

## Past Child Sexual Abuse Among Women of Color

Recently the Black Women's Blueprint (BWB) released some preliminary findings from a national survey they are conducting on rape. While the study is ongoing and results have yet to be officially published, Farah Tanis, Co-Founder of BWB has been speaking nationally on the following statistic gleaned from the research.

Based on an anonymous survey of more than 300 black women, she reports that:

**"60% of black girls experience sexual assault...by the time they turn 18."** (Black Women's Blueprint, 10 Questions About Rape, 2011)

Unfortunately, I wasn't very surprised to hear this staggering figure. Since my hire to the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, I have yet to conduct a presentation or participate in some outreach event in an African-American community where multiple attendees haven't publicly disclosed an experience of child sexual abuse or come up to me privately with that revelation.

The first time I encountered such a moment was back in 2003 when the MCASA-WOCN was conducting a focus group for our *Still I Rise: Black Women Confronting Rape* brochure. Our focus group was comprised of 12 randomly selected women who had to be willing to dedicate an hour to review and discuss the brochure, as well as self-identify as a black woman. We performed this focus group at district courthouse prior to the start of the afternoon docket; and for those women who showed up early to the courthouse as either plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, transportation or as supporting friends and/or family it was a selfless act of help and assistance in ensuring not only a culturally specific but culturally relevant brochure for women like themselves.

The focus group went off without a hitch. We had specific questions that were asked and answered and there was plenty of room for Q/A, discussion and feedback. We had the essentials in place such as beverages and snacks and certified counselors who would respond to any women who might be triggered or experience retraumatization. By the close of the group we knew we had a great brochure and were on our way to better assisting Black women in our state, however the final conversation is what hit me the hardest.

I can vividly recall my amazement when of the 12 women in attendance, 10 of them disclosed childhood sexual abuse (CSA). One by one they all recounted in some measure an incident that had happened to them as a child. Once the first disclosure was made, it was like a domino effect with one story or simply stated declaration made after another. The incidents involved family, friends, teachers, pastors, neighbors and babysitters. As soon as the words came out of the first woman's mouth, you saw heads start nodding and the whispers of "Uh, huh" and utterances of "Yep" and "I know what you mean." I was

shocked. It seemed crazy that here sat a bunch of women who didn't know one another from Adam yet had such shared experiences. And to further add to my astonishment was that the remaining two women, who while hadn't been the victims of such incidences, reported that the daughter of one and a family member of the other had actually experienced CSA in recent years. 100% of that group had some experience with CSA.

That was how CSA first came onto my radar in the capacity of the work I was doing for MCASA and since, as I stated earlier, these types of disclosures occur on a regular basis. Although, the experience left an indelible impression on me and was discussed at length on many occasions, regrettably there wasn't anything that was done. Back then VAWA didn't support initiatives that involved children; which meant that coalitions like ours and many others weren't doing a lot relative to child sexual abuse. In fact, there seemed to be a line drawn in the sand, with the work of coalitions being to promote and improve the responses to adult victims only. It was also a time before the language in VAWA had been reworked to specifically include communities of color and underserved populations. How unfortunate that so much time went by before our work and our funding caught up with the overwhelming realities that:

- Women who've sexually assaulted as children "have double the risk of being raped in adulthood as women with no history of rape." (Tjaden & Thonnes, Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Rape Victimization: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey, *NIJ* 2006)
- "More than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Latina women between the ages of 18-50 experienced re-victimization and more than 80% of the initial incidents occurred from age seven." (Romero et. al., *The Prevalence and Circumstance of Child Sexual Abuse Among Latina Women*, 1999)
- "1 in 4 Black girls will be sexually abused before the age of 18." (Stone, R.D., *No Secrets, No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal from Sexual Abuse*, 2004)
- "30% of Black women with documented histories of CSA were sexually assaulted in adulthood." (Siegel & Williams, *Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization of Women*, *Violence Against Women* 9, 2003)

I am interested to see the final report by the Black Women's Blueprint due out sometime in mid-to-late 2012 and MCASA will share the report with our members when it becomes available. I am interested to see what action items they recommend which can be promoted by statewide coalitions and rape crisis and recovery centers. I'm certain that not only will stronger alliances be developed between anti-sexual assault and anti-child sexual abuse colleagues, but programs such as our MCASA-WOCN will be better able to support best practices that give voice to the issue of child sexual abuse that's clearly occurring in communities of color without appropriate redress.