

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF BLACK WOMEN FROM THE YEARS 1619–2020

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The appalling history of slavery in the United States is something that will be ingrained in its dirt. Between 1690 and 1865, enslaved males and females were stolen from their native countries and brought to America only to become subjected to grueling labor, mental and physical pains, and divested of their rudimentary human right to life and liberty.¹ They were beaten heartlessly, disunited from loved ones at the will of slave owners, and, regardless of sex, considered property by law.² There are paramount factors that distinguish the treatment of male slaves from female slaves.³ For example, fieldwork was divided along gender lines, with the more physically demanding tasks assigned to males.⁴ A major difference, however, was the slave owner's exploitation of the black female's sexuality.⁵ For this reason, a historical analysis might shed light on how current sexual and reproductive health outcomes and body images of black women have been shaped by years of racism.

The treatment of black females who were slaves has contributed to the disparities in sexual and reproductive health today.⁶ The experiences that female slaves endured included public nudity; nude physical auction examinations to determine reproductive ability; rape for sexual pleasure and for economic purposes (reproducing children who could become slaves);⁷ intentional abortion to women who were pregnant as a result of rape generational poverty; and hyper

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¹ Jennifer Hallam, *Men, Women, & Gender*, THIRTEEN, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/gender/history.html> (last visited Apr. 21, 2021).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Cynthia Prather, et al., *Racism, African American Women, and Their Sexual and Reproductive Health: A Review of Historical and Contemporary Evidence and Implications for Health Equity*, HEALTH EQUITY 2:1, 249-259 (Sept. 22, 2008), <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/heq.2017.004>.

⁷ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, DOCUMENTING THE AMERICAN SOUTH (2003), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>.

sexualization.⁸ From adolescence, black female slaves were subjected to their master's desire for them to reproduce because increasing the number of slaves resulted in an increase in profits.⁹ Whether it be forceful or subtle, there were instances of sexual intervention that occurred at the hands of the slave master.¹⁰

The physical as well as psychological struggles that came with childbearing were enormous for enslaved women. They were expected to put the needs of the master and his family before those of their own children. The slave mothers on large plantations returned to the fields soon after giving birth, leaving their child to be raised by others.¹¹ On a smaller plantation, the responsibilities of slave mothers were simply added to their usual duties.¹² Slave mothers often intentionally stayed in bondage to avoid being separated from their child, while their male counterparts attempted to escape.¹³ Tragically, the enslaved mothers faced the possibility of witnessing their daughters suffer the same fate of essentially being a breeder for the slave master.

In addition to being a slave breeder they were also the subjects of experimental gynecological and reproductive surgeries, which were often performed with no anesthesia.¹⁴ Some sources estimate that 58% of all enslaved women aged 15–30 years old were sexually assaulted by their slave owners and other white men.¹⁵ It is dismaying to consider the mental state of those who endured such treatment and disheartening to develop a hypothesis as to whether all, and not just some, of the experiences that black women faced during the duration of slavery are listed above—are there supplemental egregious experiences that occurred?

Throughout the duration of slavery in America, white society overtly believed black women to be innately lustful beings.¹⁶ The portrayal of black women as lascivious by nature is an enduring

⁸ Carolyn M. West, *Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women*, RESEARCH GATE (Mar. 2013), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264707899_Sexual_Violence_in_the_Lives_of_African_American_Women.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Hallam, *supra* note 1.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Jeffrey S. Sartin, *J. Marion Sims, the father of gynecology: hero or villain?*, SOUTH MED. J. (May 2004), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15180027/>.

¹⁵ Prather et al., *supra* note 6.

¹⁶ David Pilgrim, *The Jezebel Stereotype*, FERRIS STATE UNIV. (July 2012), <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/>.

stereotype.¹⁷ The descriptive words associated with this stereotype are singular in their focus: seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd.¹⁸ Historically, white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, modesty and even sexual purity. Black women, however, were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, and even predatory.¹⁹

“Jezebel” is a common stereotypical representation of black women.²⁰ “A “Jezebel” is a “worldly seductress” depicted to be an alluring and seductive black woman, who is highly sexualized and valued purely for her sexuality, fulfilling the sex objectification requirement of white womanhood.”²¹ She is reduced to her body and treated as a tool that exists for the pleasure of others.²² Although hypersexuality and many features of the Jezebel stereotype can also be imposed on white women, the notion of the Jezebel is particularly pronounced for black women, signifying their inferior status.²³ The Jezebel stereotype was particularly common during slavery, when black women’s bodies were socially controlled as sexual objects based on racist, classist, and sexist ideologies.²⁴ Within the bounds of slavery, masters often felt it was their right to engage in sexual activity with enslaved black women.²⁵ Sometimes, enslaved black women acquiesced to advances hoping that such relationships would increase the chances that they or their children would be liberated by the master.²⁶

In the 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*, Lydia Brown is a mulatto (a person of mixed white and black ancestry) woman, who was the mistress of a savage, corrupt, and libidinous white character, Senator Stoneman.²⁷ The movie portrays her as overtly sexual and using her feminine wiles to deceive the formerly good white man.²⁸ While cinematic depictions portraying black women as sexually promiscuous became a commonplace only in the 1960s onward, it

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ K. SUE JEWELL, *FROM MAMMY TO MISS AMERICA AND BEYOND* (Routledge 1st ed. 1993).

²² *Id.*

²³ Pilgrim, *supra* note 16.

²⁴ Hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black women and feminism* (1981), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0361684318791543>.

²⁵ Hallam, *supra* note 1.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Pilgrim, *supra* note 16.

²⁸ *Id.*

began in 1915 when images of black women displaying such overt sexual behaviors were shown on the big screen.²⁹

Although the Emancipation Proclamation granted freedom to the enslaved, the Jim Crow era and black codes set a new way to carry out the immoral sexual treatment that black women endured.³⁰ The Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local laws that enforced segregation, thus systemizing racism.³¹ Black codes were restrictive laws designed to prevent the liberation of black people and maintain their availability as a frugal labor force after slavery was abolished during the Civil War.³² The time period of Jim Crow laws and black codes lasted from 1865-1965, for a total of 100 years.³³ In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which legally ended the segregation that had been institutionalized by Jim Crow laws.³⁴

During the 100 years after the Civil War, rape, lynching, genitalia/reproductive mutilation, uncertain/unequal civil rights, hypersexualized stereotypes and negative media portrayals all continued.³⁵ As a result, black females were medically experimented on and underwent compulsory sterilization.³⁶ The poor and impoverished black women had minuscule to no opportunities to receive quality health care treatment and hence limited opportunities for reproductive rights and justice.³⁷ The Jim Crow era and black codes opened the floodgates for this type of abuse because there were very few repercussions for such comportment from the criminal justice system.

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In a public lecture given in 1833, Maria W. Stewart, a pioneer black abolitionist and women's rights advocate, invoked black women's

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *White Supremacy and Terrorism*, PBS THIRTEEN, <https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/white-supremacy/> (last visited Apr. 21, 2021).

³¹ *Id.*

³² History.com Editors, *Black Codes*, HISTORY (June 1, 2010), <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-codes>.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ Peter Ferdinando, *Book Review: Rebecca M. Kluchin, Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America: 1950–1980*, UCLA HISTORICAL J., 26(1) (2015), <https://escholarship.org/content/qt2r83m4cb/qt2r83m4cb.pdf?t=nydl38>.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Prather et al., *supra* note 6.

³⁸ *Id.*

demands for sexual justice by asking, “What if I am a woman?”³⁹ It was a question with profound repercussions if answered in the affirmative.⁴⁰ What would it mean to acknowledge women, especially black women, as full human beings and citizens, with legal and political rights? If black women were granted not just the rights of life, liberty, and happiness, but additionally self-sovereignty, or agency, then they would withal be entitled to the legal protections of those rights.⁴¹ By asking the question, Stewart asserted the essential humanity of black womanhood and called for the recognition and inclusion of black women as full human and autonomous beings, the “owners” of their own bodies with the facility to withhold consent.⁴²

Malcom X once famously stated: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”⁴³ Many of the sexual abuses black women faced continued through the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁴ The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s advocated equality and liberation for black people and other people of color.⁴⁵ During the time period of 1955-1975, uncertain/unequal civil rights and violence against women to show superiority and control, as well as stereotypes and negative hypersexual media portrayals continued.⁴⁶ Inhumane healthcare provided during the black codes and Jim Crow era was superseded with circumscribed, poor-quality, or no health accommodations for many black people, categorically those living in poverty during the Civil Rights era.⁴⁷

In the post-civil rights era, hyper sexualization of the black woman continues. As in the movie “Birth of a Nation”, the exploitation of black women is still carried out through means of the media, movies,

³⁹ Crystal N. Feimster, *When Black Women Reclaimed Their Bodies*, SLATE (Feb. 2, 2018), <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/02/how-formerly-enslaved-black-women-fought-for-human-dignity-and-sexual-justice.html>.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Chloe Hilliard, *The New Black Body*, THE ATLANTIC (Jan. 28, 2020),

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/01/new-black-body-cosmetic-surgery/605575/>.

⁴⁴ *Civil Rights Movement*, ADL, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/civil-rights-movement> (last visited Apr. 21, 2021).

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ DANIELLE L. MCGUIRE, *AT THE DARK END OF THE STREET: BLACK WOMEN, RAPE, AND RESISTANCE-A NEW HISTORY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM ROSA PARKS TO THE RISE OF BLACK POWER* (Vintage 2010).

music, and photographs.⁴⁸ The stereotype persists today, exemplified in the way that black women are represented in mainstream media. Black women are hypersexualized to a greater degree in the media than white women.⁴⁹ For instance, a study titled “Sex and the spectacle of music videos: An examination of the portrayal of race and sexuality in music videos that analyzes sex and the spectacle of music videos” found that of the content of 120 music videos, black women characters were significantly more likely to appear in provocative clothing than any other character type.⁵⁰ Rather than being shown as active agents in the clips, they are presented simply as decorative objects with their sole purpose being to look attractive and desirable to male audiences.⁵¹ Additional to this study, there are many content analyses that have revealed that black women are typically depicted as hypersexual in rap music videos, with an overemphasis on their sexualized physical appearance.⁵²

In a study called “Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women”, the data of several themes were identified.⁵³ These include issues related to hair, skin tone, body type, and message sources (media).⁵⁴ In this study it was emphasized that black women’s bodies and beauty have largely been devalued and rejected by mainstream culture, which overvalues the European aesthetic and undervalues the esthetic of other racial/ethnic group with of exception of exoticizing them.⁵⁵ It was found that the U.S. puts a premium on “fair” white skin, blue eyes and straight, long, blond hair and considers these features the epitome of beauty.⁵⁶ Features more akin to the African esthetic are deemed ugly, undesirable and less feminine; the notion that black women are less attractive is a message

⁴⁸ Lisa Rosenthal & Marci Lobel, *Stereotypes of Black American Women Related to Sexuality and Motherhood*, *PSYCHOL. OF WOMEN QUARTERLY* (Feb. 17, 2016), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0361684318791543>.

⁴⁹ Joel R. Anderson et al., *Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification*, *PSYCHOL. OF WOMEN QUARTERLY* (Aug. 22, 2008), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0361684318791543>.

⁵⁰ Jacob S. Turner, *Sex and the Spectacle of Music Videos: An Examination of the Portrayal of Race and Sexuality in Music Videos*, *SEX ROLES* 64, 173-191 (Feb. 2011), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-010-9766-6>.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ Germine H. Awad et. al., *Beauty and Body Image Concerns Among African American College Women*, *J. BLACK PSYCHOL.* 41(6), 540-564 (Nov. 12, 2014), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4713035/>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

that is transmitted daily and from multiple external forces or social institutions (e.g., church, government, business industries, media, and family/peer groups).⁵⁷

It can be inferred that through personal experiences of being treated as an object, as well as sexualized media depictions, black women begin to learn to internalize an observer's perspective and come to view themselves through an objectified lens.⁵⁸ As a result, being objectified can result in developing an influx of issues with mental health, which include body shaming and depression.⁵⁹ It can be inferred that the negative feelings that black women resultingly have facilitate a host of damaging outcomes for them.⁶⁰ Such feelings make them think that they are less competent, less worthy of moral consideration and treatment, more responsible for being raped, and more deserving of maltreatment.⁶¹

Some of these feelings are exemplified in the increasing rates of plastic surgeries amongst black women.⁶² From 2005 to 2013, the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery found that black patients increased by 56 percent.⁶³ In 2016, 8 percent of all plastic surgery procedures were for black patients, doubling the percentage from 1997.⁶⁴ Women who cannot afford professional treatments have resorted to home remedies that include deadly and illegal injections with a toxic substance to accomplish their desired look.⁶⁵ These home remedies sometimes result in death, and those who do survive are left with debilitating scars and lingering health issues.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the prominent sexualization within the media has become, and ultimately has been, a situation of societal norm.⁶⁷ The sexual portrayals that are expressed through media, music videos, and musical lyrics, leave an impression on black women and young black girls, which has a potential of perpetuating this cycle.⁶⁸

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ Chiara Rollero & Norma De Piccoli, *Self-Objectification and Personal Values. An Exploratory Study*, FRONTIERS (June 23, 2017), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01055/full>.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ Prather et al., *supra* note 6.

⁶² Hillard, *supra* note 43.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

Lamentably, there are not many ways to end this cycle so long as the societal norms and standards of beauty are the descriptive measures that favor a categorical group. In essence, the media engenders the conception of how one should look.⁶⁹ Social media seems to promote norms of beauty emulating a more European look.⁷⁰ The promotion of self-love may combat the insecurities that black women and adolescent black girls may be exposed to, allowing them to be comfortable in their own skin by boosting their confidence. As a society, it is imperative that we acknowledge how greatly implicit biases impact our interactions with others and the long-term impact that these interactions have on the recipient of such inequity.⁷¹ This beseeches the question: if the sexualization of black women was non-existent during the period of slavery, how would the image of the black women be different in 2020?

There has been a little over 400 documented years of sexual exploitation that black women have faced in the United States alone.⁷² Race-predicated experiences of black women being sexualized underlie many of their sexual and reproductive health conditions as well as their noetic views that encompass their self-image.⁷³ Ultimately, it is ideal that the sexualization of black women, and the historic cycle of racism that it has perpetrated, ends.

⁶⁹ Awad et. al., *supra* note 53.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² Jacobs, *supra* note 7.

⁷³ *Id.*