

RAPE AND RACISM

By Kalamu ya Salaam/AHIDIANA (ca. 1979)

Although there are numerous and equally important facets to the question of rape, the dynamics of the interaction of rape and racism is perhaps the least discussed facet of rape. Statistics and analytical interpretation reveal that, percentagewise, the black woman, is both the prime victim and the most ignored victim of rape, and that the black man is both the recipient of punitive legal responses to rape and the person most often used as a social scapegoat.

Studies show that, contrary to prevailing mythology, the rapist and his victim tend to be of the same class and the same race, and that the majority of reported rapes happen disproportionately among black people. Margaret Hyde, writing in her book, Speak Out on Rape!, in analyzing Patterns in Forcible Rape, the 1971 study of reported rapes in Philadelphia by Menachem Amir, noted that “77 percent of all rapes have been committed by black men raping black women.”

Local collaboration of these and other studies is found in the report released by the Orleans Parish Coroner’s Office which unequivocally states, “Generally, the average woman who is raped is Black (70%), in her 20’s, and the perpetrator is also of the same race (80% Black)...”

In Rape, Racism, and the White Women’s Movement: An Answer to Susan Brownmiller, Alison Edwards reveals the racism of judicial responses to rape, “...although the rape laws did not specify “for blacks only” that is what they meant. Out of 455 executions for rape in the last forty years, 405 have been of black men...No white man has ever been executed for raping a black woman.”

Lynda L Holmstrom and Ann W. Burgess writing in The Victim of Rape, not only concur with Edwards but also specify how the judicial system is skewed against black women.

Race of the victim makes a great difference. The conviction rate when the victim was white was 6 of 60 (10%), compared to only 2 of 48 (4.2%) when the victim was non-white. The conviction rate was even lower when one looks at black victims alone rather than all nonwhite victims. Among black female victims, only 1 of 43 cases (2.3%) led to a conviction for rape. The one case was that of a five-year old girl. Thus, not one black

adolescent of adult woman was able to take her case to the criminal justice system and have her definition of the situation sustained.

As the statistics show, black people and specifically black women should be packing the audience and providing major input from the panel and podium at rape conferences, but we do not. Politically perceptive feminists should be pointing out how myths about rape, as well as misinterpretations and misrepresentations of the reality of rape, are used to both divide opponents of the status quo as well as blame the problem of society on minorities (especially blacks) and sick individuals, but they are not doing that.

A recent one-day program, RAPE: RESPONSES AND RESPONSIBILITIES, which was held on 12 May 1979 and sponsored by the Rape Crisis Service of the YMCA is a good example of what I mean. The conference featured presentations from Doctors Ann Burgess and Nicholas Groth, two nationally recognized authorities on rape. There were reactions from panelists drawn from in and around New Orleans.

Dr. Nicholas Groth, Director, Sex Offender Program, Connecticut Department of Corrections, and Chief Clinical Psychologist for ten years at Bridgewater, Massachusetts Treatment Cent for Sexually Dangerous Persons, as well as noted author and lecturer on the topic of rape, emphasized that the hardest fact to get across to most people was that rape is primarily a crime of violence and not a sexual act per se. He pointed out that his numerous studies and readings have confirmed time and time again that the rapist was not acting out of a need or desire to have sex with the victim but rather out of efforts to express dominance, anger or sadistic victim reversal (most sadist have a record of childhood sexual abuse are other severe social adjustment problems incurred during childhood and are venting their frustrations through sadism).

Dr. Ann Burgess, professor of Nursing, Boston College and Chair, Advisory Committee, National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, as well as co-author of two books and numerous articles on rape, spoke about how rape affected the victims of rape. Based on direct study of the clinical and social aftermaths of rape attacks, and the physical and psychological trauma that accompanies rape, Dr. Burgess asserted that rape was a “major life stressor” which significantly effects the lives of victims.

As I listened to the presentations of Burgess and Groth it became clearer and clearer to me that the way in which rape was being discussed and analyzed was like describing an iceberg by talking about that part which sticks up out of the water.

The rapist that Groth studied were “convicted rapists” who were incarcerated. Except for rapists who are also sadists (estimated to be low but highly publicized percentage), most convicted rapists have the same general psychological profile as the majority of “normal” men in America. In one of Groth’s control groups he found that more “than half were married”, and nearly all of them were engaged in sexually consenting relationships. When asked did they think that rape was good sex only two out of seventy-five rated it average or above; most rated rape zero to two on a zero to ten scale of sexual satisfaction.

Groth postulates that rapists are people who have defects in their “life management skills”. He defines rape as an anti-social behavior brought on by an inability to cope with the stress and strains of everyday life.

To their credit, two panelists, Andrea Canaan and Dr. Mary Capps, suggested that there was a larger problem below the water line and that the enormity of rape had not yet been fully realized.

Andrea Canaan, a former counselor with the YMCA’s Battered Women’s Program and a volunteer counselor with the Rape Crisis Center, suggested that the American culture needed to be analyzed and that the culture of the victims, particularly Black and Hispanic victims demanded closer inspection to fully understand the dynamics of rape with respect to the perpetrator, victim and community. Mr. Canaan coined “the drop in the bucket syndrome” to describe how many black women are forced to feel about rape, in the face of other hard pressing survival issues, unless the rape is excessively brutal or accompanied by extreme psychological terror, many black women often forget about or repress the effects of rape. They view it as but another “drop in the bucket” of trials and tribulations they daily face.

During one of the breaks Ms. Canaan commented on the high percentage of black rape victims. “The black woman in this country is the most vulnerable woman. She is accessible to any man. I say she is accessible because first, historically and psychologically, for white men, black women have always been accessible. The other thing is that black women work in settings

where they are without power. She is the maid, the waitress, the secretary, again she is always low woman on the totem pole and that makes her accessible.”

Mary Capps, assistant professor of sociology, Nicholls State University, and first director of the Rape Crisis Service tested the waters by sounding out her view that all myths and particularly rape myths have “social functions”. She believes that rape myths serve to “silence victims” of rape and deactivate and demotivate social institutions which should be addressing the issue of rape. Additionally, rape myths propagate and support the sexist role structure of modern society by legitimizing male dominance of women.

The program was good as a discussion on rape in general and the presenters offered interesting and specific information based on their clinical experience with rapists and victims. Nevertheless, most of the speakers discussed rape clinically and with emphasis on women in general. But rape is not abstract and non-specific. Rape is more than an antagonism between men and women, the profile of both attacker and victim are more than merely man and woman, and the reasons that rapists attack women and other men, cannot simply be boiled down to male hormones gone wild nor individual fault lines which cause social instability.

There are race and class elements to the rape question, as well as the obvious sexist aspects. But to determine the degree and depth of these and other elements would require a dispassionate investigation of the reality of rape.

While we are in the process of doing such an investigation, it would do us well to take off our racial blinders. Rape disproportionately and adversely effects blacks. Given this reality, rape will never be eradicated until a conscious and effective program is developed to obtain greater input from blacks in the anti-rape movement.

To accomplish such a task will, of course, require an analysis of the cause of rape which is consistent with racial as well as other realities of rape (for example, Amir’s ’71 study showed that 53% of the convicted rapists were unskilled laborers, 28.2% were unemployed, 11.5% were students, and only 6.4% were of “all other occupations”).

The YMCA’s Rape Crisis Service’s program provided a giant step forward by hosting the program on rape and also by steadfastly maintaining an anti-rape program to help victims of rape and raise the awareness of the community about the realities of rape.

Some people assume that “feminists” are just crying rape to get attention to their cause, others believe that it’s primarily an issue artificially raised by “middle class, white women” who have nothing else to do, and more than a few people consider rape a fictitious issue without factual merit. Too few of us perceive rape as a serious and growing community problem which affects us all whether female or male, white or black.

Dr. Frank Minyard, the Orleans Parish Coroner, believes that “there is a serious rape problem” in New Orleans and that “the number of rapes has continued to increase during the last few years...” Now is the time for all of us to become more involved in the fight against rape; yet there is a palatable reluctance to get involved among people of all classes, races and sexes.

But then that’s consistent with America where the problems which disproportionately effect lower class minorities and women don’t command the attention nor respect accorded to those problems which effect the “majority” (defined generally as middle class, white, male) community.

Unfortunately, many people do not perceive the importance of social problems until they are directly and individually effected by those problems. Additionally, the institutional racism of America effectively shrouds rape, rendering it an invisible problem which non-victims, both black and white have difficulty relating.

Perhaps when 70% of the rape victims are white men, instead of black women, then there will be a hue and cry, mass public indignation and a consensus call for community action. But why wait?