



The Collective Power of Black Women to Reshape the Narrative about Sexual Violence

Discussion Guide #1



EVENT SUMMARY

For generations, Black survivors, such as Harriet Jacobs, Recy Taylor, and Anita Hill, have courageously told their stories, often at high costs. While Black women and girls disproportionately experience sexual and gender violence, they *are least* likely to be believed and protected, and more likely to be blamed and face backlash for coming forward.

Despite the mounting pressure to stay silent and protect Black men and the culture, over the last several years, we've seen prominent examples of survivors telling their stories on their terms, from *Surviving R. Kelly* to *I May Destroy You* and *On The Record*. Together, these high-profile projects have carved out much-needed space for Black survivors to speak their truth, push back against dangerous stereotypes around Black female sexuality, examine the pervasiveness of rape culture in Black communities, and reshape the narrative about sexual violence.

But even with this progress, Black survivors still face an uphill battle. From Megan Thee Stallion to the women who came forward about being sexually assaulted by T.I. and Tiny Harris to the growing violence and murders of Black trans women and the death of Breonna Taylor by Louisville, Kentucky law enforcement, the painful truth is this clear: Black women still aren't safe.

If we are powerful enough to influence elections and save our democracy, why can't we be uplifted, supported, and believed? Looking to the future, how can our society shift the narrative and create a safer world for all of us?

During the first conversation on April 7, 2021, "The Collective Power of Black Women to Reshape the Narrative about Sexual Violence," the panelists dove deeply into these complexities from a historical, cultural, political, and social justice perspective. Monifa Bandele, Fatima Goss Graves, Salamishah Tillet, and Ashlee Marie Preston joined the first of a five-part call-to-action series to discuss the following topics:

- The collective power of Black women to reshape the narrative about sexual violence;
- How white supremacy and patriarchy have played a role in the mistreatment of Black survivors; and
- The importance of centering Black survivors' stories and the importance of creating space for healing and revealing on survivors' own terms.



African-American women, we are trained to value our community at the expense of ourselves, and so we attempt to protect the African-American community.”

— Anita Hill

DISCUSSION THEMES

Racial loyalty -- and the cultural pressure to value the people who harm us over ourselves -- has played a key role in silencing survivors, fostering rape culture in our communities, and reinforcing stereotypes that make it harder for Black survivors to come forward. This overarching premise led to a range of themes for deeper discussion, as laid out below.

Centering the Stories of Black Survivors

Historically, survivor justice has focused on white women through advocacy work and cultural representation, and with the assistance of the mainstream media (for example, the appropriation of Tarana Burke’s #metoo by white advocates).

Despite progress over the years, we still have barriers today. Many Black survivors do not report to law enforcement for fear of being disbelieved or because of an obligation to protect the community: [91% of Black women are sexually assaulted by Black men](#) and 75% of those attacks are by men they know --family members, friends, trusted advisors, or neighbors.

But Black women aren’t bystanders; rather, they are agents of change to this movement; and the contributions and sacrifices of Rosa Parks, Recy Taylor, and Anita Hill, among countless others, cannot *and* will not be erased from the history that Black survivors have made on our behalf. Black survivors' stories must be front and center.

Questions on Black Survivorhood:

- If you are a survivor, how would you have wanted someone to support you?
- What can you do to take action against sexual harrassment and sexual violence? Identify steps you can take to prevent sexual assault in your community and support survivors.

- Often, high-profile white men “get away” with abuses of power and sexual assault and Black men don’t. Does that interfere with your ability to hold Black abusers accountable?

Challenging Stereotypes About Black Female Sexuality

We have worked hard as a community to destroy the myth of “the Black male rapist” sexually assaulting white women, but we haven’t done the same work for Black women and girls around sexual stereotypes, stresses Salamishah Tillet, one of our event speakers.

Since slavery, stereotypes like the Jezebel have been placed on Black women to oversexualize and justify their enslavement. Over time, the community has internalized these tropes by adopting their own, such as the “fast-tailed girl,” which suggests that if an assault happens, it was because “Black women and their sexuality lured men to them.” These harmful beliefs run deep and make it hard for Black survivors to be heard and believed. We have to find a way to stop policing Black women and girls' sexuality and embrace it; and when policing happens, we have to interrogate the reasons why and work together to condemn patriarchy and sexual violence.

Questions on Believability:

- How have you seen Black women or girls become oversexualized and adultified? Did you do or say something? Why or why not?
- When Black women come forward with allegations against Black men, do you question their stories and motives? If so, why?
- What do you think about the lack of representation of Black survivors in crime shows, documentaries, or mainstream media? How has this impacted how you show up for Black survivors?

Interrogating the “Strong Black Woman” Stereotype

Like the Jezebel or the “fast-tailed girl,” the “Strong Black Woman” is a stereotype rooted in white patriarchy and slavery ideology. It buys into the notion that Black women can’t be physically assaulted because they are indestructible, and fearless. We know this is far from reality, since Black women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. This stereotype also works to undermine and diminish Black survivors by telling them that their trauma is not painful, and if it was painful, that they shouldn’t feel it or just shrug it off.

Black women are not one-dimensional beings. They are multifaceted people who also feel and express pain, joy, sadness, fragility, and vulnerability. “So, when we're thinking about stories to untangle and replace with new ones, we have to tackle the story that Black women are superheroes as well,” said Fatima Goss Graves during the conversation.

Questions on Stereotypes:

- How can you best support Black survivors on their journey to healing?
- How do we expand the conversation about Black survivors' experiences beyond trauma? And how do we center healing, joy, and perseverance?

Excluding Black Trans Women from the Conversation

For too long and too often, Black trans women have been pushed away from conversations about womanhood, the Black community, and survivor justice -- but we can't afford to exclude them anymore. In fact, [53% of Black transgender people](#) have been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. This is especially true for Black transgender women, who [comprise the vast majority of victims](#) of fatal violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people as they face the daily injustices of racism, sexism, and transphobia.

The reason we are silent, panelist Ashlee Marie Preston explained, is due in part to transphobia and the dangerous misconception that Black trans women are deceptive and, therefore, deserve to be assaulted, and/or killed. However, Black trans women are our sisters, who deserve to be uplifted, supported, and have their stories centered. Just as Black trans women show up for Black cis women and Black people within the Black Lives Matter movement, the community must reject transphobia by recognizing and respecting the [contributions and lives of Black trans women](#).

Questions on Black Trans Women:

- If you are cisgender Black woman, how can you check your own biases (i.e. hypersexualization, etc.) against Black trans women? When have you shown up/not shown up for Black trans women?
- How does misogyny, misogynoir, and trans misogynoir impact how Black survivors' experiences are amplified and believed?

Disrupting Rape Culture in the Black Community

Rape culture is pervasive and is embedded in Black communities. It's everywhere, from social media, to classrooms, churches, subways, streets, and even at kitchen tables. In order to push back, we have to recognize the nefarious ways rape culture seeps in our lives and act to disrupt it. And we must listen to Black survivors and empathize with their experiences.

It is also important to recognize that people process traumatic events and deal with the aftermath in different ways, Preston said. Do not expect a person to react to trauma in any specific way, but do be patient with them. The fact that they're sharing their story is a sacred privilege. Tillet expressed how it is also important to trust survivors when they share their story and help them find resources. These acts add up and can have a huge impact on a survivor's journey toward healing. Together, we can shift the way we talk about Black survivors and rape culture in our communities and build a future that is free of gender and sexual violence.

Questions on Rape Culture and Power:

- How would you describe rape culture? Where do you see this showing up?
- What are the responsibilities of people who hold power?
- When it comes to sexual assault, has there been a time when you chose not to disclose or withheld personal information for the sake of protecting someone or your community?
- Have you ever pressured someone to remain silent? Or have you been pressured against coming forward?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

To move from a culture that amplifies the harm of Black women and survivors toward liberation, it is important to have a full understanding of the terms used during this discussion.

- **Anti-Blackness**: The specific kind of racial prejudice directed towards Black people. The concept of anti-blackness pushes back against the idea that all ethnic minorities have the same lived experiences and can be shoved under a singular umbrella.
- **Cisgender**: People who are assigned female at birth identify as girls or women, and most people who are assigned male at birth identify as boys or men. These people are cisgender (or cis).
- **Jezebel**: The Jezebel stereotype portrays Black women as sexually promiscuous. The stereotype leads to a societal belief that Black women need various forms of social control, including restricted access to reproductive care. Historically, the stereotype helped justify a wide range of abuses against Black bodies, including rape and lynching. The stereotype lives on in modern form in hip hop caricatures of Black women as the “hoe” or “gold digger.”
- **Misogynoir**: Misogynoir combines “misogyny” and “noir” to describe the anti-Black sexism and misogyny that Black women face on a daily basis.
- **Misogyny**: The hatred, dislike, or mistrust of women, manifested in various forms, such as physical intimidation and abuse, sexual harassment and rape, social shunning and ostracism.
- **Rape Culture**: A set of deeply entrenched societal attitudes and beliefs that normalize sexual violence. It is demonstrated through media, language, and policy, promoting sexual objectification and coercion, lack of agency over one’s body, and dismissal of feminine-presenting or gender nonconforming individuals as not “fully human.” Rape culture is ubiquitous in representing violence as “sexy,” “alluring,” and “hot.” These ideas pervade everything from the magazines we read to the movies we watch, the music we love, the language we use to talk about sex, and the laws that govern bodies and behavior. Rape culture relies on other systems of oppression to perpetuate victim blaming and gender inequity, including hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy.
- **Survivor**: A survivor has been hurt, but is capable of healing. They’re someone who has been impacted by destructive or injurious, acute or chronic mental, emotional, or physical harm, derived from real or perceived threats or actions. Survivors can suffer from the effects of one or more traumas.

- [Transgender](#): An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms -- including *transgender* or *trans*. Use the descriptive term preferred by the person.
- [Transmisogynoir](#): The intersection of misogyny, transphobia, and anti-Blackness.
- [Transphobia](#): Transphobia is the fear, hatred, disbelief, or mistrust of people who are [transgender](#), thought to be transgender, or whose gender expression doesn't conform to traditional [gender roles](#). Transphobia can prevent transgender and gender non-conforming people from living full lives free from harm.
- [Trauma](#): Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event, series of events, or set of circumstances that can be experienced as emotionally or physically harmful and life threatening, with lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Trauma often overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes one's sense of self, and hinders one's ability to feel a full range of emotions.
- [White Supremacy](#): The belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races.

SELF-CARE TIPS AND RESOURCES

We, As Ourselves is a call-to-action to center, hear, and support the voices and experiences of Black survivors. We encourage you to learn what sexual violence is and understand the breadth of experiences that produce harm to Black survivors.

For Survivors: Notice if you are feeling triggered.

Know that it is normal to experience a mix of emotions and that you don't have to set expectations for how you may feel. These feelings could include aggression, despair, rage, shame, and more. Honor how you are feeling by taking a moment to breathe, pause, and figure out if you need to step away.

Have a practice you can turn to.

If you become activated, try stepping away and calming your thoughts by:

- **Meditating.** You can start with [this mediation](#) by Lauren Ash, founder of Black Girl in Om.

- Going on a walk. GirlTrek is an organization dedicated to building changemakers through walking. Their [Black History Bootcamp](#) is a good companion for a 30-minute walk.
- Working on art or crafts. No matter how big or small, complex or simple, working with your hands can calm the mind. You can start with a simple doodle on a sheet of paper.
- Journaling or writing down your thoughts. You can start with BEAM Community's [journal prompts for wellness](#).
- Turning to your community. Find a community of loved ones, supporters, friends, or a therapist who you can reach out to in those moments when you need to decompress.

Please visit the [resources](#) section of the We, As Ourselves website for specific ways to get help, tips to support your healing and that of others, and leading organizations to connect with in your community.

Keep in touch with our panelists' work:

- Salamishah Tillet
 - ◆ [In Search of The Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece](#)
- Ashlee Marie Preston
 - ◆ [Black Trans Women Have Always Been Integral in the Fight for Women's Rights](#)
 - ◆ [The Anatomy of Transmisogynoir](#)
- Fatima Goss Graves
 - ◆ [National Women's Law Center](#)
 - ◆ [TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund](#)

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About Us

We. As Ourselves

We, As Ourselves is a collaboration, powered by The 'me too' Movement, National Women's Law Center, and TIME'S UP Foundation to reshape the narrative around sexual violence and its impact on Black survivors.



'me too' Movement

['me too.' International](#) works to center survivors in the movement to end sexual violence through survivor and community healing programs, community organizing, narrative change, and resource building. As The 'me too.' Movement affirms empowerment through empathy and community-based action, the work is survivor-led and specific to the needs of different communities.



TIME'S UP Foundation

[TIME'S UP™ Foundation](#) insists upon safe, fair, and dignified work for all by changing culture, companies, and laws. We enable more people to seek justice through the TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund™. We pioneer innovative research driving toward solutions to address systemic inequality and injustice in the workplace through the TIME'S UP Impact Lab. And we reshape key industries from within so they serve as a model for all industries. The TIME'S UP Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.



National Women's Law Center

The [National Women's Law Center](#) fights for gender justice — in the courts, in public policy, and in our society — working across the issues that are central to the lives of women and girls. We use the law in all its forms to change culture and drive solutions to the gender inequity that shapes our society and to break down the barriers that harm all of us — especially those who face multiple forms of discrimination, including women of color, LGBTQ people, and low-income women and families. For more than 45 years, we have been on the leading edge of every major legal and policy victory for women.