



A Brief History of the Anti-Rape Movement

By Polly Poskin, Executive Director, Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, September 2006

Key Learning Points:

- The Anti rape movement of the 1970s did not materialize out of thin air.
- Rape of women has historical roots in understanding women as the property of men, a legal, historical, and cultural context around the world.
- The anti-rape movement owes its genesis to other social justice movements of the last two centuries, including the women's suffrage movement, the anti-war movement of the 60s, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s.
- The anti-rape movement has grown and changed between 1970 and now. What began as a radical change movement has become mainstream as evidenced by local, state, and federal funding that supports advocacy, systems change, and prevention.
- As a movement, we continue to assess our effectiveness in providing services and changing norms to make sexual violence a thing of the past.

The anti-rape movement of the 1970s did not materialize from thin air. Like all significant changes in the evolution of human history, the Anti-rape Movement is – on the one hand – a manifestation of the gradual progress of an evolving culture and – at the same time – a noticeable shift in the prevailing norms, mores, and beliefs of that culture.

The word “rape” is derived from the Latin “rapere”, meaning “to steal, seize, or carry away.” Forcible seizure and rape were accepted methods of claiming a wife in early history – and, in some cultures, this still occurs. Owning property and gaining wealth were considered marks of manhood. This ownership revolved around possessions and, without a wife, a man’s lineage would end. According to Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will*, “Concepts of hierarchy, slavery and private property flowed from, and could only be predicated upon, the initial subjugation of women.”¹

Throughout most of history, rape was not viewed as a crime because women were considered property, and, therefore, without rights. Like taking land, men took women as an act of aggression; an affirmation of their strength and masculinity. In most cultures, marriages were arranged when the groom purchased the bride from her father. Rape was initially considered a crime only in terms of the property violation of another man. Punishment was delivered to a man who damaged the husband’s property – his wife – by rape. Very often the raped woman would also be punished as an adulteress, regardless of her lack of complicity in the assault. For instance, ancient Hebrew women who were raped were considered defiled, and stoned to death.

Throughout English history, punishment for rape included castration or death of the rapist. However, to receive legal justice, a victim had to be born into the privileged classes: “...if a member of the feudal class committed his crimes against anyone other than the king or a great lord, he was fairly safe from prosecution, or at least from punishment,” wrote Sidney Painter in *History of the Middle Ages*. Prior to the thirteenth century, a raped woman had to be a wealthy, propertied virgin to have legal recourse against her attacker.

In the late thirteenth century, English laws were rewritten to exact a penalty of death upon a man who raped an unmarried or married woman (except his own wife). Although this law was rarely enforced, it was one of the first laws making rape against all women a crime.

By the late 1700's in the United States, women, seemingly one by one, recognized the powerlessness of women in the face of male domination in the educational, social, political, and economic institutions of this emerging nation.

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote the Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1790. Wollstonecraft recognized the failure of contemporary education for girls and the powerlessness of women in unhappy marriages. She ridiculed the notion of women as meek and modest; as attractive and shallow playthings for men. She maintained that women should be equal partners to their husbands. For the first time, a woman put words to the experience and perception of many women – these words served as a galvanizing force.

Women “galvanizing as a force” began with the anti-slavery movement. The Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah, were among early activists in the anti-slavery movement during the 1830s. They were born into a slaveholding family, but rejected their family and joined the Quakers who were notable abolitionists. They published a letter in the anti-slavery newspaper, and later went on speaking tours against slavery and championed the rights of women. Work in the anti-slavery movement thrust women into the political, activist arena. This work gave women a forum for discussing injustice and recognizing the similarities with all women's lives.

The Women's Rights Convention of 1848 solidified because men attempted to silence the women at the earlier Anti-Slavery Convention. The 1848 convention represented the first major national organizing around women's rights. This convention grew out of abolitionism, which taught them how to organize, publicize, and articulate a political protest. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Lucretia Mott are considered among the mothers of the early feminist movement. They were also abolitionists who loosely held the belief that women were, in some sense, slaves, too.

Incidents of sexual assault are a part of the historical cycle of violence.



Over 200 women attended the 1848 convention. The delegates passed the Declaration of Sentiments, written like the Declaration of Independence – calling on women to organize and petition for their rights. The right to vote passed by a narrow margin and was quite controversial – and a reflection of the racism so pervasive then (and now); tragically, women of color were not included in the right to vote. That decision and others resulted in a schism between white women and women of color that continues today.

Sojourner Truth connected the issues of women and race. She spoke of the role of black women in the fight for women's rights in her famous speech “Ain't I A Woman?”

In 1866, when the Memphis Riots occurred, Congress held hearings about the chaos and brutality during the riots. Black women testified before Congress about being gang raped by a white mob. These women were perhaps the first

women to break the silence of rape.

The issue of rape, race, women, and slavery was also addressed by a significant Supreme Court case, *Missouri v. Celia*, in 1851. The decision is, of course, a travesty – a black slave woman is declared to be the property of her owner with no right to defend herself against his rape of her. A decade later, the Equal Rights Association became the first organization in the U.S. to advocate national women's suffrage.

During the post-Civil War years, women leaders gained more and more national attention as travel and communication systems improved. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony, along with fourteen other women, tried to register to vote; she was arrested and refused to pay the \$100 fine. That same year, the Susan B. Anthony amendment, giving women the right to vote, was first introduced into Congress. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was also a notable black activist in the late 19th century. Her anti-lynching campaign stirred more and more African-Americans to speak out about the horrors of racism and segregation.

By the early 1900s, women were re-defining their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Emma Goldman first wrote and spoke about women's reproductive issues, and Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, NY, in 1916.

In 1920, women gained the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment. With new rights, greater emphasis on education, and massive mechanical and technological advances, women's opportunities for employment blossomed. It was no surprise that women joined the workforce en masse during World War II, and over 400,000 women joined the military.

The second wave of women's activism began with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the Student's Free Speech Movement of the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement, through the inspiration and work of women like Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, gave hope that groups of committed citizens can fight against injustice and institutionalized violence, and obtain equal rights. Other social change movements at the time included: labor, peace, and anti-Vietnam War. Betty Friedan's best-seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, sold millions of copies and laid the groundwork for the modern feminist movement. From the early consciousness raising groups to the establishment of women's studies programs in universities, women's voices, experiences, and realities joined the public debate about radical shifts in the power structure of institutions and relationships. The anti-rape movement did not materialize out of thin air.

The anti-rape movement of the 1970s set out to change the world. It is not like there was a choice; it was something that had to be done in order for women to survive.

Imagine, if you will, what women's lives were before 1970:

- The North American Indian Women's Association did not exist;
- The publication, *Off Our Backs*, had never been published;
- There were no speakouts on rape;
- There were no rape crisis centers;

- There were no shelters for battered women;
- Ms. Magazine had not been published;
- The National Women's Studies Association did not exist;
- Women did not march in the University of Minnesota's marching band;
- Abortion was not legal in the United States;
- Girls could not play Little League baseball;
- Olivia records was nowhere to be heard;
- There had never been a national lesbian feminist conference;
- Women made less than 59 cents to a man's dollar;
- Women's basketball was not an Olympic sport;
- The National Association of Black Professional Women did not exist nor did the National Alliance of Black Feminists;
- The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault was 9 years from introduction; and
- The National Women for Color Leadership Project for Sexual Assault Services and Policy didn't yet exist.

In 1970, women's lives were about to make an unprecedented break with the traditional image and role of the American woman. In the 1950s and 60s, the economic needs of families had prompted many women who had been employed during the war years to return to the labor force. Employment of women became more socially acceptable. At the same time, the emerging women's movement raised the issue of women's "second class status," our relegation to working and non-working roles that were less valued, not as profitable, less diverse, and outside of the power and decision-making controlled by men, disproportionately white men. As more women began working outside of the home and pursuing educational opportunities beyond high school, women forever changed our society's definition of gender roles and our thinking about the value of female lives.

All of these shifts laid the groundwork for change: new rules about decision-making, power, and authority. And women gave themselves and other women permission and support to risk the most intimate and one-sided relationship we knew: our relationship to men. Whether we were married to men, partnered to men, hoping to be one or both, someday or again, or not interested in men as partners, we knew that revealing our pain, joy, frustration, satisfaction, or ambivalence with and about men would be the hardest part of our work. Women knew from history that eventually men would concede some things: the right to work, better working conditions, the right to vote, a driver's license, admission to professional associations, even divorce. But women had never before demanded – as a movement – that gender roles change, and that the expectations and the limits of behavior within those roles would be now and forever defined by women. As Gloria Steinem said:

"In our various ways we were mutually uncovering the secret of this land of opportunity. If you aren't born white and male in America, you are statistically likely to end up as some sort of support system for those who are...[women] realized that they shared problems as women, and they needed to support each other to have any power at all. As for rights of sexual

expression and reproductive freedom, women finally discovered that all of us were endangered when one group was denied."²

The National Organization for Women had pushed to bring women "into full participation in the mainstream of American society." NOW's agenda focused on reproduction, equal pay for equal work, child care, housework, and sexuality, not to be confused with sexual orientation. We owe a debt of gratitude for the achievements of the early women reformers. And we must also acknowledge that by the late 1960s, the feminist movement had not yet recognized or analyzed the impact of interpersonal violence on women's lives.

The work that needed to be done to stop the rape of women and lift us from the physical, psychological, and institutional brutality of second-class citizenship became crystal clear when women spoke publicly about the rape in their lives. In January 1971, the New York Radical Feminists held a speak out on rape at St. Clement's Church in New York City. No one published the women's voices from that evening, but I imagine the stories were the same painful, heart wrenching, and frightening stories [hear]we more than three decades later. From those moments forward, rape victim advocates knew that fundamental changes must occur.

Perhaps the most profound analysis by early feminists is that they declared the private is not separate from the social or the political. The anti-rape movement embodied this analysis as reflected in the Chicago Women Against Rape's 1970's statement of purpose:

"Rape violently reflects the sexism in a society where power is unequally distributed between women and men, black and white, poor and rich...In rape, the woman is not a sexual being but a vulnerable piece of public property; the man does not violate society's norms so much as take them to a logical conclusion."³

The anti-rape movement listened to what survivors were saying. Survivors named those who blamed them for rape: law enforcement officers, prosecutors, boyfriend, friends, authors of literature, law scholars, reporters, sports figures, families, and just about everyone who learned their story.

The rape of Joan Little in August 1974, by a guard at the jail in Beaufort County, NC, galvanized public focus on the horror and terror of rape. Joan Little, a black prisoner in the Beaufort County Jail, was attacked by the white jailer, Clarence Alligood. Joan broke away from her rapist, killed him with an ice pick he had taken into her cell, and then broke free from the jail. She was caught and charged with murder, and Angela Davis led the national outcry to bring justice to Joan Little. Eventually, Joan, her lawyers, Angela Davis, and public support prevailed. A jury acquitted Joan Little of killing Clarence Alligood. As Angela Davis so eloquently stated before Joan's trial:

"All people who see themselves as members of the existing community of struggle for justice, equality, and progress have a responsibility to fulfill toward Joan Little. Those of us – women and men – who are black or people of color must understand the connection between racism and sexism that is so strikingly manifested in her case. Those of



Advocates may need to consider that a victim/survivor or secondary victim's response may be connected to their age and the understanding of sexual violence that they were taught.

us who are white and women must grasp the issue of male supremacy in relationship to the racism and class bias which complicate and exacerbate it.

Let us be sure that the leitmotif running through every aspect of the campaign is unity. Our ability to achieve unity may mean the difference between life and death for sister Joan. Let us then forge among ourselves and our movements as indivisible strength and with it, let us halt and then crush the conspiracy against Joan Little's life."⁴

The anti-rape movement sponsored speakouts, hosted forums, and distributed literature and fact sheets correcting the lies and the myths, desperately trying to shift blame to where it belonged: with the rapist. The anti-rape movement listened as survivors courageously disclosed the sexual violation in their lives by men, sometimes known to the survivor, sometimes not. Sometimes, it was an incident that occurred long ago, sometimes the night before. They said they did not have anyone to talk to about what happened. They said they wanted to go to the hospital, but were fearful that their humiliation would be multiplied and the origins of their injuries ignored. They never considered going to the police station.

These women said something needed to be created. Not for themselves, they said; it was too late. But they wanted to answer a telephone in the middle of the night to help chase away someone else's nightmare, and they wanted to talk to nurses and doctors about how to treat a rape victim differently than anyone else who came to an emergency room. And, they wanted to talk to teenagers and college kids and all the women in the community about how to avoid rape. And a few of them said they wanted to teach police about how to respond to a rape victim, and how to interview her and to understand that women don't make up this "stuff" to get someone else in trouble. Many of the survivors said they wanted to stand in the streets or in the classroom or on television or in Congress or anywhere else to let people know that rape is about women being controlled by men; that men rape because they believe they have a right to rape, and they believe they will get away with it, that men who rape believe they own the victim's body. Survivors were becoming activists.

As Sandra Butler said in a speech in 1996 to the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault:

We saw what we needed and made it up. It was that simple. Nobody knew how to create a rape crisis center. Negotiate a modified collective. Develop crisis intervention for abused adolescents. Create on-going support groups for adult women. Engage the criminal justice system as allies in the effort to engage women in seeking justice in traditional institutions. No one had yet learned how to create protocol for examining a sexually abused child. No one. We were it. We just kept putting one foot in front of the other, making it up as we went along.⁵

Survivors, and the women and men who supported them said if male authority, power, and privilege were re-distributed so that women had an equal share of that authority, power, and privilege, rape would be eliminated. The reasoning was – and is – a person who respects another person as his equal will not rape her.

The social and political analysis of how domination is based on social relationships of unequal power can no more be separated from the work of rape crisis centers than the analysis of poverty can be separated from the goals of education. Understanding why rape occurs is an integral part of how to stop rape and how to heal from rape.

For more than [thirty-five years], the anti-rape movement has worked to overcome misconceptions about the origin and nature of sexual assault, prejudice toward victims, and stereotypes about perpetrators. We have insisted that victims do not “ask for it” through provocative dress or behavior. We have maintained that an adult woman raped by a husband or someone else she knows deserves the exact same justice and support as the child raped by a stranger. We have been loud and clear about the fact that only rarely does a victim falsely report rape. We have insisted that someone who rapes is not necessarily crazy, mentally ill, or deranged. They are simply men who believe they have the right to control a woman or adults who believe they have the right to control a child.

The goals of the anti-rape movement have changed very little in the past [35 years]. As early as 1971-72, rape crisis workers established 24-hour crisis lines, conducted prevention education and training programs, created thousands of brochures, offered self-defense classes, organized and marched in “Take Back the Night” events, and devoted thousands of hours to helping victims heal from the devastation of rape.

Rape crisis workers advocated – and continue to advocate – for legislative reform; insisted – and continue to insist – that police increase their arrest rates; demanded – and continue to demand – privacy for rape victims in emergency rooms; and urged – and continue to urge – that prosecutors change their plea negotiation procedures.

No one had learned from formal education, professional conferences, or the media about how to do anti-rape work. But once survivors broke the silence about the terror of rape, women devoted their minds, hearts, time, and money to construct and sustain organizations that won groundbreaking victories. These organizations – rape crisis centers and state coalitions – changed practices in hospitals, police departments, courts, and the field of psychiatry. And, most importantly, women helped each other recover from the emotional and physical violation of rape.

As the anti-rape movement gained momentum, it became clear that this was a new field. Survivors and their advocates created rape crisis centers to fill a void – with a definition and purpose different than traditional mental health, public health, or social services. With its mission of social change, equality between men and women, and its fundamental principle of victim-centered services, the anti-rape movement offered a new model for institutional policies and individual healing. This model gained recognition and credibility with each new accomplishment.

The joint efforts of the women’s rights, women’s liberationist, and anti-rape movements yielded systemic changes; there were multiple occasions to celebrate legislative victories. Laws were created to standardize the collection

of medical evidence in emergency rooms. The Rape Shield Law made the victim's sexual history irrelevant in trial and states overhauled sex crime statutes, making them gender neutral and creating a gradation of sex offenses in the effort to stop sanitizing the brutality of rape by calling it battery. New categories of victim service funds were authorized by states and Congress. The federal Victims of Crime Act of 1985 and the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 dramatically changed the number of full-time staff in rape crisis centers in the United States. In turn, the number of victims and the increased visibility and viability of rape crisis centers in local communities has increased remarkably.

In establishing the facts about rape, rape survivors and counselors taught the community and related professionals about the impact of rape on the victim's life. Apart from the interpersonal, social, and political hierarchies that perpetuate a rape culture, the single incident of rape is the most degrading, demeaning, and humiliating violation perpetrated by one human being against another because it is about loss of control, loss of ownership, and loss of power over the one thing that is yours and no one else's: your body.

The counseling developed in rape crisis centers focused – and continues to focus – on the victim's ability and her right to reclaim control over her body and the decisions affecting her life. The victim determines the timing and pace for relating her experience. She alone defines whether to report the rape to law enforcement; she directs the course of her recovery. Rape crisis center personnel are there to support her decision and to facilitate her recovery.

Rape crisis services are the foundation to change public attitudes about rape and rape survivors. We have disclosed the use of violence to maintain power and control over women. We have educated the world that shame and guilt in rape belong to the perpetrator, not the victim; we have shown that women can help women; and we have proved that feminism can redefine personal relationships and institutional practices.

We have struggled to change not only the sexism inherent in our personal and institutional relationships, but the racism and classism that pervades beliefs and attitudes about people of color and people who are poor. From Susan Schechter in her book Women and Male Violence:

“Throughout the anti-rape literature there is a recognition that the system sometimes helps ‘legitimate’ victims – a white, married women who fought their [stranger] rapist and was visibly injured. Other victims – women of color, poor women, single women, women who dared to be out drinking or walking the streets late at night, prostitutes, women raped by judges or doctors – would never be consistently helped. Nor would the racist use of the rape charge, which helped whites brutalize the black community, ever cease without major social transformation. Exactly how rape was to be eliminated remained a difficult question. Profound social struggle would have to attack the sexism, racism and class domination in our society in order to end rape.”⁶

The anti-rape movement, led by survivors and rape crisis centers, has never lost sight of its beginnings. The anti-rape movement gained strength and integrity as it uncovered the connection between the personal and the political. In order to combine the first-hand knowledge of anti-rape workers with the need to create a national forum for shared thinking and new thinking about the needs of rape

survivors, the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) was established in 1978. From its beginnings, NCASA staunchly advocated for public policies, resources, and collaborations that improved the lives of sexual assault victims.

NCASA sponsored a national conference each year for nearly two decades to provide exemplary training and staff development for workers in the anti-sexual assault movement. NCASA worked diligently and creatively to maintain a national network of services for victims of sexual assault.

Over the years, there have been changes in the service delivery of rape crisis centers and in their visibility as the community leaders for social change. The magnitude and pervasiveness of that change is difficult to measure precisely, but rape crisis centers have been compelled to create trauma-based counseling and therapy services to respond to the increasingly complex issues presented by rape survivors. In many instances, counselors trained in traditional schools of social work, psychology, or counseling have not been taught the political analysis of how rape is a natural consequence of women's historically unequal relationship to men. To a social worker or counselor not steeped in the origins of rape and the impact on a woman's life, the more obvious emotional and psychological indicators may distract that counselor from the devastation and insidious nature of rape. For instance, some women have coped with the pain of rape by using alcohol or drugs. If we do not understand, validate, and empathize with the trauma of rape, we will identify alcohol or cocaine as the most serious or as the only problems in a woman's life, and that will distract us from how to do victim-centered counseling about the impact of rape.

The growing numbers of survivors that we see – and the growing complexity of their life struggles – feeds the other equally important reason for our existence: to eliminate inequality wherever we see it. Rape is about the threatening, intimidating, and forceful behavior of (at least) one person against another. Rape is about the misuse of power; rape is the enforcement of domination and control. It is why men primarily rape women and adults rape children and not vice versa. And until inequality is addressed and eliminated, we will have rape crisis centers; they will be overwhelmed with the individual, complex, excruciatingly painful needs of people who do not have anywhere else to turn; and they will not be adequately staffed by or utilized by people of color. We must recognize, speak out about, and hold fast about the devastating consequences of inequality wherever we see it. With racism, rape, and any form of oppression, when we speak and act with integrity, we create change.

Our struggle to create change through our work is continual. Having adequate funds to do this work and maintaining the presence of victim-centered services and social change for our community is often complicated by that necessary, elusive resource: money.

The first federal allocation of money for rape prevention and rape crisis services was distributed to sexual assault centers in 1982 through the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant. Those funds continue to be a strong base for rape crisis work. Subsequent funds through the Victims of Crime Act and the Violence Against Women Act have enabled centers to hire advocates, counselors, and prevention educators.

Passed by Congress, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), created new penalties for gender-related violence, and established the Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) Program administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and S.T.O.P. grant funds administered by the Department of Justice. The Act was enhanced and re-authorized in 2000 and 2006.

RPE supports rape prevention and education programs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories. Nearly \$44 million is distributed by the CDC, which is less than \$1 million each when divided among all of the states, territories, and D.C. Obviously, \$44 million is not enough to support rape prevention in America today.

Awareness and prevention programs, a cornerstone of RPE Programs, are implemented in a variety of settings. Sexual assault crisis centers conduct programs in schools and non-school settings with youths, faith-based institutions, and community-based organizations. Many RPE grantees focus on programs aimed at promoting healthy relationships and changing the social norms that permit rape

The RPE Program also provides crucial support for state and local sexual assault hotlines. These hotlines provide 24-hour crisis intervention, referrals, and information about sexual violence. In 2004, RPE-supported hotlines received more than 400,098 calls. The hotlines provide a vital link to services for victims; the hotline call may be her first disclosure, a crisis call during a flashback to a long-ago assault, a request for an advocate at the hospital, or any other request for immediate support or information.

VAWA has made a difference. RPE has made a difference. RPE has pushed prevention to the forefront of our work in crisis centers. The focus has shifted away from teaching women and girls to stay safe. Now we have returned to our roots: focusing on social change, promoting male responsibility for stopping rape, and undoing the attitudes and associated behaviors that say it is okay for men to sexually exploit and violate women and children. This is real change - change that will make a difference. Now, the government allocates funds to support change: to help us eradicate sexism, racism, and the rape culture we live in. We have come so far, but we have so far to go.

There are several clear goals for the future of the anti-rape movement:

One goal is for rape crisis centers to hold on to the movement – to retain the unique voice, and philosophy and passion that lit the fire in the first place. Rape crisis centers and state coalitions need to challenge government and private funders to remember who started the movement: victims; and why they started the movement: they had truths to tell and needs to assert; and they were tired of being silent, pathologized, medicalized, and marginalized. As we professionalize and standardize our services – all good things, mind you – we need to retain the heart of the movement – which is first about listening to each victims' story. Which is supporting her or him as the survivor sifts through options and moves steadily forward. Which is saying to the community: men must stop the rape of women and men, and adults must stop the rape of children. Which, first and foremost, is challenging men to speak up against rape, to stand up against sexism, to hold other men accountable, to demand justice and safety for all

women and children, to support the crisis and prevention services of every crisis center – with their money, with their time, with their consciences.

Another goal for our future is to broaden our vision and our services. We need to increase our outreach to victims and communities that have been long underserved: people of color, people with disabilities, non-English speakers, the elderly, and the LGBT community. We need to create and enhance models to serve these populations. Models start with making our centers more closely reflect the entire community. Crisis centers' staff, board, and volunteers need to reflect the populations they serve and need to develop competence to serve these populations.

One more goal takes us into the world of the flesh industry. We have long been aware that pornography culture supports rape culture, and that prostitution and sex trafficking are inextricably linked with the sexual subjugation of women. We need to use this knowledge to respond to those who are commodified, prostituted, kidnapped, or held captive – whether by economic threats, coercion, or force. We need to start building the service and prevention network to serve these victims of commercial sexual exploitation. And we need to prevent these abuses and the rape culture they magnify. This will take more resources, more research, more learning and teaching, and development of models we cannot yet envision. We created all the services that exist today – and we have this new work within us.

Throughout all of our work toward these goals, we must also focus on the elimination of racism in this society. The immorality, injustice, and deadliness of racism is inseparable from the immorality, injustice, and deadliness of the sexism that perpetuates rape. We have never gotten this quite right from the beginning. Let me describe the racism that oppresses African American people in this country as an example and how it served – and continues to serve – to undermine us in our efforts to bring equality and safety to everyone's life. The unpunished rape of black females by white masters and other white men during slavery, and throughout the 19th and early 20th century, and the brutal lynching of black men predicated on false accusations of rape, have deeply affected the anti-rape movement. Since the beginning of the anti-rape movement, the women who spoke out about rape demanded more and better law enforcement to improve the apprehension and arrest of rapists; they demanded tough prosecution and serious penalties for the rapist. This pro-law and order stance by victims – and the feminists who supported victims in their fight for justice – flew in the face of many African American people who had raised the consciousness of America about the disproportionate number of black men in our jails and prisons, both at that time and throughout much of our history.

As you know, many female anti-rape activists came from the civil rights movement, the free speech movement, the peace movement, and/or the black power movement. Many of them were leaders in the new feminist movement; and they were committed to uncovering and challenging the racism and oppression that pervaded America, and was reflected in our laws and criminal justice system. White women activists did not consider their anti-rape work as contributing to historically racist practices, nor did they see it as less important than any other struggle for freedom and safety. And while that viewpoint may have reflected the true intentions of their hearts and may have been necessary

to sustain the seriousness of the work, it exacted a price on the overall goal of freedom and safety for all oppressed Americans.

African American women activists could easily see the no-win, collision course that anti-sexism and anti-racism had unwittingly climbed aboard. Black women saw in the civil rights and black power movements opportunity for the brotherhood of African American men to climb out of the demeaned and usually impoverished status imposed by the white powers-that-be who feared their equality. At the same time, African American women understood sexism and its practices, but they could not refute the promising rise of black men from second-class citizenship. With the prospect of forward movement on the legal, political, and economic playing fields for black people, black women were going to be there for black men.

And for reasons that are sometimes clear, sometimes unclear, and always a source of great debate, these two great movements for human rights ended up with a wedge between them instead of a partnership.⁷ While women of color and white women in the anti-rape movement have forged working partnerships and friendships with one another as in few other places in the American labor force, there continues to be tension and unfinished work between women of color and white women that is a consequence of this history of slavery and the refusal of far too many white Americans to acknowledge those consequences, and denounce their immoral and divisive impact.

You are now part of the history – others have gone before; others will come after. You have inherited stories, language, experience, and laws that grew out of listening to survivors. What legacy will you leave?



Oppression is pervasive and hurts us all, though not in the same ways. The experience of the oppressed group is very different. They can speak accurately about the daily experience of oppression – the slights, indignities, threats, fear, losses, and degradation that accumulate in the mind, spirit, heart, and body of the oppressed. Those with privilege cannot tell that story, nor should that person try. Rather, those of us with privilege must learn the reality of that privilege and how to use it to promote justice.

None of us invented these oppressions; we inherited a legacy of centuries. We also inherited the power to change it. There is no such thing as passive anti-oppression. We are either actively working against oppression or we are colluding with it, allowing it to continue in our name.

The Anti-Rape Movement is an impressive group of women – and, like the Marines, with a few good men, we are making a difference. We said we would change the world and we see enough daylight at the end of the tunnel that we pull one another onward.

The myths we hold are the most significant barrier to ending sexual violence. It is not enough that the medical profession provides appropriate and effective medical care and evidence collection. It is not enough that law enforcement intervenes and interviews victims appropriately and effectively. It is not enough that prosecutors vigorously pursue prosecution appropriately and effectively. It is not enough that judges conduct trials and give jury instructions appropriately and effectively. It is not enough that jurors, who may well be you and me, reach our decisions appropriately and effectively. It is not enough that advocates provide support and assistance appropriately and effectively. We must do more with our hearts and minds. We must hold and

share deep compassion for sexual assault survivors, and we must work to replace myths about rape, the victims of rape, and the perpetrators of the most heinous crime short of murder, with truths about the origin of rape, and its impact on the victim and our communities.

I love what Martha Burt, Janet Gornich, and Karen Pittman wrote in 1984. Listen to their words. They are still pertinent today:

“This work is never easy, either in terms of time or of the psychological stresses of repeatedly confronting the realities of rape in this culture. In addition, it seldom pays very well, if it pays at all. Thus the fact that so many people continue to do this work is encouraging. We take it as a sign of how well the feminist movement’s political activity raised issues surrounding rape and galvanized many women to devote their energies to trying to stop it and ameliorating the consequences. The movement’s insistence that society bears some responsibility for changing patterns of sexual assault continues to guide the activities of many rape crisis centers. For most women working in rape crisis centers, their activities reflect some level of commitment, often very great, to helping women help themselves recover and emerge strong after an assault experience. Recognizing and building on this base of commitment, rape crisis centers may want to be able to reexamine feminist analysis, take a new look at their understandings and expectations and reformulate their goals for their communities, their centers and themselves.”⁸

We can make this a more caring and supportive nation for survivors of sexual assault. And, we can work together to stop rape so that we can tell our communities that rape crisis services are no longer needed. It is the only choice we have in face of the alternative.

References

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2. Levine, Suzanne and Harriet Lyons, eds., The Decade of Women: A MS. History of the Seventies in Words and Pictures, Paragon Books, New York, 1980, p. 11.
3. Schechter, Susan. Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggle of the Battered Women’s Movement. South End Press, Boston, 1982, p. 35.
4. Davis, Angela. “Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape.” Ms. Magazine, June 1975, p. 108.
5. Butler, Sandra. “Looking Back, Moving Forward: A Celebration,” A speech to the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault Conference, San Francisco, CA, November 1996.
6. Schechter, Susan. Women and Male Violence, p 38.
7. While the words on pp. 49-52 are mine, I am grateful to Angela Davis for her original social/political analysis on this issue.
8. Burt, Martha, Janet Gornich and Karen Pittman. “Feminism and Rape Crisis Centers,” A Research Paper, The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 23.

Bringing it Home:

- How did your program start?
- What was it like to start or do this work in your community? What was the climate like?
- Do you know some stories about key players in your community?
- How has your program changed or grown over the years?
- What are some high points? Low points?