

# Preventing sexual violence through gender equity and reconciliation in African American communities

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

**Farah Tanis**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Founded in 2008, [Black Women's Blueprint](#) is a national black feminist organization that works at the grassroots and institutional levels to address gender violence against women and girls in Black, African-American, and other communities of color. The organization uses a civil and human rights approach to develop a culture where women of African descent are fully empowered and disparities are erased.

## A NEED TO ENGAGE MEN AND BOYS

Very early on, there was a conscious decision made within Black Women's Blueprint to focus on gender equity and to do so by engaging men. During the first radio program that they hosted, [Black Women's Blueprint](#) posed the following question to listeners: "How can we stop rape in Black communities?" The first caller was a young man who responded by saying that there was nothing that could be done in order to stop rape and that women would be better off buying a gun to defend themselves. This man's perspective gave Black Women's Blueprint a pulse on Black expectations about masculinity at the time, and also affirmed that there was a great need to engage men in preventing gender-based violence.

As they started this work, Black Women's Blueprint discovered that Black men and boys said that they were willing to engage in action to reduce gender-based violence, but the tools, resources, and knowledge needed to do so were not freely accessible to all communities at the grassroots. With this insight, Black Women's Blueprint started following organizations like [Men Can Stop Rape](#) and [A Call to Men](#) and built off of existing strategies and blueprints to inform their own. With that foundation, they set out to create spaces for transforming communities through creating interventions to promote gender justice and build leadership among gender justice activists.

## SUPPORTING HEALTHY MASCULINITIES AND TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Black Women's Blueprint launched the Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission together with survivors of gender-based violence in 2010. As an independent body, it is the first of its kind to focus on sexual assault against black women in the United States, examining historical context, causes, and consequences of rape and sexual assault. The commission also serves to provide victims and survivors with a public platform and offers space for those who have harmed others to begin to hear and learn about the impact that sexual assault has had in their communities over generations. The Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission draws wisdom and guidance from the work of a number of influential black feminist scholars including bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Melissa Harris-Perry. The four mandates of the Commission are truth, justice, healing, and reconciliation. Black Women's Blueprint is using a human rights framework to create models, structures, and systems of community accountability and safety that reconcile survivors with their communities. By creating a culture supportive of gender equity and community accountability and changing norms around violence in communities, this work sets forth conditions that can reduce the likelihood of future violence.



*Photo provided by Black Women's Blueprint*

A challenging but essential part of the work is pushing back against the notion that only men can engage other men in fostering healthy masculinities and ending gender-based and sexual violence – but rather that all genders can engage with men on these topics. Farah, the executive director of Black Women's Blueprint says, "We are working as women, as mothers, as caregivers, as gender justice activists, hand in hand, with black men, fathers, and boys and really have the expectation that we hear them and that they hear us. There's a mutual expectation of being heard and valued."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has created opportunities for engagement in community settings locally, statewide, and nationally. For instance, they have worked in churches where many ministers have expressed a commitment to ending violence. This partnership has been especially important because churches and other faith organizations are often the first points of contact for someone who has experienced or is committing violence; they are also culture keepers and culture translators. As a result of the Commission's work with the historic Riverside Church in New York City, the church now has a ministry that teaches boys about consent and how to be nonviolent.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has also gone to barbershops where the focus is on engaging men in spaces where they already gather. In these spaces, men can have very candid conversations about their experiences and complicity in violence against Black women and then work from a place of truth-telling to move towards solutions and restorative measures



*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has engaged men in a variety of settings including barbershops. Image source: Black Women's Blueprint*

for reconciliation. The Commission recognizes the importance of meeting men where they are at, but also believes that creating a space for reconciliation means fostering an environment for men, women, and gender nonconforming individuals to listen to each other about what has been hurting them, holding each other accountable, and making amends. This means creating a culture where men can talk about masculinities with all genders, not only just with other men.

Another initiative where Black Women's Blueprint engages men and boys is through its Emerging Sons program. As a part of this program, Black Women's Blueprint works, hand in hand, with Black fathers, men, and boys to develop curriculum, build theater programs, and organize other activities. Through these activities for Black parents raising boys, Black Women's Blueprint is creating a profound culture shift within communities. In addition to working with fathers, Black Women's Blueprint also creates forums for mothers who are raising sons alone to provide them with a space to talk about Black sexual politics and healthy masculinities, elevating these issues as the responsibility of families and communities.

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Farah Tanis is Lead Faculty for the Institute for Gender and Cultural Competence. Tanis is co-founder, Executive Director of Black Women's Blueprint working at the grassroots and institutional levels to address the spectrum of gender violence against women and girls in Black/African American and other communities of color. Tanis' work includes the development of curricula, policy development, technical assistance and training focused on an intersection of social justice issues facing women and LGBTQ communities of color on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as well as mainstream campuses and communities.

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## RESOURCES

- [A Conversation With Black Men: The Reckoning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Riverside Church Livestream of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Against Sexual Assault](#)
- [UN Women Livestream of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Against Sexual Assault.](#)

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