



Godmothers of the Movement to End Sexual Violence Against Black Women and Girls

Discussion Guide #2



EVENT SUMMARY

In our first discussion, “The Collective Power of Black Women to Reshape the Narrative about Sexual Violence,” we briefly touched on the erasure of Black women’s contributions to sexual assault advocacy over generations. From Ida B. Wells to Recy Taylor to Rosa Parks, advocates were speaking out about the intersections of racial and sexual violence Black women were facing at the hands of white men.

These brave advocates and other survivors laid the foundation for future Black women to engage in this work, yet, the conversation about *intraracial* sexual violence in the Black community continued to be cloaked in silence. Thankfully, that began to change during the ‘60s and ‘70s as the Black feminist movement emerged, led by activists, scholars, and everyday Black women. Where the Black Liberation Movement mostly ignored gender issues, and the mostly white-led Women’s Liberation Movement ignored race and class, the Black feminism movement pushed for a more radical politic that addressed the social, structural, and political needs, and embraced all aspects of Black women’s identities. This included shedding light on the gender violence—both sexual and intimate partners—that Black women and girls experienced at the hands of Black men.

During this same time, we began seeing the topics of sexual assault and Black survivorhood woven into pop culture with books and plays like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, to name a few. While collectively, many of these women received backlash for speaking their truth and were accused of being “race traitors,” by refusing to sacrifice their autonomy to protect abusive Black men, they created much-needed spaces for Black survivors to not just be seen but heard for decades to come.

As we look at the present and towards the future, especially as the Black Lives Matter and Me Too Movements continue to collide, we continue to face many obstacles—both old and new. What can we take from this rich past of advocacy to strengthen our current movements and communities? How can we use these lessons, ideologies, and even past missteps to create a safer world that prioritizes Black women and girls as we fight for *all* Black lives and survivors?

During the second conversation on May 5, 2021, “Godmothers of the Movement to End Sexual Violence Against Black Women and Girls,” our panelists Paula J. Giddings, Karma Cottman, and Loretta J. Ross lean into and pay homage to the movement and its history by discussing the following:

- How the panelists were inspired by well-known and not-widely known Black women who came before them, and how those advocates and survivors shaped their current work and politics.
- The creation of “survivors” as a political identity to build power and disrupt stigma and shame, and what it meant for Black women given how they have been historically erased from the mostly white-led conversations.

- Why Black women's natural intersectionality and understanding of identity politics best positions us to lead survivor justice movements and ensures that no survivors will be left behind, especially Black women and girls.

DISCUSSION THEMES



If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."

—The Combahee River Collective Statement

Despite harmful sexual stereotypes, like the "Jezebel," which claim that Black women cannot be sexually assaulted, coupled with the erasure of Black survivors from mainstream conversations and pressure to stay silent for the sake of racial liberation, generations of Black advocates have shown that we can never reach a world free of sexual violence if Black women, girls, femmes, and trans women are not centered in this fight. This overarching premise led to a range of themes for deeper discussion, as outlined below.

Black Women Have Been Fighting For The 'Entitlements Of Our Bodies':

While for generations, the conversations around survivor justice, advocacy, and leadership have centered on white women; Black women have always been on the front lines combating sexual violence in our communities and our lives. As Paula J. Giddings, historian, professor, and author of *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, pointed out during the conversation, throughout her research on Black women over the years, a common thread surfaced: "Black women fight for the entitlement of their own bodies and in many different forms and many different ways."

From slavery to Reconstruction to Jim Crow to the '70s to the current day, despite obstacles and backlash, Black women have been carving out spaces to fight for their reproductive and sexual autonomy along with racial liberation and seeing themselves outside of their abuse and mistreatment. Most importantly, as Black survivor justice shifted from interracial sexual assault to intraracial, Giddings added that it was imperative to work to understand that "our own bodily integrity was essential to Black liberation, rather than anathema to it" and "to lose the shame around" speaking our truth.

Questions On Fighting For Our Autonomy:

- Who is a Black woman, sexual assault advocate—past or present—that inspires you? Why?
- What are ways you have fought for your own body entitlement? What did that look like? What was the response?

- Have you ever felt pressure to not speak up about how issues such as sexual assault and abortion rights impact Black women out of fear that it was oppositional to Black liberation?

Despite Staunch Activism, We're Still Fighting 'A Conspiracy Of Silence'

Even today, we witness the difficulty for Black survivors to come forward with claims of sexual assault and harassment, especially when the perpetrator is Black. Sadly, this conspiracy of silence and "pressure to close ranks" happens because externally, Black men have "targets on their backs" which is not new or rare. But as Loretta J. Ross shared during the early days of her work, she would tell Black men in the movement that we can't achieve liberation for all if half the army is fighting and brutalizing the other half?...That ain't called work."

While Ross also talked about how even though she and other Black women who prioritized sexual assault were "booed off stages," for their advocacy, she also recalled stories of Black men—including those who were incarcerated for sexual assault—who were committed to doing the work to keep our communities safe through education, restorative justice, and more.

Moving forward, it's clear that we need more Black men to serve as allies to break this culture of silence, move liberation forward, and foster a safer community.

Questions On Silencing Black Survivors

- Have you ever been silenced in places you once believed to be safe, for example, your home, kitchen table, church, classroom, etc.? If so, where and what were the circumstances?
- Looking at current news stories about Black survivors, how do social media, news outlets, and blogs continue to silence and discredit Black survivors?
- Have you silenced your own voice or silenced others to protect other Black men? How did that make you feel? Would you do it again?

Calling Out Vs. Calling In To End Sexual Violence

According to Ross, the "beloved black community has a lot of internalized white supremacy that causes us all to lead with our trauma." At times, this trauma can lead us to use cruelty to deal with others, especially those who inflict trauma on us. When it comes to accountability and justice, too often, it comes out of "anger, rage, and trauma." But we could yield better results if it came from love and respect, Ross stressed.

While calling out, and in some instances "cancelling," has been an effective way to hold powerful abusers accountable and carve spaces for survivors to speak on truths they buried, we can imagine other ways to create safety in our communities.

As we envision a future free of sexual violence, especially one that could include prison abolition, perhaps one way is to end this cycle with forgiveness, rehabilitation and communal healing.

Questions on Accountability

- Is the prison industrial complex the best route for Black survivors to receive justice and/or to rehabilitate perpetrators?
- Do you believe abolishing prisons can be effective when looking at sexual assault in the Black community? If not, what are your reservations?
- What systems of accountability already exist that make our communities safer? What additional systems would you like to create to make our communities safer?

Black Women and Girls' Health & Safety Is Linked To The Community's Health & Safety

As we continue to fight racial injustice on the grassroots level, Karma Cottman, Executive Director of Ujima Inc: The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, stresses that “we can’t ask Black women and girls to give up their safety, to give up their wellness, to give up their mental health in order for us to achieve this other form of justice. The importance of our wholeness is critical to us as a community, actually achieving wholeness and wellness.”

Essentially, to build Black women up, is to build up the entire community.

Cottman adds this is why it’s crucial to ensure sexual assault organizations that are ran by and center Black women—which are typically underfunded and whose advocates are often overworked—need to be properly funded, especially given how intersectional their work is. Black women should also lead conversations not just on the grassroots level, but in policy-making, on the national stage, research, and beyond.

These are crucial next steps in this fight.

Questions for Black Women and Girls' Health & Safety

- Have you received messages—albeit implicit or explicit—that Black women and girls are not worthy of safety and protection? Where? How did that make you feel?
- Have there ever been times when you have had to silo parts of your identity—your gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation—to fight for Black Liberation, the Feminist Movement, abortion rights, and/or LGBTQ rights?

As We Call Out Injustice, Don't Forget To Celebrate Joy

As Ross stressed, it feels that the future of liberation rests on Black women’s shoulders because of our natural intersectionality and ability to have a “360 view of the world.” With that, comes a great amount of insight and responsibility, rendering us at times the “strongest links on the chain.” But for Black women who do this work of calling out the injustices we see everyday—many of whom are also often survivors—it’s as important to celebrate the joy in and around our lives.

Cottman adds that it’s also important that we prioritize talking about “what healing looks like for our communities, along with the ways that our community is healthy and strong.”

Questions on Celebrating Joy

- How often do you feel as if the outcomes of others—your family, the community, the nation, the world—rests on your shoulders? How do you cope with that?
- With everything going on in the world and in our personal lives, do you find the time to carve out joy and celebrate your wins? What stands in the way of doing that?
- What are some of the biggest strengths you see in your communities?

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.

Black Feminism: The tradition of Black feminism stems from the condition of being both Black and a woman. It characterizes itself by a multi-dimensional approach to liberation but is resistant to claiming a specific definition. It focuses on the intersection of racism and sexism and how they create the social issues and inequalities Black women face.

Intersectionality: Coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics such as sexual orientation and gender identity “intersect” with one another and overlap. For Black women, their lived experiences—how they experience oppression and why they are more vulnerable to sexual and state violence—are linked to their intersectionality.

Intraracial sexual violence: Sexual assault that occurs between a survivor and a perpetrator who are of the same race. For Black women, like most women of other races (outside of Native and Indigenous women), gender violence is usually intraracial. One study (Krebs et al., 2011) found that 91.7% of Black college women were raped by Black men, while another (Long, Ullman, Starzynski, Long, & Mason, 2007) found often the perpetrator was someone known to the victim (e.g., 75% of Black women in a Chicago sample knew their rapist).

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 people, including rape and lynching. The stereotype lives on in modern form in hip hop caricatures of Black women as the “hoe” or “gold digger.”

Race traitor: A pejorative reference to a person who is perceived as supporting attitudes or positions thought to be against the supposed interests or well-being of that person's own race. It's not uncommon for Black women and survivors who have spoken out against intraracial

sexual assault to be accused of being a “race traitor” or doing “white people’s work for them” by wanting to hold their perpetrator, a Black man, accountable.

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.

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 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 meditation](#) 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 within your community.

Keep in touch with our panelists' work:

Paula J. Giddings

- [*When and where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*](#)
- [*Ida: A Sword Among Lions*](#)

Karma Cottman

- [#AlyssaMilano & Karma Cottman, Executive Director of UJIMA, on Supporting DV Survivors During COVID](#)
- Ujima: The National Center on Violence In

Loretta J. Ross

- Join Professor Loretta J. Ross for her upcoming online course, titled, "Calling In the Calling Out Class" with the Black Community co-led by Sonya Renee Taylor. Register now online at www.lorettajross.com.

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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.



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.



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.