

## The Role of Faith in Working with Criminalized Black Women Survivors of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

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Acknowledging the role of faith, spirituality and/or religion is crucial to enhancing cultural responsiveness and understanding the diverse needs of many people. One's faith affiliation can provide both community and space for individual growth. For many who identify as Black and/or African-American, faith-based experiences are essential to cultural and personal identity. For Black women, who make up more than 60% of those present in religious services in the United States,<sup>1</sup> a troubling aspect of their identity often is unnoticed, ignored or misunderstood by their faith communities—victimization through domestic violence and sexual assault and subsequent criminalization of their trauma responses.

Faith-based communities, including churches, mosques, and temples represent viable settings and distinct infrastructures for community-based support and intervention for many people. Indeed, 87% of Black and/or African American people describe themselves as belonging to a religious group and they maintain a high level of affiliation with religion by attending prayer meetings and religious services. In addition, nearly 80% of Black people state that religion plays an important role in their daily lives as compared to 56% of all U.S. adults. Further, 53% of Black Americans attend religious services once per week, with more than 76% reporting that they pray on a daily basis and 88% stating that they are absolutely certain God exists.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Black Church has been, and still is, a place where important issues concerning the Black American community are addressed, having served as the main political structure for the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>3</sup> However, a culture of silence—in the name of racial solidarity—influences the ways in which

individuals and the community respond to victims of gender-based violence, including domestic and sexual assault. One conflict that the victimized Black woman often faces is either to remain in her abuse situation or risk isolation, defamation, or shame from her community if she speaks out. Either choice results in a probable state of “isolation” and “aloneness,” adding to the internal and external oppression and trauma already experienced. Without this crucial support from their faith community and the broader community in general, some women may resort to engaging in certain behaviors to protect and support themselves and their children, which can lead to legal system involvement.

*When we recognize that persons who are engaged in intimate partner abuse, in this case, exist within the church as well as outside the church, there is a need to confront both the abuser and the systems that would make abuse a reality. Whether it is through complicit silence, denial, what have you, people feel guilty... Church folks are full of real people, and we have to*

*do the reflective work that's necessary in order to get to the truth, and after knowing the truth, to respond in kind. We all know people nearby, very close, often, that are experiencing [abuse]. And, then, we have the opportunity to talk about it, to confess, to admit that this is a dilemma, still, and that the church needs to stop sitting on its hands, if you will, and to act actively, to bring voice to it, and to accompany those who have been targeted and who are trying to recover, and to do it with pride. — Rev. Dr. Cheryl Dudley*

(Click here to listen to more from Rev. Dr. Dudley)

### **How can faith communities better support criminalized Black women survivors?**

Despite the traditional response of not addressing these issues, faith leaders are increasingly interested in meeting the needs of criminalized Black women survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Below are some strategies faith communities should consider to help them better engage this population.

- Leaders must engage in training and raise awareness within their communities on the prevalence of domestic violence, sexual assault, and trauma.
- Communities must be responsible to the people they serve and address issues including domestic violence and sexual assault.
- Communities must hold individuals, communities, and tradition (theology) accountable.
- Communities must commit to centering the experiences of women and girls, diversifying leadership, and sharing power with women, especially women of color, leaders.
- Leaders must equip themselves to support victims/survivors and, in some cases, perpetrators in order to move toward ending violence against women and girls.
- Leaders must understand how to combat the traditional faith community response of upholding perpetrators of abuse, blaming victims/survivors, and failing to support

all parties. This can be done in many ways, including delivering sermons and messages about the community impact of trauma, starting support groups for victims/survivors, stressing confidentiality in conversations with victims/survivors, encouraging family involvement.

« *Those stories, those difficult, hard-to-hear stories [of trauma and abuse] need to be told from center-stage, and they need to be told in the so-called holy places because when those stories are told, they become holy as well because they become a part of the narrative of a community. The community then should be saying to [them], "We want to participate with you to find your redemption. — Rev. Dr. Cheryl Dudley*

### **Why it matters!**

Despite the traditional response of not addressing these issues, faith leaders are increasingly interested in meeting the needs of criminalized Black women survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Below are some strategies faith communities should consider to help them better engage this population.

- On average, one in three women are victims of intimate partner violence and one in five women are victims of sexual assault. These numbers underscore the epidemic of sexual violence in the U.S., which disproportionately impact women of color (e.g., Black, indigenous), immigrant, LGBTQIA+, and disabled women.<sup>4</sup>
- Black women experience victimization by intimate partners at a rate 35% higher than that of their White female counterparts and 22 times more than other Latina and Asian women.<sup>5</sup>
- The number one killer of Black women and girls between the ages of 15 to 34 is homicide at the hands of a current or former intimate partner.<sup>6</sup>
- Approximately 40-60% of Black women report some type of coercive contact of a sexual nature before their eighteenth birthday.<sup>7</sup>

According to researchers, gender-based violence is rooted in Black American impoverishment and racial inequality. Poverty, the product of bias and discrimination, limits access to adequate resources, economic stability, and environmental safety that correlate to a lack of awareness and resources that would combat gender-based violence.

### **Why not include faith-based organizations in community responses?**

Advocacy to strengthen criminal legal system attention to gender-based violence has led to the creation of partnerships between anti-domestic violence organizations and law enforcement and prosecution agencies. These partnerships have spanned years, created a structural relationship that exists in many communities today. Improved criminal legal system responses have contributed to increased safety for many victims of violence and their families, but faith leaders have traditionally not been offered a seat at the table.

Project SAFE is a U.S. Department of Justice funded initiative to provide training on the intersections of trauma as it impacts women exposed to criminalization and domestic violence and sexual assault victimization. Through technical assistance and a series of trainings and roundtables for legal stakeholders and advocates, Project SAFE has enlisted the experiences of multiple directly impacted individuals and allies to hone in on the important role of faith and religious identities across communities of Black women and girls. A trauma-informed, culturally relevant and responsive approach is crucial to ensuring that violence against Black women and girls is interrupted and eradicated. Thus, it is important to include faith-based initiatives in the community response to domestic violence and sexual assault to broaden the number of potential intervention and access points for victims/survivors and ensure clients' needs are met holistically.

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### **For More Information**

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