

**AFRO-CARIBBEAN WOMEN AND THE EXPERIENCE OF
SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE NEW WORLD BETWEEN
THE 15TH AND 17TH CENTURIES**

PROF. SYLVESTER M. EKA

AND
ASANGA, EMMANUEL DONATUS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF UYO, UYO

Abstract

Afro-Caribbean women were those group of women in the new world who traced their full or partial ancestry to Africa. Their arrival in the new world was as a result of slave trade where they were sent to provide labour in the farms. Sexual violence can better be understood against the background of the concept of rape. Sexual violence was widely accepted as a crime against women, perpetrated by men. However, the concept has become so dynamic and the definition of sexual violence also changed to incorporate male rape victims. The Afro-Caribbean women experienced different kinds of rape like gang rape, marital rape, incest rape, infant and child rape, acquaintance rape, date rape, stranger rape and war rape. The war rape was used by Christopher Columbus and his men to humiliate the Afro-Caribbean women. Colonialism, high moral decadence, early initiation into sex, poverty, starvation and contagious diseases, homelessness and social institutionalization of the Afro-Caribbean women as prostitutes all worked to entrap the women into the abuse. For the methodology, the topic not being a contemporary one made the researchers to rely heavily on secondary materials as the source of this paper. However, the finding have been very encouraging as government provision of housing, general services and good policies typical of the cultural practices common to the Nordic countries was introduced to save the Afro-Caribbean women.

Introduction

The term "Afro-Caribbean" was not coined by the Caribbean people themselves but was first used by European Americans in the late 1960s. It should be noted that the Taino people, original inhabitants of the Caribbean

area were declared extinct after more than 500 years of forced labour by the Spinards who colonized them. Christopher Columbus and his men are said to have raped, enslaved, maimed and murdered the Taino people upon landing on their shores, This included selling of the Taina people with their women and girls into what is now called sex trafficking. Columbus wrote in his journal thus:

"A hundred castellanos are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls, those from nine to ten are now in demand."¹

With the extinction of the native inhabitants of the area (Taine people), the spinards went on to import African slaves to work in their maize fields and also perform other physical labour of the conquered Islands.

The Afro-Caribbean people were therefore, Caribbean people who traced their full or partial ancestry to Africa. They account for the foreign born black citizens of the U.S. The main Caribbean countries include Haiti, The Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago. In this study therefore, the term Afro-Caribbean is used to refer to contemporary black immigrants from the Caribbean to the U.S.A, Canada and Europe.

One of the major socio-cultural and psychological challenges in our contemporary society is the prevalence of sexual assault cases. As a matter of fact, rape is a menace that is on the increase throughout the world. It is regarded as one of the most serious crimes committed against females, and is of great concern to all. The menace is indeed becoming a social cankerworm globally, even in the developed countries. The United States National Victims Centre estimated that every hour approximately 78 women are forcibly raped.²

At this point, the paper intends to consider some conceptual clarification of the term sexual violence, consider various types of sexual violence, consider some reasons behind sexual violence against Afro-Caribbean women in the colonial period, examine the requirements needed to improve the Afro-Caribbean women situation before conclusion.

Conceptual Clarification of Sexual Violence

The Term Womanism was invented by Alice Walker in her "In search of our mothers Gardens: Womenist Prose" (1983).³ According to her, this word has its roots in black folklore in which mothers tadled their female children for

"acting womanish" like a woman. Alice also defined a womanist as a woman who loves other women sexually and or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture and women's strength and is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female, Womanism was invented for the expression of the experiences of African American women whose experiences were not well articulated by the concept and theorizing of feminism. Womanism brought to fore, the diversities of women's issues as influenced by race, ethnicity and class.⁴

In the context of this paper, sexual violence can be defined as "any act of a sexual nature that a person did not consent to. This can include rape, sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse and exploitation, sexual harassment and taking or sharing sexual images without someone's consent".⁵

Sexual violence and its attendant implications on women and development are better understood against the background of the concept of rape itself. A number of scholars have attempted to define or describe what rape is all about. Olowu (2003) looks at rape as when a person uses force or threat of force to have some form of sexual intercourse (virginal, oral or anal) with another person.⁶ On the other hand, Clinard and Meier (1998) describe what they refer to as forcible rape, as an interpersonal violence, which results when one person unlawfully compels another to engage in sexual intercourse against the victim's will.⁷ McCabe Crome and Forde (1999) considered rape as forced sexual penetration of another person.⁸ On my own part, I consider rape as a "type of sexual assault usually involving sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration initiated against an individual without his or her consent. The act may be carried out by force, coercion, abuse of authority or against a person who is unconscious, incapacitated or below the legal age of consent".⁹

It is interesting to note that the concept of sexual violence which is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'sexual assault', has been dynamic through time and space. Regan and Kelly (2003) asserts that most law reforms have involved altering the definition of sexual violence to become gender-neutral. Initially, sexual violence was widely accepted as a crime against women, which was perpetrated by men. However, the concept has become so dynamic that in many countries the current legal definition of sexual violence, as the product of several law reforms, have incorporated male rape victims, acknowledging that rape does not occur even within marriages, as well as recognizing rape as all forms of penetration and not just penetration by penis. Verimed Healthcare Network (2008) sheds more light on this when it contends that "rape is a violent act, and is most often committed by a male upon a female".¹⁰

However, some cases of rape has been reported in which women raped men, Even then, although rape can be committed by women too, most reported cases of rape has been committed by men. Rape may also occur between members of the same sex. This is more common in places where there is limited access to the opposite sex such as prisons, military settings and single sex schools.

Methodology

The topic not being a contemporary one made the researchers to rely heavily on secondary sources, that is, text books, journals, online material etc on the writing of this paper.

15th century because that was when Christopher Columbus and his men opened the flood-gate of European adventure in the Caribbean area. This resulted to the development of commercial agriculture which required the use of human labour and saw the influx of Africans to the area as slaves in the plantations. Terminating the work in the 17th century resulted from the fact that slave trade and slave labour had come to stay as a means to the survival of the plantation economy of the new world. Sex violence also became institutionalized among the Afro-Caribbean women in the area about this time.

Types of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is increasingly becoming prevalent and manifests in many forms depending on the manner or context in which it was carried out or perpetrated. There are many types of rape by scholars, the most salient ones include the following:

Gang Rape: This is referred to as group rape or multiple perpetrator rape in scholarly literature. It involves multiple offenders - at least two or more violators. This occurs when a group of people participate in the rape of a single victim with little or no resistance by the victim.

Marital Rape: This type occurs between and among married couples, wherein the husband indecently assaults his wife or vice-versa. It is significant to stress that while marital rape is illegal in some countries, it is not a serious prosecutable offence in many, especially in Africa.

Incest Rape: This is the infraction of sexual relations with close kin, that is, between family members or close relations.

Infant/Child Rape: This type of rape usually involves an adult having sexual intercourse with a person under the age of consent, regardless of whether or not the underage person agreed to it or not. This is linked to Child General Abuse (CGA).

Prison Rape: This is the type of rape occurring in prison. It is the rape of an inmate by other inmates or prison staff, and in rare cases, the rape of prison staff by inmates.

Acquaintance Rape: This type is committed by someone known to the victim, and the rapist commits the act mainly for the purpose of achieving gratification. This type of rape occurs more often than the rest.

Date Rape: This is closely associated with acquaintance rape above. It occurs when someone forces another person, usually one whom he is dating or spending time with, to have sex. It was very common in the 1990s when the rapists used to drug their victims. These are assaults that are least likely to be reported. Like the preceding one, the victims of these assaults know their attackers who usually rape them after dates or other social occasions. This kind of rape seldom involve extreme force where the male fulfills his sexual expectations and fails to seriously consider resistance by his victim.

Stranger Rape: This is committed by someone unknown to the victim, and the rapist commits the rape mainly to express power and anger towards the victim.

War Rape: Records indicate that some countries use rape as a weapon or tool of war in order to subdue opponents within the same country in cases of civil war, or opponents of other countries in times of international or cross-boarders conflicts. The use of rape as weapon is often one of the most violent and humiliating offences inflicted to dehumanize and defeat the enemy psychologically. This partly explains why rape is often categorised as the element of crime of genocide, especially when committed with the intent to destroy a targeted ethnic group.

Statutory Rape: This refers to the non-forcible sexual intercourse by an adult with a person below a statutorily designated age. Usually, the age of consent is 18 years. It therefore becomes a statutory rape when at least one person is below the legally required age for such act.

It is significant to note that whatever the categorization, sexual assault or rape is a crime most females are afraid of because it can be devastating as earlier indicated above, inflicting torture, pains and severe injuries on the victims.

Causes of Sexual Violence against the Afro-Caribbean Women in the Colonial Period

Sexual violence towards the Afro-Caribbean women spread when the Spanish and other European countries colonized Latin American countries, making sex trafficking a central component part of colonization of the indigenous people of Central and North America. During the

American revolution George Washington's troops put to death all the women and children, excepting some of the young women, whom they carried away for the use of their soldiers and were afterwards put to death in a more shameful manner.¹¹ As Europeans settled in the continent, indigenous women and children were bought and sold for sex and labour trafficking from government and Christian-run boarding schools.¹²

Sexual violence against children was high in the Caribbean.

Recent survey shows that about 47.6% of the girls and 31.9% of boys are reported to have been subjected to sexual abuse.¹³ Furthermore, initiation of children into sexual activity is said to have occurred in the Caribbean more than anywhere else in the world, excepting countries that practiced child marriage. A survey by UNICEF shows that approximately 15% of children aged 11 - 12 years and 35% of young people aged 14 - 15 years have had sexual experience.¹⁴ Early sexual activity in the area is highly related to sexual abuse and coercion, both as causal link and also increasing vulnerability to further victimization, Davila and Stark (2018) stated that "over half of the boys and about a quarter of girls who are sexually active stated that their age of first intercourse was 10 years or younger and almost two-third had intercourse before the age of 13, often as a result of force or coercion.¹⁵ It therefore becomes clear that forced sexual initiation and early sexual abuse were not uncommon in the Caribbean.

Homelessness also exposed a lot of the Afro-Caribbean women to sexual violence. The homelessness of American Indian people resulted from colonization and genocide of the indigenous people in their lands, This also was the result of the direct creation of reservation system which was accomplished through. treaties, Poverty, starvation and contagious diseases, some intentionally inflicted by the military were prevalent among the native people due to the loss and theft of their lands. Removal from homelands resulted in parents and tribes being unable to adequately house, feed and clothe their children. This was used as reason by the authorities to remove Indian children from their families to boarding schools. Some parents saw boarding schools as a better option than having their children starve to death. In these schools, significant trauma and cultural abuses took place. Colonization therefore disrupted every aspect of how indigenous people had lived on this land including what they lived in, where they lived and how they lived in community, culture and had their social connections.¹⁶

Homelessness continue to be widespread among the Afro-Caribbean women even in contemporary times. Homeless women were

particularly vulnerable to all forms of sexual and physical violence. A profound link between homelessness, prostitution and trafficking of Afro-Caribbean women is evident in the Garden of Truth: The Prostitution and Trafficking of Native Women by Farley, M. He submitted that 98% of Afro-Caribbean women who got involved in prostitution and sex trafficking and consequently became homeless attributed it to colonization, domestic violence, poverty, racism and jurisdictional issues.¹⁷

In the social context, the chronic inter-generational homelessness together with institutionalization of the Afro-Caribbean women as prostitutes also contributed to the discriminations that entrapped women and girls into prostitution and sex trafficking. This situation presents the extreme difficult condition the women found themselves and could not find an alternative way to escape prostitution. Prostitution in this instance was therefore not a choice for the women, but a cycle of entrapment resulting from violent and coercive barriers that were a violation of Human Rights

Sex Violence by Intimate partners (IPV):

... he wanted sex. I told him the baby is too young and I can't go through that now. He took a knife and cut off my clothing and forced himself on me claiming to be collecting his right.¹⁸

Another pregnant lady Suzanne Scafe whose husband used to be beating and verbally assaulted her, recounted her experience thus:

When I got home from work tired, my husband would start cursing and abusing me. I cry a lot and sometimes I think of committing suicide. I blame myself a lot. I think I should have been able to see that it was not love. When someone loves you, they don't hit you. I was not happy and I became very timid.¹⁹

Yet another pregnant lady by name Amber Lascelles narrated her experience with her husband thus:

He dragged me in the grass and punched me. My baby came at seven months because of constant verbal abuse and one incident of physical abuse.'

Apart from the pregnant and married women, women and girls with disabilities were also subjected to intimate partner violence (IPV), coercion and sexual violence. The 2007 World Health Organization (WHO) Report on the Afro-Caribbean women stated that "80% of women with disabilities had been victims of violence, and they were four times more

likely to be subjected to sexual violence."²¹

Resulting from the cases of intimate partner violence (IPV), it has been revealed that Afro-Caribbean women were mostly living with HIV. The incidence of HIV has been discovered to be the highest in the Caribbean area outside Africa. Although women are biologically more susceptible to contacting HIV infection, this does not explain why the sickness has been so heavily feminized. However, increase in HIV among Afro-Caribbean women has been attributed to a complex of sexual cultures which include: early sexual initiation of girls, sexual exploitation, forced non-consensual sex, norms about male sexual entitlements, multiple partnering and sexual economic exchange relations. At the ideological level Afro-Caribbean women living with HIV and AIDS faces stigmatization, social alienation and victim blaming. These factors forced women into silence and often caused them to endure masked violence within relationships.

Requirements Needed to Improve the Afro-Caribbean Women Situation

Certain improvement in the areas of housing, services and government policies were required:

Housing:

- Permanent supportive housing that provided for child care on site were required;
- Survivor women were required to secure unrestricted housing with optional services.

Services:

- Employment and relevant education resources were required to be made available to the survivors;
- Cultural healing ways that were tribally peculiar to them were encouraged,

Government Policy:

- Service providers and funds for education were made available to discourage the Native Women from prostitution and trafficking.
- Implement the Equality Model, aka (Nordic Model) with particular emphasis on trauma-informed services (prostitution). This comprises economic and social policies as well as typical cultural practices common to Nordic countries.

Conclusion

It should be noted that the Taino people, original inhabitants of the Caribbean area were declared extinct after more than 500 years of forced labour or enslavement, massacre and disease caused by the Spinards who colonized them. This led to the importation of African slaves by the Spinards to work in their maize fields and also perform other physical labour of the conquered islands,

The descendants of these Africans constituted the Afro-Caribbean whose women were exposed to all kinds of inhuman treatment like prostitution, sex trafficking and homelessness. Their homeless state mostly resulted from sexual assaults which never spared any age of the women and girls. Rape as we know is a cankerworm to the development of women and it often cripples their destiny. A woman who is raped may not be able to contribute maximally to societal development in the same way as a raped-free woman.

In the light of the above, this paper submits that female image and lives should be protected through sex education and plausible preventive methods to reduce the assaults. This will go a long way in helping more women continue to be potent agents of development and change, Government and civil organizations are enjoined to work towards a future where colonization, victimization, sexual violence and social injustice are eradicated and ensure a future where no one is bought or sold.

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