

Black Women's Lives Matter

Breaking the cover on systemic violence against women of color

Time and time again across the U.S., the horrors of police violence against women go unanswered: violence in the form of rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion and murder; violence committed by cops with *no* accountability for their actions; violence committed against the most oppressed in our society — poor women, women of color, immigrant women, sex workers, LGBTQ persons, the homeless, and those living with mental health issues and disabilities.

Police officers in the U.S. were charged with forcible rape and sodomy 624 times between 2005 and 2013, with a nearly equal number of charges of forcible fondling. Most go free.

It took courageous testimony by 13 women for Daniel Holtzclaw, a police officer in Oklahoma City, to be found guilty in 2015 of 18 counts of sexual battery and rape over a seven-month period. The 13 survivors were all Black women who had been victimized while Holtzclaw was patrolling low-income neighborhoods. He knowingly took advantage of their vulnerability by intentionally pursuing women with prison records or arrest warrants.

Breonna Taylor, Charleena Lyles, Jackie Salyers, Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, and Sandra Bland. These are some of the recognized

names of women of color murdered by the enforcers of a racist, sexist system that uses terrorism to uphold the rule of capitalist profit and labor exploitation. Others survive but are forever scarred, such as Malaika Brooks, eight months pregnant, who was tasered three times by Seattle police in a 2004 traffic stop.

An *Al Jazeera America* investigation in January 2016, revealed sexual violence by on-duty New York City police officers to be a serious and widespread problem to which police

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Murdered by police (from top, left to right): Rekia Boyd, Aiyanna Stanley-Jones, Michelle Cusseaux, Kayla Moore, Miram Carey, Shelley Frey, Tanisha Anderson, Alexia Christian, Meagan Hockaday, Mya Hall, Janisha Fonville, Natasha McKenna

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chiefs turned a blind eye, letting cops off the hook for their exploitation of and heinous crimes against women. In many cases, arrests are knowingly made on trumped-up charges, creating greater opportunities for cops to abuse their power while their victims are rendered voiceless in a system that looks the other way. The macho, swaggering culture of the defenders of private property also results in police officers behaving violently toward their own partners and children at four times the national rate.

Most survivors of police assault do not come forward to report or pursue formal charges for a variety of understandable reasons. Structural racism and sexism make it virtually impossible for women and especially women of color to report a police officer as their rapist. Immigrant women rightly fear being deported if they make a complaint. Transwomen of color are acutely vulnerable to the torture of being misgendered and held in male facilities where they are subject to further abuse.

Double injustice

Race and gender bigotry combine in a particularly poisonous mix toward those who attempt to defend themselves.

In 2012, a Black mother in Florida, Marissa Alexander, was sentenced to 20 years for firing a warning shot to stop a life-threatening attack by her husband. Only a national movement won her release after three years in prison.

Transwoman Cece McDonald was sentenced to 41 months in 2012 for defending herself against a violent attack in Chicago. She served only 19 months thanks to public pressure calling for her release. The four young Black lesbians known as the New Jersey Four were sentenced in 2006 to 3.5 to 11 years in prison for fighting back against street harassment.

The racist and sexist stereotype of Black women as criminal by nature, angry and aggressive has historically made it almost impossible for them to find sympathy from predominantly white judges and juries.

Fierce leadership shows the way forward

Despite immense challenges, women and trans people of color refuse to be victims or to allow their murdered relatives to be forgotten. From anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells, to Emmett Till's mother Mamie Till-Mobley, to the family of Charleena Lyles, African American women have always assumed major leadership roles in the fight against racist murder. Sandra Bland herself was one of a multitude of Black women who, because of the multiple oppressions they face, are among the fiercest fighters against the brutality of the police and the system they enforce. Today, Black women are the founders and heart and soul of the Black Lives Matter movement and the #MeToo struggle.

Eliminating the root of police violence will mean getting rid of capitalism and the multiple forms of bigotry and privilege it promotes. In the meantime, we urgently need a vehicle for holding the police accountable. Radical Women and Freedom Socialist Party call for an elected civilian review board over police with the power to investigate, punish, fire and charge abusive cops. This must be coupled with an independent prosecutor. A campaign for such a remedy is currently making great headway in New York City.

The time is ripe for women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, immigrants, poor people, and all those most affected by cop violence to organize together for this mechanism that can exercise real community control over the police.

Black Lives Matter! When Black women's lives matter, all lives will matter!

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