



# Building Allegiance in the Fight to End Sexual Violence

## Discussion Guide #4



## EVENT SUMMARY

In our last conversation, "How Do We Care For Survivors' Stories?" the panelists briefly discussed the fact that to support Black women and girls who come forward with their experiences of sexual assault—albeit to their families, their communities, or the public—it's imperative that cisgender straight Black men greet them *and* their truths with open arms, *especially* when another "brotha" caused that harm.

But as Black survivor justice work morphed from the interracial sexual assault activism work of Rosa Parks and Recy Taylor in the 1950s to Black feminist scholars, survivors, and authors focusing on intraracial sexual assault in the 1970s and beyond, this must-needed allegiance hasn't been swift. From calling Black survivors "race-traitors" to referring to accountability as "hi-tech lynchings" to circulating unfounded conspiracy theories such as "he was going to buy NBC," we have all witnessed a communal knee-jerk reaction to protect Black men at all costs, even when the cost is at the expense of the Black women and girls they harm.

Granted, we cannot ignore the countless deaths of Black men caught in the crosshairs of white supremacy and the haunting legacy of white women falsely accusing Black men and boys of sexual assault (i.e. Emmett Till and the unjust imprisonment of The Exonerated Five). But we also cannot afford to ignore the oppression that Black women face outside *and* inside of our communities, including disproportionate rates of sexual violence, oftentimes by the hands of the very men we take to the streets to defend against police brutality. In order to end sexual violence and heal Black communities, we have to acknowledge and reconcile these truths.

But most importantly, this will require Black men and boys to no longer sit on the sidelines either by being complicit with their silence or encouraging and/or engaging in this type of violence. We need more Black men to stand up, support survivors, and join us in this work, now.

During our fourth conversation on July 14, "Building Allegiance in the Fight to End Sexual Violence," moderator Jay Connor and panelists Preston Mitchum, Emanuel H. Brown, and Phillip Agnew delved into these topics by discussing the following:

- Why supporting Black women is important and how their freedom is linked to the freedom of all Black women, cisgender, trans, femmes, etc.
- Moving past a mentality of #ThemFirst and moving towards a place of accountability, healing and respect.
- The dangers of toxic masculinity and the ways Black men can unlearn dangerous messages around power and consent so they can stand in solidarity with Black survivors.

## DISCUSSION THEMES



After demanding from white people that we're listened to and believed and that our livelihoods are considered our ears shut off and hearts shut out when Black women are pleading with us.  
—Damon Young

Since this conversation debuted nearly a year after 2020's "racial reckoning," we wanted to examine what true allyship looks like, an allyship that lives beyond performative black boxes on Instagram, wearing "Protect Black women" t-shirts and claiming to be a #GirlDad. When it comes to Black men and boys building allegiances with Black survivors, it has to be more than lip service. Allegiance must be grounded in tangible action inspired by a deeper understanding of cis straight male privilege, including how Black men wield it over others and how it impacts other Black people who do not possess that type of power. This premise led to a range of themes for deeper discussion outlined below:

### Every Black Man Can (And Should) Show Up For Every Black Woman

One of the strengths of this conversation lies in the diversity among the panelists who came to the table with different experiences, sexual orientations, and gender identities that allowed for a nuanced and eye-opening conversation. A common thread weaved throughout this discussion was how crucial it is for Black men in our community to support the spectrum of Black women in our community—cis, trans, femmes, etc.—and the range of what that support can look like in action.

Phillip Agnew, a Black straight, cisgender man, co-signs on the Combahee River Collective's belief that "none of us are free if Black women aren't free," stressing that while we as a community are "fighting the rest of the world," Black men shouldn't, in turn, be siding with and enforcing power over Black women. "[Defeating patriarchy] is our fight too, as Black men...and is central to our liberatory struggle."

Emanuel H. Brown, who identifies as transmasculine, stressed that showing up for Black women and fighting against sexual violence means saying the names of survivors that come forward and making sure they stay visible in the community through much-needed conversations. But most importantly, when this happens, "[it's important to] engage the dialogue with the same vulnerability [survivors] are engaging us with the vulnerability of their stories."

Preston Mitchum, who identifies as gay and queer, added that showing up for Black women means moving beyond the term “allyship” to “to actively listen, to speak up and sometimes to lose friends and relationships,” and most importantly, this work must include “speaking to Black men around all sexuality spectrums related to the harm we’re actively causing.”

#### Questions On Supporting Black Women, Survivors & Our Liberation:

- Can you name an instance when you either witnessed or cosigned on the erasure of Black women’s liberation from the overall liberation of Black people? Are there times when you’ve seen the Black Lives Matter Movement positioned against the Me Too Movement?
- When talking about women who come forward with sexual assault allegations, what are strategies you can use to counter negative reactions to your support for Black survivors?
- Have you lost relationships or opportunities for standing your ground and being an ally? How did it make you feel and would you do it again? Why or why not?

#### You Can’t Dismantle The Master’s House Using the Master’s Tools

As Agnew stressed, for Black men to better support survivors and hold themselves accountable, they need to acknowledge and examine our “generational knee-jerk” reactions to disclosure stories due to a history of white women making false accusations against Black men. As we carry with us that history, we are also simultaneously “perpetuating falsehoods” against Black women that resemble the intersections of white supremacy and misogyny to protect Black men.

Brown agreed, noting that due to the “deep grief” we have in our community from hundreds of years of oppression, we have “taken on, quite literally the master’s tools and used them on one another in intense and harmful ways.” This plays out in how we reject survivors, including Black male survivors [i.e. Terry Crews], leading to “our inability to actually access our own mourning and grieving rituals, [which results in toxic[ity], survivor blam[ing] and protectionism.”

Mitchum stressed that “divesting from white supremacist beliefs” also means acknowledging that while Black men are oppressed, they are not the “most oppressed” and they can *and* do oppress Black women, mimicking white patriarchy as a means to creating the power they may lack in the outside world. So when accountability is demanded for sexual violence, there is pushback, he explains, adding, “Many Black men, unfortunately, see justice as getting away with crimes that white men got away with...if the Black men are actively anti-Black.”

Moving forward, if we are serious about dismantling rape culture, Agnew is clear: “If we are going to be revolutionary brothers, sisters, people of all identities, then we have to untangle the different ways in which the colonial mind has taught us.”

## Questions on White Supremacy, Trauma, and Black Survivors:

- When was the last time that you or someone invoked the history of white women making accusations against Black men as a means to undermine a current Black survivor's story? How did that make you feel?
- What are the ways your internalized anti-Blackness plays out in your everyday life? What steps have you taken to unlearn and divest from it?
- How can we foster conversations with Black men around misogynoir and sexual violence without pathologizing them like white America often does and still hold folks accountable?

## It's Crucial To Examine Toxic Masculinity

Part of building this much-needed allegiance relies on Black men's ability to respect Black women's right to say no, honor their autonomy and bodies, and reject the idea that sexual violence is a rite of passage for Black women and girls. But unfortunately, toxic masculinity stands in the way. As Brown pointed out, this pressure to perform extreme manhood "disconnects us from our bodies...in the way that we move and walk through the world," adding that "most cis men and even masculine folks are cultivated into a culture of manhood" that can have dangerous consequences not just for Black women, but for an entire spectrum of Black men as well.

Angew learned early on that manhood is not only grounded in "capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism" but "secrets, silence and amnesia, too" which has been "the biggest obstacles" for him and other Black men to experience "intimacy, vulnerability, healing, and freedom" in relationships. While too often, men and boys are taught that manhood is about "having dominion over the world and Black women's bodies," Agnew points out that the silence Black men have around holding others accountable also comes from a fear of having to interrogate their own behaviors.

"If Bill [Cosby] did this, then maybe someone will start looking at me and what I did in the frat or that one weekend." Agnew explains that this leads to pushing away Black men who stand in solidarity with Black women because having them present would mean "we can't kick back because the 'police' are here." This is a prime example of how toxic behavior and undermining consent continue to go unchecked and unchallenged in our community.

For Mitchum, who shared that he distances himself from worrying about manhood on a personal level, as a male survivor of sexual abuse from the hands of an older man, he understands how toxic masculinity can make male survivors suffer in silence. "It was amazing when I started to discuss my story of sexual assault and how so many Black men actually started to direct message me and tell me that they have been assaulted, and didn't know how to share the story and didn't feel safe and affirmed to do so."

## Questions On Toxic Masculinity:

- How has toxic masculinity impacted how you internalize your own gender identity and sexual orientation? How have you worked to unlearn what you have been taught about Black manhood and Black womanhood?

- Have you ever been silent when you knew someone you loved had caused a form of sexual violence against someone else? If so, why did you stay silent? Would you do things differently, if you had a chance to go back?
- How can we collectively help create safe spaces for Black men to be honest and vulnerable about the pressures of toxic masculinity, their own survivorship and behavior?

### If You Are Not Standing In Solidarity, You Are A Co-Conspirator

As we move forward with healing and much-needed conversations around accountability, consent, and internalized anti-Blackness, it's important to emphasize that there's no gray area: You're either standing in solidarity or you're "an accomplice or co-conspirator," Mitchum stressed. One small way to make a huge impact is simply checking in with Black female friends—cisgender and trans—and be willing to ask "difficult questions such as 'have I harmed you?' and be willing to accept the answer," he says.

Brown agrees, adding how shocked he's been at how often his "friends, community and [past] lovers" have never been asked questions about past sexual harm. "This is the first entryway," he says, encouraging others to be willing to have these conversations. In addition, Brown stresses that allegiance also means "mov[ing] toward, not away" from accountability by bringing those who have caused harm into the community, lovingly but sternly, to "absolutely hold the line that it is harm that they're doing. No minced words."

For Agnew, accountability has to start with men, which includes doing the work internally and externally and not being afraid to have accountability conversations. "You have no problem telling your brother when his breath stinks or when his outfit is not tight," he says, adding in that same fashion, there shouldn't be an issue pulling a friend aside to say, "Look, bro, we need to talk."

### Questions On Accountability:

- In a romantic relationship, have you ever been asked about past or even current harm? If yes, what was the impact that had on your relationship? If not, how would that conversation have impacted that relationship for the better?
- What are the obstacles that have stood in your way to holding other Black men in your life accountable for misogynoir, street harassment, or sexual violence?
- Have you ever been able to have productive conversations with other Black men about these issues? What advice would you give to those who are reluctant to initiate these types of dialogues?

# 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:** Most 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).

**Consent:** Consent takes place when someone agrees, gives permission, or says “yes” to sexual activity with another person or persons. Consent is always freely given and all people in a sexual situation must feel that they are able to say “yes,” or “no,” or stop the sexual activity at any point. Consent can be withdrawn by either party at any point. Consent to engage in one sexual activity, or past agreement to engage in a particular sexual activity, cannot be presumed to constitute consent to engage in a different sexual activity or to engage again in sexual activity. Consent cannot be validly given by a person who is incapacitated, which includes intoxication or any other hindrance to clear communication.

**Homophobia:** The homophobia definition is the fear, hatred, discomfort with, or mistrust of people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Biphobia is fear, hatred, discomfort, or mistrust, specifically of people who are bisexual. Similarly, transphobia is fear, hatred, discomfort with, or mistrust of people who are transgender, genderqueer, or don’t follow traditional gender norms.

**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.

**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.

**Patriarchy:** Patriarchy is about the social relations of power between men and women, women and women, and men and men. It is a system for maintaining class, gender, racial, and heterosexual privilege and the status quo of power—relying both on crude forms of

oppression, like violence; and subtle ones, like laws; to perpetuate inequality. Patriarchal beliefs of male, heterosexual dominance and the devaluation of girls and women lie at the root of gender-based violence. Patriarchy is a structural force that influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not.

**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.

**Sexism:** Any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice, or behavior based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline.

**Sexual Assault:** Sexual assault is any type of nonconsensual sexual activity or contact. Sexual assault can happen through physical force, or threats of force, or if the attacker gave the victim drugs or alcohol as part of the assault. Sexual assault includes rape and sexual coercion.

**Sexual Violence:** An all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. Many of these crimes are described below. Please note that the legal definition of crimes varies from state to state. There are often other crimes and forms of violence that arise jointly with crimes like sexual assault, and these are described as well.

**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.

**Systematic Oppression:** Also referred to as "institutional oppression" or "structural racism," it is the complex interaction of culture, policy, and institutions that holds in place the outcomes in the lives of people of color, especially Black people. An extension of white supremacy, systematic oppression creates disparities in many "success indicators" including wealth, the criminal justice system, employment, housing, health care, politics, and education.

**Toxic Masculinity:** Toxic masculinity refers to the notion that some people's idea of "manliness" perpetuates domination, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and aggression. This idea that men need to act tough and avoid showing all emotions can be harmful to their mental health



and can have serious consequences for society, which is how it became known as “toxic masculinity.”

**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.

**Transmasculine:** Term includes non-binary people, gender fluid people, genderqueer people—anyone assigned female at birth whose gender falls in the more masculine range.

**Transphobia:** 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:** 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 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 within your community.

## KEEP IN TOUCH WITH OUR PANELISTS' WORK

Preston Mitchum

- [PrestonMitchum.com](#)
- ["LGBTQ students need inclusive sex ed – but less than 10% in the US are receiving it, report says" \(USA Today\)](#)

Emanuel H. Brown

- [EmanuelHBrown.com](#)
- [Reimagining Black Masculine Futures Episode 9 feat. Emanuel Brown \(IG LIVE\)](#)

Phillip Agnew

- [BlackMen.Build](#)
- [Bootcamp for Activism, Keynote Speaker, Antioch College](#)

# PAST CONVERSATIONS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

This discussion is part of an ongoing five-part series that centers on the power of Black survivors to tell their stories, exploring models of care, healing, accountability, and ways we shift the cultural conversation. Get caught up or revisit our past video events and discussion guides below:

Discussion #1: “The Collective Power of Black Women to Reshape the Narrative about Sexual Violence”

Watch Video [here](#)

Read Discussion Guide [here](#)

Discussion #2: “Godmothers of the Movement to End Sexual Violence”

Watch Video [here](#)

Read Discussion Guide [here](#)

Discussion #3: How Do We Care for Black Survivors’ Stories?

Watch Video [here](#)

Read Discussion Guide [here](#)

Discussion #4: Building Allegiance in the Fight to End Sexual Violence”

Watch Video [here](#)

Read Discussion Guide [here](#)

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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.