

Does Blackness Matter in the Antitrafficking Community?

A Collaborative Work with Five Black Female Antitrafficking Activists

A Discussion about America's Racial Roots in Trafficking and the Impact that it has on

Black Bodies in Antitrafficking Organizations

by

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## ABSTRACT

The issue of sex trafficking has been heightened the last several years but has deep history with racial injustice. Black women are disproportionately the victims of sex trafficking and criminalized in prostitution. However, within nonprofit agencies that help provide services and resources to these Black women, the women providing services do not proportionally represent the population being served. To investigate this problem of the lack of diversity and representation within antitrafficking organizations, the research conducts interviews with several Black women who are working for an antitrafficking organization. This study highlights the importance of representation within an organization to have better outcomes and participation of services without tokenizing the Black woman being hired. The research connects the individual experiences of being a token within an organization with the racial roots of sex trafficking to highlight the importance of representing the individuals being served. In order to accomplish this, the research employs qualitative interpretive research methods through semi structured interviews. It employs a critical race feminist theory approach to data analysis to show how Black women in antitrafficking organizations are tokenized but struggling to balance being the most likely to represent the women they are trying to serve.

## DEDICATION

“I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive.” -Natasha Behl

To my husband, Daniel. Thank you for finding the extra time to do the dishes while I was doing homework or cooking dinner while I rush off to class. You picked up the slack when I was stressed and overwhelmed. Thank you for having my back and loving me unconditionally. You truly are the best.

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To myself, you are here in this beautiful life, present. Here, now. Willing to act when necessary, willing to fight when called upon, ever present in this big, beautiful world that is still filled with love. Because even when things are not good, they soon will be. A mixed blood mystery.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background Story**

In the beginning of my last academic year at Arizona State University, I received the opportunity to work for my school in their Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research. I was ecstatic, to be given such a great opportunity to work in the field before even graduating was to die for. I had known since my sophomore year in college, December 2017, that I was going to work in the Antitrafficking realm of either a nonprofit, research, or government agency. Working among countless internships, volunteering at high-risk group homes, and building so many connections with youth and women who were survivors of sex trafficking, I have gained invaluable experiences on what sex trafficking looks like firsthand and the responses of nonprofit agencies to this epidemic.

The first event that I was invited to at my new job was called a Hotel STOP event. Our office, along with law enforcement and other agencies in the Phoenix area, worked together to find an alternative option to arrests for women soliciting prostitution. Women would be taken from the streets by undercover cops, brought to a hotel room where we and the other agencies would be with different services and needs. Options would be food, clothes, HIV testing, STD testing, case management, therapy, and shelter given to women who were brought in and not pressured to take any services if unwanted. My first Hotel Op was a bust because the police tried to pick up a girl, but she was a witness to an ongoing murder investigation, so law enforcement was called to investigate further. The idea of having another option for these women besides arresting them, seemed surreal, so



often I have witnessed the over-criminalization of women in sex work and prostitution without addressing the real issue of the pimp that is the pull behind them.

Over the next couple months, I was able to participate in more and more events, my favorite being a Hybrid STOP event, that allowed for more participants and a bigger production. It was outside from 6:00 PM to around 1:00 AM, and again police would pick up women from the streets who were soliciting prostitution and bring them to a different part of town, usually a huge church parking lot where all of the different agencies would be set up ready to provide services. Police when they would first arrive would take the women's names and look them up in their system, making sure there was no outstanding warrants. A survivor from one of the agencies would walk the woman over to a table that would have a survivor, four other women who are from different agencies with different service options, and then someone from our office to conduct research. We would take notes like their name, age, race, services they accepted, and then any other interesting information. I heard stories of women who started being in the life since the age of 10, women working to make enough money to be able to care for their children, women who had experienced immense amounts of abuse and violence.

After attending about five of these events, something inside me just didn't sit right. I began to have questions about the processes and the quality of care that was offered to these women. I noticed a problem. The average number of women being picked up off the streets was twelve, some nights it would be up to sixteen and other nights it would be as few as eight. The number of volunteers, law enforcement, and nonprofit agency employees would be about thirty. Most women being picked up for soliciting prostitution were Black or African American, and on several nights every

single woman was Black or African American. Yet, there were only 3 to 4 of us who were Black or African American as volunteers or service providers. Countless times, women would be brought to a table, wearing clothing that did not cover much of their bodies, and sit across from a table of women that were all white. These women, moments before this exchange, were taken off the streets by male law enforcement that did not look like them were handcuffed, placed in the back of a police car, brought to a strange location, and then made to sit across a table by a group of people who again looked nothing like them. Although there were survivors who tried to form a connection there was no one there who looked like them. As a biracial Black woman, myself, I know that situation would not only be completely terrifying but also extremely uncomfortable to be saved by a group of nice white ladies smiling across a table from me, promising me that I could be saved.

I began to ask myself, where was the representation? I started to investigate organizations that had Black women who were in direct service positions in Antitrafficking organizations. I wanted to know if these women were aware of these situations and what their experiences were like in a community that “saved” women who looked like them but didn’t necessarily represent them.

### **Research Question**

This research aims to explore new approaches to understand the dynamic of racial representation in anti-trafficking organizations by using a feminist lens throughout the research process. I offer a discussion regarding the intricate relationships between sex trafficking and race. I will focus on the role that history has played in creating the current

landscape of sexism and racism that Black women experience. This research will look at the racial fetishization of Black women's bodies and the history of prostitution in the United States. Second, I focus on the dynamic of how nonprofits within the United States aims to solve areas of sex trafficking with many organizations that do not address racial representation or without also focusing on the criminalization of Black girls and women.

There have been numerous studies highlighting the over-criminalization of Black girls and women in prostitution and sex trafficking (Bell, 2011). Most of these studies focus on the historical and systemic issues of sex trafficking such as economic vulnerabilities, runaways, the welfare system, and the school to prison pipeline regarding Black girls and women (Bell, 2011). However, there is still relatively little attention given to the problem of female Black women getting services from agencies that do not represent them racially, and the impacts that representation in sex trafficking organizations have on the participation or quality of services. This leads to the question being addressed in this study: How does the representation of race by antitrafficking organizations and related service providers impact survivors of sex trafficking who are seeking services and the quality of participation in services? There are so many complexities of the power dynamics between not only a victim of sex trafficking and the person saving them but also of race between a white woman as the savior and a Black woman as the victim (Bolstad, 2014). Representation of race in this area is so important and that is why I wanted to focus on the dynamic between service provider and survivor but from women in organizations that are Black women as change makers and not just victims. What impact does a Black provider have on a Black survivor?

Furthermore, I add another layer of tokenism of being the diversity hire or feeling like the diversity hire and how does that impact the much-needed work that these women are doing. The weight of this feeling and those thoughts are consuming because I have felt them as well, and they can shatter a soul. This research aims to not only see Black women as strong powerhouses in their field who are doing beautiful work and impacting others but also that it is not only their responsibilities to break down racial barriers, and that Black women deserve to rest too. That this fight is not their burden to bear even if they choose to each and every day. This resistance leads to another important question for myself: As the researcher, what is my responsibility of breaking down racial barriers, painting these women as powerful but also as the dynamic, unique, women that they are? By using this as a starting point, I intend to have a better understanding of how tokenism and diversity are entrenched in white slavery and the savior complex. White slavery was the movement that focused on white girls being taken into the sex trafficking which skewed the idea of what victimhood in sex trafficking looks like. Along with this viewpoint of white girls being the victim, white saviors believe that it is their duty to save Black and brown individuals from themselves. I propose to investigate the individual experiences of these Black social service providers who are on the frontlines of fighting against sex trafficking, in order to identify and analyze the complexity of systemic racism and sexism and racial representation.

Representation and resistance to racial stereotypes and boundaries need not be romanticized. Social justice for Black and brown bodies continues to be a fight, systems are still needing to be fixed and changed, whether agencies are representing the individuals that they are working with. Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and Angela

Davis continues to remind us that Black bodies are to be valued and respected and that the role of social justice does not have to solely be a Black woman's burden. I hope this study builds community for Black women who are in anti-trafficking organizations. The purpose of this study is not only networking and connection but solidarity and resistance as community members.

## **Methodology**

### a. For generating data

I am very aware that the sample population size ( $n = 5$ ) in my project is very small. The realities of this study were that finding Black service providers that specifically work with victims of sex trafficking was very limited. Through a qualitative-interpretivist lens I began to explore the systemic injustices surrounding sex trafficking, nonprofit agencies, race, and representation. In my research plan, the qualitative method in data-generating included observing local organizations' social service providers, conducting structured interviews with five Black service providers, and engaging in a close reading of relevant documents regarding the topic. Most of my observations took place during the Hybrid STOP events conducted by the Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom depending on schedules and comfortability after the COVID-19 global pandemic. The names used are pseudonyms to provide confidentiality for all participants. All social service providers have experience or are working in a direct care position in an anti-trafficking organization. Nala and Tesia are 20-35 years old and have been in the field for under two years. Mya is around 40 years old, in leadership of an antitrafficking organization and has been in the field for the past ten years. Maribel and Lyla in their 50-60s. Lyla has worked in the antitrafficking

field for four years and Maribel for nineteen years. I conduct the research in a systemic and precise way by utilizing open-ended interview questions and leaving space and time for anecdotes and personal connections.

The main purpose of this study was to connect and build a community among these Black women. Hoping to go into this same field upon graduation, I am committed to leave space for connection and engagement even after this study has been completed. Utilizing critical race feminism, there is an importance of building community, and mentoring those who are marginalized in different spaces to build unity, trust, and resilience ((Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020). Critical race feminism seeks to understand how society has been organized along intersections of race, gender, and class, specifically the social hierarchies that have impacted people of color (Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020). I hope to hold space for their voices throughout this project and beyond in professional places of work. I want to let my participants know that they are impactful for holding space for other women of color, they are healers to generational trauma and racism, and that they are beautiful for caring so deeply and not turning their backs even when the world had turned its back to them.

b. For analyzing data

The goal of this project is to create a more insightful understanding of the complexities and structural oppressions of sex trafficking and antitrafficking organizations. I hope to build upon the intersections of the importance of racial representation for building trust and community among service providers and survivors. I aim to help bring awareness to the importance of representation by using critical race feminism theory that investigates the systemic racist and sexist powers of oppression that

are imbedded into society and the intricacies of sex trafficking (Meyers, 2014). This theory helps build a larger picture of the structures of power and domination that are embedded into society's sociopolitical practices. I hope to balance this study by utilizing representative bureaucracy theory that explores the roles that increased diversity and representation can have better outcomes and policies. Representative bureaucracy theory states that organizations with more diversity can represent more of the population being served. With an increase in diversity, it allows for organizations to have better outcomes and policies (Jurek & King, 2019). Passive representation of the community is the demographic composition within agencies or organizations (Jurek & King, 2019). This passive representation eventually will lead to active representation or the pursuit of policies that reflect the interests and desires of the diverse people group (Jurek & King, 2019). Passive shifts to active when the concerns of the organization or agencies share the same values and attitudes of their clients and let that affect the decisions being made. (Jurek & King, 2019) When bureaucracy is representative of the public; policies and practices will begin to broadly reflect the public interest (Jurek & King, 2019).

### **A Feminist Critical Race Approach: Reflexivity and Positionality**

My role in all of this is an active bystander. Right now, I am not actively involved in antitrafficking work, but I as a mixed-race Black woman I am still dedicated to these women's stories and sharing what they have to say. When I spoke to each of these social service providers, I was reignited with passion for this field and the work that I hope to accomplish. They were powerful and spoke with such conviction of their experiences that I felt captivated by them. I was able to connect to their feelings and stories of racism and microaggression. However, I acknowledge that my experiences of being of mixed race

with white heritage and thin honey wavy hair that I too have immense privilege. As a researcher, who wants to write about these experiences, I must understand the balance of sharing their truth without my privilege and voice overshadowing them. It is a tough realization to question whether my privilege could create errors in the research and could alter the message that is supposed to be spoken. Being aware of my privilege will influence my ability in narrating these women's stories as a Black woman in a space that lacks representation.

Reflexivity and positionality are ways in which the researcher can better respect their influence over the researched community (Pachirat, T., 2018). Most interpretivist researchers use this approach to show thoughtfulness and care. When researchers are aware of their own reflexivity and positionality it helps build trust within participants but identifies the researcher's biases or perspectives on the world that may influence the way their research is being conducted (Behl, 2019). Privilege is defined as the benefit granted by the distribution of power, given to individuals or classes (Liu, W. M., 2017). While researching these women, I remind myself of my identity as a middle-class, biracial woman. Being a daughter of two college degree holding parents, who traveled to Europe during the summers, and being too Black for the white community but too white for the Black community, is just who I am. I am on track to graduate with a graduate degree from a university. I have a dual income household, where my husband can support me while I work as a substitute teacher. I am entrenched in privilege. I was the token Black friend, who for many years was too afraid to speak out, let alone speak out about race in general.



Over the last several years, much of my identity began to change and I started to fully accept my Black side that made me who I am. I began to love my melanin, but that still doesn't change the fact that I will only experience a scratch of the racism that this world holds. I understand the never-ending struggles and strife of being a woman especially in academia. Working with these women, I began to struggle with such questions during interviews. Did they find me Black enough? When I agreed or shared the same thoughts, would they see it as fake, would they view me as relatable, would my Blackness be enough? I had to consciously separate these thoughts from my work, as my own personal issues with my racial identity could not be cast on these women.

Working at the Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research, I learned so much about the processes of policy, grants, and aide given to survivors of sex trafficking. I became hypersensitive to the legalistic and institutional barriers that existed for these women seeking help. Aid and care came with bureaucratic and political jargon. Welfare, housing, healthcare, case management, and mental health services could take months to secure with blockades in diagnoses, stigma, and stereotypes. Gaining access to this experience, has allowed me to better understand how complicated helping someone access their basic needs can be. I quickly learned the limitations and the microaggressions and racisms that I felt but also that Black women seeking services were feeling by these "white saviors." Along with this experience but also my program, Social Justice, and Human Rights studies, I have learned so much about how to build a more just environment for marginalized communities. Being of mixed race has allowed me a benefit of learning how to adapt to each racial community.

### **Arguments and Findings**

Throughout this thesis project, I challenge the societal concepts of sex trafficking, racism, and tokenism. To develop the arguments, I have chosen to utilize Black women's voices to create resistance from racial barriers within nonprofit organizations and narrate the problems at hand. There has been a lot of research done that looks at the suffering of Black survivors of sex trafficking and the impacts that race and sex play in their struggle (Butler, 2015b). Black women viewed as victims has been studied from many different facets, such as, school to prison pipeline, prostitution, and the over criminalization of Black bodies (Butler, 2015b). By conducting this research through the lens of Black service providers I hope to enrich the discussion by expanding on the viewpoints of women conducting justice by not only being viewed as the victim but also viewed as the helper. By interviewing Black women service providers, I can lead the discussion into understanding on how shifting the power dynamics of race and gender can provide more sufficient care for sex trafficking survivors. By using interpretivist methodology, the narratives of the women interviewed will bring more empathy and real-life connection to the readers. I hope that the readers of this study will begin to understand the importance of racial diversity and to break the stereotypes of Black women.

Critical race feminism provides an emphasis on the legal status and rights of women of color around the world (Meyers, 2014). This type of feminism argues that racism intersects with other forms of structural oppression to obscure choice for people of color (Constance-Huggins, Moore, S., & Slay, Z. M., 2022). The intersectionality that these women face bring a deeper understanding of what social justice means. While looking at communities of oppression, I must also understand and acknowledge those who have benefited from the oppression. In the antitrafficking community, white saviors

have benefited from the hardships and struggles of the oppression of people of color (Maurantonio, 2017). Women of color whether the service providers or the survivors have experienced systemic oppression (Maurantonio, 2017).

Through conducting this research, I hope to change the viewpoints of white saviorism but also bring awareness to the importance of hiring skilled practitioners whose identities and characteristics better the population that is being served. I want to disrupt the power hierarchies within nonprofit organizations who are built to do good but bring more harm by not understanding the racism and sexism that impacts clients of color. For sex trafficking victims of color, this research could shift the complexities of saviorism and help break down barriers of feeling seen and heard by someone who resembles them.

I hope to bring more activism to the Phoenix community and to any antitrafficking organization. I believe that this research can continue the fight against systemic racism and the oppressions of women of color. I hope that antitrafficking organizations will hire Black women but also promote and grow them inside their organizations. Black women should be valued for the strengths and abilities that they possess rather than being a diversity hire or token. Anonymity and confidentiality are important, and I respect the choice of the women I interviewed to not disclose the exact organization they worked for or their names. I will not share the location, names, or any other actors that are involved in this research project.

### **Overview of Thesis Project**

This thesis project is divided into three chapters. In Chapter 1, I discuss the argument at hand and the research question and process. Chapter 1 explores my own “why” for conducting this research and a beginning glimpse at the intersectionality of

race and sex trafficking This first section provides an important argument about how historical racism has impacted the ways in which the world views sex trafficking victims. I describe the importance of this historical perspective and how racial representation is important but also the balance to not tokenize of the Black woman's burden.

Building a further connection of historical review of sex trafficking, Chapter 2 creates a framework of the issues at hand regarding sex trafficking and racial representation. This part of my writing works towards a greater understanding of the systemic issues of the objectification of Black women's bodies and the unconscious stereotypes that are placed on the Black female victim. The discussion explores the link of the ideal white victim during white slavery and how that has created a shift in ways that Black women victims are treated. White slavery and the rescue narrative have skewed the outlook of victimhood in sex trafficking and the importance of racial diversity. This Chapter further explores the relationship of how race directly impacts the vulnerabilities in the victimization in sex trafficking. I believe this section is important to understand why racial and cultural representation is important because of the increased stereotypes of sex trafficking and the ways in which society has viewed Black women. Having a historical background to better understand sex trafficking and the victimhood of the industry, will also shed a light on the ways in which society has used to solve this problem. White saviors and innocent white victims, instead of Black providers and innocent Black victims. Chapter 2 bridges the gap as to why representation is important in the first place, since Black women survivors have to face racism, sexism, and historical injustices it helps better understand the importance of having Black women service providers to provide the best treatment.

Chapter 3 draws from the outlooks and lived experiences of the Black women service providers that were interviewed. This chapter will challenge the notion of the rescue narrative and focus on the voices of Black women who are helping not to save but to change. Chapter 4 is a call to action, on what can be done and how to better provide care for black women service providers who carry so much of the burden of racial justice in antitrafficking organizations. All of the chapters together build on the representative bureaucracy framework of building diversity, equity, and inclusion to benefit more of the public good, as well as critical race feminism that takes into account the historical racism and sexism that Black women face and how to overcome. By incorporating a community centered voice can help bridge the gap of racial representation and antitrafficking organizations. The interviews focus on understanding how antitrafficking organizations work and whether diversity, equity, and inclusion are important to them and to their clients. The interactions with these experts who are all of different backgrounds and ages brings a deeper understanding of how to help the marginalized community and look for solutions that challenge the notion of Black women deserving services even if they are not viewed in society as the ideal victim.

### **Research Limitations**

There are many factors that contributed to the constraints of this research project. This project was conducted over a single university semester and the focus was to gather information. While gathering information, there were limitations of time and means. The limitations of time meant that I could not spend long period of time with the participants in the project. This can limit the exposure of informational and the depths in what the participants felt comfortable sharing. Most of the interviews were given an option to be

conducted in person or via Zoom. Most of the participants felt more comfortable utilizing the digital communication platform, which can hinder the human connection and the information being shared. The perspective of the sex trafficking survivors would have been extremely valuable to this project but there were limitations when I quit working at the Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research, and I was no longer able to utilize the connections that I had built there. The project does not include the voices of survivors or their perspectives of receiving help and services from agencies that value racial representation. I hope that this project encourages others to conduct research from the survivor's perspective on the impact of racial representation in antitrafficking organizations.

Along with that limitation, finding Black women who work in antitrafficking organizations and recruiting them as participants was very difficult. I contacted 12 different organizations located in Phoenix, asking for participants and only received a handful of responses. Most of the organizations could only provide me with either none or one name of a Black woman who worked within their organization. Many of the organizations and contacts did not respond or declined to participate in the study. Out of the 5 women that I was able to interview, all 5 have worked with or are currently working in antitrafficking organizations. This pool of women is very limited and small and cannot fully represent all Black women who are service providers. I had a difficult time in finding willing participants but also with leads running cold. Three more women agreed to be interviewed, however, after emails, calls, and showing up at their work, I was ghosted and have not heard from them.

The study ran into further difficulty because organizations that I would be in contact with, would take weeks to respond and the process became too late for me to interview any additional participants. January being National Human Trafficking Month and Arizona being the host of the 2023 Super Bowl in February lead to a crazy couple of months for local antitrafficking organizations. Schedules become full and busy especially those working in the nonprofit sector. I attempted to contact as many organizations as possible in the Phoenix area, however some of the organizations that participated are in neighboring cities. I was able to get several 3 contacts through snowball sampling and asking the women that had been interviewed to share contacts that would be interested in participating. I recognize the limitations of this project. However, I believe that this is still worthwhile because it looks at a deeper issue of the importance of racial representation and the impacts that it has in survivors of sex trafficking lives. I believe that racial representation matters and building more diverse social service providers can lead to better care for the survivors seeking service. I want to highlight the importance of sisterhood and Blackness that Black women bring to this world.

## CHAPTER 2

### A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SEX TRAFFICKING

#### **A Brief History: Racial Roots of Trafficking**

In the African slave trade, it is estimated that around 20,000 slaves were traded each day over the course of several hundred years. About 12.5 million African slaves were captured during this time. The process of recruiting, harboring, transporting, buying, and kidnapping people to serve an exploitative purpose has been around since the beginning of time. When slavery fell with the ending of the Civil War, the 13th amendment was ratified in 1865 “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” However, even after the ending of slavery and the ratifying of the 13th amendment, the processes of slavery; recruiting, harboring, transporting, buying, and kidnapping people still happens today, in forms of human trafficking (Interpol, 2021).

Sex trafficking is defined as using force, threats of force, fraud, coercion, or any combination to engage an individual in a commercial sex act (FBI, 2011). A commercial sex act includes but is not limited to prostitution, pornography, and sexual performance done in exchange for any item of value such as money, drugs, shelter, food, or clothes (FBI, 2011). Some of the risk factors and vulnerabilities of victimization of sex trafficking are lower socioeconomic status, history of running away, foster care, history of sexual abuse, and being in a special education class. The Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted a study showing that of sex trafficking victims, women are predominantly the victims of sexual exploitation. 62% of victims are women and are



lured into the industry during their adolescent ages. The average age of entry into prostitution is 12-14 years old, and most of these victims have already experienced some sort of sexual assault prior to entry into the life (OJP, 2007).

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act which is the United States law countering human trafficking was enacted in the year 2000 (Wooditch, DuPont-Morales, & Hummer, 2009). This law focused on combating organized networks that engaged in the illicit transport of human beings across political and geographical boundaries. This law was the first shift in the narrative of child prostitute to victim of human trafficking, regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion was used (Wooditch, DuPont-Morales, & Hummer, 2009). This law passed by Congress was important in three main parts: prevention, protection, and prosecution (Lorelei Lee, 2021). Congress created legislative interventions to combat the issue by increasing penalties against traffickers, allocating funding to assist local, state, and federal governments in prosecution, and providing protection and support services to victims (Lorelei Lee, 2021).

The TVPA aimed to increase awareness of practices of trafficking, making it easier to identify victims and pass laws that criminalize traffickers. The TVPA made trafficking a federal crime and a higher priority society to care and act toward. Advocates on both sides politically agree that minors are victims solely based on their inability to legally consent to sex (Lorelei Lee, 2021). However, not all minors are afforded “victim” status. In the United States, Black youth account for 62 % of the minors arrested for prostitution offenses according to the FBI. Yet Black people make up 13.2% of the entire United States population (FBI, 2019). The TVPA initially focused more on the trafficking of children and women internationally asserts that all individual under the age of 18 are

victims of trafficking without having to prove force, fraud, or coercion (Office of Justice Programs, 2007). However, Black minors are disproportionately being arrested and charged with solicitation of prostitution (Constance-Huggins, Moore, & Slay, 2022).

Black girls are not labeled “victim” regardless of whether they are being exploited by a trafficker or engaged in survival sex (Phillips, 2015). The overrepresentation of Black girls in the criminal system for prostitution offenses exposes the vulnerability they face in the involvement in the sex trade (Morris, 2018). The criminalization of Black girls and women as offenders reflects the historical demonstration of Black girls and women as non-victims (Phillips, 2015). Similarly, the stereotyping of Black girls and women does not line up with the construction of an innocent victim who is forced into prostitution against her will (Morris, 2018). There is an assumption that these victims not the women who “chose” to participate in the sex industry are the only women worthy of being “saved” (Morris, 2018). Policymakers have ignored the connection between race and other systemic factors that push minority and vulnerable youth into the American commercial sex trade (Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020). After exploring the history of the laws on sex trafficking and the impact that it has had on white victims, Black and brown perpetrator, and white savior, it establishes false narratives on race within the industry. These laws as well as the historical history of sexual exploitation and racial subordination regarding people of color all feed into what commercial sexual exploitation is today (Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020).

Historically, people of color have been systematically exploited and trafficked for sex throughout the slave trade. Black females were constructed as Jezebels who were

overtly sexualized and a symbol of lust and wickedness (Meshelemiah, 2022). Black women and men were not seen as human but rather property that were able to be used with however the master pleases. Often leading to increased rape, sexual assault, and abuse of Black women during slavery. White men were able to utilize rape and sexual assault as a political terror to continue to degrade, dehumanize and subjugate (Brooks, 2021). With a lack of legal protection from sexual exploitation, Black women were justified as breeders of slave children. This idea of Black women fueled society's designation of the white woman being the "ideal" or pure woman (Butler, C, 2015b). To be a true woman required whiteness (Brooks, 2021).

### **The Black "Whore"**

As the United States progressed after slavery and into the Jim Crow segregation era, the perpetration of derogatory stereotypes about Black sexuality persisted. With the aftermath of slavery, Americas commercial sex industry continued to flourish by targeting and coercing Black women to engage in prostitution (Butler, C. N., 2015b). The United States upheld a system which protected prostitution in poor Black communities and continued to promote the idea of sexual deviance in Black communities (Butler, C. N., 2015b). Black women did not receive the same legal protection or social services to help shield them from sex trafficking and sexual coercion (McAnarney, A., 2020). Black women experienced increased employment discrimination and high levels of unemployment not faced by their white counterparts and were pushed into prostitution as a means of survival. White individuals viewed the Black community as having moral deficiencies and more prone to criminal activities rather than challenging the societal factors and limited resources that led to this (Arnold, 1990). Society began to view Black

women as deviant whores, and white women as pure innocent virgins (Butler, C. N., 2015b). Jim Crow laws established the exotic sexual deviant stereotype by segregating Black women and children from white women and children based on sexual virtue and womanhood (Butler, C. N., 2015b). These racist stereotypes continue to be immersed in everyday culture and life. Black bodies are stereotyped to be deviant, sexually promiscuous, and the villain.

### **Adultification**

Without the restraints of slavery and segregation, systemic racism has continued to maintain the sexual objectification of Black children. Slavery and colonization in America created a culture that has shifted to new limits in modern day American culture (McAnarney, A., 2020). Georgetown Law's Center released a study that shows that society's perception of Black girls leads to their adultification (Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T., 2017). The report showed that adults believe that Black girls seem and look older than white girls at the same age and that young Black girls need less nurturing, protection, and support than white girls. People assumed that the Black girls knew more about adult topics and have a better understanding of sex than white girls (Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T., 2017). This adultification of young Black girls has created a culture that sees adolescent minors as being sexually promiscuous and deviant. Linda Williams writes, "because of the long-standing view of Black female sexuality and the historical lack of legal protection of the Black female, the Black victim is viewed by both rapists and society as a legitimate victim" (Williams, L., 1986).

Black teens are viewed as having more sexual partners and more willing to engage in sexually mature activities (Williams, L., 1986). With the realm of media and

pop culture, Black women's natural body parts are hyper-objectified and sexualized. America continues to profit from marketing Black bodies as a sexual commodity (Holmes, C., 2016). Black female genitalia and secondary sex features are fetishized for their size and shape in pornography, music, and advertisements (Rosenthal, L., & Lobel, M., 2016). Sex in media is focused on upholding stereotypes of Black women through discourse like "Black ass," "exotic," "jungle or animal like," and "phat" (Rosenthal, L., & Lobel, M., 2016). The racist history of America has led to racial fetishizations of young Black women that has continued to lead in the increase of sex trafficking epidemic. With the stereotyping of Black girls and women as prostitutes, who are rapable and sexually deviant, these women are most often regarded as choosing the life and not the innocent victim. The history demonstrates that Black women today are illegible as sex trafficking victims deserving protection and are instead viewed as choosing to be in prostitution. The structural oppression faced by Black women and girls are overlooked and undertheorized in antitrafficking discourse, legislation, or support services (Jurek & King, 2019).

The constructed narrative of human trafficking centers on the single story of an iconic victim/pathetic victim. Diana Meyers describes this as "the pathetic victim paradigm requires claimants to have undergone severe, documentable, humanly inflicted harm that they are not responsible for incurring. The irreproachable innocence of pathetic victims is crucial. Otherwise, they can be accused of provoking their own suffering..." (Meyers, 2011).

## **White Saviors and the Rescue Narrative**

Sex trafficking with its deep historical roots in racism and sexism continues to hold outdated views on what ideal victim type looks like. If someone were to look up what sex trafficking looks like via Google, most images associated with sex trafficking display young Caucasian girls as being the only type of victim. The United States has a historical hold from the early anti-slavery movement that focused disproportionately on “white slavery” in the 1960s (Baker, 2013). White slavery was a movement in the late nineteenth century, that focused on the kidnapping and transport of Caucasian girls and women for the purpose of prostitution (Bertone, 2016). Due to large media coverage, people believed that large amounts of white girls were being abducted and lured into prostitution. The rhetoric and frenzy, downplayed centuries of Black slavery, and vulnerabilities that people of color face that leads to greater risk of victimization (Heynen, & van der Meulen, 2022).

Many of the pictures still include some type of bondage, such as hands being handcuffed, or mouths covered by duct tape. One example, was a young white girl in chains laying on the floor with words that said, “not for sale.” Another was a white girl dressed professionally holding a sign that says, “it could be any of us.” Yet, according to the FBI, 57.5 % of juvenile prostitution arrests are Black children, and 40% of sex trafficking victims were identified as Black. Traffickers admitted that they believed trafficking Black women would land them less jail time than trafficking white women if caught (Davey, S., 2022). Even though Black women represent a large portion of sex trafficking victims, antitrafficking organizations and government agencies are reproducing images of white victims and Black or brown perpetrators (Baker, 2013). This

can be due to the rescue narrative that the government and antitrafficking organizations have utilized throughout history.

The rescue narrative began with justification for colonization, rescuing communities from themselves (Heynen, & van der Meulen, 2022). Rescue narratives can be extremely powerful to those wanting to help “save” people, the discourse is dominated by an evil trafficker or pimp who abducts or lures innocent helpless girl into a prison-like brothel and controls her with brutal violence until a heroic rescuer saves the day (Baker, 2018). The advertisements portray white sexualized, young, vulnerable looking women with text that encourage individuals to rescue her (Baker, 2018). The problem is that there is research that Black women represent a large portion of sex trafficking victims, yet they are being saved by predominantly white saviors in antitrafficking organizations. There are cultural, socioeconomic, and legal barriers that discourage Black victims of sex trafficking from fully accessing social services (O’Neal & Beckman, 2017). Antitrafficking organizations that lack representation of race will not be able to understand of Black survivors. This is essential if antitrafficking organizations want to increase Black sex trafficking victims’ access to social services and decrease revictimization of Black women in the community.

### **To Be Black is (a) Beautiful (Token)**

“I am exhausted. I am not shocked. I am disappointed.” – Mya

White saviors saving Black and brown bodies continues to be an issue today. Whiteness has taken over so many spaces in not only professional spaces but the nonprofit sector as well (Maurantonio, 2017). White saviors have positioned themselves in areas of power to help those in need and ultimately those who lack such power

(Maurantonio, 2017). Saving someone requires the acknowledgement of their suffering and believing that that suffering can and should be fixed (Cooney-Petro, 2019). The antitrafficking industry can be argued to be a white savior project. Many antitrafficking organizations are founded and sponsored by white Evangelicals, where white activists seek to individually save the racially and economically marginalized communities (Cheek, 2022). Work done like this upholds the racial hierarchy, where activists and agencies know better than the survivors (Cheek, 2022). White saviors perpetuate a colorblind indoctrination, that race does not matter because they cannot see color of skin. Although the beliefs that people are equal, connected, and treated compassionately are positive, not recognizing color does not address all the needs of those they are trying to save (Cooney-Petro, 2019). There are systemic differences between races and people of color and without acknowledging them, it erases the historical economic struggles and violent acts against people of color. Colorblindness ignores the privileges that white people of benefited from (Cooney-Petro, 2019).

Antitrafficking organizations being predominantly made of white individuals, and to not recognize this issue through a lens of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, and other aspects of identity creates space where women are left out and ignored (O'Neal & Beckman, 2017). The antitrafficking organizations that do hire and support Black women in roles of leadership, fall into a whole new territory of tokenism (Griffin, 2021). Tokenism is described as the practice of hiring or appointing a token number of people from underrepresented groups in order to deflect criticism, a performative effort of what true social justice should be (Bizzel, 2023). Ultimately, tokenism is othering (Richardson, 2014). As a social concept, tokenism stems from



discrimination, marginalization, and oppression (Griffin, 2021). It brings the illusion or appearance of equality and diversity instead of building an environment of true equality.

When Black women are hired as the diversity hire or role, Black women experience increased pressure of speaking for all oppressed groups, “shed light on all things Black” (Bizzel, 2023). Having a spokesperson for an entire race or culture, is extremely harmful and detrimental to both the individual and the culture because it labels and controls a narrative. If one oppressed person does not experience the injustice, the spectator may not believe that the injustice exists (Bizzel, 2023). Black individuals are dynamic and different, not every individual experiences or feels the same way about an issue. White individuals are not utilized to be the spokesperson for every white person. Tokens are asked to be increasingly vulnerable when it comes to call for actions or months dedicated to groups of people who are oppressed such as February being Black History Month.

Tokens are used by organizations to sit on committees, give speeches, or show resilience to all the racism they may have to face without having the space to fully heal (Bizzel, 2023). In this era of women’s rights and racial injustice, there is a continuous loop of “How do you feel?” (Richardson, 2014). Black women may be asked to highlight one community’s disparities while ignoring to other identities they may possess, such as speaking of generalized forms of sexism without being able to talk about the differences that women of color face then white women (Bizzel, 2023). Yet, Black women may not have the platform to deliberately speak on the economic, systemic, or political disadvantages that impact the Black community (Baxter-Nuamah, 2015). “One looks at the question of tokenism and just throws up her hands. There are many possibilities of

tokenization...When we are asked to speak at a certain place. You can be certain to be the only Black person there. You're going to be put in a position of speaking for the race, for all Black feminists" (Bizzel, 2023).

When people of color feel othered in spaces of professionalism, academia, or leadership, it can lead to self-doubt, poor health, and overwhelming anxiety about performing in an acceptable and appropriate manner (Chance, 2022). People of color in leadership roles have reported an increased isolation from their peers as well as from their racial community (Chance, 2022). It is a struggle to find support within organizations when they face microaggressions and are judged more harshly than their white counterparts (Bowers, 2021). Professional discrimination is people's unfair and unethical treatment based on race, sex, age, health, socioeconomic status, and religion ((Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016)). This can be shown through means of harassment, preferential hiring, wrongful terminations, demotions, unjustly promotions, and pushing people of color out forcing them to quit (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016). Experiencing racial discrimination can lead to race-based stress and posttraumatic stress disorder over time (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016). Black women must navigate their identities as a person of color but also a woman in a leadership role. As a collective, Black people have and continue to face adversity in every aspect of society. Professionally and personally, Black individuals are asked to share stories in hopes to guide discussion on diversity reform, but then judged based on those feelings or stories for being too much or not enough.

Specifically, for Black women, there is a double-edged sword when battling racism and sexism. Being a woman and being Black do not exist independently of each

other. There are more adverse experiences because Black women must challenge the notions of multiple systems of oppression. “Race does not exist outside of gender...and gender does not exist outside of race. (Chance, 2022). There is a complex intersection of potential adverse experiences. With Black women facing more adversity, they are also given less opportunity to be perceived as a failure (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Critical race feminism help focus attention on the sexual and racial attributes of power dynamics (Carastathis, 2014). Black women’s experiences in leadership, power, or influence are multi-dimensional and are subject to multiple forms of discrimination based on their race, class, and gender. Black women who have reached leadership success have beaten the odds.

Black women are often viewed as “strong, loud, and intimidating” (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). To be the strong Black woman, that every other woman can rely on to be the voice of all women, is a challenging place to be positioned. Yet there is evidence that Black women in spaces of power or professionalism are more likely to be unheard, unnoticed, and least likely to be recognized in social situations (Chance, 2022). Black women although predominantly going unheard still have to battle the stereotype of being loud and strong. Stereotype threat is the risk of self-confirming the negative beliefs or stereotypes about ones ethnic, racial, or cultural group in the eyes of others (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Black women balance not be overtly loud, aggressive, sexually deviant, or too strong, but still, they remain largely invisible. Stereotype threat leads to reduced performance, limited support, and loneliness. (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Increased cognitive conflict of stereotype threat and being the token Black women can lead her to finding herself in situations where she is so hyper aware of her position of the only Black

woman and knowing she has to behave as though those differences do not exist (Valverde, 2003). Regardless of the adverse experiences Black women face, they consistently find ways to rise above and overcome (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Leadership ambitions of Black women are extremely high, Black women are nearly three times more likely to aspire to senior leadership (Valverde, 2003). Although Black women continuously experience underrepresentation in higher education, there is a steady increase of Black women pursuing higher degrees and seeking professorships. Black women continue to face these challenges with resilience and strength, finding community in the small group of other Black women who are experiencing the same issues in agencies and organizations (Gaudiano, 2019).

## CHAPTER 3

### LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BEING THE TOKEN BLACK SAVIOR

#### **Nala**

Nala is someone that I have had the privilege of knowing for the past year or so. Her and I have frequently met and have at times been a part of the same circle. Nala brings energy and life to every situation that she is in. While speaking with her, she conveys much of her experience with such zeal and passion. Nala like everyone that I have spoken to has experienced racism in many ways. She tells me stories of racism that has impacted her in local stores, the workplace, and school. In areas of professionalism, she believes that there is an underlying truth that race should never be talked about. This notion is silent but unspeakably loud for her because even when racism happens, she must balance her morals and values and her fear of being viewed as the problematic Black woman. She speaks on her experience of being a direct service provider as a residential group home direct care worker for an organization that focused on young girls who are high risk of being trafficked or have a history of sex trafficking.

Her time working inside the group home, building deep relationships with the girls was something that she describes as heartwarming but often extremely difficult because of the lack of funding for a nonprofit and the disregard for cultural inclusion. Although in the lower positions within the organization were represented well, upper management and leadership roles were not. She felt as though the individuals who were making the decisions and having the power were not fully aware of the needs for staff or the girls. One of the greatest areas of growth was the lack of culturally sensitive food, hygiene products, or communication styles. Nala went out of her way to spend her own

money on providing the girls hygiene products and hair products that were culturally aware. She focused on teaching the girls how to properly care for their hair type and how to accept themselves for who they are. The food was often frozen or canned and had little regard for what they girls wanted to eat. Upper management did not change any of the staff or girls concerns or requests. Of the staff that did have the opportunity to grow within the organization, white women were promoted over Black women that had been there for longer. This created a divide in the organization between lower positions in the organizations and the upper positions. Representation matters, it is not about trying to separate everyone but rather including more people to show these young girls that they can accomplish more things.

Nala expressed her desire for the company to grow in unity and equity. She would love to see a level playing field, where everyone is respected for being a human being and accepted despite their culture. Her time there, there was never a training regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. For the organization to become more equitable, she advises them to focus trainings on trauma informed care, intersectionality of gender and race, and diversity training. There is a bias when Black women or girls are accessing services because of the stereotypes of Black girls being more promiscuous or less innocent. She told me about how she has seen first-hand that young Black girls are often assumed to be guilty or choosing that lifestyle rather than innocent until proven guilty. There still exists a large gap problem of over criminalizing Black girls. She tells a story of a world where all organizations focus on survivor led care and creating short term and long-term care plans. She hopes that the organization will find more credibility in these young girls' stories and knowledge on their own needs. "You have to push back; you are

not here to make people feel comfortable you are here to embrace who you are as a person.” - Nala

### **Taisha**

Taisha is a girl in her 20's and someone that I had a difficult time not seeing myself in her. She is bright and friendly and has a contagious laugh. I could see myself being her friend. She considers herself biracial, Black, and Native American but has stronger ties to her Black side. Taisha is the human trafficking case manager for her organization and has worked in this field for the past 8 months. Taisha like me and so many other Black women have encountered imposter syndrome of race with the heavy and heartbreaking question of “why am I not lighter?” Racism has impacted her life mainly in microaggressions surrounding her curly hair, it was something always brought to her attention to the point she tried to hide it, either straightening it or never wearing her hair down. Her father reminded her growing up that race is something that should not be talked about because it makes people hesitant and uncomfortable. “Race is something that people just don't talk about.” It has taken her years to fully understand her cultural background and accept that it makes her unique, she is just now starting to feel comfortable and value who she is.

When talking to Taisha about the organization that she works with she expresses that she sees the value in her role and her ability to connect with Black women survivors. Her company is diverse and represented well and she believes that this has an impact on the quality of services for survivors. The clients seeking services are predominantly people of color and she believes that being Black and Native, it is easier to break down walls and connect with the survivors because someone at least understands what it is like

to be a minority. Throughout her eight months at her company, she has had numerous participants specifically ask for a Black case manager. She told a story of a young survivor who expressed that in the past she has had a difficult time interacting with white case managers. When she would try and advocate for herself to seek out services and resources, she felt like the white case managers did not fully understand her needs. She felt at times they would judge her culture or even say micro aggressive comments and so she would just leave the organization and stop seeking services. After meeting Taisha, the survivor expressed that having someone who understands her hesitations helps. Showing people who are looking for help that there are people in these positions who understand where they are coming from and who can relate to you means a lot. Having the representation just helps to reach more people.

The biggest challenges that she faces within her company when working with survivors is the complex ways in which services and government programs work. EBT cards, healthcare, and housing are challenging, dragging, and hard to explain to clients. Most of the women who are seeking services are looking for services that are quick and accessible, but these programs are not that, and that is difficult to convince clients to stay. Along with the challenges of outside programs, she expresses her frustrations with generational trauma and the lack of knowledge that so many have about this issue. Her company trains everyone on diversity and trauma informed care but she emphasizes that there needs to be a stronger approach in understanding generational trauma and the impacts that it has on sex trafficking survivors. Women who are victims in sex trafficking are just trying to survive, most of the women that she has encountered got into the industry when they were around 10 years old. The stories range from young girls seeing



their mothers participate in the industry, to needing to get money to help feed their siblings, or their parents' stories of abuse and neglect. No survivor story is the same, but Taisha's experience is that much of the issue of sex trafficking comes from generations of trauma and the lack of support or resources for whole communities resulting in the hustle culture.

To Taisha, her goal in her company is to provide that lived experience of being a woman of color, because she believes that there still is stigma and bias from service providers when providing the best care to Black women but specifically Black mothers. Since 2020, and the death of George Floyd, she understands that so much work still needs to be done. She believes that diversity, equity, and inclusion within her organization can always be better. Her experiences have led her to focus on making all clients feel welcome, safe, and represented. There are stereotypes of Black mothers on welfare, with children from all different dads, and that she cannot take care of them. Taisha expresses her frustrations that these stereotypes impact Black survivors today who are seeking help and resources. She believes that her company as well as all the others need to grow by educating more people on these racial stereotypes and barriers but also by increasing representation of race within organizations.

“At the end of the day we are serving our survivors, that is why we are here.” – Taisha

### **Mya**

Mya is a boss lady; she is strong and a force to be reckoned with. She is caring and considered and sensitive. Mya identifies as African American and her role in her company will stay anonymous because of the higher standing position that she holds. When asked about if and how racism has impacted her life, she had a laughable response

because of how prevalent it has been in her life and her communities' struggle. Racism has impacted her all throughout her life, but she specifically remembers the time that it hit her hardest. As a ballet dancer, she was told that she will never be the solo role because the world isn't ready to take all the classics and have a Black body represent them. She expressed that "the world has been conditioned for what to expect and a Black body isn't that." Mya felt like a lifeline to me, when I was experiencing a difficult situation, she was a fresh breath of air, completely understanding my struggle and I, hers. Racism is so systemic and engrained for a lot of persons of color, and she believes that with age and awareness it is becoming more difficult. "I cannot be the martyr, or the champion to whip it out of society." Every day that she experiences it through the microaggressions, the pinches and flutters of racism every day, she becomes passive to those instances because she sometimes does not have the energy to fight it. With her position in her company, she walks a fine line in how much she should be talking about race in the business world because the culture of professionalism tells her that she shouldn't.

Mya believes that race is not represented well in her organization but that it is better than most in the valley. Diversity is prevalent within different levels and positions, but she does believe that the organization can do a better job with building equity and inclusion. She expresses that with age and time, the struggle becomes more difficult and for a lot of people of color it is so systemic that sometimes it's hard to even notice it. She expressed that it would not be taken well for her to discuss race and the strife it has on Black women because those also in power would perceive her as another angry Black woman.

Some of the biggest struggles with providing the best care to survivors but also the Black community are the stereotypes within social services. There are limitations when providing care to Black survivors because of the racial stereotypes. Black moms on welfare, or Black women working the system, still is a common thread. She expresses her frustrations on the trainings she has received with the Black male pimp or perpetrator and the stereotype that Black bodies and Black faces are criminal. So much of the problems that the Black community faces are systemic and generational. The traumas that our Black great great grandparents as all impacted the ways in which stereotypes and biases are today. The organization that she is at, has received no training regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion because she believes that the company is not ready for it. When the companies' values and missioned changed to discuss marginalized populations experience greater levels of oppression and the need for a more equitable approach to care, leadership had push back. She hopes that in the further DEI work can be accomplished through strategic planning and leadership who is not a person of color to care about the issue.

Small changes are being made when discussing better advocacy and care for clients. She expresses that there were large issues with cultural nuances and the needs of survivors. One of the things that have shifted within her organization are not just accepting any and all donations but being culturally sensitive on hygiene products and hair needs. Hygiene and hair are such an intimate part of a person, and therefore needs to reflect the unique needs of all the clients. She believes that by showing survivors that they care about their personal needs will help them feel comfortable, cared for, and valued. Survivors care when they approach our organization, and it is not just a white

woman behind the advocacy desk. There is a reflection of different people behind the advocacy desk. She thinks it is appreciated that it is not just one group. Race matters when discussing trafficking, and agencies need to do a better job of elevating survivors voices but also Black voices and bodies.

Every organization made a public comment about the death of George Floyd but in Mya's opinion nothing has changed. Organizations posted because it was something that they felt they had to do publicly, yet no real changes to their values or the systems were made. DEI cannot exist solely in someone's nine to five job and then stop existing in their personal life. Changes need to start by focusing on equity and inclusion first and diversity last. Companies and organizations are checking off the box by having a rainbow of employees but not asking themselves if their agency serves everyone equally, or if it is safe for everyone. Diversity on staff does not matter if the environment surrounding them is not safe, inclusive, welcoming, or healthy for persons of color.

Sharing stories of power and control, about the disappointment and injustice of racism in this field, we became connected. It's power. Mya said it beautifully when she told me, "I don't have the energy to dismantle, I have stomached more than what is desirable for my person or my heart. But my integrity is firm and solid, and I will not engage in the power dynamic of back and forth, but I am willing to put my stuff aside to help survivors. We all have to make the choices of what routes we take and who we want to play with in the sandbox, for me and my role and the nonprofit sector, it is very political, so if we want to make social shifts in this sandbox that is not friendly that has layers of racism throughout it, I have decided that I am willing to be in that playground because I am looking at the end of loving survivors and nothing else."

When working within all these layers of racism that are in every part of society, Mya has continued to fight for survivors. Her mission has become dismantling the fact that Black women are powerful and Black women are dynamic, but Black women have a large array of emotions and feelings, and agencies and people need to allow for Black women in power to not always be the strong, loud, forceful person. She challenges society and agencies to be okay with Black women having emotions and feelings but also that Black women need to rest because Black women have been fighting for a really long time and holding a lot for a really long time.

“Let us rest, stop making us be the shining star, right now we are tired.” -Mya

### **Maribel**

“To apply and be considered, if you know you meet the criteria, if you know you are qualified and have the skillset and ability, but you look around and everyone has blonde hair blue eyes and pale white skin, it makes you wonder will I ever have the opportunity to grow with this agency or will I have to go someplace else for growth and development.”

Maribel was someone who makes you feel warm. Maribel identifies as a Black woman who is a supervisor to community outreach and legal department. She has experience with grassroots work and direct service work with women experiencing intimate partner violence. Racism was absolutely something that she has experienced but has just learned to adapt to racism. Brush it off, move on. Race is something that should not be talked about. She expressed that race is represented well within the direct service staff however, in leadership roles and upper management it is not. Since Maribel has been working in this field for the past 8 years, she has gained a lot of experience working

with clients and participants. From her personal experience she believes that when clients see a person who looks like them, speaks like them, or identifies as the same race it means a lot to that person of color because it shifts the mindset to if they can do it, then I can accomplish that too.

There are so many different layers of services to provide best care and success looks different to each survivor, but the three basic steps are saving, building, and changing the lives of those impacted by violence. The difficulties with providing the best care to Black survivors are the stigma that Black women experience. Maribel has worked with a large number of Black women, and they have expressed their frustrations when seeking services or resources. Black women are on welfare, Black women have several children, Black women are poor, Black women lack professionalism or are uneducated. As a Black woman, you have to go above and beyond to prove yourself because of the stereotypes that impact them. Just in her own life, not experiencing violence she has been underestimated and her opinion disregarded. Since she now supervises staff, she told a story of going to train a group on sex trafficking and everyone assumed her white staff was in charge. Even after correcting them and referring their questions to her, they continued to avoid eye contact and avoid speaking to her. This was just one instance of many racist experiences she has had in the workplace.

Our conversation leads into what can make her organization and the world better regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Maribel emphasizes that her organization needs to be better about understanding the cultural differences that exist and the stigma with sex trafficking. She has had coworkers in the field make inappropriate comments like, why did she stay, why did she return, she must like it. The world and community

need to no longer blame the victim. Any form of intimate partner violence does not just happen to poor, uneducated, people of color, violence can happen to anyone and everyone. There is an immense bias of Black women seeking services. People have false beliefs of “she’s working the system; she’s been here multiple times” but as trauma informed experts none of that matters. It takes women seven to eight times to leave abusive relationships.

Maribel acknowledges that as someone with power in making these decisions about shelter, treatment, and resources that it is important to understand how to provide fair and equal care. When providing the best care to clients, she explained to me the process of accessing these resources. Most of the time there are assessments that are conducted but these assessments ask very personal and hard questions about the individual’s trauma. When the survivor does not answer these questions honestly or holds back on her experiences, suddenly, she no longer qualifies for these resources. This process is unfair to expect someone to open and trust someone after only a handful of times meeting. We shouldn’t expect people to open and share that without building that trust of relationship.

Her company currently does not provide any diversity, equity, or inclusion training and she would love for them to focus on those issues. Although, the direct service staff is diverse, it still doesn’t mean that everyone is treated equal and fair. However, most of the challenges with any nonprofit revolves around funding. Staff has asked for more trainings about these topics and bringing in other organizations who are experts in areas of DEI. However, with limited funding in nonprofits, she feels like it just won’t happen. She would love to see her company grow in professionalism, unity among

departments and job titles, and more training and education to build stronger skillsets among staff. Her goal in the company is to continue to be a role model for Black women trying to grow in professional roles because there are not a lot of opportunities for growth in her organization. Even after eight years in a company she feels like the diversity hire. “I was the token, and I knew I was the token, I had the look, because I had lighter skin, I was chosen for that position, because they needed their token who was soft spoken and not argumentative.” Maribel expresses her frustrations of being a Black woman in the work force is like. She continues to work hard for years but has this immense need to continually prove herself so that others don’t see her as just the diversity hire. That environment is not equitable or inclusive, even if it is diverse.

People are not aware of their own prejudices, people say things like “I don’t have a prejudice bone in my body, my best friend is Black or my mother hires this Black woman for this, or I voted for Obama,” but do not understand that they don’t hire people who don’t look like them because it makes them uncomfortable. Maribel would like to see people in this organization and all the organizations around the community come together and talk about bias, race, equity, and inclusion. She desires a world and space where her grandchildren do not have to go through the same things she had to. “We say liberty and justice for all and that’s what it looks like because right now we don’t have that.” -Maribel

### **Lyla**

Lyla is a woman who knows who she is, she has been in the antitrafficking realm in some sector for about 4 years and is currently the Community Engagement Manager for a small nonprofit. Lyla identifies as African American and sadly has experienced



racism throughout her entire life but specifically in her first professional job. A large part of Lyla's identity is being a mother and grandmother and the love she has for her family. She has received countless comments about "people like her." One experience she had was a time that a woman was surprised at how articulate she was and was shocked when she found her that she was African American. Even regarding professional areas, people continually are shocked at how well she speaks and how she carries herself so professionally, assuring her that she will not experience racism for being so well-behaved. To her racism is so prevalent in so many environments because people are not aware of their behaviors or how they say racist things.

In her office, she is the only person of color, and other community partners have also noticed this issue, asking "why is your organization so white?" Although she feels immense pride in her ability to represent women of color, she feels like her organization needs to do a better job at breaking down racial barriers. Her husband continually builds her up and expresses the importance of her in the company but none of the other staff has acknowledged the importance of representation. Most of the survivors that the organization works with are women of color because data continues to show that most women impacted by sex trafficking are minorities. Many of the survivors have asked for Black case managers or mentors, however, her being the only person of color, they cannot guarantee that for their clients. She wishes that the population serving would reflect who are being serving, but there would need to be a real effort made to balance this problem. This can become an issue of providing the best care to survivors because it is a need that is not being met by the organization.

Lyla tells me a story, of what it is like being the only woman of color in her organization. The organization was receiving a check and different agencies were there including local law enforcement. One of the staff asked her to pose in a picture with the new police chief who also happened to be Black. The picture was going to be posted during Black history month. Before she could say yes or no, she says “you mean like a token.” They wanted to capitalize on her race to make a statement about policing, Blackness, and social justice. Capitalizing on the moment. The staff apologized. But Lyla asks the question, what if the roles were reversed. If you were all Black in an all-Black organization and there were pictures being taken, would you choose the only white woman in the office to take a picture with an all-white man? Absolutely not, because Black women are so aware of that difference and what it feels like to be isolated and targeted based on skin color. “It may not be stated but we know because we are always reminded.”

Being a small nonprofit, it is difficult to gain funding, as of now, there are low salaries and low benefits that do not attract many people in general. Along with limited funding for salaries and benefits, there is no additional funding for additional trainings. There have been zero trainings regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Race has never been talked about within the organization. Lyla expressed that she believes her coworkers would feel very uncomfortable if it was brought up, even suggesting some people would be upset by it. Lyla discusses the balance of wanting to build equity, diversity, and inclusion but that she cannot be the only spokesperson to bring this up as the only Black person. She mentored two Hispanic girls who built school education programs about sex trafficking for a year. These two girls came from predominantly Hispanic communities

and dedicated their time to helping end exploitation. The girls were incredible, creating something from nothing. Yet they felt uncomfortable to come into the office. She expressed that social justice feels different for those with privilege, it gets misunderstood and becomes a check box rather than a mission.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion means that people of all backgrounds can work wherever they want to work based on capabilities and no other factors. Justice means that everyone is well represented in every aspect of society., if you are qualified you can get that job. It is importance to understand your own bias. Cultures are different and without acknowledging the differences it becomes harder to accept them. Survivors have expressed to her that sometimes they feel like they have a hard time communicating to other staff. Survivors have credibility and want to be treated with respect. Often, professionals don't give them the opportunities to tell their stories. Lyla expresses the importance of increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion to bridge the gaps between survivors and agencies. She believes it is only a matter of time for organizations to realize they will have to diversify their staff to grow and provide better services to the community.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHANGE THAT BEGINS WITH REST

Tokenism is a way in which an organization chooses to “other” an individual. Othering is the process in which people negate another person’s individual humanity (Whitaker, 2018). Othering is a method used to exclude or marginalize an individual who may have identities that are different from the norm (Whitaker, 2018). Although not every participant has the same exact story or feelings at their organization, I do believe that all five of the participants have experienced othering or tokenism within their organization. Through focusing on their individual experience, I saw an overarching theme of being one of few Black women in the company and there are complexities of being the spokesperson for the entire race. These women are balancing the harsh reality of making significant impact by showing racial representation for the victims of trafficking that they work with but also the complexity of being in an organization that needs to make significant strides for their staff. These women have spent months to years of their lives fighting for equality, racial justice, and better services for sex trafficking victims within the community. However, I want to ask the question, could we allow Black women in leadership rest?

This project was so important for me and for the community at large. When examining and learning about sex trafficking, there is so much information. There are thousands of stories from victims, detailing all the horrors that come with sex trafficking. Along with stories and lived experiences from victims we get government reports on number of victims, prosecution, and policy to help combat this issue. Lastly, there are the

nonprofits who provide the social services and survivor-led programs. I have been wondering though, is this system the best that we can do? When nonprofit organizations build these services and provide these resources, they are still unaware of the racial implications that come with sex trafficking. On top of that, the little number of staff that is Black or represents the race of the victims, they feel isolated, anxious, and tokenized.

I felt honored to have received the chance to listen to these five Black women tell me their stories and their struggles. They showed great strength and defiance to a system that has been unfair and unjust to them. I want to emphasize the importance of solidarity and resistance through rest. Allowing space to lean on each other, breathe, and allow for others to fight. I must remind myself to critically reflect on my own biases and shortcomings. Throughout the interviews, all of the women mentioned the importance of their communities, families, and support systems. Building sisterhood was something that made each of them strong. They were all wanting to make change for younger ones who are coming after them. Rest is not failure, it is power.

### **Resistance and Power to the People**

“I know that it takes not only the person it has affected but the awareness and the want from society and the other person.” – Mya

In performing resistance, all the Black women learned what they needed to do to continue to fight for what is right but also what is good for their souls. No matter their age or the racism that they have faced they continue to work, grow, and fight the systems of power in small ways that have big impact. Lyla, Mya, and Maribel, being older, have come to the resolution that overt rebellion is not as effective. They expressed ways in which they push the systems and challenge racism to protect their hearts. Rest was an

overwhelming concept, that it is now on generations like mine, Nala, and Taisha's to continue the resistance and inspire change. The world around us is changing, and things are getting better even if the world is nowhere close to what should be.

Black women are increasingly filtrating through barriers of leadership within academia, corporate America, and nonprofit organizations (Bowers, 2021). Black women have not folded under the pressures of misogynoir, or the prejudice towards Black women where race and gender both play a role (Bowers, 2021). Instead, Black women have created group resilience to overcome these barriers (Boyd, 2022). Black women have created community and mentorship for younger Black women and girls who are fighting for spots within an organization (Nixon, 2017). They are striving for companies and organizations that are more equitable and allow for Black women to lead (Nixon, 2017). When leadership is both diverse and inclusive, the successful outcomes for Black women drastically increase (Boyd, 2022). Black women bring strength and overwhelming support to an organization and its participants (Boyd, 2022).

2020 was undeniably one of the hardest seasons that Black women have had to face within the last several years (Nixon, 2017). It was a time in which isolation was at an all-time high because of COVID-19, and the racial injustices within the Black community were magnified in the wake of the shooting of George Floyd. All the Black women that I interviewed mentioned 2020 in some aspect because of how fresh and traumatic that period of time was for them. Racial fatigue and trauma continue to live within our bodies, our hearts still remember the agony of police violence, overt racism, and injustice (Nixon, 2017). Hundreds of thousands of individuals came out in waves of activism to protest and disrupt the narrative of Black bodies being criminalized. Black women often led the pack

of leaders in activism and justice globally. However, Black women have also forged new paths to freedom that are rooted in self-love, where rest is the resistance required to heal (Hood, 2022). Our healing is a way of fighting.

There is an urgency to find and celebrate Black love, Black joy, Black community, and Black bodies. Liberation comes from this joy to strengthen our hearts, minds, and bodies (Hood, 2022). Black women have carried the torch for too long on activism and the fight for racial justice and have worn the trope of being the strong Black woman (Gray & Brooks, 2021). However, 2020 inspired a racial reckoning, that in order to fight, Black women have to look inward. Finding peace within and radical self-love are acts of resistance (Gray & Brooks, 2021). Taking time to care for ourselves, bring about better leaders for the exhausting work of dismantling systems of dominance and oppression. Black bodies are deserving of love, deserving of emotion, and deserving of rest (Gray & Brooks, 2021).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

My work with my previous employment at the Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research with Arizona State University, really inspired this study. I met women and their children through the transitional housing who had survived sex trafficking and the connection that we created inspired me to try to make this field the most equitable and inclusive it can be. I witnessed first-hand the impacts that racial representation can have on Black and brown women who are attempting to get out of the life. Working with the five Black service providers I was given a unique perspective from the other side, not victim or survivor but savior or hero. Through working with these women, it shifted my research a little. My research became about tokenism and the isolation of being the only Black face in an organization and the difficult balance of representation for the survivor's benefit.

Working collaboratively with the Black women in this study is something that is going to be on a much longer timeline because this work is continuous. Although, the purpose of the study was to finish my thesis project and graduate with my degree. I know that building this community and starting this conversation has led to a conversation that will not end. I hope that these conversations helped open doors to other Black women within nonprofits in other fields outside of sex trafficking to discuss the importance of racial justice, equitable work environments, and inclusivity to all races. I hope that these conversations create environments of solidarity but also of healing.

There is a challenge being one of few or the only Black face within a nonprofit organization. These women have all created missions and visions to help provide women



who are victims of sex trafficking with resources and support to hopefully leave that life. All five of the women that I talked to discussed changing the systems within, providing better resources, and building trust through similar cultural experiences. All the women I spoke to are powerful and beautiful, with hearts of gold. However, the field can be emotional. The fight for social justice and human rights is no easy task. It can be mentally and emotionally exhausting to carry the burdens of the survivors that are coming asking for help. It is not only that burden that the Black women in this field must carry. There is a burden of being the only women in the company that represents them, external racism, sexism within the community, and being viewed as the strong Black woman who has to hold it together for everyone else.

The emotional toil of this balance is difficult. The participants of the study talked about wanting to connect to the survivors and fighting for their cultural needs that the other women will not be able to understand. Yet, they are exhausted because one voice can never carry the voices of the entire community. One Black woman should not have the responsibility of representing every Black woman. I hope that this study brings more equity, inclusion, and diversity, not just as a checklist but as a mission of the organization (Fox, 2007). I challenge individuals to not let this sit on the shoulders of Black women as a “Black issue” but as a humanity issue. Let us move together in solidarity to challenge systems of power but also to rest. Take a nap, go on a walk, hug a friend. You are loved. You are important. You are valued. You are never too much and you are always enough.

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