



Issue Brief: Gender Violence and Homophobia

Overview

Generally speaking, Black people do not believe that misogyny, sexism and violence against women are urgent issues. We still think that racism, police brutality, black male incarceration are the issues that we need to be concerned about.

—Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall

For years, mainstream rap artists have stirred controversy with sexually charged and/or violent lyrics. Some go so far as to denigrate women and homosexuals with messages that can make physical abuse sound normal.

In the meantime, domestic violence has increasingly been recognized as a critical public health problem and a serious violation of basic human rights under international treaties. According to the National Women's Alliance, violence against women is a broad social justice issue that happens in public and private and across race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, ability and other markers of difference. Consider the following facts:

- Murder at the hands of a romantic partner is a leading cause of death among African American women between the ages of 15 and 24, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that intimate partner violence in the United States leads to two million injuries annually and nearly 1,300 murders.
- Statistics have shown that women are most exposed and unsafe in their own homes.
- Victims of domestic violence average more surgeries, physician and pharmacy visits, hospital stays and mental health consultations than other women.
- Husbands and partners are responsible for the majority of aggression, injuries, sexual abuse and homicide.

Gender Violence in Hip-Hop

I jokingly say that I'm in recovery from hip-hop. It's like being in a domestic violence situation. Your home is hip-hop and your man beats you.

—Toni Blackman, rap lyricist, vocalist, actress, writer and U.S. Hip-Hop Ambassador

According to the market research firm Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions,

which surveyed thousands of low-income African American youths for a 2003 study, acceptance of abuse is on the rise. Many felt there were plenty of situations in which violence against a woman is justified.

In her groundbreaking article, “Love Hurts: Rap’s Black Eye,” published in *Vibe Magazine*, Elizabeth Mendez Berry writes that The Notorious B.I.G. (Biggie) set the mentality of abuse to music. On the track “Me & My Bitch,” he raps to his beloved, “You talk slick, I beat you right.” Berry notes that, “Apparently, he was keeping it real: Since Big’s death, his widow, Faith Evans, has taken a public stand against domestic violence. She sang the chorus on Eve’s indictment of abusers, ‘Love Is Blind’ (remix), and appeared in Eve Ensler’s V-Day event in Harlem, opposing violence against women.”

Rappers like Biggie figure prominently in young lives. The participants in the MEE survey listened to the radio and watched TV for an average of three hours per day; 76 percent called BET their favorite channel. Berry goes on to note, “Like Big Pun, who grew up in an abusive household, these youths are learning by example.” According to the MEE surveys, both young men and women used almost exclusively negative words to describe the females they knew—they were either “hos, sluts or bitches.”

Homophobia

While many of the images of shirtless, muscular, hardened male rap artists found in music videos might be seen through a homoerotic lens, this perspective remains highly controversial and often secretive. When homoeroticism—or the sexualization of same gender attraction—comes to the fore, it can be deadly. For sexual minorities such as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender young people, the statistics are grim and even more under-reported than violence against women. Furthermore, cultural expression in both mainstream America and mainstream hip-hop alike tend to normalize homophobia—the fear of homosexual attraction.

Advocacy and parents’ organizations have observed a murderous tide of under-reported violence claiming the lives of more than 50 non-gender-conforming youth and young adults under 30 since 1995. GenderPAC, a national human rights organization, notes, “The hostility animating this (violence) originates in a widespread gender culture that loathes ‘sissies,’ rewards hyper-masculinity and winks at the use of aggression to ‘toughen up’ young boys and prevent any sign of effeminacy.”

A case study on murders of non-gender-conforming youth found the following similarities in the victims:

- Most victims were of color (91%)
- Most victims were transgender or gay
- Most victims were biologically male, but not presenting masculinity
- Most victims were ignored by the media

The same case study found the following similarities in the assailants:

- All assailants were male; most attack biologically male peers
- Most assailants used extreme violence
- Most assailants lived in major cities
- Most assailants went free

Challenging the Problem of Gender Violence and Homophobia

Keith Boykin, host of the BET television show *My Two Cents*, a *New York Times* best-selling author and a former White House aide to President Clinton writes, “So who am I to challenge hip-hop? It’s just entertainment. Snoop Dogg once said he can’t knock nobody’s hustle. He was right. It is, after all, a hustle. But it’s a hustle that has extremely important consequences on the larger society and on the black community.”

National violence prevention organization A Call to Men has put forth the following statements in an effort to “name the problem” of gender violence:

- Well-meaning men and men who assault have more in common than differences.
- Each year millions of men severely assault the women with whom they are partnered.
- Each day several men murder their present or former female partner. The majority of these murders occur during or after a separation.
- There is a high percentage of men who assault the women they are partnered with during pregnancy.
- Men rape and sexually assault more than 300,000 women every year.
- Men will rape one out of six women.
- Men will sexually assault one out of four women on college campuses.
- Violence against women is a manifestation of sexism.
- Men’s violence against women is the leading cause of injury to women.
- Violence against women is a human rights violation.

Furthermore, A Call to Men posits that well-meaning men *give permission* to abuse in the following ways:

- Silence (silence and permission are synonymous)
- Blaming women
- Minimizing the consequences
- Desensitizing violence

And finally, A Call to Men offers the following steps for men to become part of the solution:

- Break out of the “the man box.” Challenge those traditional images of manhood that stop men from actively taking a stance to end men’s violence against women.
- Accept and own men’s responsibility that violence against women will not end until men become part of the solution to end it.
- Stop making excuses for the behavior of men. Violence against women is a man’s choice, rooted in and supported by sexism.
- Focus on creating appropriate and effective systems to educate and hold men accountable.
- Create systems of accountability to women [and sexual minorities] in local communities.
- Violence against women will end only when men take direction from those who understand it most, women and sexual minorities.
- Remember that silence is affirming. When we choose not to speak out, we are supporting the behavior.

- Educate and re-educate sons and other young men about men's responsibility to end violence against women.
- Examine and challenge men's sexism and the role it plays in supporting violence against women.
- Stop colluding with other men, get out of our defined roles in society and take a stance to end all forms of violence against women.
- Understand and acknowledge how sexism, patriarchy and male privilege are the foundation for violence against women.

Sources

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