ethnicity
• Social Class
• Marital status
• Gender Identity
• Age
• Sexual Orientation
• Religious affiliation
Transgender/Gender Nonconforming Women

• Unsolved Black LGBT Murders: Where's the Outrage? (VIDEO)

What about immigrant Black women immigrants?

- How is rape similar and different from U.S. born Black women?
- It’s complex—depends on reasons for immigration, generational status, level of acculturation, history.
Other Vulnerable Black Women

• Black college women
• Low-income Black women
• HIV+ Black women
• Incarcerated Black women
• Black women in the military
• Black women with a history of child sexual abuse
• OTHERS?
Characteristics of Sexual Assault

- Primarily intra-racial (Black-on-Black)

- Primarily acquaintances, boyfriends, intimate partners

- Range of assaults: attempted/completed, forced oral sex, unwanted genital or breast fondling

- Other types of sexual violence?
Reproductive Coercion

When compared to other racial groups, Black women reported higher rates of reproductive coercion in the form of pregnancy coercion (25.9%), birth control sabotage (27%), and unintended pregnancy (49.9%)

Commercial Sexual Exploitation


• In 2010, African American teenagers made up 56.6 percent of the entire arrests for commercial sex or prostitution.
3. RISK FACTORS
Risk Factors...

• Childhood Sexual Abuse
• Poverty
• Incarceration
• Drugs and Alcohol Use/Addiction
• Any others....???
Risk Factors- Web of Trauma

- Child Sexual Abuse
- Rape
- Sexual Harassment
- Physical Abuse
- Psychological Abuse
- Community Violence
4. PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES
Health

Physical
• Bruises and black eyes
• Reproductive Health problems
• HPV and other STI’s
• Unspecified bodily aches and pains
• Others?

Mental
• PTSD
• Depression
• Nightmares
• Phobias
• Suicidal
• Fatigue
• Low Self Esteem
• Others?
Rape Exams

Black women are less likely than others to have genital injuries identified and treated after sexual assault exam.

Rape Exam

• rape victims with dark skin are less likely to have their physical injuries detected, treated and documented as evidence by the sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs) or other health care professionals who examine them.
Health References


5. CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TREATMENT
“Black women were and continue to be sorely in need of an anti-rape movement.”

— Angela Davis
Barriers to Disclosure

• Inadequate sexuality socialization
• Rape myth acceptance
• Secondary victimization
• Racist images
• Cultural mandate to protect black men
Barriers to Disclosure

• Culture of Silence
• Expectation of Strength
• Internalized Images of Black Women
• Racial Loyalty/Political Gag order
Racial loyalty

I felt responsible for upholding the image of the strong black man for our young son, and for the white world with whom I had contact... I didn’t want to confirm the white belief that all black men rape. Better not talk about it... So I’d kept silent about what happened to me.

Expectation of Strength

*In a lot of cases Black women are accustomed to hard times. The attitude is Just endure this one*

---Dottie

Internalization of Stereotypes

• Black college women who endorsed beliefs such as “people think Black women are sexually loose” reported more victim blaming, which was related to lower self-esteem.

Political Gag Order

- Self and community imposed silence to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes
What **NOT** to do...

- Victim blaming
- Ignoring her history
- Making her invisible-Race, Size, Age, etc.
- Negating her experience
- Assuming she is always angry
- Not fostering self-determination
- Ignoring environmental factors
Culturally Sensitive Techniques

- Story Telling
- Humor, Irony, Satire
- Prayer, Meditation, Quiet Time
- Music, Dance, Art
- Cousins and Dozens
- Writing, Journaling
- Food, Gardening, Sustainability
- Hula Hooping, Biking, Running
- Ancestor Reverence
- Crystals, Water, African Centered Exercise
- Talking Hair, Healing, and Hope
- Accountability
- Urban Legends
6. RESOURCES
Activities
Brainstorm ways to discuss rape and race in high profile cases


Watch and Discuss

• Watch the Russell Simmons Harriet Tubman Sex Tape.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78OvnOmZvTg

• Discuss with your organization. For ideas see:
  http://msmagazine.com/blog/2013/08/17/the-rape-of-harriet-tubman/
Watch and Discuss- Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

- Girls Educational & Mentoring Services (GEMS)  
  (212) 926-8089

- See Study guide:  
  [http://issuu.com/gems/docs/veryyounggirls_documentary_campusguide](http://issuu.com/gems/docs/veryyounggirls_documentary_campusguide)
Watch and Discuss Legacy of Slave
Activism

• Jada - who believes she was raped at the party - bravely gave an interview with TV station KHOU, in which she showed her face but didn't give her last name. She also invented a new hashtag, #iamjada, and posted a photo of herself in a defiant pose.

• http://jadapose.com/
Activism References


Books
I WILL SURVIVE

The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse

Lori S. Robinson

Foreword by Julia A. Boyd

“A book of such intelligent humanity its shocks strengthen us, and its terrors enlighten us... Demand reading.”

—Toni Morrison

“This powerful book is scientifically accurate, culturally relevant and personally passionate. It is, in the final analysis, a book about healing.”

—Dr. David Satcher, Former Surgeon General

Surviving the Silence

black women’s stories of rape

Charlotte Pierce-Baker
NO SECRETS
NO LIES
How Black Families
Can Heal from
Sexual Abuse

“Robin Stone makes a major contribution to the well-being of black children and families. This important book should be widely read and discussed.”
—Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, and Director of the Medical Center, Judge Baker Children’s Center, Boston

ROBIN D. STONE
Foreword by Joycelyn Elders, M.D.
Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women

Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson

“Black women were and continue to be sorely in need of an antirape movement.”

--Dr. Angela Davis

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 13.6% (42 million) of the population self-identified as Black or African American. (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoefel, & Drewery, 2011). African Americans reported substantial rates of criminal victimization, including domestic violence, assault, and robbery (Truman & Plancy, 2012). Furthermore, Black women’s sexual victimization has occurred in a unique sociohistorical context. Accordingly, in the first section we will provide a historical overview. Next, we will discuss the characteristics of Black rape survivors and the environment in which their assaults occurred. In addition, we will identify risk factors that elevate Black women’s vulnerability to rape and review the physical and mental health problems that are associated with their victimization. To conclude, we will offer culturally sensitive techniques that can be used by professionals and highlight the resilience of African American survivors.
Website

http://www.blacksurvivors.org/home.html
"...Aishah Shahidah Simmons, producer, writer, and director of NO! The Rape Documentary, boldly confronts the scourge of racial, gender, and sexual oppression, and its violent manifestations.

See Study Guide:
http://notherapedocumentary.org/sexual-assault-documentary-study-guide
Organizations
To promote and increase healing for survivors of sexual assault by using alternative/non-traditional techniques for women of color communities with a special emphasis on African American women, thereby eradicating the fear, shame, and guilt as well as any barriers associated with being sexually assaulted through peer educational support groups and prevention strategies.
SASHA Center’s Work

• 1-888-865-7055
• Our Mission Statement:
  • Our mission at the SASHA Center is to increase awareness, provide resources and educate the public about sexual assault, provide culturally specific peer educational support groups to self identified survivors of rape and to increase justice and visibility for survivors in Southeast Michigan.
Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault (SCESA) is a Women of Color-led nonprofit dedicated to working with our communities to create a just society in which Women of Color are able to live healthy lives free of violence.
• http://www.blackwomensblueprint.org/our-work/

• We work to end rape/sexual assault in Black communities and on Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campuses. Our Black Women’s Truth Commission on Sexual Violence combines civil and human rights research using a critical participatory action model, engages in documentation, community organizing and aggressive public education to prevent sexual assault on Black women and girls. Teach-ins utilizing film, music, dance, theater and other art-making endeavors engage men and women in critical conversations around Black sexual politics as well as the systemic dimensions of violence against women.
Conference

The Beyond Slavery conference focused on providing a forum for leading intellectuals, activists, and the public to discuss overcoming slavery's ongoing impact on sexuality.

http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/conferences/beyond-slavery/index.html
Webinar
• Ending Violence Against Black Women: The Movement to Combat Sexual Assault in Intimate Partner Violence in Our Communities

#HerDreamDeferred
A WEEK-LONG ONLINE SERIES DEDICATED TO ELEVATING THE STATUS OF BLACK WOMEN
MARCH 30 – APRIL 3

http://www.aapf.org/herdreamdeferred