



# Black Women: Surviving in Secret

## California Black Women's Health Project

*"Committed to improving the health of  
Black women and girls in California"*

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This ongoing series provides information on health policy issues that impact Black women. Additional information about this and other projects is available on CABWHP's website: [www.cabwhp.org](http://www.cabwhp.org). This material may be reprinted only if it includes the following: Reprinted with the permission of the California Black Women's Health Project.

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*"People have said to me, "Why are you dragging this up now?" Why? WHY? Because it has controlled every facet of my life. It has damaged me in every possible way. It has destroyed everything in my life that has been of value. It has prevented me from living a comfortable emotional life. It's prevented me from being able to love clearly. It took my children away from me. I haven't been able to succeed in the world. If I had a comfortable childhood, I could be anything today. I know that everything I don't deal with now is one more burden I have to carry for the rest of my life. I don't care if it happened 500 years ago! It's influenced me all that time, and it does matter. It matters very much."<sup>1</sup>*

*"Child sexual abuse is a violation of power perpetrated by a person with more power over someone who is more vulnerable. This violation takes a sexual form, but it involves more than sex. In involves a breach of trust, a breaking of boundaries, and a profound violation of the survivor's sense of self. It is a devastating and selfish crime....Some abuse is of a covert nature and doesn't involve physical touch. [For example,] a young girl is developing breasts and as she dresses in the morning, her father watches with a sexual interest, making lewd comments about her body....[Even though no physical touch was involved,] such abuse is traumatic nonetheless."<sup>2</sup>*

*"Most adults have a difficult time accepting the fact that childhood sexual abuse occurs at all, much less to the extent that it does. So they want to treat it the same way they treat anything they don't want to face: They go into denial about it. The denial process is a defense mechanism against the truth."<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Bass, Ellen & Davis, Laura, The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse, p.37, Harper Perennial © 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, Laura, Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child, p. 13, HarperCollins Publishers © 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Engel, Beverly, The Right to Innocence: Healing the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse, pp. 33-34, Ivy Books © 1991.

## **The Long-Term Health Impact of Sexual Abuse**

“If you were sexually abused as a child, you are still suffering from its impact as an adult. Childhood sexual abuse is such an overwhelming, damaging, and humiliating assault on a child’s mind, soul and body that he or she cannot escape emotional damage. The abuse invades every facet of one’s existence: it affects self-esteem, relationships with others, sexuality, one’s ability to be successful, one’s ability to trust others, and physical health. It causes its victims to be self-destructive, over-controlling, and abusive to others, as well as addiction to alcohol, drugs, and food and attraction to love partners who abuse them physically, verbally, and emotionally. Its victims come to feel ashamed, guilty, powerless, depressed, afraid and angry.”<sup>4</sup> Many survivors have been too busy surviving to notice the ways they were hurt by the abuse. But you cannot heal until you acknowledge the areas that need healing.<sup>5</sup>

A recent study found that women who had been sexually abused were three times more likely to report being socially isolated than women who had not been sexually abused. In addition, social isolation was more common among women who had been abused by a family member, who had been abused when they were young, and who had been abused for a long period of time.<sup>6</sup> Another 1996 study found that women who were sexually abused, in contrast to those who were not, were more likely to report feeling lonely and less likely to use their social networks for assistance. Likewise, a 1988 study found that women who were sexually abused as children had poorer social adjustment and were likely to report feelings of isolation.<sup>7</sup>

Many women who abuse substances report feeling socially isolated. Moreover, it has been well-documented that there is a high incidence of sexual trauma among women who abuse substances, including alcohol, drugs and food. Not only do many survivors of sexual abuse suffer from symptoms like those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (e.g., depression, anxiety, nightmares, intrusive thoughts), many survivors also experience long-term effects that are interpersonal in nature. Sexual abuse survivors have difficulty forming secure attachments with others, tend to have lower interpersonal competence, and often report problems with their interpersonal relationships, including those with parents, romantic partners, friends and children.<sup>8</sup>

## **Impact on Black Women**

The sexual assault of Black women and girls, physically and/or verbally, is a race, gender and class issue. However, many Black people—even those who have fought systematically and passionately against racism—are reluctant to acknowledge sexism and sexual abuse within the Black community. The depth and breadth of sexual abuse’s impact on Black women’s mental, emotional and physical health mandates that we address the issue of sexual abuse actively and directly. The stakes are too high.

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<sup>4</sup> Engel, Beverly, The Right to Innocence: Healing the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse, pp. 2-3, Ivy Books © 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Bass, Ellen & Davis, Laura, The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse, p. 37, Harper Perennial © 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Young, Amy, Boyd, Carol & Hubbell, Amy, “*Social Isolation and Sexual Abuse Among Women Who Smoke Crack*,” *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*, July 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

- 40 % of Black women report coercive contact of a sexual nature before the age of 18. Yet there is very little research on the health-related effects of violence that specifically focuses on Black women.<sup>9</sup>
- Black women experiencing sexual abuse were more likely to experience unprotected sexual intercourse and unintended pregnancy. Sexually abused women were more likely to report having a partner who refused to wear a condom.<sup>10</sup>
- Black women who had a history of childhood physical or sexual abuse were more likely to report using unhealthy substances—tobacco, alcohol and drugs (73%). The proportion of women reporting childhood abuse who used two or more substances was nearly double that of women who did not report such abuse.<sup>11</sup>

These statistics demonstrate that sexual abuse is a public health issue of critical importance for the Black community. We must address sexual abuse by using creative and proactive education, advocacy and policy solutions.

### **Policy Summit 2002: Recommendations for Action**

At our second annual Policy Summit on February 8, 2002 in Sacramento, we addressed the intersection between race, gender and mental and physical health via advocacy and policy. Policy Summit attendees participated in working groups that were charged with brainstorming about ways to improve the mental health of Black women. The groups were asked to respond to many questions, including the following: *How can we more effectively link the provision of mental and emotional health services to Black women who are experiencing crises related to violence/trauma or HIV/AIDS?* The ideas expressed by Policy Summit participants included those listed below.

- Assess the true needs and the state of Black women’s health
- Identify the role of the church in the mental health arena
- Address the state of male-female relationships
- Engage men in women’s health advocacy work so they become our allies
- Address how men are linked to the emotional health of Black women
- Use individual experiences in a public way – (1) encourage women to tell their stories in person and through video; and/or (2) create case studies using elements of different women’s stories in order to protect their identities
- Create a safe place for women and providers to talk
- Try not to operate in a vacuum

If you are interested in providing input on these issues or participating in our Black Women’s Mental Health Initiative, please contact Crystal Crawford at 310-412-1828 x15 or [crystal@cabwhp.org](mailto:crystal@cabwhp.org).

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<sup>9</sup> American Psychological Association Public Policy Office, *Briefing Sheet: Intimate Violence and Black Women’s Health* © 2002 citing Russo, N.F., Denious, J.E., Keita, G.P., & Koss, M.P. (1997). *Intimate Violence and Black Women’s Health*, *Women’s Health: Research on Gender, Behavior and Policy*, 3(3&4), 315-348.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.