

# Sexual Violence Against Black Women and Girls in a #MeToo Era

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Around the world, sexual violence is an endemic social problem, with women and girls being its main victims.<sup>1</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations recorded an upsurge of gender-based violence in several regions of the world.<sup>2</sup> In Canada, as elsewhere, sexual violence is an alarming public health crisis. The resurgence of the #MeToo movement, since October 2017, has made it possible to put faces to the statistics and the very high prevalence of sexual violence in our society.

However, there are very few studies and research focusing specifically on the impacts, lived experience and prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls from African Canadian and/or Black communities,<sup>3,4</sup> and using an intersectional lens. This is paradoxical, considering that we are in the midst of the [United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent \(2015-2024\)](#).

This Backgrounder addresses the lack of literature on this important social issue, which tends to be neglected by Canadian research, some advocacy settings, and public policy. It has several objectives, including to:

- Provide an overview of the reality of sexual violence against African-Canadian and/or Black women and girls.
- Identify key barriers to sexual violence disclosure and reporting.
- Identify avenues for intervention and reflection to better support women and girls from African and/or Black communities who have experienced sexual violence.



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This resource was developed in collaboration with [action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes \(action ontarienne\)](#).



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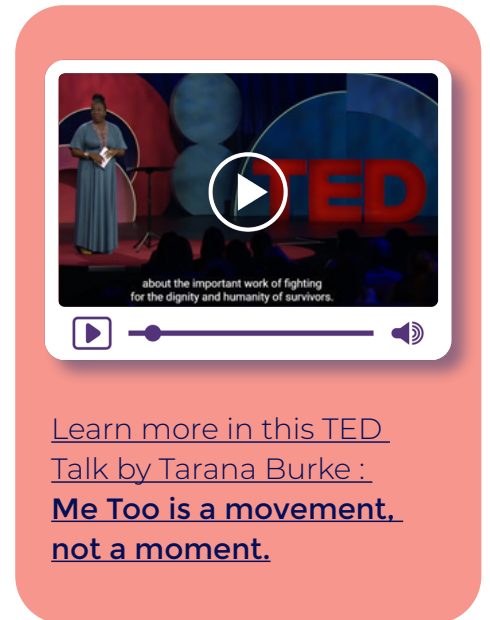
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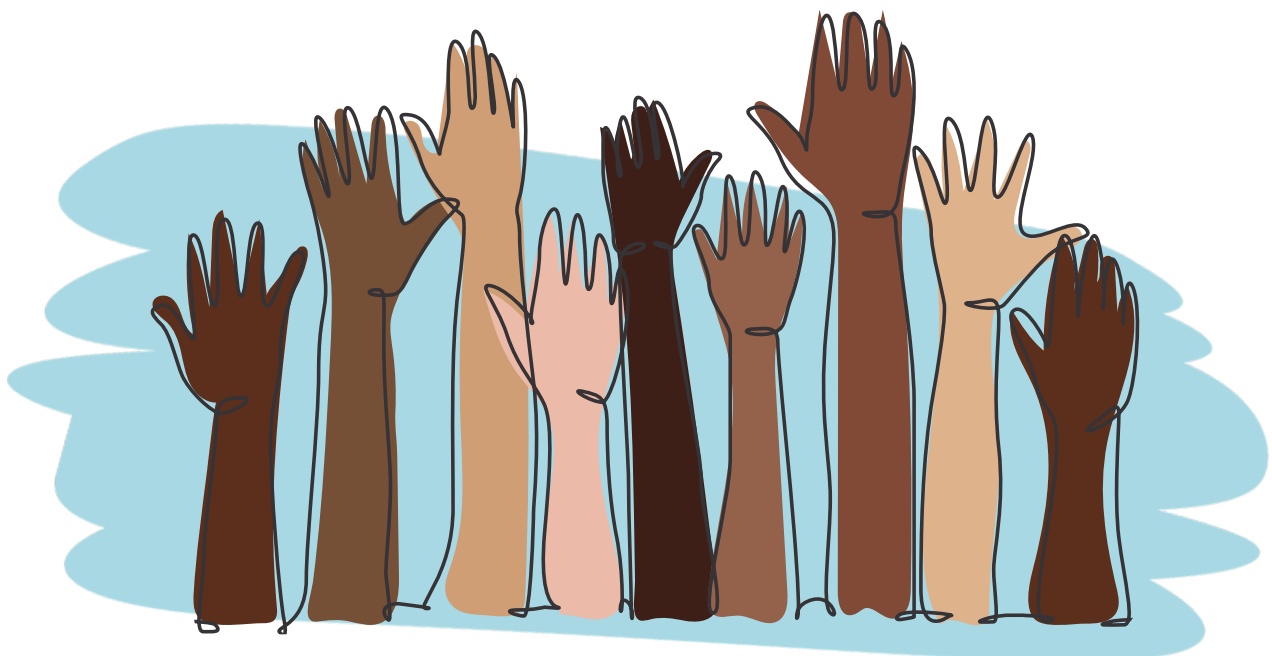
## The #MeToo movement's early roots

We owe the #MeToo movement in large part to the ingenuity of Black women and feminists.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, African-American community activist and organizer Tarana Burke launched the #MeToo campaign on the Myspace platform. Her initiative was initially aimed at countering the invisibilization and erasure of Black women and girls in sexual violence prevention and intervention efforts.<sup>6</sup> In October 2017, in the wake of the award-winning investigations of *The New York Times*<sup>7</sup> and *The New Yorker*<sup>8</sup> of the now disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, the hashtag went viral across the globe, mainly spread by American (mostly white) high-profile actresses.

The #MeToo movement has given victims and survivors of sexual violence high visibility.<sup>9</sup> It made it possible to put faces to statistics that were already very alarming. While its cultural and historical impact transcending United States borders to become a transnational movement cannot be denied, its virality and visibility championed by predominantly white privileged actresses also led to the erasure of experiences and expertise of Black survivors. This is important to illuminate and maintains the need to further elevate the experience of survivors who remain silent, for many reasons, including many women and girls from Black communities.



Learn more in this teach-in led by Kharoll-Ann Souffrant: [Pioneers Long Before #MoiAussi: Black Women, Rape Culture, and Digital Feminist Activism in Quebec](#) for the School for Black Feminist Politics, the Black feminist political education initiative and hub of [Black Women Radicals](#).



# An Overview of Sexual Violence Against Black Women and Girls in Canada

## What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence refers to a range of acts of a sexual nature that violate the physical, psychological and sexual integrity of those targeted. It may occur with or without physical contact and may leave no visible or apparent injuries. In Canada, the legal term used is “sexual assault.” The *Criminal Code* contains a myriad of sexual offences, including sexual assault, which has been listed in three ascending levels of seriousness since 1983. Many feminists<sup>10</sup> view sexual violence on a continuum, asserting that sexual violence includes a range of violent acts and actions, only some of which are perceived by the justice system as criminal.

Sexual violence has little to do with sexuality, and everything to do with power, control, and domination. That’s why it can be called “violence of a sexual nature.” The notion of consent is crucial when it comes to sexual violence. If consent is not given freely, voluntarily, enthusiastically, and in an informed manner, then it is sexual violence.

It is also important to understand that the impacts and consequences of sexual violence can be very significant for victims, regardless of the form it may take and beyond the seriousness attributed to the behaviour by an outside person.

## What are the different forms of sexual violence?

Sexual violence takes many forms including street harassment (*catcalling*), sexual harassment, criminal harassment, touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism, stealthing during a sexual relationship (removal of a condom without the consent of a partner), sexual exploitation, non-consensual sharing of intimate images or videos, sexual coercion, or rape.

Sexual violence can be perpetrated by anyone, regardless of their identity. It is often perpetrated by people close to the victims (friend, family member, sports coach, teacher, etc.). Nevertheless, men are significantly overrepresented among perpetrators in officially reported data. For example, the Ministry of Public Security in Québec<sup>11</sup>, in 2020, identified that almost all alleged perpetrators of police-reported sexual offences were men (95.5%).

## What is the prevalence of sexual violence in Canada?

In Canada, there are three main sources of data to measure the prevalence or extent of sexual violence: data from child and youth protection services, statistics on cases reported to law enforcement, and population surveys.

Since sexual violence is under-reported and seldom disclosed in our society, the figures we have are imperfect and greatly underestimate the scope of the phenomenon.

According to UN Women<sup>12</sup>, it is estimated that one in three women faces sexual and/or physical violence, primarily from an intimate partner. National survey data show that, in Canada, an estimated 30% of women aged 15 and over (nearly 5 million women), have been sexually assaulted at least once since the age of 15.<sup>13</sup>

Review of police data from 2021 showed a large increase in police-reported sexual assaults in the past year.<sup>14</sup> Rates of increase for sexual violence, along with other forms of gender-based and family violence, are greater than rates of increase for other violent crimes.

Although men may also be victims of sexual violence, women are significantly overrepresented among victims of sexual violence. Trans women, particularly Black, Indigenous or racialized Trans women; people from 2SLGBTQIA+ communities; women with disabilities; immigrant women; racialized migrant women with precarious status, including refugees, temporary foreign workers and international students; and Indigenous women and girls are more likely to experience sexual violence due to the intersection of multiple systems of oppression they face such as transphobia, lesbophobia, ableism, racism and colonialism. It is therefore important to take an intersectional approach to fully understand the issues facing victims and survivors of sexual violence.



## What is the prevalence of sexual violence against victims and survivors from African-Canadian and/or Black communities?

In Canada, according to a recent census, 1.2 million people self-identified as Black. This includes 620,000 women and girls.<sup>15</sup> To our knowledge, there are no national or governmental studies documenting the problem of sexual violence against African women and girls in this country. However, pioneering work is being done through projects such as [“The Amourgynoir Code”](#) led by WomenatthecentreE, which aims to document the realities of Black women and girls and sexually or gender-diverse persons who have experienced sexual violence and are based in Canada.

Nevertheless, a number of university and community researchers are working to document this problem independently and disparately in several Canadian provinces and cities.<sup>16</sup> By comparison, in 2016, the United States hosted the historic and first-of-its-kind Black Women’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which focused exclusively on sexual violence against African-American women and girls.<sup>17</sup> In the US, national survey data has established that the prevalence of many forms of GBV including contact sexual violence, physical violence, and stalking by an intimate partner are higher for Black individuals than for individuals who identify as Hispanic, White or Asian.<sup>18</sup> Such findings are too often unavailable in Canada.

In 2016, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent was alarmed by the lack of race-disaggregated data specifically dealing with African-Canadians, in particular, African-Canadian women.<sup>19</sup>

These findings highlight the invisibilization of African-Canadian women in public policy and research, which makes it difficult to meet their specific needs in the fight against sexual violence.

## Specificity of the stigma experienced by Black victims and survivors

Historically, archetypes of the sexuality of Black men and women have been used with the aim to dehumanize and justify various forms of violence against Black communities. These archetypes are also prevalent today. Black women have often been portrayed as strong or as having an unbridled sexuality, making them “unrapable” – the “Jezebel” archetype.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, Canadian law has long denied humanity to Black women and girls who were victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence by simply not recognizing them as legitimate victims.<sup>21</sup>

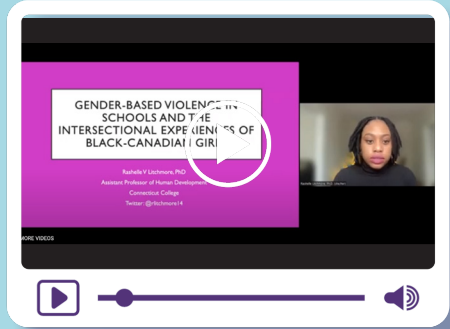
African-American social worker Kalimah Johnson,<sup>22</sup> founder of the SASHA Center,<sup>23</sup> talks about “[Black Women’s Triangulation of Rape](#)”<sup>24</sup> to illustrate the interplay between the impacts of Black enslavement in the United States, transatlantic trafficking, rape culture, systemic and societal barriers, and racism for Black women and girls who have survived sexual violence. In the late 1980s, African-American jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw illustrated that Black women’s experiences of IPV and sexual violence are distinctly and qualitatively different from those of white women.<sup>25</sup>

Some Black women and girls may fear reinforcing certain stereotypes about the so-called “bestiality” of Black men, or about their own sexuality. Their denunciation could even be seen as a “betrayal of the community,” which can expose them to severe reprisals both within Black communities and within society at large.

## Barriers to sexual violence disclosure and reporting

In Canada, the primary and most encouraged way to seek justice for sexual violence is to report it to the police. This process can lead to an indictment, a trial, and ultimately to the incarceration and criminalization of the person(s) against whom the complaint is made when a guilty plea or verdict is made. From the onset, this avenue to justice and redress has many shortcomings<sup>26</sup> for all victims and survivors, regardless of their gender or identity. It is widely documented, both in the scientific literature of feminist researchers and through the testimonies of victims and survivors, that the criminal justice system generally induces secondary victimization because it is poorly adapted to the diverse needs of victims of sexual violence.<sup>27</sup>

In response to these concerns, the Government of Quebec has set up specialized IPV and sexual violence courts in order to increase victims’ and survivors’ confidence in the criminal justice system, after the province was rocked by many waves of #MeToo-type disclosures.<sup>28</sup> However, for many Black women and girls, specificities are needed,<sup>29</sup> particularly because of the difficult historical and contemporary relationship between police and State forces, and racialized communities, including Black communities. It is therefore important to inform Black women and girls who have survived violence of all the options for justice and reparation available to them, while respecting their specific situation and their collective and individual needs.



Learn more in this bilingual webinar: [Gender-Based Violence in Schools and the Intersectional Experiences of Black-Canadian Girls](#) presented by Dr. Rashelle Litchmore.





## Plea for Kaleidoscopic Justice

Promoted by Clare McGlynn and Nicole Westmarland, “kaleidoscopic justice” is a concept of justice based on interviews with victim-survivors of sexual violence.<sup>30</sup> It is composed of several principles, including that the sense of justice of victims and survivors is a fluid process that continually evolves in a nuanced and complex manner. The importance of recognition, dignity, the victim-survivor’s voice, prevention of sexual violence, and a sense of community around oneself are paramount in this conception of justice.

It is very important to break down what is meant by “justice”, beyond the punitive and prison systems. Justice is a concept with many variations, and it is up to each victim-survivor to define it according to their own experience of sexual violence. In addition to the complaint to the police, it is important to let those who have experienced sexual violence know that justice can take the form of a civil remedy (which most often results in financial compensation from the offender to the victim), or of a restorative justice<sup>31</sup> or even transformative justice process.<sup>32</sup> For some, speaking out on social media can also be seen as a legitimate way to be heard.<sup>33</sup>

No victim-survivor should be forced to use certain avenues to obtain justice. Sharing one’s experience with loved ones, professionals, or qualified workers in the field, getting involved in the fight against sexual violence or even getting involved in the arts are all legitimate, valid, and diverse ways of experiencing one’s healing process.



# Considerations for Service Providers

When working with Black women and girls, engage in culturally trauma- and violence-informed approaches. For instance:

## Believe the victim.

Because of the shame surrounding sexual violence, particularly in Black communities, if a victim decides to talk to you about it, she is giving you a very big gift. Thank her for this gift and honour her courage in breaking the silence.

Position yourself as a helper by presenting the different options available to the victim or survivor but highlighting the potential positive and negative consequences of each option.

Support her to do a cost-benefit analysis of each option by explaining that there is no “guarantee” of the positive and negative consequences of each option.

Recognize that some options may be less safe due to anti-Black racism and misogyny<sup>34</sup> affecting Black women and girls.

Remember that many of the basic needs of Black women and girls who have survived sexual violence may be similar to those of victims of sexual violence in general: the need to be heard, believed, listened to, recognized, validated, supported (especially for daily activities), accompanied, regardless of the steps taken, and to have a community around them.



Most importantly, let survivors make their own decisions.

Support community and research initiatives led by Black women and girls and emphasize the importance of having more research by this population on this topic.



## Resources for further learning:

- [WomenatthecentrE - Declarations of Truth - Documenting Insights from Survivors of Sexual Abuse](#)
- [Yolonda Wilson - Why black women's experiences of #MeToo are different](#)
- [Learning Network - Looking Within: Anti-Black Racism and the Gender-Based Violence Sector in Canada Forum Recordings](#)
- [Battered Women's Support Services \(BWSS\) - Colour of Violence: Race, Gender & Anti-Violence Services](#)
- [Sisters in Sync - #MaybeNextTime Summit](#)



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- <sup>7</sup> Kantor, J., & Twohey, M. (October 5, 2017). Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Farrow, R. (October 10, 2017). From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>
- <sup>9</sup> We use the terms "victim" and "survivor" interchangeably in this document to honour the ability of every person who has experienced sexual violence to self-identify as they wish. The term "victim" emphasizes the non-accountability of people who have experienced sexual violence and recognizes victims who do not survive (literally and figuratively) the violence they have experienced. The term "survivor" recognizes those who have experienced sexual violence and is associated with the notion of resilience. In our view, both of these two different and politically charged terms are useful and relevant and should not be pitted against each other. Both terms recognize the diversity of responses to experiences of sexual violence and the complexity of the healing process when experiencing such trauma.
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- <sup>16</sup> Examples include pioneering work by researchers Jacqueline Benn-John, Patrina Duhaney, Rachel Zellars, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson, K. (2018). Culturally Specific Services for African-American Self-Identified Sexual Assault Survivors in Detroit. Retrieved from <https://www.sashacenter.org/TheSASHAModelPaper2018.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> This is a holistic, Afrocentric centre that provides services to victims and survivors of sexual violence in Detroit, United States. For more information: <https://sashacenter.org/>

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, K., & SASHA Center. (2018). *The SASHA Model: Black Women's Triangulation of Rape*. Retrieved from [https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SASHA-Model-Black-Womens-Triangulation-and-Rape\\_Condencia-Brade.pdf](https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SASHA-Model-Black-Womens-Triangulation-and-Rape_Condencia-Brade.pdf)

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