# Chapter 32
# Silenced, Shamed, and Scatted:
## Black Feminist Perspective on Sexual Trauma and Treatment With African American Female Survivors

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## ABSTRACT

*The African American experience is grounded in a strong religious tradition that does not adequately address sexual violence against women. This chapter offers perspective on how religiously-motivated heterocentric-patriarchy marginalizes Black female sexual trauma survivors. Recommendations are informed by Black feminisms in order to support culturally congruent practice. These interventions emphasize Black women's lived experience, raise awareness of multilevel oppression, and foster the empowerment of Black women. Basic treatment considerations for African American female trauma survivors and their support systems are provided.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence impacts approximately one in three women and one in six men; roughly 1.2 per 1,000 persons are raped or sexually assaulted (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2016; Morgan & Kena, 2017). Scholarship on sexual violence against African American women remains scarce relative to the considerable research on sexual trauma experienced by European American women. However, there are noteworthy studies that have contributed to understanding Black women's experiences with

sexual abuse (e.g., Basile, Smith, Fowler, Walters, & Hamburger, 2016; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2015; Kruger, 2013; Perry-Burney, Thomas, & McDonald, 2014; Wadsworth & Records, 2013). According to Bryant-Davis et al. (2015), between 18% and 36% of African American women report sexual assault, but survivors may not disclose the abuse or seek services due to personal, societal, and cultural barriers.

Religion is a cultural factor impacting disclosure of abuse. African Americans traditionally rely on religion for meaning and support in facing trauma, and religious institutions are credited for providing effective coping spaces (Bryant-Davis et al., 2015). However, these institutions can also conceal Black pain and sexual trauma and function as a cultural barrier to reporting sex crimes. Additional religion-related barriers include the power of religion/religious leaders; use of religion to justify abuse; belief that religious leaders will not act in the best interest of participants; fear of harm from abuser, particularly when the perpetrator is a religious leader; and fear of backlash from the religious community following disclosure (Perry-Burney et al., 2014). Patriarchal ideology has significant implications in the suppression or censure of sexual violence because patriarchy is embedded in religious texts that sanction social patterns and subjugate women (Ruether, 1982). Patriarchy is a sociopolitical structure that justifies and promotes male domination of women's bodies. Patriarchy silences women, including those who have survived sexual traumas. Silencing sexual trauma also fuels victim-blaming ideology including myths about harassment and violence that favor the perpetrator and foster poor coping among survivors. Black female trauma survivors, in particular, are routinely shamed and disempowered from sharing their trauma narratives.

While this chapter does not intend to imply that sexual trauma is exclusive to women, African Americans, or religious contexts, this focus is African American female survivors within Abrahamic religions. According to the Pew Research Center (2018b), 79% of African Americans self-identify as Christian thus more attention is shown to this religion. Black women are often simultaneously alienated by religious institutions and erased from mainstream conversations about sexual violence such as #MeToo, which began as the grassroots 'me too.' movement. The 'me too.' movement was initiated by Tarana Burke, an African American woman, and later appropriated into mainstream discussion by American celebrities via social media.

This chapter considers how Black religious institutions minimize sexual violence to preserve Black heterocentric-patriarchy. The chapter also explores how systemic oppression facilitates the need for treatment strategies that support Black women's health and coping processes. In fact, Black feminisms offers a culturally congruent approach to working with Black female sexual trauma survivors. Lastly, this chapter describes how group context, professional cultural awareness, and treatment strategies align with Black feminisms. Note, the terms "African American women" and "Black women" represent women self-identified as Black, of African descent, and of American nationality.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF HETEROCENTRIC-PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy is a system in which males and masculine persons dominate women and persons perceived as feminine; however, female and feminine allies can also adopt patriarchal values and practices. For example, Townes (2003) argued that 'patriarchy' is a misnomer because White women were so intricately complicit in racial oppression. The intersection of patriarchy and heterosexism exert control over

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