



## **Culturally Specific Services for African-American Self-Identified Sexual Assault Survivors in Detroit**

By

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"It is always the secrets that make us sick"- Dr. Joy DeGruy

### **Introduction**

Sexual Assault Services for Holistic Healing and Awareness (SASHA Center) is a non-profit in Detroit, Michigan that provides to self-identified survivors (or experiencers of rape) culturally specific services for the integration of these traumatic experiences and healing. It is a standalone 501c3 agency. The SASHA Center focuses on the African American community.

In addition to providing technical assistance to organizations/shelters/dual DV/SA agencies, SASHA Center also provides educational programs and workshops to corporations. The organization conducts trainings and community events to sorority and fraternity groups, black churches and other religious institutions. SASHA Center also collaborates with local LGBTQI agencies and their allies.

The main focus of the SASHA Center is to provide support group services across all intersections (race, religion, sexual orientation, economic status, gender or gender expression, education, age, ability, work status, and any other marker of difference).

SASHA Center provides support group services to victims/survivors of sexual assault (occurring in all contexts such as date/acquaintance, stranger, familial and/or marital rape) to individuals in the Detroit area who are or who have been influenced, reared or raised in communities or households by those who are currently living in the Midwest Region of the United States and who are descendants of people who were enslaved in America (primarily from the Southern Region of the country).

This intentional service provision for this population was deliberately created and identified because over the years, this population has been invisible, ignored, treated inadequately, inappropriately, misdiagnosed and discriminated against as it relates to race and sexual assault services. Specifically, 81% of the 11,000 untested and "shelved" rape kits in Detroit belonged to African-American women (Campbell, Fehler-Cabral, Pierce, Sharma, Bybee, Shaw, Horsford & Feeney 2015). As a result of this, justice for African-American women was usurped and their visibility was denied. Barriers that exist within the African-American community that can impede in service provision for sexual assault supportive interventions include but are not limited to economics, the criminal justice system, limited access to resources, service providers not understanding cultural nuances and negative images and stereotypes that are held by SA/DV leadership and in some cases internalized by survivors that are seeking help (Robinson, 2003).



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## **The Triangulation of Black Women and Rape**

In the African-American community secret keeping throughout our generations and within the context of surviving slavery, sexual assault, mutilation, bondage and hate has been what facilitators of groups at the SASHA Center identify as a “coping mechanism used by our people to survive” (Johnson, Davis, L., Davis, Z., & Ventour, 2018). However, this strategy of secret keeping has not always worked, therefore culturally specific services for this population must first and foremost challenge the notion and functionality (or the lack thereof) of the “no-snitching” phenomenon, which has impeded on this community’s capacity to integrate healing as a human right for sexual assault survivors. This notion and idea of “no-snitching” started during slavery and continues to present day.

Dr. Joy DeGruy talks about the transatlantic slaved trade and the rape of Black women in her critically acclaimed book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005). In it she states,

Because she is a slave, her children are also slaves and she must come to grips with the fact that she is incapable of defending them against assaults from masters and overseers...there will be a day when white men will demand to have access to her daughter...the mother anguishes over this fact...she attempts to tell her how best to prepare and survive, tells her to lie...not resist, bear the pain...(paraphrased).

Besides the notion of “no-snitching”, there are three additional key issues that are present when it comes to properly serving Black women who have been raped.

First, Black women are either over-celebrated or vehemently bonded by the “strong black woman” image/ stereotype which poses a challenge for care-givers, family, and herself which can get in the way of her asking for help, or receiving help from those who assume that she is strong and can handle all things that “God places on her”.

Secondly, the generational inheritance of trauma through slavery and the survivor stories that show up in clinical settings and advocacy centers for rape victims has been challenging to some service providers. Showing empathy and accepting that Black women do indeed get raped and that their lives are valuable and that healing is certainly possible is a concept harder to grasp when the history of slavery is ignored. There has been a lack of exploration regarding how the environment as well as the legacy of slavery has negatively impacted Black women in present day.

Thirdly, mainstream agencies lack specific funding for culturally appropriate services. Even the money that is earmarked for marginalized communities, funders and their reports lack the language, descriptions and markers for describing how resources are allocated and spent regarding collaborations, spaces, and support group topics. For instance, a funder might ask what does skin tone and hair have to do with sexual assault and why is it a topic during a sexual assault healing group session? Meanwhile, underfunded but appropriately trained



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culturally specific service providers know that these topics can impact the way in which services are rendered, how survivors may be discriminated against and whether or not survivors will get justice. Hair and skin tone often determines the extent to which the systems in place are helpful and responsive to clients because of discrimination, assumptions, acceptance of negative stereotypes and racism (internalized or otherwise). In fact, according to the Social Science Journal, “for over 12,000 black women imprisoned in North Carolina between 1995 and 2009 black women deemed to have a lighter skin tone received more lenient prison sentences and served less time behind bars” (Jill Viglione, Lance Hannon, Robert DeFina).

It is this example and many more like it that influence how programming at the SASHA Center is arranged for survivors. All services are free of charge to victims, programs are intergenerational, there is a balance within the support group services that are from clinically sound best practices as well as integrative and non-traditional (depending on who is asked or who is telling the story or explaining what SASHA Center actually does). Programming for support groups are culturally specific as evidenced by topics that are covered. Survivors and facilitators engage in discussion from hair texture/skin tone, food, music, art, dance, ancestors, prayer/meditation, humor, irony and satire, as well as earth, wind and fire (pun intended). Story-telling is cathartic and each 1-2-hour sessions include activities that engage the mind, body and spirit.

Please visit the SASHA Center website to review the SASHA Model also known as “The Triangulation of Black Women and Rape” which is copy written and provides an infographic explaining of the dynamics shared above in explicit detail. [www.sashacenter.org](http://www.sashacenter.org)

## **Conclusion**

Culturally specific programming is critical to African-Americans and a direct connection must be made between the transatlantic slave trade and the current negative impact it has on present day survivors of sexual violence. Mainstream organizations need to collaborate more with smaller agencies to support programming that is culturally specific. Topics that may appear to be unrelated to sexual assault should be explored for culturally specific programming. More specifically, safe spaces need to be created that resonate with the clients’ language, expression, experience and history. There is a need for more organizations that focus on providing culturally specific services and current funding sources need to reflect inclusivity and become more “user-friendly” for agencies and programs. Black women, families and communities deserve healing and appropriate services for integrating the traumatic experience of rape and sexual assault.



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## BIO

Kalimah Johnson, LMSW is the Executive Director and Founder of the SASHA Center, and is a consultant to the Women of Color Network's-ABC Consortium. She was previously an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Marygrove College in Detroit, MI. Recently, she completed a Certification in Professional Athlete Development from the Wharton School of Executive Education-University of Pennsylvania. She is also the Lead Consultant on Relationship Management and Safety with an emphasis on Domestic and Sexual Violence with the NBA. She has also created programming, workshops and trainings for the NFL, NHL, NCAA, E-Sports and for colleges and universities across the country on sexual assault. She is also in the newly released HBO Film Documentary "I Am Evidence" produced by Mariska Hargitay about the rape kit crisis in the United States.