



Part 2 - How Black Social Media Spaces Shape How We Talk About Sexual Harassment, Assault, and Abuse

▫ November 10, 2023

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This is the second excerpt of a two-part interview. Be sure to read the first part [here](#).

5. In 2014, your hashtag #YouOkSis went viral after you intervened with the phrase to a woman who had just been harassed on the street. How fulfilling was it for you to see your own hashtag spark discussion and make people think more critically about the gender-based harassment Black women experience daily?

I definitely think it has been one of the most enduring hashtags. That started in 2014, and people still talk about it almost ten years later. I think that it gave people almost a blueprint for how to talk about this stuff in some ways. I think that, until that point, we hadn't had many of those conversations. There was "Stop Street Harassment" and other stuff, but that was done by white people, and it wasn't necessarily accessible. I think that Black Twitter back then was rather insular. So, a lot of us, before the 2016 election...a lot of us weren't talking to white people on Twitter, to be honest. I think that the election kind of changed how a lot of these changes happened, and things became more political and universal. But I think that #YouOkSis kind of created this template for understanding, you know, "Here's how we can have these conversations. Here's how we can offer support. Here's how we can do Twitter town halls to have conversations about this. Here's how we can use a hashtag as a resource generator. Here's how we can use it as a support group." I think that a lot of those things came out of #YouOkSis, and became a template for folks to come after that to create other hashtags and other conversations that were similar.

6. Dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault is often a very isolating experience. What can advocates learn from Black online spaces about how to affirm and empower Black survivors, as well as survivors of all backgrounds, to make them feel less alone?

What came to my mind first was, "Leave us alone," and I have to kind of sit with that. I think that what can be learned is the idea of "listen more than you speak." Hold space for people without inserting yourself and centering yourself. That unfortunately has happened in the feminist movement, where white women have often been really patronizing and infantilizing of Black women, as though we don't have the tools or we're not equipped to take care of ourselves when that's really all we've ever been doing. Or as though we're not as well-versed in feminist theory and we're not approaching healing and surviving in necessarily the "right" ways.

I think that what others can benefit from is kind of just listening to how Black women show care, and how we show care for each other and show up for each other. It might look very different from what other people are used to, because other people, particularly if we're talking about white people or people who are heavily influenced by white western thought, it's a very individualistic

culture and way of being. We're not like that. We're very communal. We're very village-oriented. We look out for each other. It can be a complete stranger, and we will offer support and care and go out of our way to make that person feel like they are a part of the tribe. I don't think that's something that is necessarily inherent to European ways of being. So, I think a lot of that can be learned from Black women.

I think this idea that we really have nothing to lose because we have like no privileges...kind of that radical sense of "It's now or never" and "We all we got", that's something that I think kind of holds us together and that people are observing. They could learn a bit from what it's like to have your back completely against the wall and be willing to risk it all for the sake of freedom and liberation. I think you can see that a lot on social media.

7. One major element that determines what users see when they log on to these platforms are algorithms that predetermine whose voices reach your feed. What sort of social media practices should those in the sexual violence prevention movement employ to combat this structural obstacle and ensure they stay informed about survivor communities of all backgrounds?

That's the thing, you know. Fighting the shadowban is, you know, ridiculous, right? I think part of it may be...when people write articles about, "These are the feminists you should be following" or "These are the experts on these things", I think people can pay attention to that. I think that people should look at who other people are retweeting and whose posts they're sharing and reblogging. Kind of dig into it a little bit. If you like something that you see or see something that resonates with you, go dig a little bit into that person's work and background and decide if that's somebody you want to follow.

Shadow banning is going to happen. It happens to me on Instagram A LOT. I don't even want to use certain words in my hashtags or captions because I have 64,000 followers, and I'll get some posts that only have 100 likes, and that doesn't make sense. I'll ask somebody, "Have you seen this?" and they'll say, "I never saw that!" And it'll be about something like Black history or whatever. I post a selfie and it blows up to 2,000, 3,000 likes, but when I post

informational stuff, it doesn't really get much traction. Having that experience, I tell people, "You've got to be proactive!" The problem is that people are lazy, let's be honest. People are super lazy, and they want things handed to them. They don't want to have to look, they don't want to have to search. People certainly don't want to have to read. So I think that that makes it difficult. My advice is that people be proactive, and if you say that you're interested in these other voices...go out and find them. Go look and find them.

8. While Black women may find community online, they are also significantly more likely to face online abuse in the form of sexual and racial harassment. With that racism and sexism intertwining simultaneously, how has that impacted the way Black women shape their narratives, online and in-person, to capture the totality of their sexual violence experience?

That's hard. I don't know how to speak for everyone. I always give the caveat that I don't think I represent most Black women, just because my personality and my approach to things are really different. A lot of times, people will ask me, "What do you think about Black women doing this" and I'm like, "I don't know, because I just do what I want." I'm bold, and I'm loud, and I'm outspoken, and I don't care, and I have confidence. That is not the typical sister. A lot of us are dealing with so many things. I can boldly talk about my experiences with sexual violence and intimate partner violence and...not that it rolls off my back, but I'm used to telling my story. I'll tell my story to people who want to hear it. I get paid to tell my story if I'm being honest. So, I'm kind of used to that, in a way.

I think that there are Black women who may feel safer because there is still an air of anonymity that can make people feel more comfortable. Yeah, you've got a picture, and yeah, you've got whatever name, but people don't know that's really you. People don't know that's really your name. You can kind of come and, you know, even people like me! People still don't really know me except for what I give them. So, I think there's a safety there and a feeling like, "I can share this because I can be protected."

Also, witnessing how Black women rally around each other, I think people feel like, “This is a space where I can talk about these things because Black women got me. They’re gonna be there for me.” There’s a sister right now who has been harassed and targeted for the last 3-4 days now, all because she said she didn’t want to take any more male clients. They have been doxxing her, threatening her, calling her office with rape threats, death threats...things like that. We have all been gathered around. We are constantly trying to shield her from this and inundate her with love and positive messages and show outward support. I think that we see that, and we think, “Alright, maybe I can be okay here. Maybe I can be safer here.” It’s not necessarily a guarantee, but it’s probably better than talking to my family because my family might blame me. I can’t talk about it at work because that’s not appropriate for work. If I go to church, they might blame me too.

9. Final thoughts?

I think that you have a righteous endeavor when you want to learn from people, and marginalized people particularly. Those who have historically been silenced. That’s a noble endeavor, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. People just have to be mindful that they’re not going in and mining for content or not looking to appropriate things, or to silence people and copy or steal people’s ideas. It’s very easy to try to whitiesplain things sometimes. They’ll come and be like, “Yeah, I heard this!”, when really you could have just directed people to the person they were talking to. You don’t have to translate it. A lot of times, I think that some folks will come into our spaces, observe things, and feel the need to translate it for their communities and their audiences. As if what we’re saying is not good enough. So I think that people should be mindful about not getting caught up in that.

I think it’s always about engaging communities with respect. I’m a researcher. I do a lot of work with community research. The key is really to be respectful and to honor the autonomy and agency of the people that you’re studying and learning from. I think that sometimes when it comes to Black women, people don’t regard us as people who deserve that level of respect. So, I would encourage people to remember that we are human beings. We are worthy of respect. We deserve to have our spaces treated with the kind of respect that other people get.

This blog post was published in The Resource 2023 online magazine special issue on [Racial Equity in the Movement](#).

About the Author:



Feminista Jones is an educator, feminist writer, public speaker, community activist, and retired social worker. She is an award-winning writer and the author of the critically acclaimed *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists Are Changing the World From the Tweets to the Streets* (Beacon). Her work centers around diversity, inclusion, and equity, queer identity, race and culture, feminism and intersectionality, mental health, and social work. She is a Ph.D. candidate at Temple University where she also teaches courses on the African American Queer Experience, The Black Woman, Race and Media, and others related to the intersections of race, gender, and sexual identity.
