

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Prevention Is Possible: Recognizing The Intersectionality Of All 'Isms' In The Eradication And Prevention Of Sexual Violence

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face of afro american woman with closed eyes

This is a Sexual Assault Awareness Month editorial.

Oppression is 'the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner'; and 'the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions & anxiety' (1). Oppression is sibling to expressions of abuse, coercion, domination and injustice – much like the descriptors of acts of sexual violence.

This April, as we observe Sexual Assault Awareness Month and promote the national theme 'Prevention is Possible', you – the reader – is asked to take 'a pause for the cause'; and, in this moment of reflection, you are also urged to seek a sense of urgency in examining, identifying and acknowledging oppression and the means through which it manifests in our community through your thoughts, your communication and your actions. Likewise, you are urged to assess how these concepts and 'norms' perpetuate oppression through sexual assault and rape in our community.

We are not always inclined to conduct self-assessments that would demand authentic confessions such as victim blaming, stereotyping, labeling, assuming, justifying...the list can go on. However, it is only through these honest evaluations that we can further identify all oppressive behaviors, which are more often than not, manifested through our perpetuation of 'isms'. Yes, OUR 'isms' perpetuate sexual violence in our Virgin Islands community. Sexism, heterosexism, colorism, ageism, nativism...ALL perpetuate oppression and fuels sexual violence in its various forms. As such, you are invited, through the next couple of paragraphs, to broaden your perspective on sexual assault and rape and to recognize the intersectionality of all injustice.

Sexism, or the traditional stereotypes of gender roles, is evident when we speak to our young boys and make statements like 'why are you crying?', or 'check your woman meh son'. It is evident when we speak to our young girls and make statements like 'she high class', or 'you better go cook for your man'. What may not be so evident, however, are the seeds of internalized oppression that are planted when we don't acknowledge the weight that these statements have on highly impressionable youth. Many of our youth may not have the resources, support or ability to refute these statements with thoughts of equality and healthy alternatives. Therefore, the typical response to 'not crying' becomes 'verbally abusing'; the response to 'check your woman meh son' becomes 'force your woman to silence through non-consensual sex'. The response to 'she high class' becomes 'lowering standards to meet status quo and possibly devaluing one's body in the process'. Then, the response to 'you better go cook for your man' becomes 'He could cook for himself – I could find another man today'. Can you see how the roots of sexism can flourish into a tree of sexual violence and oppression?

Heterosexism, or the attitude that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality or bisexuality, is obvious in our community. We experience it when statements like 'As long as it's not in my face', or 'Dem people confused' are made. It is even more obvious when our society embraces vocabulary like 'battyman, fagot and punky'. What may not be so obvious, however, are the seeds of discrimination and segregation that are planted. This is what occurs when we don't take ownership for the outcomes of a marginalized population that feels confined to acts of deception in lieu of association but in hopes of validation. Therefore, the response to 'As long as it's not in my face' becomes 'Reproductive abuse and excessive childbearing as a mask for one's true identity' (or as our community often references, 'men who are on the 'down low'). Accordingly, the response to 'Dem people confused' becomes the shame based 'trigger' for 'successful suicides and attempted LGBTQ genocide'. Do you see how the roots of heterosexism can flourish into a tree of sexual violence and oppression?

Colorism, or biases based on skin tones and hair types, is present when we make statements like 'You have good, pretty hair' or 'the black one – not the pretty redbone one'. What may not be as evident, however, are the seeds of inter-racial segregation and

cultural apartheid that are planted in the very communities in which we are to collaborate, strive and progress as a multicultural people. Therefore, the statement 'You have good, pretty hair' becomes 'You are only good for making good, pretty babies'. Likewise the statement 'the black one – not the pretty redbone one' becomes 'You can blame the black one with bad, ugly hair for being raped because she is already devalued'. Do you see how the roots of colorism can also flourish into a tree of sexual violence and oppression?

Mindset. Social Norms. Behavior....These are the factors that ought to contribute to anti-oppression and anti-sexual violence descriptors like kindness, support, equality, justice and appreciation. Are your daily thoughts, expressions, and actions in support of these core fundamentals of freedom? Or are you neutral? For, in the words of Desmond Tutu, 'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor'. What 'side' will you choose for Sexual Assault Awareness Month and beyond? Will it be the side of oppression and sexual violence or will it be the side of equality, justice and a community free of all forms of violence? Remember, prison isn't the only place where perpetrators of abuse are found – oppression, judgments and negative verbalizations are forms of mental incarceration too. As such, take the time today, and every day, to assess the impact of your thoughts, expressions and actions on the landscape of our community and commit to making adjustments when necessary for collectively, 'Prevention is Possible'.

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About the Author Khnuma Simmonds-Esannason is the Executive Director of the VI Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Council, Owner of My Girlfriend's Closet Boutique & Mother of one. She has reviewed grants for the Department of Justice: Office on Violence against Women, presented for the 2015 National Sexual Assault Conference and was honored by the 'Heal A Woman To Heal A Nation' Unlimited You Campaign. She holds a B.A. in Communications from Hofstra University and a M.A. in Education Guidance & Counseling from the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix.