

*State* *of* Our Girls



# State *Of* Our Girls

**S**HE WAS A CHOCOLATE girl with “Brick House” curves, devastating good looks and a dream of being the next Mary J. Blige. But at age 15, she had nary a clue what to do with all of that talent and beauty and was more prone to screwing up than getting it right,

which is why when she missed classes at her alternative high school on Monday and Tuesday, the school counselor charged with keeping a watchful eye on not only the girl’s school work, but also her precarious home life, was concerned enough to call the girl’s mom.

“I don’t know where she is,” the mother said, adding matter-of-factly that she had no intention of calling the police or worrying about her teen daughter’s whereabouts. “Girl, she’s living better than you and me!” Mom insisted. “She’s down in Miami or Ft. Lauderdale or wherever, spending the weekend with one of her grown men. She’ll be back.”

The counselor, Karen Peters, was dumbfounded by the news—and devastated when the girl finally came back to school and admitted to several relationships with adult men, including—wait on it—her minister.

“I cried so hard over that,” Peters recalls. “Here I was the teacher and she was the student and she was comforting me, telling me, ‘Oh, it’s OK.’ I said, ‘Sweetie, it’s not OK. You’re a little girl. This is way too much for you to handle.’”

Peters found herself having the same conversation over and over again—with a

13-year-old girl whose mother was prostituting her, with a 12-year-old who asked her for help with a herpes diagnosis. Each talk was worse than the last.

“I remember going to work and standing in these classrooms and telling myself, ‘You have to hold it together,’ but all I wanted to do was break down and cry,” says Peters, who now runs a girls’ empowerment program in Florida. “The evidence was clear: We failed. We have so failed these girls.”

Peters was on the front line of a war zone. And her girls—*our* girls—were suffering massive casualties.

Still are.

## Real Numbers, Hard Truths

For decades, the African-American community has focused on the plight of the black male, leaning on poverty stats, incarceration rates, absentee fathers, failing educational systems and tales of the gravitational pull of gangs, drugs and alcohol to paint a picture of sane, educated, trouble-free brothers as some kind of endangered species. Still, even as everyone—from our most prestigious institutions down to the matriarchal grandma next door—collectively pooled their resources and poured their energy into saving black males, we consistently overlooked the troubles plaguing black girls. And now, as we march into a new decade, we find that our girls are drowning in a cavalcade of pathologies that could very well make sane, educated, trouble-free sistahs as endangered as their male counterparts.

For sure, the statistics tell the tale:

- About 40 percent of African-American

teen girls drop out of high school without receiving a diploma—and almost 60 percent of them are unemployed, according to a 2007 study by the National Women’s Law Center. Those who do have jobs make a paltry annual average salary of about \$14,000, making them more likely to need public assistance to survive.

- Nearly half of African-American teenage girls have at least one STD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- Though African-American girls had the steepest decline in teenage birth rates between 1991 and 2005 compared to their white and Hispanic counterparts, the birth rate for black teens increased 5 percent in 2006—the largest increase of any group.

- According to the Center for the Advancement of Health, poor black teen girls who think their boyfriends want a baby are 12 times more likely to wish they were pregnant compared with teens of other backgrounds. Those who wanted to become pregnant were four times as likely to have a partner at least five years older than themselves, twice as likely to have low self-esteem and family support and twice as likely to think their partner would disapprove of using condoms.

- The numbers of African-American girls between ages 15 and 19 treated for nonfatal sexual assault injuries in 2007 rose to 159 per 100,000 black teen girls, up from 102 per 100,000 in 2001.

- African-American girls are most likely out of black and Caribbean females and males to attempt suicide, and some 7 percent of black girls nationwide

By *Denene Millner*

try, according to the National Survey of American Life.

• More than two-thirds of black girls believe they are not good enough or do not measure up in some way, including their looks, performance in school and relationships with friends and family members, according to a study commissioned by the Dove Self-Esteem Fund. What's more, 41 percent of African-American teen girls say they've engaged in negative activities—disordered eating, cutting, bullying, smoking or drinking—when feeling badly about themselves.

Social media activist Gina McCauley, founder of the Web site "What About Our Daughters," says the staggering statistics speak volumes to the need for a focused, intensive intervention on behalf of black girls.

"Black women and girls are the living dead," says the Texas-based McCauley,

a whole host of factors that build the perception of who you think you are, and they're influenced by family, friends, what happens at school, media images," says self-esteem expert Jess Weiner, who conducts workshops on body and beauty image as an ambassador for the Dove Self-Esteem Fund. "What I find is that they've been told they need to be confident in their bodies, but they don't really feel that way."

This leads to "confused confidence," Weiner adds. "They don't know how to build it organically, so they begin to take risks with their behavior, without thinking through the consequences. That's when you see girls having unprotected sex or experimenting with drugs and alcohol; they may not allow themselves the process to self-analyze, to reflect, to be vulnerable, to ask questions, because they think they should already be there."

*The African-American community surrounds black men, but the crisis of black women gets marginalized or dismissed altogether...*

whose site calls attention to injustices against black women and girls—from unfair media coverage and pop culture to crimes against them. "We're ignored because we're walking around and we have the audacity to survive the crime, the violence and the turmoil. But if you look at all these problems we have, they all lead back to the fact that we are in insecure situations and we're all catching hell. The African-American community surrounds black men, but the crisis of black women gets marginalized or dismissed altogether, and that does nothing more than hurt us all."

"But if they will not fight for us," McCauley adds, "we must fight for ourselves."

Of course, childcare advocates say that before we put on the boxing gloves, first we have to lay hands on the root of the problem. Expert after expert interviewed by *Heart & Soul* pointed out that all roads to the ills plaguing black girls stem from their false sense of confidence—the belief that they're strong, beautiful and fearless, even when they haven't a clue what any of that means. "When you're a black girl, there are

**She's Not Your Superwoman**

We can lay that false bravada directly at the feet of us women, who've long been taught—and advanced the notion—that we are the matriarchs and caretakers of our community and must sacrifice ourselves for the greater good of everyone else: black men, our families, our friends, our employers and more, says teen self-empowerment coach Lacey Clark, founder of the Philadelphia-based Sisters Sanctuary.

"Our girls are being raised by women who don't understand their own needs, and so they learn to put everyone else's needs above their own," Clark says. "So you'll find a girl seduced into having sex with someone she knows she's not interested in, but because she wants to feel loved, valued, honored and celebrated, she'll do it. She's been taught that she can't say no, to say she deserves better. These girls and their mothers and their grandmothers and their aunts need historical, cultural and personal healing."

They also need to strike back at the pop culture images that often reduce young black women to sexualized backdrops—de-

grading images that dehumanize girls in the eyes of not only men, but women, too. One need only watch five minutes worth of popular rap videos, or check out the legions of little girls—some in diapers—doing their own sexualized version of the "Stanky Leg" (goaded on by their mothers!) to see the evidence.

"If you grow up in a culture that says you're untrustworthy, conniving, morally loose and that all the problems with our community rest between your legs because you just won't keep them closed, the message it sends to everyone is that black girls are nothing more than money-grubbing, back-stabbing, conniving baby mommas, and that informs the way you view other women as well as yourself," McCauley says. "Something's got to change."

How do we change it? McCauley suggests a network of programs, self-help organizations and girls empowerment groups to help "usher these girls through a safe passage from childhood to adulthood. And create environments where they can be safe and begin to push back on the culture that says it's OK to marginalize them." For sure, McCauley is doing her part by using her site, What About Our Daughters, to demand accountability. And Clark's Sisters Sanctuary holds parenting workshops to help black moms and other adult women—aunts, grandmothers, cousins, mentors—learn not only how to communicate with the little girls in their lives, but also give themselves permission to take off the "superwoman" cape and ask for help every now and again, so that they can "model" a truly self-empowered woman who values herself.

Weiner has even encouraged men to help lead her workshops, with the hope that contributions to the conversation will help "be the change" for girls who don't have strong male role models to help them navigate the tricky relationship terrain. "We'll have girls say, 'This man said something to me that got me thinking,'" Weiner says. "And that's a great thing."

Peters, too, left her position at the troubled school with the troubled girls and formed The Peace and Beauty Project, an organization geared toward helping teenage girls realize their inner beauty—and take steps to heal themselves.

"I take a grassroots approach," Peters says. "I don't know how much impact I can make on a 15-year-old who's doing what-

ever with a grown man, but I'm going to do my best to try, because I want my boys to have relationships with sisters who are strong and vulnerable and capable of being happy. We have to believe we can affect that change."

*Denene Millner is an Atlanta writer raising two girls.*



## Building Up, Not Beating Down

### *Protecting Our Girls From Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault*

by eisa ulen

**F**OR SOME WOMEN, IT starts with a slap. For others, it starts with a putdown. It might start with a forced sexual encounter. Or a text. Once in a while, it begins with a full-on, knock-her-to-the-ground punch.

For me, it all started with a pillow. It is juvenile domestic violence, and it's happening to young African-American

women at alarming rates. According to Atlanta-based health educator Carla "Dr. Carla" Stokes, M.D., black females have the highest prevalence of teen dating violence in the United States. "Teen dating abuse or teen relationship violence," Dr. Carla says, "is a pattern of abusive or coercive behaviors, including verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, that are used to gain power and control over a partner."

When juvenile domestic violence occurs, this power and control can be incremental and can start with the lightest touch. When I was still in college, I dated a guy who threw his pillow at me. Trouble was, he wasn't playing. He was angry. Frustrated. And he threw the pillow to shut me up. It did.

Over the next several months, our rela-

## Breaking Down the Numbers

"Juvenile domestic violence is very prevalent," says filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons. "According to a 2006 survey conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited and commissioned by Liz Claiborne Inc.":

- **1 in 5 teens** who have been in a serious relationship report being hit, slapped or pushed by a partner.
- **1 in 3 girls** who have been in a serious relationship say they've been concerned about being physically hurt by their partner.
- **1 in 4 teens** who have been in a serious relationship say their boyfriend or girlfriend has tried to prevent them from spending time with friends or family; the same number have been pressured to spend time only with their partner.
- Nearly **1 in 4 girls** who have been in a relationship (23%) reported going further sexually than they wanted as a result of pressure.
- **1 in 3 girls** between the ages of 16 and 18 say *sex is expected for people their age* if they're in a relationship; half of teen girls who have experienced sexual pressure report they are afraid the relationship would break up if they did not give in.

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## Am I Being Abused?

**TheSafeSpace.org**, a project of **BreaktheCycle.org**, offers the following Warning Signs of Abuse:

- Extreme jealousy
- Constant put-downs
- Possessiveness or controlling behavior
- Financial control
- Regular false accusations
- Isolation from friends and family

If you think you might be a victim of teen relationship violence, but need help to make sure, try these Web sites:

- [helpguide.org/mental/domestic\\_violence\\_abuse\\_types\\_signs\\_causes\\_effects.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/domestic_violence_abuse_types_signs_causes_effects.htm)
- [loveisrespect.org/is-this-abuse/are-you-being-abused](http://loveisrespect.org/is-this-abuse/are-you-being-abused)
- [loveisnotabuse.com/web/guest/10warningsigns](http://loveisnotabuse.com/web/guest/10warningsigns)

relationship continued to appear picture-perfect. We met each other's families, and he bought a ring. Over that same period of time, he pushed me a few times, held me up against the wall twice and, one night, pulled me into my dorm room with such force, my head hit the door. That was the night it—everything—ended.

The next day I called his mother to tell all, and that's how he found out I broke up with him. I also called my cousins—my older, male cousins—just in case.

He never technically hit me, but I was raised around women who talked about what they would do to a man "if he ever tried to put his hands on me." Things that involved common utensils found in most household kitchens; things they talked about doing after he went to sleep; things they talked about boldly. So when a mutual friend who knew a little about the growing

“...the next time *he ‘just pushes’ me,*  
*he just might push me in front of a truck...*”

abuse in my college relationship asked why I ended our seemingly perfect love affair, I looked at him with incredulosity. How could someone who had even an inkling of knowledge of my ex's growing physical threat to me ask such a question?

Still, I answered it: "Because the next time he 'just pushes' me, he just might push me in front of a truck," I said, and then added, "Do you think I should hang around and wait to see just how much worse this could get?"

Our friend backed off, but he's not alone in thinking it is somehow OK for a guy to grab a girl, push her or "jack her up against the wall." Somehow, for some, that doesn't qualify as abuse. But it is. Even worse than failing to identify juvenile domestic violence, too often, when friends and even family members do admit that a young woman is in an abusive relationship, they blame her for her partner's violence.

Judge Eugene Hyman of Santa Clara, California, agrees: "We continue to victimize victims, especially when they are women, as it is part of our [American] culture that women have little value. During my time in delinquency court, I had cases where a woman was sexually assaulted and

## A How to Get Out Primer

"Ending a relationship with an abusive dating partner is often the most dangerous time in the relationship," says Marjorie Gilberg of [BreaktheCycle.org](http://BreaktheCycle.org). "No one can control a partner's abusive behavior, but teens can take steps to stay as safe as possible. At Break the Cycle, we promote two main tools to help safely end an abusive relationship: restraining orders and safety plans. It is important to create a safety plan and follow some of these key safety tips":

- Inform someone you trust about where you are going and what you are doing.
- Carry a cell phone and a list of emergency contact numbers at all times.
- Avoid isolated places and try not to walk around alone.
- Identify a safe place to go in case of emergency—like a friend's house.
- Call 911 if you are in immediate danger.



He pushed you? Do not fall into the trap of thinking you did anything to deserve that abuse.

## RESOURCES

In my work with teens, I am troubled that many young men express attitudes such as 'girls like to be beat,'" says Dr. Carla, of HOTGIRLS. "In my research and work with girls, I have also observed that some young women are attracted to 'thugs' and hypermasculine men and boys who are hard, aggressive, tough and violent, which is concerning because research has demonstrated that men and boys with more traditional masculine gender role ideologies are more likely to report violence in their intimate relationships."

Lucinda Holt of *Sex, Etc.* agrees. "I'd love to see us make the issue of dating violence not simply be a girls' issue," she says, "but for it to be an issue that men and boys take on."

Holt thinks we need more men and boys to refuse to accept other young men, our brothers, cousins and friends, being abusive toward our girls. "If men didn't stand for that," she asserts, "we could start to end abuse and really focus on having black people form loving and mutually supportive relationships."

Several organizations are working to educate boys and young men about these issues and stop juvenile domestic violence:

- **A Call to Men:**

[acalltomen.com](http://acalltomen.com)

- **Men Can Stop Rape:**

[mencanstoprape.org](http://mencanstoprape.org)

- **Men Stopping Violence:**

[menstoppingviolence.org/index.php](http://menstoppingviolence.org/index.php)

- "I believe the **National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline**

([loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org)) is an excellent resource for heterosexual teens in abusive relationships," documentary filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons says. "The Anti-Violence Project ([avp.org](http://avp.org)) is an excellent resource for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender teens in abusive relationships."

## ONLINE RESOURCES

- [thesafespace.org](http://thesafespace.org)
- [notherapedocumentary.org](http://notherapedocumentary.org)
- [drcarla.com/home](http://drcarla.com/home)
- [breakthecycle.org](http://breakthecycle.org)
- [judgehyman.com](http://judgehyman.com)
- [sexetc.org](http://sexetc.org)

had to change schools because of how other women students were treating her." This fear of backlash from peers and even adults silences many girls and privileges the boys who break the law every time they use violence to express power.

Our society enables this violence in teen relationships. But some are advocating for change. Hyman established the nation's very first juvenile domestic violence court. After presiding over both adult domestic violence court and family court, as well as looking at the research, he realized "that domestic violence was happening to teenage victims and that nothing was being done about it."

Hyman believes we need increased public education on what domestic violence is, across the spectrum of abuses from verbal assault to stalking to murder. All forms of domestic violence, regardless of age, involve "the use of violence in a relationship to control the behavior of the other person." No matter how it is expressed, juvenile domestic violence always gives the abuser power over the victim. But, Hyman asserts, even those charged with protecting victims "misunderstand what domestic violence is." He explains that "there are many situations where law enforcement, prosecutors, probation and the courts do not ask the correct questions, and as a result domestic violence cases are not properly recognized as such."

### The Media's Influence

This problem is not confined to the criminal justice system. Dr. Carla created HOTGIRLS, a youth-driven health education and development organization that "provides leadership development programming that empowers young women and girls to educate their peers about dating violence, street harassment, images in the media and hip-hop, and other issues." She says, "One of the contributing factors that I am most concerned about is the objectifi-

cation and sexualization of women and girls in the mass media and American culture, which normalizes violence, unhealthy relationships and abuse." This normalization in the media means many Americans fail to become desensitized to domestic violence in real life. The normalization Dr. Carla describes may have contributed to some of the backlash singer Rihanna experienced last year when images surfaced on celebrity gossip Web sites and television shows of her beaten, bruised, swollen face.

Philadelphia-based filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons knows the influence of mass media well. She used media to counteract violence in relationships by producing the award-winning documentary film "NO!," which focuses on the issue of rape. "Chris Brown's documented beating of Rihanna was so very disturbing," Simmons says. "The actual beating itself was horrific, but the varied responses as opposed to a unified response against Brown's vicious and violent behavior was egregious."

Simmons says she wasn't surprised by some who further victimized Rihanna, but she was pained. "Their response," she says, "not only blames Rihanna, but also blames all of the nameless Rihannas who endure physical and verbal assault in their relationships. I understood the origins of their response, because we live in a world where girls and women are more often than not blamed for the violence that they experience in their intimate relationships."

Despite these grim truths, Simmons does see some signs for hope. "I've been working on the issues of sexual and domestic violence for more than 15 years," she says. "Throughout my tenure, I've spent a lot of time lecturing, facilitating workshops and engaging in dialogues about domestic and sexual violence with young women. While we are far from where I hoped we would be with responding to documented accounts of domestic violence in the first part of the 21st century, I must share that we've come a long way from where we were when I started working on this issue."

"It is absolutely true that there were so many young women and men who blamed Rihanna. What's also true, however, is that there were also many young women and men who blamed Chris Brown and supported Rihanna. While some of them expressed deep empathy for the fact that Brown grew up in an abusive household, they didn't try to contextualize or excuse

his abuse against Rihanna. This is progress. Equally as important, in response to Chris Brown beating Rihanna, celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey and Tyra Banks, used their television programs as platforms to address the issue of domestic violence, which was most definitely not a first for Winfrey or Banks."

### Helping Hands

Just as celebrity black women talk show hosts used their media platforms to help transform society—and teen relationships—for the better, others continue to work online and in other places where young people gather.

Break the Cycle is an organization that trains young people to help teen victims of

domestic violence. High school and college students go through professional training that includes Dating Violence 101. According to Executive Director Marjorie Gilbert, TheSafeSpace.org, a project of Break the Cycle, "is the most comprehensive online dating violence resource." This presence online is key, as "teens increasingly report 'digital abuse'—receiving threats by text messages or being stalked on Facebook or MySpace." Online harassment is one significant area where "the mechanisms for perpetrating abuse are unique to teen culture."

Break the Cycle works on three key areas to reduce dating violence: access, confidentiality and environment. The organization gets teens access to informa-

tion and services; helps them get confidential medical, legal and emotional help; and addresses the environmental factors that, Gilbert says, "are perpetuating the myth that violence in a relationship is normal or acceptable."

This year, Break the Cycle is launching a program aimed at LGBTQ youth. "There is strong evidence to indicate that abuse in same-sex teen relationships occurs at higher rates than in opposite-sex relationships," Gilbert says. LGBTQ youth are generally underserved in American society and too often overlooked when juvenile domestic violence occurs. One additional problem unique to LGBTQ teens is that young victims may still be "in the closet" and so afraid to reveal that they are experiencing abuse from a same-sex partner.

As an out feminist lesbian, Simmons believes it is critical that "we do not ignore the fact that queer teens experience domestic violence in relationships. We must remember that when it comes to domestic violence in any type of intimate relationship, teens, regardless of their sexual orientation, could be faced with life and death situations. Instead of punitive debates about whether or not LGBTQ lifestyle is right or wrong, LGBTQ teens need resources and support so that they, too, can be in healthy and safe relationships."

Another problem is that juvenile domestic violence takes on many forms, and can look a lot like "normal" teenage behavior. Lucinda Holt, the Rutgers, New Jersey-based managing editor of a magazine by and for teens called *Sex, Etc.*, says that while most people think of physical abuse when dating violence occurs, "more often it looks like isolating a partner from his or her friends, name-calling, shaming, pressuring a partner into sex with threats (like, 'I'll just find somebody else if you don't do it'), extreme jealousy or explosive anger."

Because some teen violence isn't always as simple as "he slapped me," teens often don't know how to articulate the experience with abuse that they do have. Holt says, for example, that many girls write in to *Sex, Etc.* about not enjoying or not really wanting to have sex, but having sex anyway to please their partner. "This isn't always 'violent' behavior," Holt insists, "but it is abusive." ♥

*Eisa Ulen is a New York City writer.*

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