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—MICHAEL NOWAK

VIOLENCE. Violence against women can occur across the lines of race, age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. Usually owing to limited economic resources, black women are more vulnerable than others to domestic violence, community violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace. Institutional barriers, such as lack of police protection and limited medical care, and stereotypes about their ethnic group make it difficult for black women to escape the violence in their lives. As a result, some victims experience long-term mental and physical health problems. Victims may cope by medicating themselves with alcohol and drugs, or even by committing suicide. Despite these challenges, most black women are resilient and use a variety of strategies to survive the violence in their lives.

Although examining individual risk factors can provide some insight, the violence experienced by African American women has deep historical roots. It has been brutal, systemic, and institutionalized. Black women have faced, and continue to deal with, battery, rape, and other forms of sexual violence, while police brutality, community violence, and mass incarceration continue to claim the lives of African American men and boys.

Roots in Slavery

Unfortunately, there seems to be a deafening silence around the historic and contemporary violence against black women. A case in point is the Hottentot Venus, an African woman lured to Europe in 1810 with promises of great wealth. Instead, she was put on display at parties. Upon her death, she was dissected and her mummified body, skull, skeleton, and disembodied vagina were

preserved in specimen jars and displayed at various museums until 1974. In 2002, after years of protests, her remains were returned to South Africa for a dignified burial.

Objectifying black women in this manner made it easier for slave owners to poke and prod their nude bodies on the auction block. These inspections were used to determine the childbearing capacity of enslaved women. Rape and forced breeding were used to increase the slave population and to further demoralize black women. Laws did not recognize such sexual assaults as crimes. As a result, both black and white men could rape black women without legal or social sanction. Even when slavery ended, and well after the Reconstruction era, black women continued to be victimized in the labor force. When they were forced to work as domestic servants, employers continued to extort sexual favors from them in exchange for employment.

Black women have been trapped, too, by ideological barriers, which are myths and stereotypes. These false representations can influence how violence against black women is perceived. For example, the "Mammy" image originated in the South after slavery. Physically, Mammy was depicted as an asexual, bandanna-clad, obese, dark-complexioned, older woman with large breasts and a broad grin. Her primary role was that of a subordinate, self-sacrificing, domestic servant who happily performed her duties with no expectation of financial compensation.

The Mammy image may contribute to role strain or the expectation that black women can effortlessly fulfill multiple roles without having their personal needs met. As a result, some battered black women believe that they should endure the frustration—and resulting abuse—that black men are unable to express in the larger society. Tremendous loyalty to their abusive partners makes them reluctant to report their husbands and boyfriends to an overcrowded, discriminatory criminal justice system. In fact, some battered black women are so devoted to maintaining the illusion of a happy family that they find themselves incarcerated. In 1996, Beth Richie interviewed some such women at the New York City's Rikers Island Correctional Facility after they sold drugs or prostituted themselves to support their abusive partners.

The Mammy image, which contradicts white beauty standards, may also contribute to black women's pain and shame surrounding physical features such as skin color, hair texture, and weight. Batterers may target these sensitive topics when verbally abusing their partners, calling them, for example, "black and ugly," "nappy-haired," or "fat." Negative media images coupled with this verbal abuse may leave black women feeling unattractive. The black male-to-female gender imbalance further exacerbates this concern. Consequently, battered black women



DRAFT RIOTS in New York City, 1863. Violence against African American women has taken public as well as personal forms. This drawing, a scene from the draft riots during the Civil War, was captioned "Rioters chasing Negro men, women, and children through the vacant lots in Lexington Avenue." (Collection of the New-York Historical Society.)

may experience low self-esteem and perceive few options to leaving their abusive situations.

During the era of slavery, traditional standards of womanhood (feminine, fragile, passive) were not applied to black women. Instead, if they did not fulfill the self-sacrificing Mammy role, they were characterized as strong, dominant, and aggressive. The media later reinforced this image in the form of "Sapphire," the hostile, nagging wife on the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio and television shows in the 1940s and 1950s. When black women are depicted as Sapphires, batterers perceive violence as an appropriate punishment for their "emasculating" behavior. Some victims become so fearful of reinforcing this stereotype that they become less assertive and more supportive of male dominance.

Others embrace the image of toughness and use physical retaliation in response to abuse. One black woman described her self-defense technique: "I started hitting him back, I got tired of him hitting on me. And I popped him across the head with a skillet one day." Although this form of self-defense may be effective in the short term, there are some disadvantages. First, using physical aggression can escalate the violence. As previously discussed, homicide by intimate partners is a leading cause of death for African American women. Second, these victims can underestimate the extent of the abuse and their need for protection, emotional support, or medical attention. Finally, the Sapphire image, coupled with black

women's propensity to fight back when physically and sexually assaulted, is inconsistent with the societal stereotype of victims who are more deserving of sympathy and intervention, most notably victims who are white and middle-class, who are perceived as passive and weak. If black women are characterized as mutual combatants, dangerous, or inherently violent, service providers may be less likely to intervene on their behalf.

Rape and forced breeding used to increase the slave population gave rise to another stereotype. Instead of acknowledging this sexual victimization, slaveholders portrayed black women as promiscuous, immoral "Jezebels" who seduced their masters. This image left the impression that black women could not be rape victims because they always desired sex. More than a century after emancipation, black women continued to be viewed as legitimate victims of sexual assault. As evidence, they are visually and lyrically beaten, raped, verbally abused, and murdered in "gangsta" rap music, videos, and pornography.

The Jezebel image has implications for how sexual victimization is experienced by black women. When their sexual assaults are revealed, the criminal justice system often fails to protect them. They are not seen as credible victims when they are raped by white men, and rapes committed by black men often go unpunished. In fact, black men who sexually assault black female acquaintances receive the most lenient punishment of all

race-relationship categories. In addition, many black rape victims struggle with feelings of disloyalty. Charlotte Pierce-Baker candidly expressed this dilemma when she wrote:

I felt responsible for upholding the image of the strong black man for our young son, *and* for the white world with whom I had contact. . . . I didn't want to confirm the white belief that all black men rape. Better not to talk about it . . . so I'd kept silent about what happened to me.

(Pierce-Baker, p. 64)

And yet, black women over the centuries have resisted the violence in their lives in a multitude of ways. From poisoning abusive slaveholders to organizing as free women in the club movement of the late nineteenth century, black women have shown that they will not long tolerate violence towards themselves or towards those they love. For example, in 1955, the teenaged Emmett Till was murdered and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi. His mother, Mamie Bradley, in the midst of her terrible grief, turned his death into a symbol that helped spark the civil rights movement. She allowed her son's body to be viewed by thousands in Chicago; enlisted *Jet* magazine to disseminate photographs of his swollen, disfigured body; and traveled around the country to tell his story in churches and schools and auditoriums. Because of her, Emmett Till will continue to live in the collective memory of black Americans. Finally, in the 1980s, African American women, who were victims of both racial and sexual harassment, filed the first legal cases used to define case law on sexual harassment. In 1991 the country witnessed the most public sexual harassment hearing in history, brought forth by the professor Anita Hill against (shortly thereafter, the Supreme Court justice) Clarence Thomas, both prominent African Americans. Black women are active help-seekers despite the many institutional and ideological barriers to disclosure.

Types of Violence

"Domestic violence" is overcontrolling, abusive, violent behaviors or threats of violence to family members. It can involve child abuse, elder abuse, and violence between brothers and sisters. "Intimate partner violence" is also a frequent occurrence in American homes. According to national surveys, one in four women, a conservative estimate, will be physically assaulted by a current or former husband or boyfriend over the course of their lifetimes. Abuse comes in many forms but usually falls into one or more of the following major categories, each of which can be seen as a range or continuum of behaviors or patterns:

1. physical abuse—along a continuum from pushing and shoving to battering and use of weapons;

2. sexual abuse—pressure to have sex, forced sexual contact, rape; control of reproductive rights, such as being forced to have an abortion or denied contraceptives;
3. emotional abuse—intentionally hurting her feelings, humiliating, making her feel guilty or ashamed, insulting;
4. verbal abuse—constant put-downs, name calling, swearing;
5. intimidation—making her afraid by using looks, actions, or gestures; destroying her property; displaying weapons;
6. isolation—not allowing the victim the usual freedoms, such as telephone calls and visiting friends; controlling what she reads; using jealousy to justify these actions;
7. financial abuse—preventing her from getting or keeping a job, taking her money, not letting her have access to family income;
8. children—using visitation to harass her, threatening to take the children away, making false reports of child abuse.

Of course, there are different forms of physical violence. Some couples engage in mutual violence that does not escalate beyond pushing, shoving, and slapping. Among other couples, wife battering is more severe and life threatening. Such women are subjected to systematic, serious, and frequent beatings. In addition to physical violence, abusers use threats, deception, harassment, and humiliation to maintain power and control over the victim.

A "cycle of violence" is yet another pattern of relationship abuse. During the first phase, referred to as tension-building, the batterer may be irritable, hostile, and use minor violence. The victim nervously "walks on egg shells," as she mistakenly believes that she can control the abuser's behavior by cooking his favorite meals, keeping the children quiet, or becoming a "better wife." Despite her efforts, the tension escalates as the abuser moves to phase two, the acute battering stage, where the most serious violence erupts. The victim tries to protect herself by fighting back, calling the police, or fleeing. In phase three, the loving contrition or "honeymoon" period, the batterer may be apologetic, remorseful, and shower the victim with gifts and promises to change. The victim remains hopeful and attempts to salvage the relationship. Eventually, with the return of the conflict and tension, a new cycle of violence begins.

The types and dynamics of domestic violence are quite similar across ethnic and racial groups. However, African American women are at greater risk. According to national studies, they are victimized by an intimate partner at a rate 35 percent higher than that of white women. Much of this violence is severe and can result in hospitalizations, fractures, miscarriages, and head or brain

injuries. Sometimes, the violence is fatal. In fact, murder by intimate partners is the leading cause of death among young African American women between the ages of fifteen and forty-five.

Like their middle-class counterparts, some black women live the American dream of home ownership on safe, tree-lined streets. In contrast, an alarming number of black women and their children live in an urban nightmare of "community violence," which is aggression that occurs outside the home. It may, and often does, involve acquaintances and even family members as victims or perpetrators. In studies conducted in urban areas (Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, DC), approximately 30 percent of the black women surveyed had witnessed a murder, stabbing, or shooting. More common yet is the loss of an intimate to violence. More than one-half of the black women in some studies had lost a friend or relative to neighborhood violence.

In addition to coping with the violence against loved ones, black women must contend with their own victimization. While shopping, waiting for the bus, or performing other routine daily activities, they often experience unwanted sexual attention in the form of catcalls, leers, winks, and pinches. The intimidation can escalate to verbal or physical assault if the victim does not respond to the street harasser. Although this behavior may seem insignificant, the message is clear: black women are sexual objects and cannot freely travel in their communities. Sometimes the violence escalates to sexual assault.

Although most rapes are committed by acquaintances, strangers also assault black women. In her book *I Will Survive: The African American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse*, Lori Robinson recounts the trauma of being blindfolded, gagged, and raped by two armed gunmen who forced their way into her apartment.

While negotiating violence in their homes and the streets, black women must also confront sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment can be categorized into two types. There is "quid pro quo," which refers to the exchange of sexual favors for special privileges, such as a raise, promotion, or a better grade in school. Creating a hostile environment is another form of harassment. In these cases, the behavior is subtler, but equally destructive. The supervisor or teacher may display pornographic pictures, ask inappropriate questions about sexuality, or make negative comments about women in general. This behavior results in an unpleasant work atmosphere that leaves a woman feeling demeaned and humiliated.

Estimates of sexual harassment in the lives of African American women have varied widely. Generally, compared with Caucasian women, black women and other women of color reported higher rates of sexual harass-

ment, ranging from 60 percent to 85 percent. In addition, sexual and racial harassment can be combined in unique ways for African American women. Sometimes the behavior is covert. For example, black women in positions of authority may have conflicts with the white clerical staff. They may refuse to make coffee or copies, duties they had performed in the past for a white supervisor. Some black women supervisors perceive this as a refusal by white employees to engage in behaviors that may be construed as "serving" a black woman. These behaviors can also be an effort to make her job more difficult by creating unnecessary barriers. Other times, the actions may be subtly overt and include behaviors that are described as sexually harassing, but not directly racist. Instead, these experiences reflect assumptions and stereotypes about black women's sexuality, such as their availability for sex. For instance, one woman was told by her white male coworker, "I bet you are a slave to sex." Yet another category, considered overt, combines obvious racist and sexist intentions. For example, one interviewed black woman was repeatedly asked to pose for pictures because her white male coworker "loved big, sexy, black women."

Victims

Anyone can be a victim of violence. However, despite economic and social advancement, hundreds of years of victimization and race, gender, and class discrimination have not been erased, and African American women continue to be overrepresented among categories that are most vulnerable to violence. Typical victims are young, single, impoverished black women who live in urban communities. Women who fit this demographic profile lack economic resources because they live at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression. As a result, they are forced to remain in violent partnerships, live in dangerous neighborhoods, and remain in low-paying jobs where they are often demeaned and harassed.

The experience of victimization can vary across one's life. For example, girls are vulnerable to childhood sexual abuse. Although there is no universal definition, it can involve a range of sexually abusive behaviors that are categorized as contact abuse (fondling or oral penetration) or noncontact abuse (perpetrator exposes his genitals or takes pornographic pictures of the child). Though there are documented cases of female offenders, men are far more likely to be the perpetrators of this kind of assault. The most common perpetrators are fathers, brothers, and uncles. Strangers and trusted adults, such as babysitters and neighbors, also commit child sexual abuse. Physical force and coercion are used to gain compliance. In other cases, the abuser uses subtler forms of power, such as his age or authority as a teacher, coach, or clergy

member to intimidate the child. The "grooming" process begins once the perpetrator has identified the victim, usually a child who is vulnerable in some way. She may be isolated, developmentally delayed, or struggling with family problems. The typical scenario begins with seemingly accidental or affectionate touches. Gradually, the level of sexual contact escalates from fondling to sexual intercourse.

Similarly to women from other ethnic backgrounds, one in four black girls will be sexually abused before age eighteen. However, they are especially vulnerable to severe forms of violence, such as vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. Several factors account for these high rates of severe childhood sexual abuse. Penetration is more likely to occur if the child is older or if the perpetrator is the mother's boyfriend. Black women are overrepresented in these categories. On average, black girls are eight years old when they experience the first incident of sexual abuse; and, owing to marital patterns in the African American community, a substantial number of black girls are exposed to stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends. Sadly, this sets the stage for a lifelong pattern of abuse. A substantial number of these victims will be physically or sexually revictimized during adulthood.

Black adolescents and young adults, similarly to their white counterparts, are frequent victims of dating violence, also referred to as courtship or premarital abuse. In some studies, as many as 90 percent of black high school students and college undergraduates had used verbal aggression, such as swearing, insulting, and name calling, and almost one-third had inflicted or sustained physical aggression. Much of the aggression involved pushing and shoving. However, some black high school students experienced severe dating abuse. The violence is somewhat mutual; certainly, black adolescent women threaten, throw objects, and hit their boyfriends. But, they are also frequent targets of severe physical and sexual violence, including beating, choking, and sexual assault. Violence committed by young black women should not be minimized or excused. However, it is important to consider the context and motives for the violence, which is often self-defense or retaliation for the abuse used against them.

Finally, as the population ages, the rate of elder abuse has increased. Intimate partners who battered elders during young adulthood may continue this abusive pattern. In addition, elders may be neglected or financially exploited by their adult children or nursing home providers and other institutional caregivers. The cultural belief "You just don't hit your momma!" coupled with the revered role of grandparents in the African American community should minimize the risk of elder abuse. Unfortunately, elderly black women are not always

protected. Similarly to their white counterparts, approximately 10 percent will be physically abused, while almost 20 percent will be financially exploited and emotionally abused.

Violence cuts across sexual orientation. It has been documented among dating, engaged, married, and divorced heterosexual couples. Black lesbians and same-sex couples are not immune. Within their intimate relationships, physical violence often occurs in conjunction with emotional and sexual abuse. However, their sexual minority status further complicates the violence. Lesbian batterers can use homophobic control as a method of psychological abuse. For example, without the victim's permission an abuser may "out" her partner. There can be a variety of negative responses when the victim's sexual orientation is revealed. She may be shunned by her family or even evicted from her home. She may be labeled a "bull dyke" and physically or verbally abused by community members. Sadly, some institutions that provide support for others, such as the church, seldom provide sanctuary for battered black lesbians. Employers and coworkers may also be hostile. In addition to the threat of racial and sexual harassment, black lesbians risk losing their jobs if their sexual orientation is discovered.

Finally, violence occurs across socioeconomic class lines. For obvious reasons, poor black women are most vulnerable. However, economic resources may not always protect wealthier black women from victimization. They, too, experience racial and sexual harassment in predominantly white workplaces. Although they may not be traumatized by drive-by shootings, middle-class black women often live in hostile communities. They are followed by security guards as they shop in upscale boutiques, are mistaken for domestic servants, and detained by the police as they drive through suburban neighborhoods. Although such incidents appear mundane, these "microaggressions" can, over time, create stress. Along with these daily "traumas," many middle-class blacks must struggle to maintain their financial security while balancing the demands of childcare and two careers. Not surprisingly, domestic violence can erupt.

Mental and Physical Health Consequences

Despite the violence in their lives, most black women are resilient and do not exhibit long-term negative consequences. Other survivors of sexual abuse, partner violence, and sexual harassment do not fare as well. Certain victims are especially vulnerable to depression, for example black battered women who experience multiple incidences of sexual victimization, such as marital rape or childhood sexual abuse.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is another common psychiatric disorder. First recognized in combat

veterans, PTSD is a response to an extreme stressor that involves threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others. The event may have been experienced or witnessed firsthand, or it may have happened somewhat more remotely, to a family member or friend. Victims often experience a range of symptoms, including nightmares, impaired concentration, feelings of nervousness and anxiety, guilt for surviving while others perished, and panic attacks.

Unfortunately, some victims cope badly with these symptoms. When compared to their peers, black survivors of childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault consistently reported higher rates of substance use and abuse. They used alcohol, marijuana, and crack cocaine to self-medicate and block the pain and memories of abuse. When the pain becomes too intense, other victims commit suicide.

The combination of victimization and mental health problems increases the probability that African American women will experience physical and sexual health problems. For instance, physically and sexually abused black women, particularly if they had experienced multiple victimizations, reported higher rates of unintended pregnancies, abortions, and reproductive health problems, such as decreased sexual desire, painful intercourse, genital irritation, repeated vaginal infections, and problems conceiving. High rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were also common among black survivors of childhood sexual abuse, dating violence, partner violence, and rape.

In general, victimized black women perceived less control over their sexuality. Depression and substance abuse can make it especially difficult for black survivors to make healthy sexual choices. These women may be at increased risk for STDs and reproductive health problems for several other reasons. First, the fear of additional violence makes some survivors reluctant to demand condom use and safe sex practices.

Second, some victimized black women engage in risky sexual behaviors, including prostitution, anal sex, group sex, and partner swapping. To conclude, many survivors are resilient and have happy, productive lives despite their victimization. However, other survivors experience serious mental and physical health problems. It is clear that living with violence can drain energy that could go toward more self-enhancing activities.

Barriers to Escaping Violence

Black women face additional challenges when they try to escape the violence in their lives. Similarly to their white counterparts, battered black women's efforts to terminate abusive relationships may occur in stages: learning to survive the abuse, preparing to leave, coping with the

initial crisis of leaving, sustaining their separation from the abuser, and healing emotionally. With economic resources, black women do move to safer neighborhoods. However, white suburbia can be hazardous to black women emotional health in other ways.

Many of the barriers black women face are institutional. For example, they often have negative interactions with social service agencies. Some black women are disrespected, mistreated, and, in some cases, sexually harassed by medical providers. Police officers have a history of not responding when black women call for assistance, even when children are present. Battered women's shelters may be culturally insensitive and unwelcoming environments.

Oppressive welfare policies also make it difficult for black women to escape violent relationships. Specifically, policies such as the Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Promotion Act of 2003 reduce opportunities for education and training while promoting marriage and "family values" as a solution for poverty. Without adequate financial resources, more black women will remain trapped or resort to homicide to end battering relationships. As evidence, Jody Raphael interviewed Bernice, a battered black woman who endured brutal partner abuse, violent rapes, stalking, and blocked access to birth control. The author demonstrates how public assistance regulations can make it difficult for women to escape poverty and domestic violence.

Suggestions for Intervention

There are various strategies that can be used to improve the quality of black women's lives. First, the wide range of violence in the lives of black women needs to be addressed. This includes domestic violence (child abuse, intimate partner violence, and elder abuse), community violence, and sexual and racial harassment in the workplace. There also needs to be acknowledgement about how such violence varies across life span, sexual orientation, and social class. It is also important to challenge oppressive images. Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel stereotypes are rooted in history. They continue to exist and are frequently used to justify violence against black women.

The economic plight of black women must be improved. More economic resources, better jobs, and educational opportunities should dramatically reduce the rates of violence. Institutional barriers must be dismantled to help African American women gain access to culturally sensitive medical, legal, social services, and other support systems to deal with the mental and physical health consequences of violence. Many victims find comfort in spirituality, literature, art, and music.

The activism crucial to addressing this issue can take many forms. Community members can develop media campaigns or violence prevention programs, and

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CIVIL RIGHTS RALLY in Brooklyn, New York, July 1978. These women were protesting against police brutality and racism in their community. (© Bettye Lane.)

professionals could assist by volunteering their services. It is particularly helpful if activism takes place in a black feminist environment in which participants work to eliminate race, class, and gender oppression. For example, the harassment of Hill motivated thousands of black women to issue "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves." This statement of outrage about the long history of violence against black women appeared in the *New York Times*.

Finally, community members and professionals need to be educated. Therapists, nurses, police officers, clergy members, friends, and relatives will be called on to assist survivors. They should become knowledgeable about violence in the lives of black women.

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—CAROLYN M. WEST

VISUAL ARTS. For the past one hundred fifty years, conditions of ignorance and suppression have been challenged by black women artists whose work reflects the exhilaration of social and political change. Now, with the speed and accuracy with which both images and sound can encompass the entire world, things that influence us, and how we interpret them, are multiplying. One thing remains constant: a person drawn to the making of images is trying to understand the world and her place in it.