

History of the Rape Crisis Movement

by Chad Sniffen on November 1, 2009

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The following text was written by Gillian Greensite, Director of [Rape Prevention Education](#) at the [University of California, Santa Cruz](#). It was written as a section in CALCASA's 2003 publication of *Support for Survivors: Training for Sexual Assault Counselors*. Readers are invited to add to their own recollections to this history in the comments section.

History of the Rape Crisis Movement
By Gillian Greensite

OUR WILLINGNESS TO BECOME INVOLVED in the anti-rape movement deserves support and praise. Whatever particular reason drew you to this most important work, the results will not only help survivors in significant ways but will also give you a connection to the thousands of women and supportive men whose actions have formed a movement of people determined to confront and change the conditions that encourage and support a rape culture. A knowledge of the history of this movement will help you deal with the frequent frustrations and the ever-present outrage and will give you broader shoulders as you listen to and help relieve the trauma of those who have been raped. An awareness that you are part of a movement will connect you with a broader perspective and will challenge you to keep the movement alive.

The history of the rape crisis movement in the United States is also a history of the struggle of African American women against racism and sexism. During slavery, the rape of enslaved women by white men was common and legal. After slavery ended, sexual and physical violence, including murder, were used to terrorize and keep the Black population from gaining political or civil rights. The period of Reconstruction from 1865 to 1877, directly following the Civil War, when freed slaves were granted the right to vote and own property, was particularly violent. White mobs raped Black women and burned churches and homes. The Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866 in Tennessee, was more organized. The Klan raped Black women, lynched Black men, and terrorized Black communities. Propaganda was spread that all Black men were potential rapists, all white women potential victims. The results and legacy of such hatred were vicious. Thousands of Black men were lynched between Emancipation and World War II, with the false charge of rape a common accusation. Rape laws made rape a capital offense only for a Black man found guilty of raping a white woman. The rape of a Black woman was not even considered a crime, even when it became officially illegal.(1)

Perhaps the first women in the United States to break the silence around rape were those African American women who testified before Congress following the Memphis Riot of May 1866, during which a number of Black women were gang-raped by a white mob. Their brave testimony has been well recorded.(2)

[Sojourner Truth](#) was the first woman to connect issues of Black oppression with women's oppression in her legendary declaration, "[Ain't I a woman](#)," in her speech at the Women's Rights



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Conference in Silver Lake, Indiana, challenging the lack of concern with Black issues by the white women present at the conference.

The earliest efforts to systematically confront and organize against rape began in the 1870s when African American women, most notably Ida B. Wells, took leadership roles in organizing anti-lynching campaigns. The courage of these women in the face of hatred and violence is profoundly inspiring. Their efforts led to the formation of the Black Women's Club movement in the late 1890s and laid the groundwork for the later establishment of a number of national organizations, such as the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#). Although women continued individual acts of resistance throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the next wave of anti-rape activities began in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the heels of the civil rights and student movements.

The involvement of other women of color accelerated in the mid-1970s. Organizing efforts brought national attention to the imprisonment for murder of a number of women of color who defended themselves against the men who raped and assaulted them. The plight of Inez Garcia in 1974, Joanne Little in 1975, Yvonne Wanrow in 1976, and Dessie Woods in 1976, all victims of rape or assault who fought back, killed their assailants, and were imprisoned, brought the issue of rape into political organizations that had not historically focused on rape. Dessie Woods was eventually freed in 1981, after a long and difficult organizing effort.

The earliest rape crisis centers were established around 1972 in major cities and politically active towns such as Berkeley, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. As more and more women began sharing their experiences of rape in consciousness-raising groups, breaking the silence that had kept women from avenues of support as well as from seeing the broader political nature of rape, a grassroots movement began to take shape. The establishment of rape crisis centers by rape survivors brought large numbers of middle-class white women into political activism. Although women of color were still involved, their visibility and efforts were made largely invisible in the absence of critical attention to racism within the movement and by white women's taking the center stage. Gradually the rape crisis movement became to be and to be seen as a white women's movement.

During the latter half of the 1970s, with increasing frustration about the exclusion of women of color, a number of radical women of color and white women within the movement began arguing for and organizing for an anti-racist perspective and practice within the movement. Tensions increased and the dialogue was frequently bitter, but the groundwork was laid for confronting racism within the movement. These efforts are ongoing and need constant attention. The number of women of color in the movement grew visibly between 1976 and 1980. Women of color are now major figures and leaders within the movement, but the dominance of white women within the power structures of most rape crisis centers is still a reality.

The character of the early rape crisis centers was significantly different from that of their counterparts today. The early centers tended to be grassroots collectives of women, predominantly survivors of rape, which may or may not have had an actual building or center, with no outside funding, making decisions by consensus with no hierarchy or board of directors. Many saw their anti-rape work as political work, organizing for broader social change, increasingly making connections among issues of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. Many articulated a radical political perspective, which often unwittingly excluded all but younger white women who were neither mothers nor fulltime workers.

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Tactics to confront rape were often creative. Confrontations, in which a woman supported by her friends would confront and hold a man accountable in a public setting, were a feature of the more radical collectives. Description lists of men who raped were published, and there was general suspicion toward the police—well deserved in many cases. Self-defense classes began to be offered and “take back the night” marches organized. The first march was organized in San Francisco in 1978, bringing together 5,000 women from thirty states. A huge march followed in 1979 in New York. This heralded the beginning of an event that has spread across the country. Today, “take back the night” marches are organized in many communities and at most major universities in the United States as well as in other countries.

The 1980s saw the beginnings of anti-rape education spreading into universities and an increase in feminist academic research around the issue of rape. Myths about rape were seriously critiqued and the facts supported by a growing body of research. A clearer picture of the extent and seriousness of rape began to emerge. Heated debates centered on a need for sensitivity in our language and awareness of the politics of language, as illustrated by the successful effort to replace the word victim with survivor. The hard work of so many dedicated feminists, most of them survivors, began to bear fruit. An understanding of the reality of acquaintance rape grew. The extent and seriousness of child sexual abuse began to be uncovered. New laws were passed that attempted to better serve survivors; police departments were educated to improve their training and protocols; a few hospitals began to provide special examining rooms and trained nurse examiners.

Not everything was positive in the 1980s. The decade also saw a backlash against the reality of rape being exposed by the anti-rape movement. The media elevated to prominence those writers who challenged the research and statistics about acquaintance rape.⁽³⁾ Funding for rape crisis centers became scarce. Meanwhile, many of the politically active radical feminists had graduated, disbanded, or been forced to find paid work. The movement became more fragmented. Many centers moved politically to the center to secure support and funding from established sources.

A look at the anti-rape movement of the 1990s and a comparison of writings from the late seventies to the late nineties reveal some significant changes. The dominance of a shared political analysis of rape and a strategy for social change has eroded. It still exists, but in fewer and fewer places. In some ways it has been absorbed. For example, many aware students and other women and men assume that rape is an act of power without its having to be spelled out for them. The changes in the anti-rape movement also reflect a decline in the radical politics of all social activism.

The establishment of rape crisis centers across the nation is a testament to the hard work of countless women. The resources available to survivors from such centers is without question one of the most significant and tangible results of the anti-rape movement. As is common within all movements, the daily challenge of providing a critical service with limited resources makes maintaining a conscious political analysis very difficult. The existence of a national organization, the [National Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#) (NCASA), and a statewide coalition, the [California Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#) (CALCASA), from the early days has helped to keep a political edge and has provided critical resources and connections to often-struggling local programs and centers.

However, many within the movement feel there needs to be more discussion and debate at the local, state, and national levels around important political issues affecting the future direction of anti-rape work. Some examples of these issues that need careful analysis are the effects of the increasing state and federal legislation concerning rape; the redefinition of the issue of rape away from a political model toward a health model; the strategy for building a bigger movement toward the elimination of rape and the role of rape crisis centers within this effort; the impact of the growing number of males within the movement.

Notes

1. Deb Friedman, "Rape, Racism and Reality," *Quest* 1 (1979).
2. Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).
3. Katie Roiphe, *Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).

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Chris St. John November 2, 2009 at 4:39 am

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Thank you CALCASA for posting this! This is one of the best histories of the rape crisis movement I have read.

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