

Black Churches and Sexual Violence



Evidence Based Research

My name is Ahmad Greene-Hayes and I am the founder of Children of Combahee, a faith based organization, which works to end child sexual abuse in Black church communities.

With an increase in child sexual abuse cases in the Roman Catholic Church, along with various Black church denominations including the largest Pentecostal body in the world, the Church of God In Christ (see cogicabusewatch.wordpress.com), it has become increasingly apparent that there is not a widespread, public, and national conversation about children and the sexual violence they experience both within and outside of Black church communities.

The National Center for Juvenile Justice notes that nearly 70% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) are experienced by children ages 17 and under. National statistics show that 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused; and according to Prevent Child Abuse Texas, children who are abused are 30% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime as an adult.

These numbers are important because they demonstrate the pervasive nature of child sexual abuse across racial and ethnic lines and they also shed light on the ways child sexual abuse is nuanced by gender, class, citizenship, Black sexual politics, racism, poverty, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Many survivor-activists have pushed Black churches, in particular, to think about its complicity in the rape and sexual assault of countless women, men, children, gender nonconforming, queer, transgender, and poor Christians and non-Christians; and yet, the Black church continues to turn a blind eye to the reality of racial-sexual violence.

Monica Coleman's *The Dinah Project* (2010) intervenes in a history that registers unchecked sexual violence and illicit sexual behavior as standard, if not normative, alongside patriarchy and cisheterosexism. Coleman writes:

"Every congregation contains victims of sexual violence. Every church with women, men, boys, girls, or the elderly contains victims of sexual violence. Whether an individual confides in the church leaders, family, or friends, or chooses to remain silent, there is no church void of the people whose lives are changed by experiences of sexual violence. Because every church contains persons affected by sexual violence, the church must respond. Because sexual violence affects every aspect of our communities, including our religious and spiritual lives, the church must respond. Because silence is a response of tolerance, the church must respond" (Coleman 2010, 4).

If the church is filled with so many survivors of sexual violence, why then does the church lack urgency and conviction in the fight to eradicate the unholy and perverse reality of sexual abuse? Perhaps it is because (Black) churches are more concerned with the sexual practices, behaviors, and orientations of its constituents that are nonheterosexual, nonnormative, and/or disruptive to puritanical notions of sacred, holy, and virtuous.

Among many things, the politics of respectability as defined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and the culture of dissemblance as told by Darlene Clark Hine explicate the ways Black church people have used silence as a means of protection from white racial-sexual terrorists. To mitigate the effects of white supremacist violence, many African Americans do not address intracommunal violence, and in some instances extracommunal violence, because they do not want to portray the race in a negative light or they often want to be race loyal, or even race first, everything later.

These patterns are deadly and send a loud message that racial justice takes precedence over the justice that every individual deserves in regard to their bodies and psyches—regardless of age, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, religion, or any other marginalized identity. Indeed, fighting against rape and the sexual violation and sexual molestation of children is a racial justice issue.

Action Plan

As a son of the Black church tradition and as a [survivor of child sexual abuse](#), my journey to healing is life-long. It is never ending. It is continuous.

Here are five things I do to actively work towards my healing:

Writing

Putting words down that speak life; life that will live once I die.

Therapy

Speaking from pain. Speaking through pain. Speaking about pain.

Fitness

Moving my body. Being in tune with my body. Reclaiming my body.

Boundaries

Speaking my truth, loving my truth, living in my truth.

Community

Joining forces with other survivors. Choosing and creating family with those who value me in all that I am and in all that I do in the service of the community.

Questions For Discussion

- Many advocates focus on Black male-identified children in ways that align with patriarchy. Far few discuss sexual violence against children perceived as male. 1 in 6 boys are assaulted. As those children grow older, patriarchy continues to silence them. How will we stop this?
- The media suggests that the Roman Catholic Church is the only religious body that has sexually violent clergy. This narrative is further pushed with white faces dominating the story. Yet, such Black denominations as the Church of God in Christ are also facing this issue according to cogicabusewatch.wordpress.com. How might we challenge the media's narrow purview?
- The Rev. Dr. Monica Coleman argues, "Every congregation contains victims of sexual violence. Every church with women, men, boys, girls, or the elderly contains victims of sexual violence." How then do we transform churches into spaces of anti-rape activism?
- Mirror Memoirs, an oral history project led by Amita Swadhin, argues that many LGBTQ youth leave religious

spaces not just because of homophobia and transphobia, but because of the threat of rape and child sexual abuse in their childhood homes. Thus, the movement to end sexual violence in Black churches is inextricably connected to the movement to end church homophobia and transphobia. How can we keep LGBTQ children safe in the church?

Ways to Speak Out

- Consider partnering with [Children of Combahee](#), a faith-based organization working to end child sexual abuse in Black church communities, to host a town hall, prevention and education workshop, or clergy safety training in your church or local community.
- If you are a pastor or a preacher, attend sermon workshops around gender-based and sexual violence offered by womanist and Black feminist organizations such as [WomanPreach!](#) Learn ways to carefully address these topics from the sacred desk.
- Look to survivors of sexual violence in your congregation and local community and work with them to create a survivor-centered healing and advocacy ministry or support group. An example of this is "[Sacred Sanctuary](#)," a ministry at Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia, that walks with those impacted by sexual abuse.
- Assess the ways your houses of worship and ways of worshipping are complicit in sexual violence and rape culture. Is consent readily discussed and practiced? Is touch handled delicately? Are women shamed when they report sexual harassment? Are rapists allowed to serve in the offices of the church without accountability? If so, how do you intend to shift this culture, center survivors, and hold harm doers accountable, even when they are leaders?
- Hire a therapist or social worker to work with your congregation. No amount of pastoral theological training can take the place of a mental health professional.

Some Reading Suggestions

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