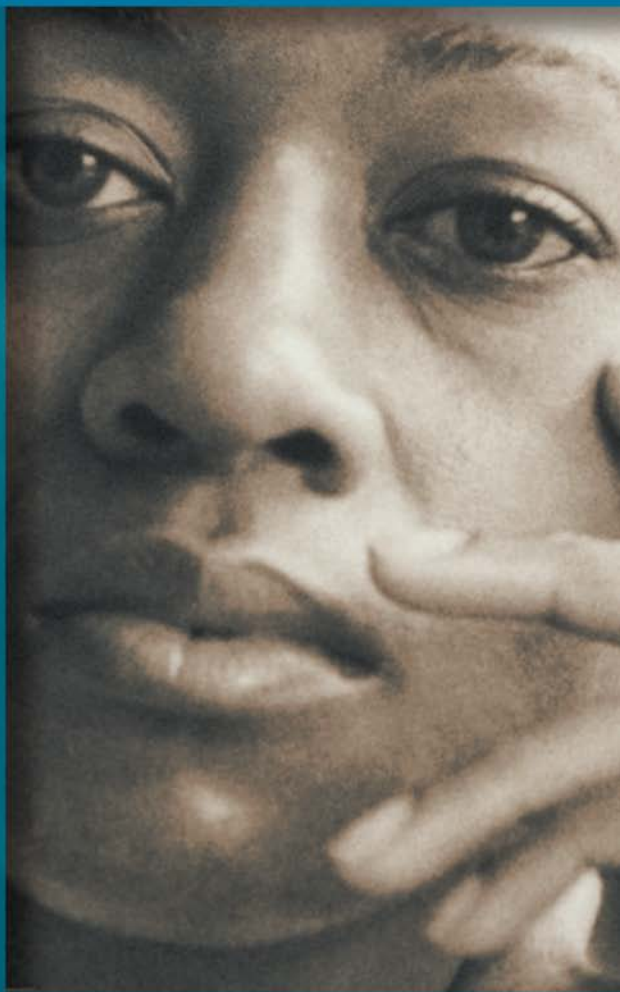


Violence in the Lives of Black Women

Winner of the
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*Battered,
Black,
and Blue*



Carolyn M. West, PhD • Editor

Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue

Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue has been co-published simultaneously as *Women & Therapy*, Volume 25, Numbers 3/4 2002.

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Carolyn M. West, PhD
Editor

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

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Introduction

How do feminist therapists, researchers, advocates, activists, and survivors begin a dialogue about violence in the lives of Black women? The discussion often starts with the familiar tag line, "Domestic violence is a problem that affects all women, regardless of race and social class." This statement is true. To some extent, violence in the home, on the streets, and in the workplace is *color blind*. In our patriarchal society, any woman is vulnerable. Other scholars have considered violence to be a problem that plagues people of color, particularly African Americans. In some respects, this statement is also true. Race, class, and gender inequalities place Black women at an increased risk for many forms of victimization. Therapists and scholars face the challenge of articulating the many similarities among survivors, without negating the particular experiences of Black women. Simultaneously, we need to acknowledge racial differences without perpetrating the stereotype that African Americans are inherently more violent than other racial/ethnic groups.

This challenge requires us to develop a Black feminist analysis of violence in the lives of African American women. Such a perspective would not privilege gender oppression over race or class oppression. Instead, a Black feminist approach would consider how living at the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression, and other forms of oppression, such as homophobia, converge to shape Black women's experiences with violence. For example, when compared to poor women and lesbians, social class and heterosexual privilege can protect middle-class or heterosexual Black women from some types of aggression. At the same time, racism can make it difficult for Black women, regardless of their economic status or sexual orientation, to escape racially-based forms of violence.

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All these forms of oppression and violence are deeply rooted in history. For example, slavery created institutionalized forms of violence, including rape and forced breeding. Oppressive images were created to “normalize” this violence. It was easier to perceive Black women as sexually promiscuous Jezebels rather than as rape victims. Although this history is unpleasant, it continues to influence institutional responses to Black survivors. Some mental health, legal, and medical professionals continue to minimize the violence in Black women’s lives. However, Black feminist scholars also emphasize Black women’s long history of resistance to violence in their lives and communities. We see examples of this resistance in Black women’s literature, music, and spirituality.

The authors of this volume are therapists, researchers, community activists, and survivors of violence. Most of the authors are African American women, and all are deeply committed to ending violence in the lives of women. They write from a Black feminist perspective. Such a framework requires us to broaden our definition of violence to include violence in intimate relationships, violence in the workplace, and violence in the community. Accordingly, the first section of this volume is a literature review. In the first article, I focus on childhood sexual abuse, dating violence, partner abuse in intimate relationships (both dating and married couples), sexual assault, and sexual harassment. In the second article, Esther Jenkins reviews the literature on community violence, with a focus on witnessing violence and the loss of an intimate to homicide. Both articles provide prevalence rates and risk factors, and discuss the most common psychological sequelae associated with each form of victimization.

The second section of this volume delves into each type of violence in more detail. The goal is to focus on violence across the life span, beginning with violence during childhood. Victoria Banyard, Linda Williams, Jane Siegel, and Carolyn West used a longitudinal study, whose sample consisted primarily of African American women, to investigate the long-term physical and mental health consequences associated with childhood sexual abuse. They discovered that many survivors of child sexual abuse are vulnerable to re-victimization in the forms of partner violence and rape in their adult relationships. These findings indicate that violence in the lives of Black women is not an isolated incident. Instead, violence is often a “complex web of trauma exposure,” which influences many areas of Black women’s lives.

The abuse experience is further complicated when survivors live at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. As evidence, NiCole

Buchanan and Alayne Ormerod conducted focus groups with professional African American women. They discovered that racism and sexism converged to form what they describe as “racialized sexual harassment.” Roxanne Donovan and Michelle Williams explore how living at the intersection of racism and sexism can make it difficult for Black women to disclose having been raped. Consistent with Black feminist theory, the authors explain how Black women’s history of sexual violence and the history of oppressive images influence how contemporary Black women experience sexual harassment and rape.

The diversity among African American women will obviously shape their experiences with violence. Accordingly, the third section of this volume focuses on battered African American women who are further silenced by their marginalized status. Amorie Robinson addressed the unique challenges faced by battered lesbians, such as internalized and institutionalized homophobia. Martha Banks and Rosalie Ackerman focus on Black battered women who had experienced traumatic head and brain injuries. The authors used cases studies to allow Black women from these marginalized groups to speak for themselves.

Despite the challenges, many Black women are survivors and active change agents. Banyard and her colleagues investigate characteristics that are associated with resilience among Black survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Other authors also contribute to our knowledge in this area. Specifically, several authors used interviews to investigate the decision-making and termination process that Black women use to escape abusive intimate relationships. April Few and Patricia Bell-Scott focus on violent dating relationships, and Janette Taylor extends this discussion with her focus on marital relationships. Regardless of their relationship status, leaving is a process that requires many women to identify their partners’ behavior as abusive, to disengage from their partners, and finally to move toward healing.

Black feminist scholars value testimonials offered by survivors and believe that a variety of methods can be used to raise awareness about violence in the lives of Black women and thus promote healing. Consequently, the final section of this volume is devoted to activism and healing. Janette Taylor conducted interviews to demonstrate how formerly battered Black women used the research process to heal themselves and to help others. Salamishah Tillet and Aishah Simmons draw on their personal experiences as rape survivors. Both authors have used the media and the arts to depict their vision of a world where Black women are free from sexual violation. Rev. Rosalyn Nichols represents the voice of a spiritual leader and community member. Reliance on faith and cour-

age inspired her to develop a program to address violence in her community. In the final article, I summarize the authors' findings, review their suggestions for intervention, and provide a list of references and resources.

This volume is entitled *Battered, Black, and Blue* because we know that too many Black women are battered in their intimate relationships, communities, and workplaces. Furthermore, Black women are battered when social institutions are unresponsive to their plight. In addition, as the title suggests, many Black women are *blue*. The color blue represents the physical and emotional bruises caused by the violence in their lives. The color blue represents the depression and other negative mental and physical consequences associated with abuse and victimization. Finally, the color blue represents a form of music that Black women developed to resist the violence in their lives. Although one volume cannot provide all of the answers, it is clear that violence in the lives of Black women is a serious problem. It is our hope that this volume will help feminist therapists, researchers, advocates, activists, and survivors begin a dialogue about violence in the lives of Black women.

Carolyn M. West

OVERVIEW OF VIOLENCE

Battered, Black, and Blue: An Overview of Violence in the Lives of Black Women

Carolyn M. West

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SUMMARY. The purpose of this article is to review the many forms of violence in the lives of African American women, including childhood sexual abuse, dating violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. The first section will address definitions of violence, prevalence rates and risk factors, and suggest new directions for research. The second section is a review of the most common psychological sequelae associated with Black women's victimization. The final section is devoted to activities that promote healing, including therapy, participation in research studies, and activism. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Blacks, battered women, rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, violence

Take all my money, blacken both of my eyes
Give it to another woman, come home and tell me lies

—*Black Eye Blues* by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey

I woke up this mornin’, my head was sore as a boil
My man beat me last night with five feet of copper coil

—*Sweet Rough Man* by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey
(as cited in Davis, A.Y., 1998, p. 204 & 247)

Battered Black women have a long history of singing the blues. During the 1920s and 1930s, blues women like Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and others used music to document their abuse, depression, and ultimate triumph over the violence in their lives. According to Angela Y. Davis (1998), this music was important because it “named domestic violence in the collective context of blues performance and therefore defines it as a problem worthy of public discourse” (p. 28).

In the tradition of Black feminist scholarship, this article will identify the various types of violence experienced by African American women across the lifespan. More specifically, I will define each type of violence, discuss prevalence rates and risk factors, and suggest new directions for research. The second section is a review of the most common psychological sequelae associated with violence in the lives of Black

women, such as substance abuse, depression, and suicide attempts. Finally, I will discuss activities that promote healing, such as therapy, participation in research, and activism.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

This section will focus on Black women's experience with childhood sexual abuse, dating violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Although each type of violence will be discussed separately, it is common for multiple forms of violence to co-occur. For example, battered women are often victims of marital rape (Campbell & Soeken, 1999a).

Childhood Sexual Abuse

There is no universal definition of *childhood sexual abuse* (CSA). However, researchers (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999) have identified two overlapping but distinguishable types of interactions: (a) forced or coerced sexual behavior imposed on a child; and (b) sexual activity, whether or not obvious coercion is used, between a child and an older person, for example, when there is a five-year age discrepancy or more between the victim and perpetrator. Sexual abuse can be categorized as intrafamilial and involve a father, uncle, or brother, or extrafamilial and involve a baby sitter, neighbor, or authority figure, such as a coach, teacher, or clergy member. Although males are perpetrators in many cases of child sexual abuse, there have been documented cases of female offenders. Perpetrators commit a wide range of sexually abusive behaviors, which can be categorized as contact abuse (e.g., fondling or oral, anal, or digital penetration) or noncontact abuse (e.g., exhibitionism or taking pornographic pictures of the child).

Estimates of CSA have varied widely. In small San Francisco (Wingood & DiClemente, 1997a) and Baltimore (Banyard, 1999) samples of low-income Black women, approximately 14% reported a history of childhood sexual abuse. However, almost one-third of the surveyed Black women in a community sample of Los Angeles residents had been victims of CSA, a prevalence rate that has remained stable over a ten-year period (Wyatt, Loeb, Solis, Carmona, & Romero, 1999). This is consistent with the rates reported by Black women in a variety of samples, including Black adolescent girls in a community-based health program (23%) (Cecil & Matson, 2001), Black college women (21%, 44%)

(Kenny & McEachern, 2000; Urquiza & Goodlin-Jones, 1994, respectively), and Black welfare recipients (37%) (Marcenko, Kemp, & Larson, 2000).

Although African American women report a range of sexually abusive experiences in childhood, they are especially vulnerable to severe forms of violence, such as vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. Nearly two-thirds of Black girls whose medical records were reviewed (61%) (Huston, Prihoda, Parra, & Foulds, 1997), Black girls treated at child abuse clinics (53%, 65%) (Shaw, Lewis, Loeb, Rosado, & Rodriguez, 2001; Sanders-Phillips, Moisan, Wadlington, Morgan, & English, 1995, respectively), and Black girls in foster care (73%) (Leifer & Shapiro, 1995) reported some form of forced penetration. A similarly high percentage of Black women in a community sample reported childhood sexual abuse that involved attempted or completed oral sex, anal sex, or rape (Wyatt et al., 1999).

What accounts for these high rates of severe childhood sexual abuse? Penetration is more likely to occur if the child is older or if the perpetrator is the mother's boyfriend (Huston et al., 1997). Black girls are often overrepresented in these categories. On average, Black women are eight years old when they experience the first incidence of sexual abuse (West, C. M., Williams, & Siegel, 2000), and, due to marital patterns in the African American community, a substantial number of Black girls will be exposed to stepfathers or their mothers' boyfriends (Abney & Priest, 1995). Both of these demographic factors may leave Black girls more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Many Black survivors of CSA will be re-victimized in adulthood, defined as the occurrence of at least one incident of sexual abuse during childhood followed by a subsequent incident of adult physical or sexual victimization (West, C. M. et al., 2000; Wyatt, Notgrass, & Gordon, 1995). In addition, they are often exposed to community violence, in the form of witnessing assaults or losing family members to homicide (Jenkins, 2002 [This volume]). Banyard, Williams, Siegel, and West (2002 [This volume]) use a longitudinal study, whose sample consisted primarily of Black women, to investigate mental health consequences, re-traumatization, and resilience.

Dating Violence

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (1997) defined *dating violence*:

As the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple on the other member within the context of dating or courtship. This violence encompasses any form of sexual assault, physical violence, and verbal and emotional abuse. (p. 1)

Researchers have been investigating dating violence, also referred to as *courtship violence* or *premarital abuse*, since the early 1980s (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). This form of aggression has been documented among Black high school students (Coker et al., 2001; O'Keefe, 1997; Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999; Watson, Cardiac, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001) and Black college students (Clark, Beckett, Wells, & Dungee-Anderson, 1994; DeMaris, 1990).

Similar to their White counterparts, verbal and psychological abuse are the most commonly reported forms of courtship violence. The majority (90%) of Black college students had used verbal aggression, such as swearing, insulting, and name-calling, in the context of a dating relationship (Clark et al., 1994). Substantial rates of physical violence have been reported as well. Approximately one-third of Black undergraduates were victims or perpetrators of physical aggression, such as pushing, slapping, and hitting (Clark et al., 1994). Disturbingly high rates of dating aggression also have been discovered among adolescents. Almost one-half of African American high school students in a South Carolina sample had been victims or perpetrators of severe dating violence, defined as beating, kicking, or knocking a partner down (Coker et al., 2000).

A review of the literature indicates that women are equally or more likely to inflict dating violence as their male counterparts (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). A similar pattern of gender aggression has been found among African Americans. Black college women inflicted more aggression than their male peers (Clark et al., 1994), and Black adolescent males and females inflicted and sustained equal rates of physical aggression (Valois et al., 1999; Watson et al., 2001). However, when researchers considered the types of aggression enacted, women experienced forms of violence that were more injurious. For example, West, C. M., and Rose (2000) discovered that the Black adolescent women in their sample made threats, threw objects, and hit their partners. They were also more likely to have their feelings hurt and to be victims of severe violence, such as choking and attempted rape. In contrast, the young men made their partners feel inferior, degraded them, and were more likely to use sexual aggression, including forced breast fondling and at-

tempted rape. This pattern of abuse suggests that although young Black women may inflict dating aggression, they also endure severe forms of violence, which may increase their risk of injury.

Black women who experienced violence in another area of their lives were at increased risk for dating aggression. Specifically, Black college women who had witnessed parental fighting were more likely to be victimized by their boyfriends (DeMaris, 1990). In addition, low-income Black adolescent girls appear to be especially vulnerable to premarital abuse (Brown & Gourdine, 1998; Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001). For instance, in a sample of Black youths who were enrolled in a government-sponsored vocational training program, almost one-fourth had been threatened with a weapon, and nearly one-third had been beaten by a date (West, C. M. & Rose, 2000). Researchers believe that exposure to community violence, which can spill over into intimate relationships, may partially account for the high rates of dating violence among impoverished Black youths (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997).

After more than two decades of research, there continues to be a dearth of information on dating aggression among African Americans. In particular, there needs to be more research on how Black women assign meaning to the psychological, physical, and sexual violence in their dating relationships. In this volume, Few and Bell-Scott (2002) investigate the coping strategies used by psychologically abused Black college women.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence, also referred to as *domestic violence* or *wife battering*, often involves a broad range of abusive behaviors including:

Physical violence, sexual violence, threats of violence against the woman and children or other loved ones, emotional/psychological abuse, economic exploitation, confinement and/or control over activities outside the home (e.g., social life, working), stalking, property destruction, burglary, theft, and homicide. (Mahoney, Williams, & West, C. M., 2001, p. 145)

More researchers are beginning to focus on violence in lesbian relationships (Kaschak, 2001). However, with few exceptions (e.g., Butler, 1999), researchers have neglected violence in the lives of Black lesbians. Although the dynamics of abuse are often similar across sexual ori-

entation, lesbian batterers can use homophobic control as a method of psychological abuse. For example, an abuser may *out* her partner by revealing her sexual orientation to unsupportive relatives or co-workers. In this volume, Amorie Robinson (2002) addresses issues concerning this population.

To date, most researchers have investigated violence in heterosexual Black relationships, which will be the focus of this literature review. Based on national surveys, Black women experience an alarmingly high rate of intimate partner violence. For example, in the National Family Violence Survey, 17% of Black wives had been victims of at least one violent act in the survey year (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). In the more recently administered Violence Against Women Survey, one-quarter of the Black women surveyed had been victims of physical partner violence, and 4% had been stalked (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

When rates of severe violence were considered, Black women were frequent victims of wife battering (Kessler, Molnar, Feurer, & Appelbaum, 2001). For instance, 7% had been kicked, choked, beaten, or assaulted with a weapon (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). The battering often continues when the woman becomes pregnant. In a sample of women, primarily African American, who sought emergency treatment at an Atlanta gynecologic and obstetric clinic, 50% had a history of abuse or were currently in an abusive relationship. Fractures were the most commonly reported injuries. Other patients listed moderate to severe injuries, including head injuries, nerve damage, and miscarriage (Geary & Wingate, 1999). These types of injuries, particularly head and brain injuries, may impair a survivor's future physical and psychological functioning (Banks & Ackerman, 2002 [This volume]). In the most severe cases of abuse, Black women have been murdered. In fact, homicide by intimate partners is the leading cause of death for African American women between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997).

Women from all economic and social backgrounds are victims of wife abuse (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). However, the demographic profile of victims indicates that women who are African American, young, divorced or separated, impoverished, and residents in urban areas are the most frequent victims of partner violence (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Among indigent Black women, those who received food stamps or other forms of government assistance were especially vulnerable to physical (67%) and psychological abuse (95%) (Honeycutt, Marshall, & Weston, 2001). Other high-risk groups included Black women with a history of violence in their families of origin (Hampton & Gelles, 1994;

Huang & Gunn, 2001), incarcerated Black women (Richie, 1994), substance abusing Black women (Davis, R. E., 1997; Curtis-Boles & Jenkins-Monroe, 2000), and HIV positive Black women (Wyatt, Axelrod, Chin, Carmona, & Loeb, 2000).

Many battered women eventually terminate their abusive relationships. Although researchers are beginning to consider cultural differences in the termination process (Kearney, 2001), with few exceptions (Burke, Gielen, McDonnell, O'Campo, & Maman, 2001), little research has focused on the process that battered Black women use to disengage from their violent partners. In particular, more research should focus on how African American women survive in abusive relationships, how they prepare to leave, and how they cope with the initial crisis after leaving. In this volume, Few and Bell-Scott (2002) investigate the process that Black college women use to terminate their abusive dating relationships. Married Black women face additional challenges when they flee violence in their homes, such as protecting their children and locating housing. Janette Taylor (2002a) investigates Black women's strategies for terminating violent marital and long-term relationships.

Sexual Assault

Similar to intimate partner violence, sexual assault can involve a broad range of aggressive behaviors, including:

sex without consent, rape, sexual control of reproductive rights, and all forms of sexual manipulation carried out by the perpetrator with the intention or perceived intention to cause emotional, sexual, and physical degradation to another person. (Abraham, 1999, p. 552)

Although stranger rape does occur, women are more likely to be raped by acquaintances, boyfriends, and husbands (Bachar & Koss, 2001).

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, nearly 3 Black women per 1,000 had been raped or sexually assaulted (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). In another national study, 7% of Black women identified themselves as rape survivors (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). When self-reports were used, researchers discovered even higher rates of sexual violence. For example, approximately 20% of Black adolescent females had been raped (Valois et al., 1999). Although Black teenage girls are sometimes sexually aggressive in their dating relationships, they are more likely to be victims of a wide range of sexual violence, including

forced kissing, forced breast and genital fondling, and attempted rape (West, C. M. & Rose, 2000). Even higher rates of rape, more than 30%, were reported by Black women in community samples (Molitor, Ruiz, Klausner, & McFarland, 2000; Wyatt et al., 1999) and in samples of Black college women (Carmody & Washington, 2001; Urquiza & Goodlin-Jones, 1994).

Similar to victims of domestic violence, low-income Black women (Kalichman, Williams, Cherry, Belcher, & Nachimson, 1998) and Black women who received public assistance (Honeycutt et al., 2001) experienced elevated rates of sexual assault. Women who are battered are also at increased risk of partner rape. This pattern of violence creates an extremely dangerous situation for victims. When compared to Black women who experienced physical abuse only, victims who were both beaten and raped were more likely to be psychologically abused and to experience physical violence that was severe and potentially lethal (Campbell & Soeken, 1999a).

Although substantial numbers of African American women have been raped, many survivors never disclose their sexual assaults (Pierce-Baker, 1998; Washington, 2001). In order to understand their reluctance to seek help, scholars and therapists must begin to contextualize rape (Neville & Heppner, 1999). This entails investigating how discrimination and negative images of Black women, which depict them as sexually promiscuous and thus not legitimate victims, can create barriers to the help-seeking efforts of Black rape survivors (Neville & Hamer, 2001). In this volume, Donovan and Williams (2002) explore how two historical images of Black women, the Jezebel and Matriarch, may potentially influence the disclosure patterns of Black rape survivors.

Sexual Harassment

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), *sexual harassment* includes, but is not limited to, unwanted talk or jokes about sex, sexualized pranks, uninvited physical contact, pressure for dates or sex, sexual abuse, and rape. This form of victimization can be categorized as *quid pro quo*, which refers to the exchange of sexual favors for special privileges (e.g., a promotion, a raise, a better grade) or *hostile environment* harassment, which results in an unpleasant work atmosphere that leaves women feeling demeaned or humiliated (O'Donohue, Downs, & Yeater, 1998). African American women have been sexually harassed in a variety of settings, including the church (Whitson, 1997), on the