fact sheet

WOCN: Understanding the Issues

MCASA
Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Race, Gender and Oppression

Historically, communities of color have a shared experience of systematic prejudice, racism and oppression. These systems largely began during eras of Colonialism and Imperialism, in which administrative dominance and violent force were exercised to conquer and control native populations of color. For women of color the intersection of racial oppression and violence very often resulted in severe experiences of sexual victimization.

Sexual violence was used as tool, to exercise power and control over people of color. It desecrated the women, emasculated the men and threatened the existence and survival of future generations. Sexual violence against women of color was/is exemplified through acts of rape, genital mutilation, disembowelment, burnings, the rape of their children, forced prostitution, trafficking, sex slavery, gang rape, genetic genocide, imperialism/ethnic cleansing, forced impregnation, forced separation from children and mates and forced realignment of their loyalties.

Seen as "spoils of war," women of color have had their sexuality exploited for the growth and prosperity of their oppressors. Forced to bear future generations of laborers, these women ensured active workforces while simultaneously giving birth to some of the greatest nations of the world, but significant cost.

Women's Rights

Women of color have experienced extreme intolerance of their racial differences but it is important to note that we have also experienced significant gender discrimination. Our reality as "double minorities," has required us to seek justice not only in terms of our race but our gender as well. We have readily challenged racial disparities but have been reluctant to champion our cause as women.

Many women of color have misinterpreted "women's rights" to mean or require the swapping of "traditional" gender roles for men and women. However, it looks more like the following:

- The Right to Vote
- Hold Public Office
- Work
- Own Property
- Receive Fair Wages
- Have an Education
- Marital Rights
- Parental Rights
- Religious Rights
- Serve in the Military
- Enter into Legal Contracts
- The Right to Bodily Integrity and Autonomy

The marginalization of women is reflective of gender inequity in the world at large and contributes to the perpetuation of women's subordinate status. Women should not to be viewed as second-class citizens or as 'property' to be owned.

Anti-Sexual Assault Movement

Dating back to antiquity, rape and sexual aggression were viewed as crimes against family, its honor or against its estate rather than crimes against the individual woman. In almost every instance, the victim was penalized as much as her perpetrator. While there were individual women and groups of women who resisted forced sex and violence, it was not until we entered a more modern era that we witnessed an organized movement to end these occurrences.

In the US, during the last 19th century, the anti-lynching movement laid the foundation from which the domestic violence and sexual assault movement would grow. In the 20th century, particularly the mid 1970s high profile cases involving women of color who fought back or killed their assailants brought an increased awareness and visibility to the issue of violence against women and largely began what is known today as the rape crisis movement.

Today, programs like Maryland's Women of Color Network have continued to build upon this grassroots movement; working hard to ensure that the responses to women of color survivors of rape, sexual assault, and sex abuse are equitable, safe, effective and appropriate.

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