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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

University College

Department of American Culture Studies

**THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS ON THE
EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVORS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE IN THE
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

By

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A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
INTRODUCTION OF PROBLEM.....	1
BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM.....	2
RATIONALE, RELEVANVE AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	7
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.....	10
DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	12
METHODOLOGY.....	14
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	18
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	21
HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.....	21
BLACK FEMINISM AND GENDERED VIOLENCE.....	25
INTERSECTIONALITY AND GENDERED VIOLENCE.....	28
BLACK MALE PRIVILEGE AND GENDERED VIOLENCE.....	31
COLLECTIVISM AND GENDERED VIOLENCE.....	36
NARRATIVE OF SURVIVORS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE BY AFRICAN AMERIAN MEN THROUGH THE LENS OF BLACK MALE PRIVILEGE.....	42
NARRATIVE OF SURVIVORS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE BY AFRICAN AMERIAN MEN THROUGH THE LENS OF COLLECTIVISM.....	53
CONCEPTIONS OF THE “BLACK SUPERWOMAN” HOW THEY IMPACT COLLECTIVISM AND THE CULTURAL SENSITIVITY OF RESOURCH PROVIDERS.....	56
CONCLUSION.....	61
RESTATING THE PROBLEM.....	61
METHOD OF STUDY.....	61
LIMITATIONS.....	62
FUTURE RESEARCH.....	62
FINDINGS.....	63
Works Cited.....	65

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION OF PROBLEM

If sociologists ought not express their personal values in the academic setting, how then are students to be safeguarded against the unwitting influence of these values which shape the sociologist's selection of problems, his preferences for certain hypotheses or conceptual schemes, and his neglect for others? For these are unavoidable and, in this sense, there is and can be no value-free sociology. The only choice is between an expression of one's values, as open and honest as it can be, this side of the psychoanalytic couch, and a vain ritual of moral neutrality which, because it invites men to ignore the vulnerability of reason to bias, leaves it at the mercy of irrationality.
(Gouldner 1962, 212)

Gouldner states it plainly. It is nearly impossible and mildly insincere as researchers not to admit some modicum of influence from our personal experiences. It is the passion incited by these experiences that formulates the questions and hypotheses of our inquisitive spirits.

That no research question can intrinsically be "value-free," validates the researchers' inability to detach entirely from their "subjects". It becomes fairly obvious then, that as an African-American woman and a survivor of sexual assault, there is some direct correlation between the fundamental questions posed in my research and my personal experience (Gouldner 1962)

In evaluating the cultural and environmental factors that impact the experiences of survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in the African American community, I called less upon my personal experience as a survivor and more upon my experience with

the absence of discourse surrounding sexual assault and domestic violence in the African American community.

Considering my personal experiences in the African American community, I have noticed that particularly distressing themes: sexual assault, domestic violence, sexuality, mental disorders, etc. are often aggressively and expertly avoided. I have always desired to understand why that is. What about the African American community invites and perhaps compels, women especially, to remain silent about these issues? Certainly this is not a solely personal observation. In the following chapter an analysis of the socio-historical factors that promote silence will be addressed. Most commonly it seems this silence is in response to a prevailing historical mistreatment of African American men by law enforcement as well as an attempt to protect African American women from the perpetual imagery of sexual deviance purported by society.

Maya Angelou contends, “There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.” The untold stories of African American female survivors of sexual assault have rendered the plight of this community ostensibly invisible. But how are the voices and experiences of African American women different?

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

One can dissect the cultivation of what Darlene Clark Hine refers to as the “culture of dissemblance,” employed by African American women to uphold the politics of respectability. Respectability, so earnestly coveted by most African American women,

amounts to the cultural attempt of these women to curtail further accusations as perverse, deviant and, insatiable sexual beings. Historically, as is the case at present, most African American women have always acted with the intent of protecting their community, and reactions to gendered violence have been no different. Hine agrees that:

Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. (Hine 1989, 915)

But while it is the prevailing cultural response to the systematic racial and gender-based discrimination, not all African American women subscribed to this culture of silence.

Black women began to make the enduring injustice of gender-based violence known through literature and open testimony of their attacks. “Virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape.” (Hine 1989, 912-913)¹ Cases began to multiply, following emancipation when Black women began reporting the sexual and domestic violence they encountered. Interracial sexual violence against Black women faced was employed as a weapon by White men - previously situated under a legislative regime that entitled them to control over the African American form, to maintain social order and continue to relegate the African American community to the status of second-class

¹ Two works of slave narratives Hine mentions in particular are Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes: or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868). More modern articles of literature that similarly purvey the gruesome acts of violence and abuse Black women endured include: Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982).

citizen. This violence worked to reinforce the debilitating principle that Black women's bodies were still not their own and their Black men could do nothing to protect them. And, as if sexual violation was not degrading enough, the bold Black women who chose to accuse their attackers were denied their civil liberties when cases went unprosecuted and reports were dismissed.

These unprosecuted and often dismissed cases of brutal gang rapes from the Jim Crow era are only now being acknowledged, publicized and reconciled. In the revealing journal article, "It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped": Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization and the African American Freedom Struggle" (2003), historian Danielle McGuire begins to recount the gripping tales of sexual attacks on Black women, and by proxy, the Black community, by their White male counterparts. Far from being complicit, the African American community was often enraged by the blatant injustice of the judicial system in cases of sexual violence against Black women. In fact, these experiences only further substantiate the distrust of law enforcement and the legal system by the African American community.

McGuire shares one account in particular, that of Mrs. Recy Taylor of Abbeville, Alabama, that has gained recent national coverage and begins to depict a legislative shift in addressing gendered violence against African American women. Nearly 70 years ago in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944, Recy Taylor, age 24, was abducted and gang raped by six white men while walking home from Rock Hill Holiness Church. As it is recounted:

...A carload of six White men pulled alongside her, pointed a gun at her head, and ordered her to get into the car. They drove her to a vacant patch of land where Herbert Lovett pointed his rifle at Taylor and demanded she get out of the car and “get them rags off or I will kill you and leave you down here in the woods.” Lovett held her at gunpoint while each of the white men took turns “ravishing” her. After the men raped her, Lovett blindfolded her, pushed her into the car, and dropped her off in the middle of town. (McGuire 2004, 910)

Taylor subsequently reported her rape to her father, her husband and the Abbeville county Sheriff. Marvin White, the defense attorney for the six men who openly admitted to raping Taylor, offered Taylor’s husband \$600 to drop the charges contending that the monetary settlement should more than suffice for the rape of his wife. No more than a month passed before the jury had heard Taylor’s case, including in court confessions to the rape, and refused to indict the defendants. Since publication of McGuire’s article, Taylor’s case garnered support from nearly 20,000 during a national campaign, by the online social change movement Change.org petitioning a public apology for the survivor. On March 29th, 2011, the Alabama House took momentous action in the movement to end violence against women when they unanimously passed a resolution to apologize to Taylor for state and the court’s failure to uphold justice and prosecute her assailants.

Though legislation regarding sexual assault has changed, the legacy of such blatant disregard for African American female survivors of sexual assault remains an ever-

present memory for Black women, further supporting the inclination to disengage from association with law enforcement.

Women's movements have struggled for this caliber of recognition for decades. Political discourse finally began in 1993, at the second World Human Rights Conference in Vienna, the United Nations ratified a "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women," globally recognizing that women's rights were inseparable from human rights and opening the door for politicians and activists to create programs to further protect those rights.

In 1994 the Violence Against Women Act [VAWA] was signed into law both as a reaction to international political action and as a federal response to violence against women. American Bar Association Governmental Affairs Director Robert D. Evans, spoke to the value of VAWA and the necessity for its continued reauthorization by Congress. Evans contended the Violence Against Women Act:

Has made a difference in the last decade in how our courts and legal system respond to domestic violence and its victims.

He explained that VAWA-funded programs, including the Civil Legal Assistance and STOP Grant Programs, have improved and aided in the prosecution of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse cases; provided necessary training and support for law enforcement personnel; and increased civil legal services for victims of domestic violence.

VAWA also has increased public awareness of domestic violence as well as an understanding that it takes the coordinated efforts of all members of a community to prevent domestic violence and to stop it once it has begun.

(American Bar Association 2005, 5)

To some extent, VAWA represents a paradigmatic shift wherein the struggle to end violence against women is recognized as not only a problem for those survivors of brutality, but also holds societal implications if overlooked. While this recognition is necessary and long overdue, the imperfection of VAWA becomes clear in the execution of the act. In relying on a criminal justice system notorious for discrimination against minority populations and insensitivity to community needs, it is made near impossible to effectively address culturally specific phenomenon that influence both the nature of domestic violence and rates of reporting such attacks.

RATIONALE, RELEVANVE AND SIGNIFICANCE

It is true that progress has been made. There are now a multitude of task forces, federal policies, legal principles, and resource providers available to women who are survivors of gendered violence. It is true that recognition of gendered violence as an epidemic has inspired funding, accountability, and awareness. It is also true that our society – specifically these United States – still operates under the guise of patriarchy wherein male-dominance is expected and encouraged; and such a structure manifests its authority, power, and control socially, politically, and economically, resulting in a severe deficiency in both the empathy and the impetus to act on behalf of women's issues.

In 2000 the National Institute of Justice and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention jointly conducted a survey exploring the “Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence.” A study of a “nationally representative sample” was conducted “of 8,000 U.S. women and 8,000 U.S. men” (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000, iii) was conducted to evaluate the prevalence and experiences of intimate partner violence from diverse cultural backgrounds. The research found that non-white men and women suffer significantly higher rates of intimate partner violence and concludes on the issue of minority experiences that,

These findings underscore a need for research on intimate partner violence among specific racial and ethnic groups. As the survey may exaggerate differences between whites and nonwhites and, at the same time, obscure very large differences among persons of diverse minority backgrounds.

(Tjaden and Thoennes 2000, 25)

Statistics that have been gathered to evaluate varying cultural experiences concerning gendered violence do tend to be a consistent indicator that African American women on average experience more gendered violence; are less likely to report their victimization; and are less likely to access resources made available to survivors. A 2004 study showed Black women experienced intimate partner violence at a rate of 35 percent higher than White women, and about 2.5 times the rate of women of other races. (Rand and Rennison 2004, 7) Unfortunately, according to Feminist Majority Foundation, Black women “are less likely than whites to use social services, battered women’s programs, or go to the hospital because of domestic violence” (Feminist Majority Foundation 2009). And though the rate of violence against African American women is higher, the Bureau of

Justice Statistics Special Reports estimates that for every one Black woman that reports her rape, at least 15 Black women do not report theirs. (Hart and Rennison 2003, 7) Both empirical and anecdotally-based reports suggest the rationale for such low reporting includes a compulsion to protect the African American community – the supposition being that reporting domestic violence reinforces the stereotype of the African Americans as a violent people; a fear of mistreatment by both police and law enforcement; and expectations – from both their community and external forces – of the strong Black woman..

Since we no longer live in the Jim Crow era where gendered violence was utilized as a weapon of terror to assert the status of White males in the social hierarchy as supreme; since feminist activists and women’s groups have sprouted up in defense of the female sexuality; and since policy has been created to protect and prosecute female survivors and male perpetrators respectively, why then is there even a need for discussion surrounding the experiences of survivors of gendered violence - and what makes the African American experience different from any other?

In all of the discussion surrounding women’s liberation, feminism, even the civil rights movement, the particular beliefs and concerns of African American women were not and still are not readily addressed. In fact, it seems that in every activist movement Black women have chosen to involve themselves; they were co-opted into the larger group, and stripped of their “other” competing status. The women’s rights movements asserted that white feminist women acted on behalf of all women and race was immaterial to this

particular group's struggle. During the civil rights movement African American women were Black first and gender was an extraneous attribute. But to be Black and to be a woman – a double minority² - is a wholly different experience than it is to belong to one, singularly defined.

And, while the statistics do serve to depict the scope of gender violence directed at women, many research studies and institutions have failed to problematize the cultural dimension of the epidemic. To conflate the issues of violence against women and violence against African Americans as a universal monolithic problem is to ignore the cultural factors and implications intrinsic to intra-racial violence of this sort. These issues can be seen most readily in the presentation of statistical data – wherein in rationale for omitting racial variables offers that is the issue is only gender and not racially related – and insufficient cultural competency on the part of service providers. When denied that recognition that the intersection of gender and race fosters a wholly different experience, we fail to problematize the complementary dimensions of an individuals' identity. And, without recognition of the problem, there can be no solution.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study will examine the cultural and environmental factors mediating silence surrounding gendered violence in the African American community, utilizing St. Louis,

² Here I must acknowledge that there is in fact an additional status of triple minority, where to be Black, a woman, and homosexual is an entirely different monster. While the majority of the interviewees for my study were heterosexual women in physically and sexually abusive relationships, I was afforded the opportunity to interview one openly gay Black woman whose experience with resource providers was indeed markedly different than those of her heterosexual counterparts.

Missouri as a case study. I hypothesize that two cultural phenomenon are at play: “Black Male Privilege” (BMP) in conjunction with “collectivism.” Black Male Privilege (a term that will be further defined in the following section) is in essence, the privilege afforded African-American men by their female counterparts in an attempt to empower the subsection of the African American community that is seemingly relentlessly disparaged by the remainder of society to and condemned to fail.

I posit the combination of these cultural phenomena work both to create and normalize a climate of silence, including silence surrounding gendered violence. I also suggest that these phenomena serve to perpetuate a societal culture of acceptability of gendered violence and preclude the understanding of the intersectional dynamics of race and gender; creating, amongst other issues, insufficient access to culturally sensitive resources for such violence for survivors.

Ideally, these thesis findings will contribute to our understanding of how Black Male Privilege and collectivism influence the actions of African American women – particularly survivors of gendered violence. These findings will also help to uncover facets of the African American community that create an environment where these phenomena can occur; what must be altered in the African American community to end this silence; and what changes can be made to pre-existing survivor resources to better accommodate the needs of the African American community.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In the current project, gendered violence will refer to both sexual assault and domestic violence, primarily in heterosexual relationships wherein the female is the victim and the male the perpetrator. The United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) Office on Violence Against Women defines Domestic violence as

A pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone. (US Department of Justice 2010)

And the USDOJ Office on Violence Against Women defines sexual assault as,

Any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs by force or without consent of the recipient of the unwanted sexual activity. Falling under the definition of sexual assault is sexual activity such as forced sexual intercourse, sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling and attempted rape. (US Department of Justice 2010)

For the purposes of this discussion, I define Black Male Privilege (BMP) as the privilege wherein African American men are allowed to dominate the discourse related to issues within the Black community without hearing or considering their female counterparts. Utilizing the rationale that the injustice and degradation Black men experience – because

of racism and discrimination in society at large - predominate those of Black women, BMP coerces the Black community to consider Black men's issues as the primary concern.

As privilege often allows, Black Male Privilege is one practiced almost exclusively inadvertently; and the collectivist ideology of Black women helps to corroborate this privilege.

Collectivism, as it relates to this discussion, is an ideology, which suggests that the welfare of the Black community as a whole supersedes that of the individual; the community in this case referring to the state of Black men. In the 1995 study "A Socially Contextualize Model of African American Identity" - published by the American Psychological Association - Oyserman, Gant and Ager deconstruct the causal factors that sway a population towards a collectivist mentality. Utilizing the concept of "stereotype vulnerability," Oyserman et al reasons that groups threatened by negative presumptions of their community may become insular in as a means of group-preservation. However, collectivism is not purely reactionary. In the African American community the practice of collectivism is a value system that seeks to preserve, uplift and sustain their community. Oyserman et al, noticed a generational cultivation of gendered socialization in the African American community that begins to explain the perpetuity of the practice of collectivism.

In addition to gendered patterns of racism, gender appears to play an important role in socialization in the family. Although African Americans tend to socialize their

children in terms of egalitarian gender roles, parental expectations and behaviors appear to differ somewhat for boys and girls...African American women remember their parents focusing on African American community and heritage while men are more likely to report receiving parental messages about individual initiative, action and ability to overcome difficulties. **INSERT CITATION. DECIDE IF ENTIRE QUOTATION IS NEEDED.**

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand what, if any, cultural and environmental factors directly impact the experiences of survivors of gendered violence in the African American community. In particular this study focused on heterosexual relationships between African Americans in which the survivor was female and the perpetrator male.

While there is substantial data relating the statistical occurrence of acts of sexual violence against women of color as well as offender-based and womanist/black feminist approaches to understanding why violence against women occurs, there does seem to be a lack of research chronicling the phenomenon unique to the experiences of African American survivors of such gendered violence. And, because the most accurate source of information regarding such experiences are from survivors themselves; interviews with African American women survivors were conducted to gain insight as to how, most often times unbeknownst to them, these phenomenon of Black Male Privilege and collectivism are manifested.

This study was crafted utilizing the qualitative research method of narrative analysis. Open-ended questions were employed with interviewees to allow them the opportunity to interpret the question and recreate an intimate understanding of their experiences with sexual assault and/or domestic violence. As Carolyn K. Riessman states in her volume on Narrative Analysis

To the sociologically oriented investigator, studying narratives is additionally useful for what they reveal about social life – culture “speaks itself” through an individual’s story. It is possible to examine gender inequalities, racial oppression, and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers. Narrators speak in terms that seem natural, but we can analyze how culturally and historically contingent these terms are. (Riessman 1993, 5)

This method was necessary to not only utilize the narratives shared with interviews, but to gain greater access to underlying meanings of the shared information.

Subjects were recruited both from personal contacts and service providers. A combination of ten sexual assault resource centers and battered women’s shelters were contacted to recruit clients for interviews. Due to confidentiality agreements, no shelters, interview participants or administrative personnel will be named or in any way made identifiable in this study.

It proved extremely difficult to make contact with resource providers to recruit participants. As should be expected, contact of service providers was met with

skepticism and many providers were reticent to accept my research proposal. Of the ten service providers contacted, only three shared an interest in allowing research to be conducted. Many directors were concerned that the nature of my study could cause a traumatic relapse and declined participation. The preeminent concern of all service providers is to maintain the safety and anonymity of all clients, as is to be expected, making the partnerships developed with the few service providers willing, sacrosanct.

Some resource providers posted an informational recruitment flyer regarding this study in their facility with contact information for those interested. Eligibility requirements included: 21+ years of age, female and survivor of sexual assault and/or domestic violence. The race of the survivor was not specified in the eligibility requirements because I believe that an experience in the African American community does not necessarily preclude women of all ethnicities.³

After numerous meetings with the residential and executive directors, one battered women's shelter in particular allowed me to conduct a presentation at their facility. All clients were gathered for their weekly meeting where I presented my research and gathered volunteers to interview at the facility.

³ While African American community experience is a unique and complex one, it is not exclusive in that only African American males and females encounter it. Non-Black members who are fully immersed in the community by proxy and relationship, I argue, are also privy to the African American community experience. While I acknowledge too, that as a Non-Black member of the community, there are differences in the experience – because race loyalty is a powerful force in the community, for the purposes of this study Non-Black women in relationships with Black men were considered.

In total 10 interviews were conducted. Two phone interviews were conducted with sexual assault survivors made privy to my research through personal contacts; three were administrators of resource providers; one domestic violence and sexual assault survivor contacted me from a recruitment flyer posted at a service provider; and the remaining four domestic violence and sexual assault survivors were volunteers from the battered women's shelter where my research was presented.

Of the participants interviewed, two were non-Black women previously in abusive interracial relationships with Black men and one recently escaped an abusive homosexual relationships with a Black woman. All participants were in varying stages of recovery and elapsed time from their experiences with gendered violence ranging from 20 years to three weeks.

All participants signed informed consent waivers and were notified that complete anonymity would be upheld both during the interview and in the final product. Participants were informed of the purpose of my research and subsequently asked a series of non-leading questions, which allowed them to recreate a narrative understanding of their experiences as survivors.

One interview was conducted with each participant, which ranged in duration from thirty-five minutes to two and a half hours depending on the comfort and verbosity of the participant. All participants interviewed in person received a small incentive for their participation. All interviews were recorder, transcribed within a week of their recording,

and all audio files discarded to protect the participant's anonymity. No names or current locations were used during the recording of interviews.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An intersectional approach was used to evaluate the cultural discourse that fosters the often times debilitating phenomenon of collectivism. An intersectional approach implores the individual to realize that identities, i.e. race and gender, are not mutually exclusive; rather it is the combination of the discrimination and oppression one is subjected to from both identities that creates the whole experience. Additionally the interplay of discrimination received as a member of one identity, may incite further discrimination when coupled with a second minority identity. In her article, “Mapping the Margins”, Kimberlé Crenshaw provides anecdotal evidence of the compounding nature of multiple minority identities and concludes that, “intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.” (Williams 1994, 96)

Scholars who are advocates of the intersectional approach suggest that feminist discourse and antiracist discourse serve to marginalize the concerns of Black women requiring them to identify primarily as a woman or Black to benefit from the activism of their respective groups.

Feminists of color have argued that neither feminism nor antiracism alone can adequately describe the social world, nor succeed in justly changing it.

Intersectionality has been the most important analytic and methodological tool in a generation for linking together discrete social histories, theories, and movements. (Berger and Guidroz 2009, 114)

And, in evaluating the disjointed nature of feminism and antiracism – where Black women are concerned – the phenomenon of Black Male Privilege may begin to become a more palpable subject. Here a Black Feminist approach is used to explore the aspects of the - already oppressed - Black community that abet an environment where such further subjugation, like that suffered under the guise of Black Male Privilege, can occur.

Black feminism could be considered the functional arm of intersectionality, stemming from the same exclusionary practices antiracist and feminist discourse employ. Black feminism however, may have a bit more of a contentious relationship with feminism however. Historically, Black feminism arose from a schism with White feminists. White feminists made it abundantly clear that the sole concern of their advocacy was women's issues, of which race was not a factor.

Patricia Hill Collins suggests that Black feminist thought, “consists of specialized knowledge created by African American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it.” (Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment 1991, 22) In

Race, Identity and citizenship: A Reader, Collins breaks down the definition, discourse and derision bundled in the term Black feminism.

When given these two narrow and false choices, black women routinely choose “race” and let the lesser question of “gender” go. In this situation, those black women who identify with feminism must be recoded as being either non-black or less authentically black.

The term black feminist also disrupts a longstanding and largely questioned reliance on black racial solidarity as a deep taproot in black political philosophies, especially Black Nationalist and cultural pluralist frameworks. (Collins, *What is a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond* 1999, 13)

The anecdotal responses Collins shares from community members to those women who proclaim to be Black feminist further illustrates the deep-rooted communal and patriarchal nature of the African American community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Issues of sexual assault and domestic violence have only recently made their way to the forefront of political and academic discourse. In fact, prior to the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, there was no policy on the books protecting the sexual rights of women.

Coverture laws required that a woman's legal rights were merged with her husband's; even long after those regulations were obsolete, women still lacked equal rights in marriage, as they were required to be sexually available to their husbands – with no laws against marital rape, husbands could demand (or force) sex with no legal repercussions. A woman's place as a personal servant for her husband in exchange for financial security was enshrined into law. (Friedman 2008, 14)

Though some theoretical frameworks in this field may be young, seminal works in the field have forever changed the course of discussion analyzing and understanding the phenomenon conducive to an environment where gendered violence goes under reported and explained away by women seeking to uphold the integrity of their community.

The movement towards gender equality, or at least political recognition that violence against women is an issue that breaches the private sphere, started with the activism of

women. In 1992 Diane M. Bush commented on the government responses to domestic violence in the United States and India. In her article, “Women’s Movements and State Policy Reform aimed at Domestic Violence Against Women” Bush contends that it is out of these women’s movements that progress has been made.

Public recognition of domestic violence against women as a social problem in both countries paved the way for further movement demands. Initially, the BWM (battered women’s movement) and hegemonic ideology that the family was a private sphere, not subject to state interests or action, and that the state had no interest in the family. These movements also challenged the notion that women’s interests were identical with “family interests.” In both countries, SMOs (social movement organizations) began to focus on changing police practices as a concrete way to help women survivors and prevent further violence. Both sets of movements were able to get reform enacted that criminalized domestic violence against women. (Bush 1992, 599)

But was the women’s movement and feminist activism enough for *all* women?

The all-encompassing notion promoted by feminists that women’s issues are universal is one that has raised great concern, especially in the African American community. The conflation of womanhood and racial minority experiences left an entire group of women ostracized, their needs unaddressed. In *A Cross-National Comparison* of violence against women compiled by S. Laurel Weldon, she considers the issue of women and feminist movement. “The central question for feminist theory over the past decade has been how

the group “women” can be seen as politically relevant in itself, when class, race, ethnic, and other differences significantly divide women.” (Weldon 2002, 71)

The largest issue it seems, when championing to end violence against women, is considering the variables, which lead to such violence. From a strictly feminist prospective, gender is the ultimate determining factor in defining the impetus for violence against women. And many scholars, ostensibly in defense of the Black community and as a effort to curtail further negative stereotypes concerning heightened violence and Black male aggressiveness, have promoted the idea that gender and class supersede the issue of race with regard to violence against women. In *Black Intimacies* Shirley A. Hill describes the deleterious effect of those who have worked to “refute derogatory images of black people.” Hill believes that such protection, while well intentioned, has often times, “...led to downplaying race as a factor in intimate violence, or at least camouflaging it under the banner of class.” (Hill 2005, 173)

Beth E. Richie has also found flaw with the original feminist approach to research on violence against women. As a sociologist and activist in the movement to end violence against women, Richie focuses on the ways in which race and/or ethnicity coupled with class impact experiences of survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in the African American community. Richie maintains that

The antiviolence movement and its central “rhetoric paradigm” that claims domestic violence “can happen to anyone,” has meant that, “those who mattered most in a society got the most visibility and the most public

sympathy,” even to the point of passing antiviolenace policies, such as arrest laws, that further endangered black women. She sees the experiences of black women as having been “de-gendered” and placed in a special category. (Hill 2005, 183)

Scholars evaluating gendered violence of African American women date their experiences back to the sexual exploitation that ran rampant during and beyond slavery. Sojourner Truth’s “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech at the Women’s Rights Convention of 1851 in Akron, Ohio offers an enlightened diagnosis of the state of race and gender relations in America. Debora Gray White takes this analysis a step further in her volume, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* by relating Truth’s experiences to those of all enslaved women.

To the question “Ar’n’t I a woman?: the Silver Lake audience answered “No.” It was an answer given daily to the millions of enslaved women who worked in Southern plantations. They were the only women in American who were sexually exploited with impunity, tripped and whipped with a lash, and worked like oxen. In the nineteenth century, when the nation was preoccupied with keeping women I the home and protecting them, only enslaved women were so totally unprotected by men or by law. Only Black women had their womanhood so totally denied. (D. G. White 1999, 162)

Out of this legacy of physical abuse and sexual exploitation Black women endured, and seemingly no political recourse from civil rights organization or feminist groups, emerged activism designed specifically to address the concerns of Black women.

BLACK FEMINISM AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

Often considered the amongst the most significant documents produced by black feminists, The Combahee River Collective – a Black feminist Lesbian organization of scholars – issued a statement chronicling the development, political ideology and social identity of Black feminism. In 1977, following a series of meetings, the Combahee River Collective generated and published “A Black Feminist Statement,” sharing their general concerns and dissection four major issues necessary to address in order to incite notable political discourse and social change.

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking... As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 13)

The collective along with additional scholars and activist of Black feminism acknowledged that their politics rode in along the second wave of women’s activism.

Partially a reaction to the existing structure of feminism, Paula Giddings shares the political differentiation between Black and White women.

The white wife was hoisted on a pedestal so high that she was beyond the sensual reach of her own husband.... In the nineteenth century, Black women's resistance to slavery took on an added dimension.... For women this meant spurning their morally inferior roles of mistress, whore, and breeder – though...they were “rewarded” for acquiescing in them. It was the factor of reward that made this resistance a fundamentally feminist one, for at its base was a rejection of the notion that they were the master's property. (Giddings 2001, 43)

And resolved that fringe treatment of issues concerning women of color by civil and women's rights organizations was reason to create a movement for their underrepresented minority statuses.

It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women and antisexist, unlike those of black and white men. (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 14)

The beliefs of the Combahee River Collective and all Black feminists also introduced the underpinnings of the concept of intersectionality.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our

lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression, which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16)

Patricia Hill Collins, another progenitor of the ideology of Black feminist thought, aligns with the beliefs of the collective; that an autonomous group and movement is necessary for two fundamental reasons,

First, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought re-conceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance.

Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory and in the sociology of knowledge concerning the ways of assessing “truth.” Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications. (Collins 1990, 222)

The principle of interconnectedness that flows through Black Feminist thought and Black feminism served as the foundation in the formation of the methodological study of intersectionality; a theory credited with first being highlighted by the Black feminist (Crenshaw 1989).

INTERSECTIONALITY AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

Intersectionality meets Black feminism where theory meets practical application. The editor of *African Americans Doing Feminism* relays this concept flawlessly in the introduction where she describes the activism attached to feminist ideology.

We reject monolithic notions of what an “African American feminist practice” is, or even what an African American feminist is. However, certain themes emerge, such as (1) how interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class) affect Black women’s lives; (2) the adoption of multipronged approach to problem-solving that tackles multiple inequalities, as well as Black women’s multiple identities and roles, and (3) our commitment to addressing both racial and gender equalities, without ranking one as more important than the other. (A. M. White 2010, 3)

In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw discusses the faults in evaluating issues such as domestic violence without using an intersectional approach.

... For Black women, the problem is that they can receive protection only to the extent that their experiences are recognizably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine. If Black women cannot conclusively say that “but for” their race or “but for” their gender they would be treated differently, they are not invited to climb through the hatch but told to wait in the unprotected margin until they can

be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex.

(Crenshaw 1989, 152)

It is for this reason that Crenshaw and others suggest a paradigmatic shift from the current model where considerations of gender discrimination are based on White women's experiences and racial discrimination based on the experiences of Black men. In part, this is because the social construction of race and class disallows the broad acceptance of white women and black men's experiences as universal. "Black men and women live in a society that creates sex-based norms and expectations which racism operates simultaneously to deny; Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women seen as passive." (Crenshaw 1989, 155) As is shared in Zanita Fenton's article, *Silence Compounded*, just as harmful as the misconception of universal experiences is the culturally specific perception of violence – the victims and perpetrators based on gender and race.

... Once our initial focus is on gender, the experienced realities of violence dictate the associations of the private with women and the public with men: "Women are *6 times more likely* than men to experience violence committed by an intimate...men [are] about twice as likely as men to experience acts of violence by strangers. However, when the initial focus is on violence [read: public violence], social conceptualizations are associated most closely with poverty and race, while violence perpetrated by those in the "mainstream" [read: moneyed, white and male] are obscured and treated as aberrational. (Fenton 2002-2003, 277-278)

There is however, some dispute over the efficacy of an intersectional approach. The major concern is that just as minority experiences cannot be universally applied, neither can intersectional approaches. In *Race and Feminist Standpoint Theory*, Anika Mann addresses Patricia Hill Collins' concern on the matter.

According to Collins, it is simple to analyze how race, gender, and class intersect and mutually construct one another in the lives of individuals....

The problem stems in part because intersectionality has the potential to imbue individualism within group analyses... Collins states that intersectionality does not operate in the same way at the individual and group level. (Mann 2010, 107)

Andersen and Collins, co-authors of *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, suggest that in addition to the disadvantaged minority statuses evaluated under the guise of intersectionality, pre-existing structural forces of oppression should be analyzed to effectively understand and create meaningful change using the intersection paradigm with a *structural approach*. They emphasize that in utilizing an intersectional approach, there tends to be a focus on the distinctive struggles varying groups experience in respective groups. They characterize a structural approach as, "analysis and criticism of existing systems of power and privilege; otherwise, understanding diversity becomes just one more privilege those with the greatest access to resource and power." (Anderson and Collins 2001, 3) Andersen and Collins go on to explain that

Analyzing race, class, and gender as they shape different group experiences also involved issues of power, privilege, and equity. This means more than knowing the cultures of an array of human groups. It

means recognizing and analyzing the hierarchies and systems of domination that permeate society and that systematically exploit and control people. (Anderson and Collins 2001, 5-6)

Mann implores however, that we distinguish between a cultural and structural element when analyzing experiences of violence against women.

Domestic violence scholars struggling to achieve a balance between the role of culture make it clear that culture should not be confused with patriarchy. Instead, we should look at how patriarchy operates differently in different cultures. (Mann 2010, 47)

BLACK MALE PRIVILEGE AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

The theory of Black Male Privilege [BMP] is an awkward beast that has been constantly and unknowingly described but was only recently developed and continually defined by the Black male scholar Dr. R L'Heureux Lewis not three years ago. Immediately the concept presents itself as a contradiction, and oxymoron even. How can a group of people that have been so decisively discriminated against and oppressed hold any privilege? In fact, when we consider gender violence and the African American community, images of rape automatically elicit the imagery of Black male lynching, an epidemic during slavery and the Jim Crow era of segregation.

However, in considering the cultural application of patriarchy, perhaps the theory can begin to make sense. Dr. Lewis shares his working definition of this theory during a radio interview with Michel Martin of NPR News' "Tell Me More."

Prof. Lewis: My working definition is really a system of built-in and often overlooked systematic advantages that center the experience and the concerns of black males, while minimizing the power that black males hold.

Martin: So when you say privilege, are you speaking relative to someone?

Prof. Lewis: Absolutely. Black male privilege is first centered as being relative to Black women.

Martin: Give an example.

Prof. Lewis: ...there was actually an incident of sexual assault between a Morehouse student and a Spelman student. And what I found quickly were that black men were – instead of actually talking seriously about issues of sexual assault, which are very common in our community – it became a discussion about the ways in which black men become vilified. (R.

L’Heureux Lewis, interview by Michel Martin, *Tell Me More*, 90.7KWMU FM, March 4, 2010.)

In the African American community, there seems to be a group consensus, at least among men, that the perils and concerns of the community were synonymous with those of Black men. “Much of the African-American male leadership and virtually all of their white males sympathizers believed that the costs of racism were borne primarily by black men, ‘emasculate’ by their lack of economic power.” (Hill 2005, 7) The remaining vestiges of de-masculinization and lynching Black men suffered were reason enough for the community to surround and support their Black male population. That coupled with the myth of the Black Superwoman and the notion slavery has rendered the Black

community a matriarchal society, allowed men to disregard the concerns of women and focus effort and activism on uplifting the image of Black men both in their community and the larger population.

The culprit of this desire to attain Black Macho is in part cultural upbringing and in part the existence of mainstream patriarchal system. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, bell hooks suggests that the resilience of this system of privilege is at least partially due to complacency in its existence. This is not to say the hooks blames survivors of gendered violence for being subjected to it; but more a comment on society's reticence to confront this struggle for power amongst men.

Clearly we cannot dismantle a system as long as we engage in collective denial about its impact on our lives. Patriarchy requires male dominance by any means necessary; hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence. We hear the most about sexist violence in public discourses about rape and abuse by domestic partners...The point of such violence is usually to reinforce a dominator model, in which the authority figure is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain that rule through practices of subjugation, subordination, and submission.

(hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* 2004, 24)

Historically, African American women have been victimized increasingly by Black men following the emancipation of slavery as a means to assert their masculinity and in an attempt to reclaim the position as head of the family. (Hill 2005, 179) Black male activist leaders condoned, even championed the notion that power, which seemed unattainable

for them, could be stolen from their female counterparts as an assertion that, though they Black men fall low on the totem pole, the system of patriarchy afforded them the ability to oppress a more subjugated group.

Support for traditional gender expectations also runs high among African American men who, deprived of other legitimate sources of power, often cling tenaciously to the ideology of male dominance and see controlling black women as crucial to their claim to masculinity. Stung by the “black matriarchy” thesis, many black men appear to become even more blatantly sexist in their demand for female subordination. Even Black Power militants missed the irony of advocating violence to overthrow racial injustice, while insisting on the subordination of women. What makes a woman appealing is femininity,” says Black Nationalist Maulana Ron Karenga, “and she can’t be feminine without being submissive.” (Hill 2005, 98)

The ideal of the Black macho man became synonymous with misogyny; and as Michelle Wallace contends in her exceptionally controversial book, *The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, the myth of the Black superwoman helped to condone the gendered violence against Black women. A community belief was developed that legacy of sexual violence African American women endured during and following slavery equipped them with a strength and resilience that rendered them impenetrable beings. So, while Black men were well aware of violence they employed to dominate their female counterparts, Black men were convinced their women would emerge unscathed and Black women were inclined to accept it, for their community’s sake.

From the intricate web of mythology that surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with the ability to tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really *more* of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman. (Martin 1978, 107)

Black women have remained the supportive backbone of the African American community to a fault. They have accepted this notion that, because they are lauded for possessing this unparalleled strength and resilience, it is their duty to tolerate the Black macho man and all misogynistic acts that accompany him.

To a certain extent, the system of patriarchy practiced by “mainstream” society enables the perpetuation of Black Male privilege and as an absolutely unintended consequence, so too does the practice of collectivism. In the “Black Male Privilege” interview with Dr. Lewis, Michel Martin inquires as to the phenomenon propelling this privilege on.

Martin: What’s driving this (BMP), in your view? Is their idea that group solidarity is so important in the African-American community, somehow the community has made a decision that when there’s an issue involving Black men and Black women, that Black men are favored?

Prof. Lewis: I think you've, unfortunately, identified one of the central issues of Black Male privilege. So often, Black men are used to being under attack that when it comes to being accountable for the actions we may have, we quickly say, well, I couldn't possibly be doing anything wrong. I'm at the bottom of the barrel. What that does is rob us of the opportunity to actually build stronger community and it robs Black men of the chance to actually take hold of the actions that they have so we can empower the community. (R. L'Heureux Lewis, interview by Michel Martin, *Tell Me More*, 90.7KWMU FM, March 4, 2010.)

This is of course not blame the survivor for the perpetuity of Black Male privilege, rather it is to bring light to yet another unique cultural factor that impacts survivors of gendered violence in the African American community.

COLLECTIVISM AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

The philosophy of collectivism is by no means a novel concept; it isn't even necessarily a destructive practice in most instances. However, when collectivism - this emphasis on prioritizing the concerns and progress of the group over the individual - is exercised unconditionally, trouble can arise. When issues of gendered violence arise, racial solidarity or collectivism is applied as an excuse by Black women and an expectation of Black men in an attempt to defend the character of their community.

It almost seems preposterous that a community engrained in the spiritual tradition of the testimonial and inundated by relentless discrimination would chastise any member for sharing their pain. An aspect of collectivism entails, what bell hooks refers to as, “Cultivating the art of dissimulation,” which she suggests has “also created an over-valuation of ‘appearance’ in Black life.” (hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* 1993, 24)

Take for instance a fictional account of sexual violence disclosure such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. The protagonist Miss Celie openly recounts her experiences with incest, rape and domestic violence. Walker’s candor with regard to gendered violence in the Black community was taken as an abomination and disloyal to her own community. (hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* 1993)

In fact, there are numerous accounts of gendered violence in the African American community perpetrated by Black men on Black women that have received national media attention. More often than not, the Black woman’s story was attacked as untrue and to the community, she was perceived as a traitor. The Black men accused were instantly embraced by community leaders especially and fervently defended.

In Kevin Powell’s introspective piece, *Who’s Gonna Take the Weight*, Powell evaluates the harmful effects of a community of Black men who came to expect the forgiving nature of collectivism in the African American community.

...R. Kelly and Mike Tyson cases of sexual misconduct “...which says, to me, in the main, that we have become so warped by our powerlessness, our self-hatreds, our hatreds of Black women, that we will rationalize *any*

sickening behavior that one from our ranks does because we feel it is our birthright as men to have the sexual favors of women, of girls, even if it means taking it forcibly. And because speaking out against someone from our ranks – a Mike Tyson, a Tupac Shakur, an R. Kelly – portends that we are part of the White establishment attack on Black manhood, that we don't understand (!) that Black men are an endangered species. (Powell 2003, 122)

Collectivism and the expectation thereof is by no means a recent phenomenon or one merely reserved for notable members of the community, though these cases do illuminate the extent to which this practice is ingrained. So ingrained in fact, that Black men exploited Black women's bodies at their whim predicated upon their expectation that racial loyalty would protect them. In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver – a leading member of the Black Panther Part – admitted as much.

I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto – in the black ghetto where dark and vicious deeds appear not as aberrations or deviation from the norm, but as part of the Evil of a day – and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. (Cleaver 1968, 14)

In 1991 Mike Tyson, a world-renowned boxer, was accused by Desiree Washington – an African American woman – of rape. While Tyson was indicted for his crime, there was

civil unrest in the Black community over a Black woman publicly accusing a prosperous Black man of such felonious misdoings. In his article *The Social Construction of a Rape Victim*, Kevin Brown contends

Victimization, however, was not confined to Desiree. The implications for African-American women were victimizing as well: “Don’t talk about date rape, because we won’t believe you; you much have consented.” “Don’t cooperate with the Man in taking down a Brother, even if you think he is wrong, especially one who is a celebrity.” “Your concern about your bodies and how males inflict pain on you had to be subordinated until the racial problem is resolved.” (Brown 1999, 156)

In the same year Anita Hill came forward during the Senate Judiciary Committee’s confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas to accuse him of sexual assault. Perhaps tensions were already high with numerous allegations of “respected” Black men brutalizing the bodies of Black women, but the African American community lambasted Anita Hill for her courageous testimony. In *Collard Greens, Clarence Thomas and the High-Tech Rape of Anita Hill*, Melba Boyd shares her view on public reaction to the case.

The periphery comments made by many women and men, even when they believed at any cost, even when they believed Anita Hill was harassed, is reflexive of a cultural code that dictates: “As a black woman, she should have checked him and got him straight from the get go, but she should have *never* exposed him to in front of white America.” In addition to being accorded so little respect and consideration, black women are still expected to eradicate the onslaught of male madness and to endure

indignities simply because to reveal the truth about the devils in the camp would be an embarrassment for the “race.” (Boyd 1992, 44)

African American women are expected to maintain respectability both of their individual self and that of their community, by any means necessary. This internal pressure stems primarily from a fear of public intervention and a distrust of the criminal justice system.

Traci West suggests,

They [black women] feel protective and responsible for assuaging the debilitating impact of white supremacist social violence upon their men. The act of calling “white authorities” for assistance can be seen as the consummate expression of betrayal of him, because this action confirms her collusion with white racism in the “emasculatation” of black men. (West 1999, 85)

Collectivism then, can mean a devastating loss of individual identity, especially for African American women silently enduring the physical and mental anguish of gendered violence.

The historical legacy of racial oppression and the contemporary structural position of African Americans place many African American women in a tragic double bind. For example, how do they seek redress for the violence if doing so opens their abuser to systematic abuse from White, racist institutions? Bell and Mattis (2000) described the psycho-cultural implications for African American women who have internalized the notion that they must remain unwaveringly strong in the face of all

adversity. They have also suggested that African American women may require help “to grieve the loss of their identities as people who have the power to withstand all adversities independently.” (Hampton, Oliver and Magarian 2003, 548)

It is the interplay of all of these cultural phenomenon – Black feminist thought, Black Male Privilege and collectivism - that influence the ways in which gendered violence in the African American community is experienced by survivors, rationalized by perpetrators and concealed by the community. Hill agrees that,

Socially constructed images of African American women and paragons of strength and Black men as the primary victims of racial oppression, misguided efforts to prioritize racial unity over gender justice, and scholarly work aimed at debunking racial myths all inadvertently obfuscate analyses of gendered violence among African Americans. (Hill 2005, 194)

Cultural responses to gendered violence of this community illicit a dire need for introspective qualitative research that may intimately delve into greater understanding of Black women’s experiences as survivors of gendered violence as an amalgamation of identities and enhance the cultural competency of resource providers, policy-makers and the criminal justice system.

NARRATIVE OF SURVIVORS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE BY AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN THROUGH THE LENS OF BLACK MALE PRIVILEGE

Such culturally competent research involves collaborative research efforts with people who are directly affected by and living with domestic violence. By doing so, scholars can be responsive to the concerns of marginalized communities. (Solkoff and Dupont 2005, 48-49)

Nine women in total participated in semi-structured interviews for the purposes of this study. All women were between the ages of 29 and 72 years of age. While all of the women were not African American, all but one had experiences with sexual assault and/or domestic violence in the African American community.⁴ Three of the nine interviews conducted were with African American women in some capacity involved as service providers for survivors of gendered violence. Pseudonyms will be used for all interviewees to maintain safety and anonymity as the following matters discussed are extremely personal, traumatic and potentially life threatening.

The movement to end violence against women is one precariously aligned on the spectrum of activism where many activists and administrators are intimately entwined with the issue. This should of course be no surprise, when the *2007 National Crime Victimization Survey* reported that 248,300 women were victims of rape, attempted rape and sexual assault, nearly 1 in 6 women every year. (US Department of Justice 2007)

And, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, women

⁴ The woman who had no personal experience with gendered violence was actually the residential director at the battered women's shelter where four of the nine interviews were conducted.

experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes every year. (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2006) Well aware of these statistics and saddled with the personal experience as a survivor of domestic violence, one woman shared with me her journey to healing; and how she came to begin her own unique organization to partner with and fundraise for domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse prevention and awareness organizations.

Makayla is a survivor of domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse. She wholeheartedly believes that work of advocacy to end domestic violence “found her.” As a survivor, Makayla urges education is one the most important initiatives we must undertake in order to end the epidemic of violence against women. In her educational emphasis, she chastises the African American community for cultivating an environment where Black Male privilege can exist and flourish. Makayla contends, “ Our kids are doing the best that they can. We are not teaching our boys its okay to cry. We’re teaching them that being tough is who you have to be.” And thus the Black Macho persona that demands all but respect for the Black woman is born

Makayla has a unique conception on the theory of Black Male privilege and references the cases of Kobe Bryant and Clarence Thomas to make her point. “Society is only concerned about who has the most power, or perceived power. We do it to. The African American community rallies around status and not the victim.” And so, Makayla works tirelessly through her organization to raise funds and implement educational programs directed towards awareness and prevention, not only to end violence against but also to

educate the communities on healthy and positive gender expectations for young women and men.

Donna, the residential director of one of the largest battered women's shelters in the city, shared with me a bit of background, and some unique aspects of this her women's shelter. This particular shelter at the time of our interview was approximately 98% African American, eschewing the notion that Black women do not seek assistance or escape from their abusive environments. Donna's shelter is extremely unique in that it is one of few shelters that are willing to accommodate male children up to the age of 17.⁵ At this shelter the average duration of residency is between six and eight weeks, and their support services include therapy, support groups, living skills and transitional housing support.

Donna quite aptly described what she saw as major cause for concern in the psyche of many of the African American woman housed at her facility. While she did not necessarily label it Black Male privilege, it paralleled the definition L'Heureux Lewis assigned the ideology. During our interview Donna began to preach passionately about the cultural factors she sees plaguing African American women at large and specifically those survivors of domestic violence.

⁵Many would not even consider the issue, however many domestic violence emergency shelters will not allow male children over a certain age to reside with the abused parent in the shelter. And because, "Black women have been conditioned to repair damage that has been done to Black families because we feel it is our responsibility to keep the family together at all costs," (White 1985, 25) the inability of some shelters to provide housing for older male children is a further deterrent to finding help.

A lot of women *don't* press charges. These women here, they don't know how to love or how to be loved. Its trans-generational you know? It's starts with how we [African Americans] raise our sons. We baby them. We allow them to think they're entitled. They think they're the prize. So we tolerate it.

But tolerating violence is all together different than accepting it. As Beth E. Richie relays in her book, *Compelled to Crime*⁶, survivors of domestic violence who remain silent often feel trapped, by community expectations of silence and a compulsion to protect their abusers. "In the private sphere of their lives they were deeply misunderstood by the people closest to them, betrayed by their loyalty to their families and communities, and abused and degraded in their most intimate relationships." (Richie 1996, 5)

And yet some women, thought degraded and abused, still seem to manage to invoke pity for the abusive African American men they find themselves in relationships with. In a similar study conducted, Nash reported all the women interviewed, "...perceived Black men as vulnerable to unprovoked police brutality, workplace discrimination, and negative stereotyping within the general citizenry. AS a result, at some point, each either resisted

⁶ In *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*, Richie analyzes the lives of battered black women who are subsequently detained for "alleged criminal violations." While her focus is primarily on the correlation between physical and sexual abuse of Black women and criminal inclinations, the former – violence – creates shared experiences for non-incarcerated battered Black women. As Richie states, "The victim's perspective, if considered at all, is typically explored from a psychological rather than social or institutional perspective. And those studies that have ben conducted from a standpoint of the battered women have been overwhelmingly concerned with the experiences of white women." (Richie 1996, 12)

of felt community pressure to not report her abuser.” (Nash 2005, 1428) One survivor in particular interviews identified exceedingly with this concern for her abusers well being.

Rebekah, one of two white women who participated in the study was 29 years of age and married to her abusive husband for six years.

⁷ Rebekah met her abuser while purchasing drugs with a coworker in an area notoriously known to be heavily population by African Americans. She recalls the abuse began subtly and initially remained solely mental.

...I don't want to say the controlling started from the first day but it was like every day, come and see me. Every day come and visit me. Every day come and hang out with me.... it really slowly progress. Like oh, let me borrow \$20. Ok, I let him borrow \$20.... So you know, he gave me my \$20 back.

Rebekah explained how the trend continued, until eventually her abuser failed to return borrowed money. He coerced Rebekah to drive him around on his drug runs so that he could return her the loaned money and “they could be done with it.” He then began taking *her* car, dropping her off and picking her up sometimes hours late from work.

This was of course a progression of manipulation that would evolve into mental and

⁷ Rebekah, while not a Black woman, qualified for the study because of her experience as a battered woman in the African American community. It cannot be denied that her experience as a White woman in an interracial relationship, no doubt impacted her experiences in quite pointed ways, our focus throughout the study was on her experience in the engrossed in the African American community during her relationships. Surely too, a portion of the “pity” or “guilt” for her African American male abuser may have stemmed for her racially conscious self; wherein Rebekah seemed abundantly aware of her own race and the difficulties of being a Black man. Still, she noted reasons similar reason to those of African American women for enduring her abuse, all related to the aspects of Black Male privilege.

quickly physical abuse. She eventually recounts the first instance of physical abuse by her husband.

...I can't even remember what I said to him but he was like you're a bitch!
In front of everybody, like in front of his mom, his brother, his sisters. In front of his mom! ...And so I smacked him in his mouth for calling me that in front of all these people and he f—in smacked me back to the f—in floor and not a single person did shit to help me or said shit to him.

And with the blessing of an entire African American family, by their inaction, Rebekah's abuser continued to control her through physical and mental abuse.

There is no easy way to ask a survivor why she decided to stay, nonetheless, it was necessary, and Rebekah's explanation was startling reinforcement of Black Male privilege to its core. When asked were you in love with him as a sort of explanatory inquisition for remaining she responded with great candor.

...um, yea, I think more of it. I think I was beginning to love him.
Because he had divulged a lot of personal information to me at this time.
And he had a very horrible upbringing. Um, very dysfunctional family....
he had witnessed he father getting murdered when he was a young child.... I really did care for him. In a way that like, I wanted his life to be better. Like, I didn't want him to always have to sell drugs... I just didn't want him to go back to jail because he had a f—ed up life already...I don't want to ruin his life.

There is something to be said about a woman that can be physically and emotionally abused for six years and still be capable of feeling pity or guilt for their abuser. But Rebekah is by no means the exception to the rule. Quite the opposite, it is the privilege of Black men to belong to a community with women who unwaveringly coddle them, which in part allows their privilege to subsist. "...Because there is a clear mandate, even if it is unspoken, that Black women must do everything in their power to protect their men, to be ever faithful to them in the face of society's persistent anti-Black prejudices." (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, 39)

Pat (53), a survivor of gang rape at a historically Black College, never even reported her assault to the police. She decided instead to contact her mother and together they went straight to the University's president to address the assault. As Pat recounts, the assault was handled in house. Her four attackers were suspended and she decided to leave the University. It seems however, that unlike the women interviewed, who were or had received some type of counseling or therapy, she understood her attack – decades later – in a manner that causes pause. She explains her reason for leaving the university,

I mean, I was told by the President that I could actually stay there with him and his wife. But you know, they told me that I was more than welcome to stay. I wasn't in trouble or anything like that.... But uh, I had decided just to not return the following semester.... Yea, for discomfort.

It is understandable that one would be reticent to return to institution where a traumatic event such as sexual assault has occurred, but the real focus of her explanation falls with her statement "I wasn't in trouble or anything." There is absolutely no reason why a

survivor of sexual assault should fear reprimand for being victimized. However, culturally, Black women feel compelled to endure the violence of their black men, considering it the only outlet to mend the ego society's racism and oppression had broken. "The African American battered woman adopted their mother's tendency to feel sorry for men in their lives, tolerating their irresponsibility, their limitations, their indiscretions, and, ultimately, their violence." (Richie 1996, 64)

Later in the interview, when asked her thoughts on the stigma of discussing issues of sexual assault and domestic violence in the Black community, she speculated not on the lack of discussion in the community, but the impetus for abuse. Pat even suggested that such abuse is non-gender specific,

You know, I mean, you find that the women are abusing the men you know? And it seems like it's over, just listening to the news, it seems like it's over finances you know, financial. Stressed out. Losing their jobs and not able to make enough income. You know the ones [Black men] wanting to be head of household and help out. They're losing their jobs and not making enough income or on drugs you know?

And once they begin to experience a lack of power and self worth, men project those feelings onto their already indulgent female partners because, as Black macho-ism dictates, emotions are not allowed.

As the research in domestic violence indicates, it is indeed the emotional wearing down of a woman's hope and self-worth that is a major factor in a man's ability to maintain dominance and control

over a battered woman, once fear and injury is established through physical violence. (Richie 1996, 85)

These may appear to be issues reserved for African American men and women located in low-income communities, but Black women in affluent African American communities experience rampant physical and sexual abuse and exhibit identical reactions to and rationale for their abuse.

In 2006, *Essence* – a monthly magazine geared towards the demographic of African American women ages 18-49 – ran an article that declared a middle and upper-middle class lifestyle did not preclude the prospect of domestic violence and sexual assault. In the article Veronica Ginyard, mother of eight, shares a similar progression of violence to that of Rebekah's. "I'm not from a background of abuse, so as it was happening I didn't recognize it as being abuse.... I thought, Hmmm, He's having a bad day; that's why he just called me a bitch." (Graham 2006, 219)

Verbal abuse quickly escalate to physical abuse and occasionally Ginyard sought refuge with friends, but as she lamented, "Until you're ready to leave, you don't want the police involved because you know you're going to get hurt later." (Graham 2006, 219) But Ginyard's compulsion to stay was greater than her hesitancy to involve the police, to herself and the African American community, she had arrived, admission of marital abuse would have ruined that image and, Ginyard believed, brought shame to the black community. "I thought I was bringing shame on my family. And especially being African American I always believed, we wont be another statistic, another family that

broke up. That played an important part in my decision to stay.” (Graham 2006, 222)
Unfortunately, Ginyard’s experience in Prince George’s county was not a statistical aberration.

In Prince George’s County, Maryland – the nation’s richest predominately African American county according to U.S. census data – 48 people between 2001 and 2006, mostly women, have died as a result of domestic violence. In 2005, more than 14,568 orders of protection were handed out as a result of high domestic abuse claims in the community, and yet women are compelled to stay. (Graham 2006, 219) In part the privilege Black men exploit elicits guilt, and pity from women, but perhaps a greater compulsion to remain in abusive relationships is the obligation Black women possess to nurture and cultivate a positive perception of the African American community. In *Wounds of the Spirit*, Traci West suggests, “Being a Black woman in the United States... there is a dictum, I would say, in the Black community, that men come first, that Black men are the ones that are oppressed, and the rest of us need to support them in surviving racism.” (West 1999, 42)

Black Male privilege, to a certain extent, is born out of the spirits of African American community collectivism and mainstream patriarchy. This pull towards collectivism is almost stronger than excusing theory of Black Male privilege. For a community to have endured such social degradation for centuries, it is only natural that a unified front was forged. Unfortunately, the same discrimination that unifies the community in struggle,

divides it along gender lines, comparing the magnitude of suffered injustice and concluding, that the uplift the Black man is to uplift the Black race.⁸

⁸ The legacy of spirituality, while not a focus of this study, does deserve mention here. Issues of concern for the Black community are often presented to congregations in church. Church congregations offer a substantial network in which large masses of people can be reached immediately in regular intervals. In “The Secret Shame of Prince George’s County” one woman attempted to tap into that network and was shut down by the overwhelming majority of them. She posits church leaders believe that scripture condones such behavior. “Ivey refers to Ephesians 5:22-24. In those passages wives are told to ‘submit to your husbands as you do the Lord’ and ‘to submit to your husbands in everything.’ The interpretation by some people has been, I think, passively condoning some degree of physical force.... They won’t say that, but I don’t see any other reason they would be reluctant to talk about the issue.” (Graham 2006, 220-221)

NARRATIVE OF SURVIVORS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE BY AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN THROUGH THE LENS OF COLLECTIVISM

For the African American battered woman, a sense of racial/ ethnic identity and family loyalty had a contradictory effect on their identities.... On the one hand, feeling what could be describe as an almost universal connection to African American people and a deep sense of cultural pride was empowering...At the same time, however, this sense of racial solidarity served to limit the women's self-determination, independence, and autonomy, leaving them vulnerable to the gender entrapment that resulted in violence from their male partners... (Richie 1996, 61-62)

No survivor of sexual assault or domestic violence desires to admit to her attack. African American women, especially those victimized by Black men, are extremely hesitant to accuse their attackers. So when 93% of all sexual assaults are intra-racial (Amir 1971) and assault is predominantly intra-racial across offense/offender categories (Becker 2007), it is nearly impossible for African American women to report abuse without implicating a member of her own community. This is by no means a fabricated concern for Black women; community and family members readily and openly chastise women courageous enough to seek the aid of law enforcement agencies. Traci West comments on the tolerating nature of Black women when it comes to relationships.

...Friends and family members sometimes dismiss domestic violence for these reasons, offering victim-survivors retorts like: "you've got a man, you should be thankful and try to keep him," or "at least he's a good provider."... An especially unfortunate message passed down to some girls is that, "All Black men are no goo anyway, so what did you expect?" These messages may cause women to have minimal expectations of positive treatment... This dismal portrayal of social realities trivializes the intimate violence and accompanying emotional anguish that Black women

may endure, even making them seem inevitable in heterosexual relationships. (West 1999, 82)

With lowered expectations and community pressure to preserve intra-racial relationships at all costs, women like Imani find little support for their plight.

Imani (45) is now disabled as a result of the abuse she suffered from her husband of 18 years. Imani recalls in her experience, there was no progression of abuse, it was instant and dangerous from the day they were wed. Imani fled the state after a stint in the hospital where she was unresponsive and comatose for 59 days. She graciously shared with me the gruesome stories of abuse she endured, her pleas that led to her hospitalization.

“ I was three minutes late one day comin in from [from work] and when I came in I got hit in the head with a bat.... And all I could hear was, bitch you know you sposed to be on time!” Imani was held hostage for two weeks by her abuser, handcuffed, tied and gagged to her own bed. She was raped and tortured recalling, “ the smell of burnt cigarettes all on my skin.” Once Imani’s employers called her mother to find out why she missed so much work, the police were contacted to ascertain her whereabouts. “And that’s when they kicked the door in. Because, it was the smell [pauses] from me using the bathroom on myself and blood and so that’s when they found me.”

And still, she was unable to escape her abuser, but not from lack of effort. Imani was adamant that she pleaded for police assistance to no avail. “I went to the police

EVERYTIME. They didn't care, they didn't care at all. They said, we get so many calls from you and then we constantly come back and we're tired of coming back. But if I call you, I'm asking for help. At least you can escort him out of my house or something."

Her family was worse. Time and time again she sought refuge with sisters and her mother and time and time again they would share with her relocation with the offender.

It was after an incident on her birthday, that she fled the state, never to return. Her abuser slipped a mickey in her glass of birthday champagne; Imani was hospitalized and relocated for protection. Her abuser found her, spiked her IV with three different types of drugs triggering her lungs to collapse along with kidney and liver failure. Fearing that her family would again disclose her location, she has only informed her son and daughter of her current residence. In *Why Men Hate Women*, Adam Jukes posits that

...Male violence is a sign not of the collapse of the patriarchy but of a particular patriarch's feeling that he has lost, or is in danger of losing, control over his partner. The violence is an attempt to maintain or re-establish that control, and it is predicated on the belief that it is appropriate and right for a man to control a woman. (Jukes 1993, 261)

Imani admits to herself now, that there were numerous red flags during the relationship that not only was it violently dysfunctional, but her desire to keep her family intact and "do what I had to do to take care of my son," far outweighed her concern for her personal well-being.

Still, Imani has attempted to use her experiences in the shelter to shatter the propensity of African American woman to air towards to the politics of collectivism. Imani implores the young women residing with her in the shelter, that the men they've left have no intention to stop their abuse. It disturbs her to see these young Black women on the phone with their abusers, forgiving them and lamenting with their abusers over their current separation. But, she concludes, "They just haven't had enough yet."

Sarah (34) had a bit of an atypical experience for a Black lesbian. She came out at the age of 12 and was openly accepted by family. Unfortunately she chronicled multiple experiences with domestic violence in several different relationships, the last of which was life threatening. In her interview, Sarah focused less on her experiences of domestic violence or her experiences in the shelter as the only gay woman, the majority of our interview delved into the outsider perceptions she felt from volunteers and resource providers.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE "BLACK SUPERWOMAN" HOW THEY IMPACT COLLECTIVISM AND THE CULTURAL SENSITIVITY OF RESOURCE PROVIDERS

Perhaps another justification for the practice of collectivism is the fear of negative perception from individual and group entities outside of the African American community. There are two competing notions of African American women in general and survivors of gendered violence in particular that have inculcated society and Black women themselves have internalized.

The first, and less widely accepted notion is that, as Sarah explains, “they think everybody here is supposed to be down and out.” Some scholars tend to build analyses that “link poverty and intimate violence [which] can create the impression that rape and incest are “natural” occurrences in the lives of poor Black women.” (West 1999, 99) But when they interact with women with positive outlooks like Sarah and Imani in the arena of a battered women’s shelter, their only recourse is to attribute their disposition to the myth of the Black Superwoman.

According to accounts in Julia Boyd’s, *Can I Get a Witness*, African American women are taught at an early age to “stand up for yourself. You better not ever let me hear that you didn’t fight back.” (Boyd 1998, 43) Boyd suggests that this urge to appear strong stems from a desired belief that, “our historical lineage of survival coupled with our indomitable spirit will protect us from what we consider to be a personal weakness.” (Boyd 1998, 6)

In Shorter-Gooden and Jones' *Shifting*, the authors consider three myths entwined in the Black superwoman ideology that severely damage Black women’s personal psyche and external perceptions. The Myths of “Unshakability, nonfemininity and promiscuity” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003) interact to foster disbelief and insensitivity regarding the severity of Black woman’s experiences. In short, Black women are considered resilient, emasculating, provocatively sexual beings, not all together phased by sexual abuse.

West conjectures

Presuppositions of Black women's "resilience" and continued belief in the "Black superwoman" mythology create an atmosphere wherein resource providers, authorities, and mainstream society sincerely believe that "while rape is by no means an inconsequential even to a Black woman, it may not, in fact, be the worst thing that has even happened to her. And because her identity is shaped more by her color than her sex, it is not likely to destroy her. (West 1999, 146)

It is obvious to decipher the devastating effect that the Black superwoman mythology has on resource providers. One of women in Boyd's *Can I Get A Witness* shares an instance in which an agent of law enforcement demonstrated these expectations, of Black women's resilience.

Once, after being verbally assaulted and threatened with bodily harm by a drunken vagrant as I walked through a city part, the officer on the scene told me that I didn't look as if I was too shaken up by the incident. When I asked him what he meant, he replied calmly, Well, you know, miss, most women might have gotten hysterical, but you look as if you've got it all under control. (Boyd 1998, 38)

Everything African American women have been taught from the politics of respectability to the culture of dissemblance contributes to an extreme composure that renders Black women, at least outwardly, unfazed. It seems however, that this composure permeates the façade and actually causes difficulty for some Black women, in disclosing abuse. In

Through Black Eyes, Shondrah Nash believes that even for women who do choose to disclose, this composure can cause difficulty.

For those who do seek and find institutional support and treatment modalities, race and gender can still form problematic implications for help and healing. In an unsettling ironic turn, the strong resilient identity internalized by many African American women and girls can discourage come from communicating experiences with sexual violence. (Nash 2005, 1423)

For African American women silence is synonymous with respectability; the problems of the Black community equate to the problems Black man, and strength and resilience are the paramount characteristics Black women must embody.

Because these things are true, it is imperative that when and Black woman relinquishes her spirit of collectivism and seeks help, she is ready. Richie explores progression of culturally sensitive resource providers between 1970 and 1990 and concludes

... We still have very little theoretical or empirical work that speaks to the African American battered woman from low-income communities. Consequently, few anti-violence programs, criminal justice policies, or theoretical explanations are sensitive to ethnic differences or address cultural issues that give particular meaning to violence in intimate relationships for African American and other women of color. (Richie 1996, 12)

Therefore, service providers must take into consideration not only the issue of gender, but also the total intersection of race, gender and class. Doing so will improve the possibility of understanding that an African American woman's experience as a survivor of gendered violence is multi-faceted and all together different dominant archetype of a survivor. And, when a Black woman is willing to denounce her strength to ask for help, and potentially betray her community, she has had enough.

CONCLUSION

“My core is cracked when the rapist is a man my politics have told me to call brother.”
(West 1999, 84)

RESTATING THE PROBLEM

Under the guise of Black Feminist thought, this study was conducted to evaluate the ways in which Black Male Privilege and collectivism work to influence actions of African American women – particularly survivors of gendered violence-; what aspects of the African American community foster an environment wherein these phenomena can occur; what must be altered in the African American community to end the silence; and what changes must be made to pre-existing survivor resources to better accommodate the needs of African American women.

METHOD OF STUDY

This study utilized intimate narratives from women who considered themselves survivors of some form of gendered violence in the African American community. Those narratives, coupled with existing research were used elucidated the ways in which women experienced and understood their abuse in the African American community.

I relied upon the fact that as an African American woman and a survivor of sexual assault by a Black man, the women interviewed would be increasing more open and willing to share their experiences with a fellow survivor. The fact that this study also attempts to present a cultural perspective of gendered violence inspired the openness of participants.

LIMITATIONS

As can be seen from this study, the African American community is a multi-faceted and complex one. It was necessary to narrow the scope of research to two factors that I suggest, account for vast cultural differences as survivors of gendered violence. Because of this three considerable topics were not able to receive the credence they are due.

The interaction between the Black church and survivors of gendered violence alone would be a formidable topic to address, and so was only briefly mentioned. Because this study focused on experiences in the African American community, the impact interracial relationships have on gendered violence was not addressed. And finally, homosexual relationships, which constitute two entirely new factors – sexuality and the African American community’s beliefs about sexuality – were unable to be addressed and actually made, by the one African American woman interviewed who could speak to it, a non-issue.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should include the Black church. Religion and spirituality are a large a part of African American culture as the practice of collectivism. Evaluating the ways in which clergy navigate the issue of domestic violence; how scripture is used to support or refute abusive male dominance; and the efficacy of religious-based services for survivors of gendered violence would be an interesting study to conduct.

Additionally, abuse⁹ in homosexual relationships of African Americans would pose a dynamic study where power dynamics, culturally based issues of sexuality could be dissected.

FINDINGS

Evelyn White's research shows that, "two of the most common beliefs and the ones most likely to affect your interaction with the police as an abused Black woman are 1.

Domestic violence is a private "family matter" in which the police should not interfere; and 2. Violence is a "natural" part of black culture." (White 1985, 36) These two beliefs encompass a great deal of what collectivism works respectively to uphold and curb perception on.

When the African American community takes into account the legacy of racial injustice, police brutality, and sexual exploitation, it is only natural to respond by developing an insular community. The politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance Black women adopted requires them to present an image of a chaste, moral woman living in harmonious bliss for audiences not their own. While in their communities, Black women endured the physical and verbal manifestation of the Black man's burden.

And what was the Black man's burden? The same racism that his Black woman endures daily. But, the legacy of slavery thought to completely emasculate Black men and

⁹ At the point where both individuals in a relationship are of the same sex, it can no longer be referred to as gendered violence – which in itself is a fascinating dynamic. Abuse her refers specifically to domestic violence and sexual assault.

promote the Black woman to a status of Matriarch loomed in the minds of Black men. Black women, indefeasible through the years, took on the burden of Black men and work tirelessly to hold the community together, attempting to protect it from injurious interference by way of silence. Nash succinctly states the problem, “ a cultural pact has been made to protect African Americans from being presented pathological, a tradition that could foster an underreporting of Black-on-Black sex crimes.” (Nash 2005, 1423) The perpetuation of these cultural affinities has become increasingly harmful for survivors of gendered violence and constructed a difficult obstacle service providers must prepare themselves to forge through if they intend to impact change.

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