

Chapter 4

THE HISTORY OF MOVEMENTS TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Many of us have limited knowledge about the history of anti-sexual violence movements. Much of the more widely known and taught history starts in the 1970s and excludes the long history of organizing against sexual violence and intersecting forms of oppression.¹

People have been organizing underground and grassroots supports for survivors of sexual violence throughout history, starting with communities of color and other marginalized communities. The history of sexual violence, and movements to end it, dates so far back that there is often little written history on record. Movements to support survivors have included many different efforts. They include highly organized or fragmented movements, community based or government/institution sponsored movements, movements that are resistance-oriented or working within the existing power structures, and everything in between. While the history here just skims the surface, it offers a snapshot of the efforts over the last several centuries to support survivors and end sexual violence.

Indigenous communities experienced sexual violence by European colonizers beginning in the 16th century when colonizers came to what is now known as the United States. “Rape was uncommon in traditional matrilineal Native societies, but that changed with the arrival of Europeans.”² Rape and other forms of sexual violence were used as tools of oppression and conquest against Indigenous communities. This legacy of violence against Native communities continues today.

In European societies rape was not viewed as a crime because women were considered property of their husband and without any individual rights. Rape was initially considered a crime only in terms of property violation of another man — a husband or a father. Very often in these cases, the women who had been raped would also be punished for adultery, despite their lack of consent. Organizers with the grassroots anti-sexual violence movement in the U.S. advocated for such legal protections for women in the late 20th century, such as changing laws that still allowed rape within a marriage.

Select Moments in U.S. Movements Against Sexual Violence³

1848 The Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 was the first major national women’s rights organizing event in the United States. Organizers and participants Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Lucretia Mott are considered among the mothers of the early feminist movement. Delegates attending the convention voted and passed the “Declaration of Sentiments” calling on women to organize and petition for their rights.

Women of color in attendance at the Women’s Rights Convention were not permitted to vote in the passage of the declaration. That discriminatory decision contributed to a disconnect between white women and women of color in the women’s rights movement that continues to have an impact today.

1851 Sojourner Truth delivered her famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, powerfully demanding that the experiences of Black women be heard and included in the larger discussion about women’s rights.

1866 The 1866 Memphis Riots in Tennessee were ignited by racial tensions following the Civil War. Mobs of white supremacists and white policemen attacked Black neighborhoods, assaulting and killing Black men, women, and children. During a Congressional investigation of the riots, a group of Black women survivors testified before Congress about gang rapes perpetrated by white mobs during the riots. These women were perhaps the first to break the silence of rape in such a formal, public setting.



1885 The significant Missouri Supreme Court case *Missouri v. Celia* addressed rape, race, women, and slavery. Celia was an enslaved Black woman convicted of murdering Robert Newsom, the person who enslaved her. Celia’s case was appealed to the Missouri Supreme Court, with the argument that she had killed Newsom to protect herself from being raped by him. The Court refused the appeal, declaring Celia to be the property of the enslaver with no right to defend herself against sexual assault.

1890s Black women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett took

leadership roles in anti-lynching campaigns to combat existing rape laws that did not protect Black women, but justified lynching Black men accused of raping white women. At the time, rape was a capital offense only when Black man raped a white woman. The rape of a Black woman was not considered a crime.

RESIST
INSIST
INSIST
INSIST

1896 The hundreds of Black women’s clubs from across the country organized into the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in response to the anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells and the need for a more powerful national group. Through the NACW, thousands of clubwomen across the country devoted their efforts to a range of political, social, and economic reforms. In addition to anti-lynching, reforms included housing, education, health care, childcare, job training, wage equity, and voter registration.

1944 Recy Taylor, a Black woman living in Alabama, was kidnapped and raped by six white men. Although the men admitted to the rape, the investigation was undermined by local law enforcement and two grand juries who declined to indict and charge the men.

After an outcry by the local Black community, Rosa Parks formed the Committee for Equal Justice for Ms. Recy Taylor. The Committee conducted nation-wide awareness campaigns, rallies, boycotts, and advocacy demanding support and justice for Recy Taylor and other Black women who had experienced sexual violence. The case mobilized activists nationally more extensively than ever before and was an early spark of the Civil Rights Movement.

1955 Emmett Till, a Black teenage boy, was brutally murdered for allegedly grabbing, menacing, and being sexually crude towards Carolyn Bryant, a white woman. Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted on an open casket funeral to bring attention to the brutality of the murder and to the violence and racism experienced by African Americans more broadly. Tens of thousands attended his funeral or viewed his casket, and his murder was another pivotal spark of Civil Rights Movement.

The men who murdered Emmett Till were acquitted but later confessed to the murder with no consequences. Years later, Carolyn Bryant admitted that she had fabricated her testimony that Emmett Till had made verbal and physical advances toward her.



This is just one example of a long history of white women being complicit in the oppression of people of color. Today's anti-sexual violence movement is attempting to reckon with this history. Among many other reparations, white women in this movement must recognize the ways racism prioritizes their power and maintenance of the status quo.

1967 Women involved in the group "New York Radical Women," including Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt, Kathie Sarachild, and Carol Hanisch, began the first consciousness-raising group in New York City. These groups gave women a place to speak about issues in their lives, including sexual violence, child abuse, and intimate partner violence. The groups quickly spread throughout the United States. In the early 1970s, 100,000 women were involved in consciousness-raising groups nationally.

1970s A growing campus anti-rape movement brought attention to the concept of "date rape." They demanded that rape other than assault by a stranger be recognized and addressed. This movement led to many awareness events such as Take Back The Night, Denim Day, the Clothesline Project, and the Vagina Monologues.

1972 The first rape crisis centers were established: Bay Area Women Against Rape in Oakland, CA and the Washington DC Rape Crisis Center. These rape crisis centers provided services to survivors and were "networking hubs" for the national anti-rape movement.

1974 Joan (pronounced Jo-Ann) Little, a Black prisoner in the Beaufort County Jail in North Carolina, was attacked and raped by Clarence Alligood, a white guard at the jail. Little broke away from him, killed him in self-

defense, and then broke free from the jail. She turned herself in a week later and was charged with murder. The national outcry for justice for Joan Little involved prominent civil rights and women's rights activists, such as Angela Davis. A jury acquitted Joan Little of killing Clarence Alligood. She was the first woman in U.S. history to be acquitted with the defense that she used deadly force to resist sexual assault.



Mid-1970s The National Organization for Women began advocating for policy changes to create stronger protections for survivors of sexual assault, including marital rape laws, rape shield laws, redefining consent, and striking down requirements that a witness be present to be able to prosecute sexual assault.

The Combahee River Collective was formed as a Boston-based organization of Black feminists, many of whom were lesbians. Active between 1974 and 1980, the Collective was critical of mainstream white feminism, pointing out the discrimination and bigotry that many white feminists directed toward women of color, poor women, LGBTQIA+ women, and others during the second wave of feminism.

The Combahee River Statement, released in 1977, was an approach to community organizing that centered the most marginalized group (in this particular case, Black women) in liberation work because their freedom guarantees everyone's freedom, and would mean the dismantling of all oppressive systems. This framework continues to be used today in movements such as Black Lives Matter.

1978 The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault was established to advocate at the national level for public policies and increased resources to improve the lives of sexual assault victims.

We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.

The Combahee River Statement, 1977

1982 The Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant was the first federal allocation of money for sexual assault prevention and response distributed to sexual assault centers.

1985 The Federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) was passed, establishing a central source of federal financial support for direct services to victims of crime, including sexual assault.

1988 The film *The Accused*, starring Jodie Foster, was released. Loosely based on a real events, the film examined themes related to sexual violence, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and victim blaming.

1990s Beginning in the 1990s, more public conversations about men and boys who experience sexual violence started. Despite increasing conversations about sexual violence in the 1980s, most sexual violence victimization discussion was limited to women and girls. In 1997 Michael Scarce released the book *Male on Male Rape: The Hidden Toll of Stigma and Shame*.

1991 Anita Hill was called to testify in front of Congress when a private interview of Hill with the FBI is leaked to the press. In the interview, she talked about sexual harassment she and others experienced perpetrated by then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. Hill was widely criticized by many political supporters of Thomas, and her credibility as a victim and as a professional was called into question.



The Senate confirmed Thomas' nomination in a 52-48 vote. Hill continued to face condemnation and death threats (some of which continues now). However, Hill continues to publicly state that she has no regrets about testifying.

1994 The first federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed, creating new penalties for sexual violence and establishing the Rape Prevention and Education Program and S.T.O.P. grant funds. This legislation has provided significant visibility, funding, and stability to sexual violence victim services and prevention work ever since.

Unfortunately, the legislation was supported by mainstream sexual and domestic violence movements,

despite concerns voiced by women of color. Concerns included the consequences of legislatively aligning sexual and domestic violence advocacy so closely with the criminal legal system. They pointed out consequences, including barriers to services for marginalized communities, weakened activism within the field, and contributing to mass incarceration, as well as the consequences of downplaying women of colors' voices. These consequences continue to have an impact today.

2000 The Trafficking Victim Protections Act (TVPA) was passed, establishing human trafficking as a federal crime with high sentencing guidelines and resitution for victims. TVPA also established the T Visa and the U Visa, which are pathways for victims of human trafficking and sexual violence to become temporary U.S. residents.

2000 INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence formed after the Color of Violence Conference at the University of California Santa Cruz.

2001 Arte Sana was established in response to the racial and ethnic disparities and lack of language justice in the victim services field. Arte Sana continues to hold the anti-sexual violence movement accountable and advocates for more racial equity and language justice in service provision and in national anti-sexual violence work. Arte Sana is the Spanish phrase for "art heals."

2003 After significant advocacy by organizations like Just Detention International, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the NAACP, and faith-based organizations, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) was passed. PREA is the first federal legislation in the U.S. that addresses sexual violence against people who are incarcerated.

2004 FORGE, a national organization that supports, educates, and advocates for the rights of transgender individuals, expanded its mission to work on behalf of transgender survivors.

2006 Amnesty International released its report "Maze of Injustice," highlighting the horrific levels of sexual assault perpetrated against Native Women, and the jurisdictional "maze" that keeps them from accessing justice, emboldens perpetrators, and maintains an environment of fear and despair in many Native communities.

2006 Activist and community organizer Tarana Burke started the #MeToo movement as a way for survivors of color to connect with and show support for one another. Burke continues to speak across the nation about sexual violence.



2009 President Obama is the first U.S. President to declare April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

2011 The SlutWalk movement began in Toronto, Canada, after a Toronto Police officer made the comment during a talk about campus rape that “women should avoid dressing like sluts” as a precaution against sexual assault. Three thousand people gathered to protest victim-blaming and slut-shaming. While SlutWalk rallies and marches have since spread internationally, SlutWalk has been criticized for not being inclusive of Black women and other women of color.

In an open letter to SlutWalk organizers, Black Women’s Blueprint stated, “Women in the United States are racially and ethnically diverse. Every tactic to gain civil and human rights must not only consult and consider women of color, but it must equally center all our experiences and our communities in the construction, launching, delivery, and sustainment of that movement.”

2011 Jerry Sandusky, a football coach at Penn State University, was indicted on 52 counts of child sexual abuse that he perpetrated over a period of at least 15 years. In 2012, Sandusky was convicted of 45 counts and was sentenced to 30-60 years in prison.


Penn State President Graham Spanier, Vice President Gary Schultz, and Athletic Director Tim Curley were also charged with perjury, obstruction of justice, failure to report suspected child abuse, and related charges. An independent investigation found that Penn State’s longtime head football coach Joe Paterno also knew about the allegations as early as 1998. After news of the abuse broke, Spanier resigned. The Board of Trustees fired Paterno and Curley.

As a result of Sandusky’s abuse, the National Collegiate Athletic Association imposed the most severe sanctions ever imposed on an NCAA member school.

2012 *The Invisible War*, a documentary exploring the alarming rates and stories of sexual violence in the military, was released. It won multiple awards and gained lawmakers and military leadership attention, prompting legislative and policy changes. *The Invisible War* has been credited with encouraging more survivors of military sexual assault to come forward and with forcing the military to deal more openly with the issue.

2013 Organized and connected by survivor activists like Annie E. Clark and Andrea Pino, university students across the country filed a wave of federal Title IX and Clery Act complaints against their universities after their reports of campus sexual assault were ignored and mishandled. Some of their stories were told in the documentary film *The Hunting Ground*, released in 2015. Their stories and advocacy inspired legislative changes, the founding of organizations such as Ending Rape on Campus and Know Your IX, and national initiatives such as It’s On Us.

2014 Daniel Holtzclaw, an Oklahoma City police officer, was arrested and later charged with sexually assaulting 13 women, all while on duty and in many cases by explicitly threatening arrest if they did not comply. All 13 women were Black, and many of them had previous warrants or arrests, had substance abuse issues or were found with drugs, or were sex workers. When the trial received almost no attention from the media or mainstream anti-sexual assault advocates, local activists and national organizations like Black Lives Matter, the African American Policy Forum, and Black Women’s Blueprint organized local support and a national response, much of which focused on the lack of media and national attention of sexual violence against Black women and girls. Holtzclaw was found guilty and sentenced to 263 years in prison.



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Black Women’s Blueprint, 2011

2014-2018 In 2014, comedian Hannibal Buress joked about Bill Cosby during a show, alluding to Hollywood's "open secret:" Cosby drugs and rapes women. The clip went viral, and prompted new accusations and reports.

In July 2015, 35 survivors assaulted by Cosby appeared on the cover of *New York Magazine*.

Cosby finally went to trial in June 2017, which was declared a mistrial because jurors couldn't agree on a verdict.

In April 2018, Cosby's second case began. He was convicted on three felony counts of aggravated indecent assault. He was sentenced to 3-10 years of prison.

Pennsylvania's Supreme Court overturned Cosby's conviction in 2021, finding that he should not have been charged or sentenced due to his agreement with a prosecutor. He left prison the day his conviction was overturned.

2014-2015 Carry That Weight was a work of endurance and performance art by Emma Sulkowicz for her senior thesis at Columbia University.

Beginning in September 2014, Sulkowicz carried a 50 pound mattress (the same kind of mattress that Columbia uses in its dorms) whenever she was on campus. Sulkowicz said she would stop carrying the mattress when Paul Nungesser, the student who raped her in her dorm room in 2012, was expelled or left the university. Sulkowicz carried the mattress through the end of her spring semester and her fellow students helped her carry it at their graduation ceremony in 2015.

2015-2019 In early 2015, Brock Turner sexually assaulted Chanel Miller (referred to in court documents as Emily Doe) on the Stanford University campus while she was unconscious. Two graduate students intervened and held Turner until police arrived. Police arrested Turner who was initially indicted on five charges: two for rape, two for felony sexual assault, and one for attempted rape. The two rape charges were later withdrawn.

Turner pleaded not guilty to all charges. In 2016, Turner was convicted on all three. Chanel Miller's (still known then as Emily Doe) victim impact statement at Turner's sentencing went viral. However, Santa Clara

County Superior Court Judge Aaron Persky sentenced Turner to a mere six months in jail, followed by three years of probation, and registering as a sex offender for life.

Turner was released after serving only three months for "good behavior." In December 2017, Turner appealed his sentence. His appeal was declined. Persky was widely criticized for Turner's light sentence and was recalled by county voters in 2018.

The case led to significant policy changes in California, including requiring prison terms for rapists whose victims were unconscious, and including digital penetration in the definition of rape.

In September 2019, Miller relinquished her anonymity. Her autobiography *Know My Name: A Memoir* was an instant *New York Times* bestseller.

2016 The first Tribunal of the Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, organized by Black Women's Blueprint, was held in New York City. It was the first event of its kind in the nation to focus on rape and sexual assault against Black women in the United States. The Truth Commission declared sexual violence as a human rights atrocity against women and girls of African descent past and present, which has never been acknowledged or sufficiently addressed.

2016 A thirteen year old boy working at a Dollar General store on tribal lands of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians was sexually assaulted by a manager. The survivor and his family, members of the tribe, sued the manager and Dollar General in tribal court.

Stating that tribal courts did not have jurisdiction over people who were not Native, Dollar General sued the tribe in district court. The case made it to the Supreme Court, over the question of whether tribal courts could hold non-Native people responsible for particular crimes, such as this sexual assault, occurring on tribal lands. The Supreme Court was equally divided, which meant that the ruling allowed the tribe to have jurisdiction in this case.

2016 Three leading anti-sexual violence agencies — the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, the National Sexual Assault Resource Center, and Prevent Connect— announce the creation of RALIANCE — a



collaborative initiative dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation. The initiative is funded by a \$10 million commitment from the National Football League, the first-ever major corporate funding of sexual violence prevention initiatives. The NFL committed the funding after fumbling several high-profile cases where NFL players perpetrated sexual and domestic violence against others.

2015-2017 In August 2016, the Indianapolis Star published a lengthy investigation detailing USA Gymnastics' handling sexual abuse complaints over decades. Later that month, Rachael Denhollander filed a criminal complaint against Larry Nassar with Michigan State University Police. Larry Nassar was the United States Women's Gymnastics Team doctor. She alleged that in 2000, at age 15, she was sexually abused by Nassar during treatments for lower back pain.

The public soon learned that for nearly 20 years, Nassar's position gave him access to hundreds of girls and young women whom he sexually abused.

Overall, 125 women filed criminal complaints. More than 300 people (victims, spouses, and parents) filed civil suits against Nassar, USA Gymnastics, and Michigan State University. Many victims say coaches and administrators were aware of complaints against Nassar, but no one did anything about it.

In 2017, Nassar was sentenced to 60 years in federal prison on child pornography charges. In 2018, he was also sentenced to up to 175 years in Michigan state prison after pleading guilty to seven counts of criminal sexual conduct. At that sentencing, 98 survivors read victim witness statements, speaking to him directly as he sat on the witness stand.

In 2021, gymnasts Simone Biles, Aly Raisman, McKayla Maroney, and Maggie Nichols testified at a Congressional hearing about the FBI's mishandling of the Nassar investigation. They asked members of Congress to dissolve the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee's Board due to the mishandling of abuse allegations against Nassar. By the printing of this manual, no further actions had been taken.

2016-Present Just weeks before the 2016 presidential election, footage of Trump from 2005 was released

where he admitted to sexually assaulting women. Despite the footage, he was elected as the 45th President of the United States. On his inauguration day, millions of women protested and set the stage for what happened later that year.

In October 2017, sexual abuse accusations against filmmaker Harvey Weinstein were published in the *New York Times*. The article, written by Jodi Cantor and Megan Twohey, launched a tsunami of harassment and abuse allegations leveled at (mostly famous) men across the United States. A few days later, the *New Yorker* published yet another Weinstein article, further solidifying the credibility of other Weinstein allegations. That article was written by Ronan Farrow. Cantor, Twohey, and Farrow won the Pulitzer Prize for their investigations and articles.

Shortly following the articles, actresses began telling their stories online using the hashtag #MeToo. The hashtag was initially used without giving credit to #MeToo creator Tarana Burke.



What followed was what many have referred to as a reckoning, including significant policy changes in both federal and state laws, updates to private company policies and approaches to workplace sexual harassment and assault, and thousands of survivors demanding justice in different ways.

However, many high profile sexual assault issues remained deeply challenging. In 2018, millions of Americans tuned in to listen to Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testify in Congress. Dr. Ford provided testimony and answered hours of questions about then Supreme Court Nominee Brett Kavanaugh, who sexually assaulted her when they were both teenagers.

Despite Dr. Ford's testimony - and other survivors coming forward to say they had also been assaulted by Kavanaugh - Maine Senator Susan Collins cast one of the deciding votes, resulting in Brett Kavanaugh being sworn in to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

#MeToo continues to be culturally significant in the U.S. and around the world, and continues to pave the way and change how we deal with sexual harassment and assault.

Chapter 4

People have been organizing underground and grassroots supports for survivors of sexual violence throughout history and our modern movement.

The movements to end sexual violence are not monolithic and do not all always share the same framework, vision, or solutions.

The federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) has played a huge role in funding and defining the anti-sexual violence movement, creating new penalties for sexual violence and establishing the Rape Prevention and Education Program and S.T.O.P. grant funds.

VAWA was supported by the mainstream sexual violence movements, in spite of the concerns voiced by women of color about the consequences of the ways that the legislation aligned anti-sexual violence advocacy so closely with the criminal legal system. This still impacts communities of color today.

As you support survivors, educate your community, and dream of new approaches to ending sexual violence, you can know that you are part of a movement and your voice is an important one.

We have come a long way and we continue to struggle with a legacy of challenges. In society at large, survivors are still blamed for the violence they suffer.

