

EXPANDING OUR FRAME

DEEPENING OUR DEMANDS FOR SAFETY
AND HEALING FOR BLACK SURVIVORS
OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



A Policy Brief

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for the National Black
Women's Justice Institute

February 2019



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me too.

In 2006, Tarana Burke launched the “me too.” movement to build a community of support and healing among Black women and girls who are survivors of sexual violence. Ten years later, #MeToo was popularized as a viral social media hashtag by actor Alyssa Milano, sparking a long overdue national conversation about sexual violence from Hollywood to the halls of Congress, and resulting in accountability for a number of high profile perpetrators of sexual violence.

In January 2018, over 300 women in the entertainment industry announced the creation of Times Up,¹ a non-profit focused on changing workplace conditions, increasing representation of women in leadership roles in the entertainment and other industries, and providing survivors of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace with access

to legal and public relations support through the Times Up Legal Defense Fund, housed at the National Women’s Law Center.²

When actors began using the #MeToo hashtag to call attention to sexual violence in the entertainment industry, many were quick to point out, lift up, and honor its roots in Burke’s long-standing grassroots organizing as a Black woman and survivor of sexual violence. Actors also responded to an expression of solidarity from the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, a national organization of women farmworkers,³ by using the 2018 Oscars to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence in agricultural, domestic and service work - industries where Black and Latina women are disproportionately represented.

Yet despite the specific origins of “me too.” in conversations among Black women and girls, Black women and girls’ stories, narratives, and experiences remain largely at the margins of mainstream #MeToo conversations. When Black women like Lupita Nyong’o have come forward to say #MeToo, their credibility is often questioned, the harm they experienced minimized, and accountability far harder to come by.⁴ Tiffany Haddish’s #MeToo experience of sexual assault by a police cadet when she was 17 received little mainstream news coverage or attention despite the fact that she raised it during an interview for a *Glamour* magazine cover story.⁵ Black trans, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people’s experiences of sexual violence, as well those of Black women and girls with disabilities, have remained even more invisible in mainstream #MeToo discourses, despite the fact that both populations experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence.

The recent successful campaign to free Cyntoia Brown⁶ and release of the Lifetime documentary *Surviving R. Kelly*, produced by dream hampton, have sparked national conversations about the abandonment of Black girls to sexual violence and the failure

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to hold those who perpetrate sexual violence against Black girls accountable. Yet, we still have a long way to go. As Salamishah and Scheherezade Tillet of Chicago-based organization A Long Walk Home put it a *New York Times* Op-Ed on the R. Kelly documentary, “our optimism is tempered by history, which shows that social justice movements rarely center, for any meaningful period, on black girls, or anyone who has survived sexual violence.”⁷ As the Tillet sisters point out, Aishah Shahidah Simmons’ documentary on the rape of Black women and girls, *NO!*, released in 2006, took over 10 years to make without any support from major studios or networks. One network executive told Simmons when rejecting *NO!*, “Let’s face it very

unfortunately, most people don’t care about the rape of black women and girls.”⁸

Indeed, throughout U.S. history, Black women, trans and gender nonconforming people’s experience of systemic sexual violence during slavery, in domestic servitude, in the workplace, and in our homes and communities has largely remained invisible, obscured and rationalized through deeply entrenched narratives framing Black women and girls as inherently sexually deviant, hypersexual, and inviolable. These problematic narratives have evolved over time, and have been the subject of consistent individual and collective resistance, organizing, and scholarship by Black women. Nevertheless, the

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“ There is also a reluctance to acknowledge that sexual violence is systematically perpetrated by people, institutions, systems, and networks advanced as sources of safety and solutions to sexual violence. ”

perceptions of Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people that normalize and facilitate sexual violence remain deeply entrenched, contributing to ongoing silences and a failure to act in support of Black survivors of sexual assault.

These silences are particularly pronounced when it comes to sexual violence experienced by Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people in the context of policing, criminalization, and punishment.⁹ In part, the invisibility of sexual violence in these settings stems from the fact that it is experienced by people who are criminalized and otherwise stigmatized – people who are, or are perceived to be, involved in the sex or drug trades, homeless, disabled, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. In other words, women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and

nonbinary people at the margins of society, whose experiences may not lend themselves to campaigns focused on respectability or redemption.

There is also a reluctance to acknowledge that sexual violence is systematically perpetrated by people, institutions, systems, and networks advanced as sources of safety and solutions to sexual violence. Recognizing the pervasive and systemic nature of sexual violence against Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people by police, penal, and immigration officers, in prisons, jails and/or detention facilities, and in social service, learning, and health care settings, calls into question our reliance on these systems and structures of dominance as responses to sexual violence, and as effective mechanisms of prevention, early detection, and healing.

EXPANDING THE FRAME

In a June 2018 joint letter, Tarana Burke and Joanne Smith of Girls for Gender Equity emphasized that the movement is “working to reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors including young people, queer, trans, and disabled folks, Black women and girls, and all communities of color. We want to build bridges for restorative accountability and want to implement strategies to sustain long term, systemic change.”¹⁰

In October 2018, the ‘me too’ movement and allied organizations issued a call for action to address sexual violence that is inclusive of settings beyond the workplace, that addresses sexual violence in all its forms, and that makes clear “the wide-ranging connections it has to issues from public health to mass incarceration.”¹¹



Ms. Foundation grantee partners, along with their allies and networks, can join in centering Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people in “me too.” and the global conversation around sexual violence by:

■ Challenging, uprooting, and dispelling deeply entrenched and continuously reproduced images of Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people as sexually deviant and universally available, inherently promiscuous, disposable, and fundamentally inviolable.

■ Moving beyond the workplace to focus attention on where, how, and why Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people are experiencing sexual violence in additional locations – including our homes, communities, and institutions, in interactions with police, penal, and immigration officials, and in economic sectors, informal economies, educational settings, and social services where Black women girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people are disproportionately represented.

■ Attending to the ways in which sexual violence pervades public and private spaces, including institutions, environments and residential spaces presented as “safe” alternatives to violence and victimization.

■ Recognizing that responses that rely exclusively on policing and the criminal legal system fall short of providing protection for Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people – or, worse yet, may perpetuate further sexual violence.

■ Developing, implementing and evaluating alternative approaches to prevention, detection, and accountability for sexual violence that address and redress Black women’s, girls’, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people’s experiences, and promote healing among survivors.

WHAT WE KNOW

GENERAL STATISTICS

- Native Americans experience the highest overall rates of sexual assault in the U.S. – nearly 27 percent of Native women will experience rape in their lifetimes – followed by Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people.
- Twenty-two percent of Black women and girls 12 and older experience rape and sexual assault.¹²
- According to Black Women’s Blueprint, 40-60 percent of Black women report being subjected to coercive sexual contact by age 18.¹³
- Fifty-three percent of Black trans women, 65 percent of nonbinary people assigned female at birth, and 64 percent of Black trans people with disabilities report a sexual assault in their lifetime.¹⁴
- For every Black woman who reports her rape, at least fifteen do not.¹⁵ Many cite a fear that they will not be believed by authorities, or, worse yet, subjected to further violence and criminalization.¹⁶

SEXUAL ASSAULT IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

- Fifteen percent of Black transgender K-12 student respondents in a national survey reported sexual assault, 7 percent by a teacher or staff member.¹⁷
- Eleven percent of Black girls in a national high school sample reported being raped.¹⁸
- An investigation by the Chicago Tribune uncovered hundreds of cases of sexual assaults in schools by educators, coaches, and school security officers over a decade-long period.¹⁹
- According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, on average 6 in 1000 college-age Black women report rape or sexual assault.²⁰
- One study found that 14 percent of Black women who were enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) reported a completed or attempted rape.²¹



SEXUAL ASSAULT BY POLICE AND PENAL OFFICERS

Black women are also disproportionately impacted by sexual violence in the criminal legal system. Many people rightfully reacted to former Oklahoma City Police Officer Daniel Holtzclaw's prosecution for the rape and sexual assault of 13 Black women and girls with shock and outrage. Yet Daniel Holtzclaw was not an anomaly, nor is the ongoing problem of sexual assault by police officers corrected by his conviction and sentencing.

Police sexual violence represents a largely hidden epidemic – one which disproportionately targets Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people.

Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people continue to be vulnerable to sexual violence once inside prisons, jails, immigration and juvenile detention centers, foster care, and while on probation, parole and in treatment programs, as well as in drug treatment²² and mental health facilities, state hospitals and nursing homes. The Bureau of Justice reports particularly high rates of sexual assault against transgender people in prison.²³

■ Sexual misconduct by police is the second most frequently reported form of police misconduct after excessive force.

■ An officer is caught in an act of sexual misconduct every 5 days on average – and researchers across the spectrum agree that the incidents that come to light represent just the tip of the iceberg.

■ Sexual violence by police officers often takes place in schools and youth engagement programs, and in the context of police responses to calls for assistance relating to sexual and other forms of violence.²⁴

■ Citing Bureau of Justice statistics, *The Nation* concluded that women are 30 times more likely to experience sexual assault in prison than on the outside.²⁵

■ Almost half (45%) of transgender respondents to a national survey who had been in jail or prison reported a sexual assault, including about a third of Black transgender respondents.²⁶

SEXUAL ASSAULT IN FOSTER CARE

- Sexual violence in institutions is not limited to prisons and jails. One study found that almost half of confirmed reports of abuse in the Baltimore foster care system involved sexual abuse.²⁷
- Another study found that 30 percent of cases of abuse of children in foster care in Colorado involved sexual abuse.²⁸
- In Illinois, sexual abuse was the second most frequent form of abuse reported in foster care, representing 20 percent of cases, and increasing to 41 percent of abuse in specialized foster care.²⁹



SEXUAL ASSAULT IN HEALTH CARE, PUBLIC HOUSING, AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROVISION

■ Sexual abuse in the context of health care provision,³⁰ particularly against people with disabilities,³¹ as well as in social services and child welfare enforcement, is pervasive.

■ For Black women and girls living in low-income housing complexes or without stable or permanent housing, vulnerability to sexual violence and substance abuse is heightened.³²

■ Black women who receive public assistance have also been found to experience elevated levels of sexual assault.³³

Further complicating the issue is the reality that Black women survivors of sexual violence who live in poverty face an increased risk of depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and addiction—often from the combined vulnerabilities associated with their location at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and sources of trauma.³⁴



LEGAL AND POLICY LANDSCAPE

Sexual assault is a crime in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, no matter who the perpetrator or victim is, and no matter whether a person is in custody of law enforcement or penal officials.³⁵ Additionally, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) contains specific provisions governing sexual assault in prison and in police lock-up facilities.³⁶ Employers and public officials are also civilly liable for sexual assault among employees under federal law.

In some states, all sexual conduct with individuals in the custody of police or prisons is prohibited. In others, police or correctional officials, like any other person accused of sexual assault, can raise a defense in a criminal trial that an individual in their custody consented to sexual contact, which can be overcome by the prosecution. Current efforts to eliminate



the consent defense for police or correctional officials through amendments to state criminal laws, while a small step in the right direction, fall far short of a comprehensive solution to sexual violence perpetrated by the police and penal systems.³⁷

For instance, most police departments have no policy explicitly prohibiting officers from engaging in sexual harassment or assault of members of the public whether on or off-duty, and very few have effective prevention, detection, and accountability strategies in place. There is no official data collection on sexual assault by police, leaving only media reports, civil suits and criminal prosecutions as sources of information about patterns, contexts, and responses to sexual violence by law enforcement agents.³⁸

There is also a lack of investment in non-criminal legal/policy responses to sexual violence by police and penal officials aimed at prevention, early detection, and accountability.

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CENTERING BLACK WOMEN, GIRLS, AND FEMMES IN "me too." AND BEYOND

EXPANDING THE FRAME

Criminal legal responses to sexual violence often don't increase safety for Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people and often leave them unprotected, unbelieved, and without agency or a long-term remedy for root causes of the violence and exploitation they have experienced.³⁹ In fact, they often contribute to further violence against Black women, girls and femmes, and do not prevent sexual violence or shift social, economic or cultural conditions that make it possible.



EXPANDING THE MESSAGE

Inclusive messaging should make **the following points:**

■ Ending sexual violence requires us to confront persistent perceptions of Black women, girls, trans, gender non-conforming and nonbinary people as inviolable, unbelievable and unworthy victims, and our collective failure to believe them when they come forward.

■ Ending sexual violence against Black women, girls, trans, gender non-conforming and nonbinary people requires empowering workers in domestic, agricultural and other service sectors, as well as informal economies, including the sex trades, where Black women are disproportionately represented, sexual violence is systemic, and protections are minimal.

■ Ending sexual violence against Black women, girls, and femmes requires ending sexual violence by law enforcement, penal officials, probation and parole officers. Strip searches and cavity searches that are inherent to the “war on drugs” and to incarceration are experienced as sexual assaults.

■ Ending sexual violence against Black women, girls, trans, gender non-conforming and nonbinary people means ensuring effective mechanisms for preventing, detecting, and holding officers accountable for sexual violence.

■ Ending sexual violence against Black women, girls, trans, gender non-conforming and nonbinary people requires decreasing police interactions, reducing police power over and criminalization of Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people.

■ Ending sexual violence against Black women, girls, trans, gender non-conforming and nonbinary people in learning spaces requires removing police officers from schools and creating mechanisms for students, parents, teachers, and counselors to co-create transformative approaches to school safety.

BUILDING NEW STRUCTURES AND PARTNERSHIPS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people are developing community-based responses to violence, including sexual violence, outside of carceral systems that are preventative, transformative and healing.

The following are just a few examples featuring **Ms. Foundation grantees and allies:**

BLACK WOMEN'S BLUEPRINT



In May 2016, Black Women's Blueprint (BWB) (blackwomensblueprint.org) hosted a historic Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on sexual violence. The Commission was rooted in a human rights framework, and aimed at acknowledging, reckoning with, and ensuring healing and redress for historic and present-day systemic sexual violence against Black and African descended women. The Commission was a transnational initiative featuring a Black diasporic analysis and envisioning Black survivor-centered

interventions to stop sexual abuse. Survivors testified about their experiences of sexual assault, made policy recommendations to end sexual violence, participated in healing rituals, and received apologies from harm-doers and survivor allies for the trauma they experienced. According to BWB, "This communal and integrated response to sexual violence places the concept of justice in the hands of survivors so that we determine how to best heal and reconcile ourselves, our families, and our communities."

BLACK WOMEN'S BLUEPRINT, continued

The Commission was guided by four mandates:

Truth: Unearth the truth of survivors by providing a platform for speaking and sharing their narratives. Part of this mandate has included critical participatory action research and multi-media (film, audio, photo) documentation of survivors' lived experiences across three generations, beginning with the watershed case of Recy Taylor in 1944, to 2016.

Justice: Strengthen the voices and capacity of women of African descent to develop and set our own standards of social and economic justice, as well as to advocate for state and systemic reform.

Healing: Create a safe space and programs for survivors of sexual violence to recover and engage in strategies for healing.

Reconciliation: Partner with a group of Black men calling themselves Emerging Sons to promote intra-community reconciliation and public deliberations using a human rights framework.⁴⁰

BWB is continuing the work of the Commission by building a monument to survivors,⁴¹ and engaging Black men and boys through Emerging Sons in programming focused on acknowledging and preventing sexual harm. Additionally, through social media and organizing campaigns under the hashtags #DearSurvivor during the #CosbyTrial and #MuteRKelly, the organization has continued to call attention to and demand support, healing, and accountability for Black women survivors of sexual violence.

Through the Institute for Gender and Cultural Competency, BWB specializes in liberatory bystander intervention models, transformative and healing models, as well as asset-based community accountability models. Using proven effective pedagogy and methodologies, the Institute works to equip people, groups and /or organizations with a framework for developing strategies anchored in civil and human rights as key points for intervention.

For more information, please visit:
bwbtraining.org

BYP100 (BLACK YOUTH PROJECT 100)



In 2013, a young Black woman shared her experience of sexual violence by a leader in BYP100 (byp100.org), a national, member-based

organization of Black 18-35 year old activists and organizers dedicated to creating justice and freedom for all Black people.

She agreed to participate in a community transformative justice process. BYP100 leadership immediately reached out to experienced transformative/restorative justice (TJ) practitioners from the Just Practice Collaborative who have facilitated accountability processes regarding sexual violence. With the consent of the survivor, following an independent meeting with the practitioner, the organization's leadership handed over primary responsibility for implementation of the process to the practitioner and an experienced co-facilitator selected by the survivor.

Through Survivor Support and Accountability Teams, members of both parties' and the BYP100 community worked

to identify and meet the survivor's needs for healing and accountability. The individual who caused harm signed a written accountability agreement, and worked to meet the conditions of transformation and accountability set by the survivor.

Additionally, in an effort to transform the conditions that facilitate sexual harm within organizations and movements, the organization has developed an "enthusiastic consent curriculum" which is a central part of its membership orientation and political education process.⁴²

In 2018, BYP100 launched the Keep Her Safe campaign, aimed at addressing all forms of violence experienced by Black women, girls, trans and gender nonconforming people.

For more information, please visit:
byp100.org

TRANS SISTAS OF COLOR PROJECT

Through Trans Sistas of Color Project, Black trans women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people are building communities of safety and resilience in Detroit and beyond through self-defense trainings and emergency assistance funds for trans women.

For more information, please visit:
[facebook.com/TSCOPD](https://www.facebook.com/TSCOPD)



WOMEN WITH A VISION

Women with A Vision, a community-based non-profit founded in 1989 by a grassroots collective of African-American women in response to the spread of HIV/AIDS in communities of color, works closely with survivors of multiple forms of sexual violence. Through Crossroads, a groundbreaking diversion program, women accused of prostitution-related offenses are immediately referred to services and groups provided by Women With a Vision, limiting interactions with institutions in which they would be vulnerable to sexual assault.

For more information, please visit:
wwav-no.org



GIRLS FOR GENDER EQUITY



Since 2002, Girls for Gender Equity has offered Black girls and young trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people a safe space to heal and organize through its Sisters in Strength Program, a 2-year youth organizing program for 15 young women of color entering 10th or 11th grade. Programming is shaped both by the unique needs and interests of the SIS youth organizers, and by Girls for Gender Equity's (GGE) vision, mission, and goals. SIS does community organizing around gender-based violence and confronts the multiple layers of individual and institutional discrimination that threaten the safety of girls and women. While the program has always created space for survivors of sexual violence, sexual assault survivors will be more explicitly supported and centered in Sisters in Strength programming through "me too." youth survivor circles.

GGE also founded the Young Women's Initiative, a participatory governance project centering the voices and visions of young women in New York City's legislative agenda, policy making, and programming.

The final report and recommendations of the Young Women's Initiative contained a number of recommendations specifically addressing sexual violence and harm faced by young Black women, trans, gender nonconforming and nonbinary people in schools, communities, and in police interactions and police custody.

GGE plays a leadership role in the efforts of Communities United for Police Reform, a campaign to end discriminatory, unlawful and abusive policing in New York City and beyond, to address gender based violence by New York City Police officers, including sexual harassment and assaults by officers stationed in schools and on the streets, and who respond to calls for assistance from survivors.

For more information, please visit:
ggenyc.org

EVERYBLACKGIRL

EveryBlackGirl, Inc. (EBG) is a 501c3 organization based in Columbia, SC founded after a 2015 incident at Spring Valley High School involving the assault of a 15 year-old girl at the hands of a school resource officer, and the subsequent arrest of the victim and a classmate who spoke out against the attack. A central approach of the organization is creating safe spaces for Black girls while also helping them access the tools and knowledge required to create safe spaces for other Black girls.

One immediate result of EBG's work has been Black girls and women breaking the silence about the sexual violence committed against them in their homes, in school and in the community. This journey has brought EBG into contact with girls as young as 11 and women as old as 70 finding courage to speak about their abuse for the first time in our space. After bearing witness to their stories, the EBG community has advocated on behalf of survivors as they shape the justice they need.

EBG offers workshops and programming, including healing circles that address sexual and gender-based violence, as well as advocacy training. We also train boys and men on how to encourage, support, and advocate for women and girls in their schools and communities, and relationship building with families to ensure holistic communal healing approaches to supporting women and girls.

EVERYBLACKGIRL, INC.

For more information, please visit:
[facebook.com/EveryBlackGirl](https://www.facebook.com/EveryBlackGirl)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following organizations advance robust community-based, network-oriented, and healing-informed responses to sexual violence in Black communities:

- Just Practice Collaborative
shirahassan.com/just-practice-collaborative
- Impact Justice
impactjustice.org
- Women of Color Network, Inc.
wocninc.org
- Men Can Stop Rape
mencanstoprape.org
- #LoveWithAccountability
lovewithaccountability.com
- Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective
batjc.wordpress.com
- Transform Harm
transformharm.org

- Creative Interventions
creative-interventions.org
- STOP (Story Telling Organizing Project)
stopviolenceeveryday.org
- INCITE!
[incite-national.org/
community-accountability](http://incite-national.org/community-accountability)

They are critical to the sustainability of efforts to popularize an inclusive framework for addressing sexual violence against Black women, girls, trans, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people.

Additionally, 'me too.' movement has created an online platform at metoomvt.org with resources for survivors engaged in healing and advocacy.

You can find out more about the Times Up Legal Defense Fund at timesupnow.org.

About the Author

Andrea J. Ritchie is a Black lesbian immigrant feminist and survivor whose research, organizing and advocacy has focused on profiling, policing and criminalization of Black women, girls, and LGBTQ people for over two decades.

She is the author of *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* (Beacon Press 2017) and co-author of *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Violence Against Black Women* (African American Policy Forum 2015) and *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Beacon Press 2011).

She is currently Researcher-in-Residence on Race, Gender, Sexuality and Criminalization at the Barnard Center for Research on Women, where she co-leads the Interrupting Criminalization: Research in Action initiative, and was a 2014 Senior Soros Justice Fellow.

The National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI) works to reduce racial and gender disparities across the justice continuum affecting Black women, girls, and their families, by conducting research, providing technical assistance, engaging in public education, promoting civic engagement, and advocating for informed and effective policies.



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