

It's a little known fact that Rosa Parks worked with the NAACP as a sexual assault investigator. In the 1940's she organized others in her community to defend Black women and girls from sexual violence in the Jim Crow South. She served as branch secretary of the Montgomery NAACP, conducting investigations into rape. Rosa Parks is iconized for the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, often heralded as the beginning of the civil rights movement.

Black women and girls have historically been dehumanized, objectified as hypersexual, not seen as victims of sexual crimes and therefore left without legal recourse. Rosa Parks encouraged Black women to fight the violence of silence and speak out. Many today, want to dismiss the sexual violence Black women have experienced as a relic from another time. The reality is 8 decades after the work Rosa Parks started and 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, the struggle to address the victimization of women of color remains at a standstill. 35% of Black women experience some form of sexual violence during their lifetime. 40% of confirmed sex trafficking survivors in the US are Black. Black women are two and a half times more likely to be murdered by men than their white counterparts are. In addition, 9 in 10 black female victims knew their killers. The Department of Justice estimates that for every White woman that reports her rape, at least 5 white women do not report theirs. For every Black woman that reports her rape, at least 15 Black women do not report theirs. Silence is a violence of its own.

There are reasons and barriers that keep black women from reporting, including the historical and structural oppression that they have experienced based on their gender and race. And while many will claim they do not see color, the outcomes tell a different story. Black girls are disproportionately punished in school and held to a higher level of accountability than White girls. They make up nearly one-third of the girls referred to law enforcement, and over 40 percent of girls arrested in connection with a school incident. Black girls are pipelined into the criminal justice system and incarcerated at rates four times higher than their share of the population. Law Enforcement does not represent safety and protection for many members of the Black community. Law enforcement has and still is used to control rather than protect Black communities. If a Black woman tries to access the justice system to report, she is typically not viewed as an individual but as an accumulation of racial and gender stereotypes that do not take into account the layers of oppression including expecting a black woman to make choices from alternatives not available to them because they are black.

For many, Rosa Parks is remembered only for refusing to ride in the back of the bus, and it is often forgotten that she also played a key role in speaking out for the humanity of Black women and girls in our country. Racism does not end with better seating. Today our conversation must take a deeper look into how structural racism impacts work to serve survivors of sexual violence in our counties, state, and country. If we are to truly transform systems, then our system must stop seeking out stereotypes of the perfect victim of sexual violence. One in five Black women are survivors of rape. There is a chance that there are black women and children in your community that have experienced sexual assault and have not reported. Their lack of reporting is a result of change that WE as system workers, advocates, and white allies must address, have hard conversations about, and make intentional change to better serve all survivors in our communities. Their silence is violence.

