



How Do We Care For Black Survivors' Stories?

Discussion Guide #3



EVENT SUMMARY

In our second discussion, “Godmothers Of The Movement To End Sexual Violence Against Black Women and Girls,” the panelists briefly discussed the importance and power of Black survivors not just telling their stories but *owning* them as well.

While owning one’s story can look different for each survivor, the need for *all* survivor stories to be treated with care by those around them is universal. Sadly, when Black survivors come forward whether in their homes, their communities, and to the media, that is not usually the case.

Black women and girls encounter a range of obstacles—personal, communal, and institutional—for speaking their truth, and the consequences they face can be steep. Stigma, alienation, and rejection play a huge factor in why we are least likely to come forward, least likely to be believed, and least likely to report our assaults to the police. And when Black survivors, especially those who have high-profile assailants, disclose mistreatment, time and again, we have witnessed our communities, folks on social media, and even in the media treat them abominably. This essentially sends a message to other survivors that they should stay silent and accept the lie that sexual violence is a rite of passage for Black women and girls. Even worse, it doubles down on the myth that we are not worthy of protection.

As we continue to prioritize and fight for survivor justice, how can we rewrite these dangerous narratives? How much of that lies in our ability *and* inability to treat survivors and their stories with care, respect, and empathy? Most importantly, how can we create communities and systems that prioritize Black survivors and automatically believe and welcome them in, as opposed to pushing them away and ignoring them?

During our third conversation on June 16, “How Do We Care For Black Survivors’ Stories?”, Latifah Lyles, N’dea Johnson, Dr. Robyn Gobin, Ph.D. and Michelle Grier lean into these questions to discuss the following:

- The importance of Black survivors’ stories and how they encourage other survivors to come forward, educate communities on rape culture, shift culture, and spark policy change.
- How we continue to show up for survivors and how we fail them when we refuse to believe them and want to scrutinize their stories.
- How the pressure of being the “Strong Black woman” can deter survivors from acknowledging their trauma, stand in the way of their healing journey, and block them from owning their stories.

DISCUSSION THEMES



“I’ll tell you what freedom is to me: No fear. I mean really, no fear!”
—Nina Simone

Since this conversation debuted during the week of Juneteenth, we wanted to explore the concept of “freedom” and what that means to Black survivors and our community as a whole. As we fearlessly envision a world that is free of sexual violence, it is crucial to acknowledge the ways we fight for *and* block individual and communal healing, public accountability, and our overall liberation. This premise led to a range of themes for deeper discussion, outlined below.

Black Survivors’ Stories Play A Critical Role In Our Liberation

As the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements intersect—both created by Black women—Black survivors’ stories are especially important right now given that too often stories about police brutality usually center on Black men while stories about sexual assault mostly center on white women, panelist Dr. Robyn Gobin points out. She stressed that “it’s important to put a spotlight on Black women” because our intersectionality is what will “free all of us from all of the forms of oppression, whether it’s sexism, racism, or systemic oppression.”

When other Black survivors see and hear those stories whether it’s on social media, on the news, or in-person, they might be “triggered,” but being able to see oneself reflected in these narratives validates other survivors, and most importantly, serves as a catalyst for individual and communal healing, panelist N’dea Johnson added.

For Michelle Grier, given that this nation’s ongoing racial reckoning highlights how Black lives are undervalued, Black survivor stories illuminate this fact and given that these movements flourished thanks to viral social media, Black advocates, especially young Black women, have used this moment to advocate for themselves, educate their families, raise more awareness, and emphasize that they “are not going to wait” for change when it comes to sexual violence.

Questions On The Necessity Of Black Survivor Stories

- How does seeing or hearing Black survivors’ stories either online or in-person trigger you? How do you cope with those triggers?
- What is one Black survivor story that has inspired or validated you? What about that story resonated with your personal experiences?

- How does the intersection of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Me Too Movement impact your own life and your advocacy? What are the ways that both movements or one of the movements have excluded your experiences?

To Own Your Story, You Have To Own Your Emotions & Your Truth

When Black survivors come forward, too often, they are met with the obstacle of being deemed "Strong Black Woman," the notion that we are indestructible and fearless. This stereotype also undermines and diminishes Black survivors by telling them that their trauma is not painful, and if it was painful, they shouldn't feel it or should shrug it off.

These ideas that we are "inherently tough" and can just "move past" forms of trauma also rob Black survivors from starting their healing journeys and owning their stories, Johnson stressed, adding that she no longer wants for people to tell Black women that they are "resilient." Instead, she tells survivors to accept their tears and work on being okay with the idea of not being okay, a luxury that many of us have not been allotted throughout our lives.

Dr. Gobin agrees that the pressure Black women face for being resilient stands in the way of acknowledging our truth and trauma, which can lead survivors "down a path where we're not liberated and held captive by our stories." This is why it's crucial to be in the "driver's seat of how our stories impact our lives" by "acknowledging the reality of what happened so that we can move forward and heal."

Most importantly, Johnson added that even in acknowledging our trauma, it's necessary for survivors also to be able to see their "identities outside" of it. Remember: What happened to you doesn't define you.

Questions on Black Women Owning Their Vulnerability

- When was the last time you cried? Did you allow yourself to sit in your tears? Did you cry alone or in front of someone else?
- Are there times when you have felt pressured by stereotypes such as the "Strong Black woman" or the "Angry Black woman" that have stopped you from acknowledging the harm others may have caused you?
- Even in the face of trauma and oppression, how do you create spaces in your life for joy?

In Order To Shift Culture, 'We Have To Believe Black Survivors Immediately'

When we think about Black survivor stories being received by the public, it's not always with care or respect. This type of response is rooted in white supremacist ideals that Black women cannot be sexually assaulted, or they not worthy of being believed. This can retraumatize survivors and further isolate them, moderator Latifah Lyles noted.

During this portion of the conversation, Johnson recalled her experiences trying to navigate the criminal justice system to report her brutal attack to the police, referring to it as "the most arduous thing I've ever had to experience" given how they treated and dismissed her. Luckily,

she had access to political leaders to share her experience, and finally, she was taken seriously. But what happens for Black women and girls who lack that type of access, she wondered. They fall through the cracks.

For survivors who are apprehensive about or refuse to utilize the judicial system, being believed in their homes and community is equally as important, Grier stressed. Also, recalling her survivor story, she said that instead of going to a hospital, she went to her aunt and cousin because there she could "be my authentic self, and get into my tears, then figure out a strategy together." But, what happens if survivors don't have these familial or communal safe spaces either?

For Dr. Gobin, this is why "we need to start believing survivors immediately" wherever they disclose and remember that it's not our job to interrogate people's stories and investigate what and how it may have happened. "Our job is to unlearn a lot of the myths and misconceptions we have about what it means to be a survivor so that we can just show up and be fully supportive."

Questions On Believing Black Survivors

- While the phrase "listen to Black women" has become mainstream, why do you believe that when it comes to sexual assault that same phrase doesn't apply as often as it should?
- What are the messages you have received, albeit in your childhood and/or adulthood, that convey the idea that Black women and girls are not trustworthy? How did that make you feel and how, if at all, has that affected the way you see yourself and other Black women?
- Have you ever doubted a Black survivor story? Why and when? If that was in the past, do you feel that same way now? Why or why not?

You Have Every Right To Say 'No' To The Media

Since the hashtag #MeToo went viral in 2017, we have seen the impact survivors' stories have had on shifting our culture. As stated earlier, these media stories have raised awareness, debunked myths, and encouraged others to come forward. While media and social media helped catapult this global movement, these same spaces have not always been safe for or kind to Black women and girls.

This is why Johnson tells survivors that when journalists reach out, it's completely normal to have reservations in sharing one's story. She suggests taking into account "intent vs. impact," which means the intent may be good, but the outcome can retraumatize the survivor and further harm them.

Grier pointed out the need to create boundaries with reporters, negotiate what parts of one's story to share, and be honest about the potential impact of coming forward. In addition, make sure you ask the journalist about their publication, get a list of questions they plan to ask, who

else are they interviewing, and past articles they have written about sexual assault and Black communities.

Finally, it's completely OK to decide that going public isn't the route you want to take at this time, or ever. As Dr. Gobin noted, while there is the pressure of "If I don't do it, who else will?", keep in mind that "your story will always be your story and you get to own it. You get to define it and you get to know who has earned the right to hear your story."

Questions About The Media and Black Survivors

- Have you either witnessed or experienced a situation when media and/or social media wasn't safe for Black women? How, if at all, did that alter how you navigated those spaces in the future?
- When it comes to Black survivor stories in the media, what do you wish you could see more of? What do you want to see less of?

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.

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.

Juneteenth: An annual and newly-minted federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. [According to the New York Times](#), on June 19, 1865, about two months after the Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Va., Gordon Granger, a Union general, arrived in Galveston, Texas, to inform enslaved African-Americans of their freedom and that the Civil War had ended.

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.

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

N'dea Johnson

- ["Reaching for the Sky: Adversity has spurred N'dea Johnson \(M.A. '20\) to help others. Now she hopes to do so in Congress"](#) (Teachers College/Columbia University)
- ["After Being Sexually Violated By A White Man, Watching George Floyd's Life Taken By One Was Another Kind Of Trigger"](#) (Blavity)
- ["A Tale of Two Trials."](#) N'dea Johnson, (2021). (Girls Write Sh*t Blog)

Dr. Robyn Gobin, Ph.D

- Author, [The Self-Care Prescription](#), [The Doing My Work Therapy Journal](#) and [The Self-Care Prescription Journal](#)

Michelle Grier

- [Girls for Gender Equity Campaigns page](#)
- [GGE's National Agenda for Black Girls page](#)

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](#)

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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.