

Racism & Sexual Violence

Implications for Movement Building and Victim Services

The movements to end sexual violence and racism in the United States have a long mutual history. At times, they were inseparably connected. In other instances, movement directions and priorities led to divergences. This bulletin continues the discussion of the connections between Racism and Sexual Violence by exploring movement history and implications for victim services.

Reaching back to the roots

It's widely accepted that the mainstream anti-sexual violence movement grew out of feminist and women's liberation movements during the 1960s and 1970s. It was during the 1970s that we saw the founding of sexual assault centers and statewide coalitions of these programs. However, the roots of our movement actually reach back to antebellum activism.

In the early days of our nation, both Black and White women were organizing movements for suffrage (the right to vote), abolition (to end slavery), and temperance (ending the consumption and distribution of alcohol). Many of the founders of the Women's Rights Movement, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, started out working for abolition. The Abolition Movement sought to gain access to civil and political rights for people who were enslaved based on

the principles of equality and human rights. Women working toward these rights applied the same ideas to their own lives and experiences, asking for equality for women under the law ([Boundless, 2016](#)).

As the Abolition and Women's Rights Movements grew, activists felt that they needed to streamline their efforts and prioritize key issues to make progress. The movements separated, and in many cases made choices that would alienate or exclude those individuals working on other issues. The work of these early activists led to the passage of multiple amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Yet, despite major victories like the abolition of slavery and universal suffrage during the early 20th century, the autonomy of state and local governments in implementing the law of the land led to widespread discrimination and unrest.

As we entered the Civil Rights era in the 1950s and 60s, social activists were once again seeking political remedy to rampant discrimination. This time period saw desegregation of public schools, marches and rallies, anti-war activism, and discussion of women's labor and healthcare.

Second wave feminism and the women's liberation movements of the 1960s felt it was necessary to

focus exclusively on key women's issues to make progress, and many White feminists diverged from other social movement involvements. The mainstream anti-sexual violence movements of today are largely rooted in the activism of these White women. At the same time, women of color and Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer women felt that it was unfair to have to focus exclusively on issues that impacted women (namely straight, White women). They believed that women had many identities, and that shouldn't mean having to choose sides (see the work of bell hooks & Audre Lorde for examples).

Moving into the late 20th and 21st century, we saw the rise of third wave feminism. This new generation of feminist thought and activism was largely invested in intersectionality. Third wave feminism teaches that it is impossible to address one type of social inequality or oppression without understanding how they all overlap and are reinforced by other forms oppression. Second wavers criticized intersectional feminism as having lack of focus and diluted cause. What's more, deep lines of division between the White or mainstream anti-violence movement and activists of color were already in place.



Infrastructure for providing victims services seems to be lacking for many women of color.

Access to rape crisis services

While rape crisis centers have worked hard to carve out space for the voices of victims since the 1970s, this work almost exclusively focused on the social, political, and economic needs of White women. Black women's voices and life experiences were often systematically left out of the conversation.

With the attention in mainstream movements focused on criminalization and civil legal remedies in response to sexual violence, communities of color increasingly felt that mainstream services were not for them. People of color, Native people, men, and LGBTQ people, did not see themselves represented in the work or in outreach efforts and materials. As a result, they did not feel welcomed and affirmed in many sexual assault centers. They sought support elsewhere, if at all. Also consider that people who are incarcerated (disproportionately people of color) have traditionally had VERY limited access to services.

While most sexual violence advocates openly fight for the rights of any survivor to receive compassionate and affirming support in their healing process, the infrastructure for providing those services seems to be lacking for many survivors of color. In their [2013 Applied Research Paper](#), West and Johnson outlined several strategies that mainstream anti-violence organizations can adopt to help address this disparity and build culturally competent services. Some examples include:

- **Educate** staff on the history of sexual violence and historical trauma for communities of color
- **Create** culturally sensitive policies, practices, and programs
- **Provide** programming on race-specific rape myths
- **Hire** ethnically diverse staff and leadership
- **Honor** the resilience of survivors of color and the communities they belong to

They also provide recommendations for other victim service professionals.

Legal remedies and barriers to reporting

As mentioned above, mainstream anti-violence movements have dedicated a great deal of time and energy to securing civil and criminal remedies to sexual violence. Victim service providers should recognize the fact that interaction with law enforcement and the criminal justice system could be a barrier for survivors of color to reporting their victimization. There is a long history of fear and contention between communities of color and law enforcement. Law enforcement and criminal justice systems have been used as a tool of racist oppression for decades. Consider the following examples:

- Returning escaped slaves
- Enforcing Jim Crow laws
- Enforcing segregation
- Using physical violence to break up peaceful civil rights protests
- Enforcing unfair drug laws, mandatory minimum sentencing, and criminalization of drug abuse that disproportionately impacts communities of color
- Posting of community resource officers in urban secondary schools serving primarily youth of color/ School to Prison Pipeline

Understandably, many people of color do not see reporting victimization to law enforcement as a safe or viable option. There is also pressure within communities of color to avoid involving law enforcement because sending a member of the community to prison often increases hardships and reinforces racist stereotypes. People of color are disproportionately represented in incarcerated populations, and often draw longer and harsher sentences in the legal system.

Incorporating anti-oppression work into our programs

In our work to address sexual violence we recognize that all of our individual social identities are overlapping and intersecting. Race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity all have a profound impact on the risk of experiencing sexual violence. For survivors, this also influences access to the options available for healing, support, and restoration after violence. Anti-oppression work is at the core of the kinds of lasting social change that will ultimately prevent sexual violence. These efforts, though challenging, will also make our programs stronger.

References

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Anti-oppression work is at the core of all kinds of lasting social change.

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