

STEP FORWARD

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Addressing the Sexual Harassment of
Black Girls on High School Campus



BLACK WOMEN
FOR WELLNESS

written by:

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Introduction

Picture this: If there are 11 Black girls in a classroom chances are four of them have had someone forced sexual contact or threaten them in a sexual manner ('coercive contact of a sexual nature') before their. Seven of the girls would have already experienced someone "touch, grab or pinch them in a sexual way" in this classroom.

Black girls experience some of the highest rates of sexual harassment and gendered violence in and outside of school. While Black girls are more likely than their peers to experience sexual harassment publicly, in cafeterias, hallways and even public transportation, and more likely to confront aggressors, they are least likely to receive support from school administration and law enforcement in combating this issue.

According to Berkeley School of Law report "Hit it and Quit it" Black girls are more likely to experience physical sexual harassment such as being forced to kiss someone as opposed to verbal harassment. Despite being victimized by peers at a higher rate, when Black girls confront their aggressors at school they are often met with punishment instead of protection. According to the same report, Black girls self defense is often misconstrued as aggression or a bad attitude.

Unchecked racial bias' leave Black girls under the tutelage of school staff that assume they are unruly and ghetto. These bias' effect the degree to which administrators respond to their victimization appropriately.

And even though all Black girls are at higher risk, those that identify or are read as LGBTQI, low income, or gender queer are increasingly at risk for violence.

Prolonged Sexual Harassment damages confidence and affects Black girls conception of safety and security in the world and in their bodies. Black girls and young women reported feeling, "self-conscious, embarrassed, afraid, and less confident as a result of being sexually harassed."

School should be a space where we are given the time and opportunity to cultivate our identities, intellectual abilities and primary relationships. If Black girls are constantly fighting off unwanted sexual advances without support, recognition or justice, what are we teaching them about their worth? What are we teaching them about how dedicated they should be to maintaining healthy sexual boundaries with their peers?

The numbers don't lie. School Administrators inadvertently make sure one less Black girl makes it to graduation day when they turn a blind eye to sexual harassment. They increase the likelihood that we'll need to add one more bed in a jail cell. Ignoring this violence also increases the likelihood of unhealthy relationships, sexual violence and negative reproductive health outcomes. By ignoring violence on high school campuses' we send the message that it is normal for Black girls to have their personal space violated. We send the message that their discomfort is irrelevant. We send the message that they don't matter to us.

„Step Forward” Campaign

Step Forward, Step Back is traditionally a privilege exercise where participants stand in a straight line in the middle of an empty space and respond to statements about their personal social class experiences. With each true statement (i.e 'step forward if your parents went to college) individuals either step forward representing experiences and circumstances that have afforded wealth, education, health, and well being; or step backward representing experiences that frustrate educational, economic and social advancement.

The exercise reveals that success in our society is not an equal race, there are in fact, experiences that marginalized people face due to racism, sexism and economic inequality that act as major obstacles to resources and opportunities to succeed.

During the exercise we asked the girls questions like:

Take a step back if you've ever been called a hoe, b*** or any other derogatory term at school

Take a step back if you've ever had to leave a classroom because you were being sexually or verbally harassed

The exercise revealed that many of the girls were experiencing similar levels of disrespect on campus from peers.

Our goal is to use this project to highlight 1) how girls of color experience racism and sexism on at the hands of peers and school administrators and 2) start to create policies and procedures that address sexual harassment in campus.



Ways to address Sexual Harassment on Campus

1. Workshops - Creating spaces is a great way for teens to talk about sexual harassment as well as share what issues are going on at their campus or in their community.

2. Policy - Focus on systems as well as interpersonal oppression. Sexual harassment may be happening on an interpersonal level but it is far from just a personal issue. Addressing the rules that administrators have on campus as well as at a school district level could go a long way in addressing campus harassment of Black girls.

- Ask your students whether or not the policies are enforced
- Devise a survey to assess the ways students on campus are affected by sexual harassment
- Disseminate and discuss the survey results with the student body, faculty, staff and administrators
- Using the survey results, organize meetings with administration and have a series of asks during the meeting to hold them accountable to sexual harassment policies.
- If there are no policies, collaborate with students to create sexual harassment policy at the school. Find policies from other schools that address sexual harassment well to use as models.

3. Creating After School Groups - Create a space for Black girls to discuss this issue together. Allowing Black girls to have a space of their own is important because they may not feel comfortable bringing up certain issues in front of their male peers.

Find community members to create a space where young women of color can discuss these issues.

The curriculum should include a component on gendered violence, rape culture, non-violent communication and gender roles/stereotypes.

4. Create spaces for male allies - Involve males on the campus in your work. The movement to end sexual harassment is not just an issue for the

girls on campus. Involve males on campus by:

- Finding out if there is a group on campus that talks about gendered violence with young men
- if it doesn't exist, work on finding community members to create a space where young men of color can discuss these issues. The curriculum should include a component on gendered violence, rape culture, non-violent communication and gender roles/stereotypes

5. Forums - Challenge the culture at your junior high school, high school and/or college by organizing a forum at your school on the topic of sexual harassment and gendered violence. Make sure the forum highlights the role of popular culture in . Involve examples from music videos, ads and movies to show (to make it relevant) how gendered violence has been normalized in our culture. Prepare your students to lead the forum. Peer led forums will set the precedent for students to engage in healthy dialogue about challenging issues. Remember to not have someone out of touch with the group leading it

Things to remember during your discussion

Use an intersectional approach

We all embody multiple identities: we can be women, queer, poor and Black. This lens is called Intersectionality, this school of thought recognizes that all of our identities affect the way that we move through our lives. Therefore, our experience of sexual harassment might be different according to the layers of our identities

Don't victimize or victim blame

Victim blaming means focusing on how the victim's actions motivated the aggressor to behave badly. Victim Blaming can take the form of commenting on the actions, behaviors or attire of the victim and the role this played

Examples:

- saying anything about the way that they're dressed
- saying anything about their actions
- saying anything about their body types

Victimizing someone means making a person feel like they're helpless or that they can't defend themselves. Avoid talking about sexual harassment on campus as if the behavior of aggressors will never change or improve. Like "some boys are just aggressive when they really like you". In your lesson plan spend time on solutions as well as checking in on how this issue is affecting your students self-esteem and academic experiences.

Understand respectability politics

Respectability politics is a belief that injustice faced by African Americans is a product of our defective culture i.e our bad habits and attitudes rather than structural oppression. This logic suggests that if African Americans "pull up their pants, get rid of their hoodies, or stop acting ghetto" that state, sexual and interpersonal violence would come to a halt. This logic suggests that respect comes from being "respectable". It's important to remind your students that sexual harassment is not brought on because you come from a particular community, neighborhood, or culture. Lower income Black girls are often affected by the logic of respectability politics because it is assumed that because of their background they don't deserve to be respected

Slang: Race, class and gender

The words we call one another can be a powerful indicator of an individual's status in society. If a girl is considered a thot or hoe by her peers sexual harassment often becomes normalized. Ask your students about some of the slang used to refer to Black girls. Challenge your teens to unpack how the slang they use is racist, sexist and misogynistic. If this comes up, address it head on. Below are a couple of questions you can ask teens. :

What are the 3 most common slang phrases referring to “easy” women? Close your eyes. What does this woman look like? What is she wearing? Explore how race and class creates ideas of how people should and shouldn't be treated.

Temperature Check

Do check in's with your students. Check in's allow for students to let you know how they're feeling. Ask students to rate how they're feeling on a scale of 1 to 10. One being okay, ten being fantastic. Being aware of how folks enter the conversation can give you an understanding where to take the conversation that day. If everyone in the class is a one it might be an indication that the conversation needs to go at slower pace. Remember you are not therapist but the mood in the room will affect the student's ability to delve into touchy issues. So be mindful.

Workshop

Step Forward – Leading the Conversation About Sexual Harassment on Campus – Workshop

- Audience: high school students 9th -12th grade
- Length of session: 60 minutes
- Capacity limit: 25 people
- Materials: Poster board, pens, notebook paper.

Below are some suggested procedures to help lead initial discussions on campus about sexual harassment of Black girls.

Room setup – It is important that all individuals feel safe in the space to speak. Making sure that the room feels private, and has a door that can close. Chair should be set up in a circle or square.

Laying the foundation

10 minutes

If you are newly working with the group, introduce yourself, and take the time to share a story of self that personalize you with the teen. If teens do not know each other, ask each teen to introduce themselves.

Introduce the topic and set ground rules for the session. Make sure that teens “buy-in” to the ground rules and that you get verbal agreement for all teens in the place.

Some ground rules to include:

- One mic – Only one person speaking at a time
- Confidential Space – personal information shared in the space should not be shared outside of the space.

Leading the Discussion

30 minutes

Topic Questions 1 – What is your definition of sexual harassment? Do you think sexual harassment look different for Black girls? When a person is sexually harassed what are common things you hear people say to excuse the way the person has been treated? Highlight that different kinds of Black women (of all classes and backgrounds) are harassed. How does class factor into the way that different women are treated?

Topic Questions 2 - What are the different pieces of your identity? How do these different pieces affect the way you are treated by your peers on campus?

Topic Questions 3 - Have you seen sexual harassment on campus? What are the ways in which your peers respond to sexual harassment? Have you experience sexual harassment on campus yourself?

Topic Question 3 - What ways do administrators/ teachers respond on campus to sexual harassment? Is there a way they(we) could respond better

Taking Action

15 minutes

Have teens jot down what things they would like to see different on campus? What would they like administrators/teachers to do when it comes to creating a safe space for Black girls on campus. Once they had 5 minutes to write, ask a couple of teens to share their answers? See if there is agreement on certain policies. Write shared strategies on poster board.

Closing

5 minutes

Have teens say a word or two about how they are feeling?

Collect sheets of paper where students have write down what they want to see different

Six Week Lesson Plan

Lesson One: Race and Gender messages in the Media

Objectives: Students will be able to define hyper-sexualization and understand how race and gender impact representation in the media

Essential Questions: What is hypersexualization? What are stereotypes around Black girls sexuality? How do race and gender inform the way Black women are portrayed in the media?

Lesson Two: Hip Hop/Rap, Rape Culture and Violent Masculinity

Objective: To learn and analyze the components of sexual harassment and sexual assault through real-life examples and group discussion.

Essential Questions: How are sexual harassment and sexual assault defined? What are some examples of each? What cultural norms make sexual harassment and sexual assault pervasive? How can youth identify risk factors and signs of violence and abuse? What cultural, religious and family traditions encourage sexual violence? How are male victims marginalized by traditional notions about sexual assault victimization?

Lesson Three: Hip Hop/Rap, Rape Culture and Violent Masculinity

Objectives: Students will learn 'media literacy' i.e deconstruct popular songs and images and identify language that perpetuates toxic masculinity, and rape culture

Essential Questions: What is media literacy? How do you analyze or decode a song, music video or advertisement? What is toxic masculinity? What is rape culture? Where can we see toxic masculinity and rape culture in the songs, music videos and advertisements that we know and love? What is "misogynoir" and how does the term relate to the way black girls are perceived?

Lesson Four: Mad Science or School to Prison

Objective: Students will be able to define the school to prison pipeline and identify/reflect on key ways Black girls are 'pushed out of school' including sexual harassment, sexual violence, stereotyping and gender policing.

Essential Questions: What is the school to prison pipeline? What does it mean to be 'pushed out' of school? What is institutional racism? What issues specifically impact LGBTQI and queer girls of color when it comes to pushout? What role do respectability politics play in the pushout of black girls of all sexual orientations? How does the culture of low academic expectations specifically affect black girls when it comes to STEM education and non-traditional disciplines?

Lesson Five: Intimate Partner Violence and Healthy Relationships

Objective: To understand the characteristics of healthy dating and intimate partner relationships (gay/straight/bi) as well as to analyze the cultural stereotypes and messages that promote abuse and violence in intimate relationships.

Essential Questions: What is intimate partner violence? What are some examples of unhealthy behaviors in a relationship? What does it mean to blame the victim or "victim-blame"? How are women of color victims of intimate partner violence treated or portrayed by the media? What role do social media play in promoting intimate partner violence and other forms of bullying and sexual harassment? How can young men and boys become allies in helping to prevent intimate partner violence?

Lesson Six: "The transformation of silence into language and action"

Objective: Students will identify key ways to transform climate on their campus in regards to sexual harassment, sexual violence, bullying and criminalization.

Essential Questions: What is a 'safe space'? What would make you feel safer at school? Who do we need to talk to to create this change? How have other activists created safe spaces for Black girls throughout time?