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It's possible that many of us have limited knowledge about the history of anti-sexual violence movements. Much of the history that is widely known and taught starts in the 1970s and excludes the long history of organizing against sexual violence and intersecting forms of oppression.

People have been organizing underground and grassroots supports for survivors of sexual violence throughout history, starting with communities of color and other marginalized communities. The history of sexual violence and movements to end it date far back in history, but often with little written history on record. Movements to support survivors have included efforts that are highly organized and fragmented, community based and government or institution sponsored, resistance-oriented, and everything in between. While the history provided here is just skimming the surface, it offers a snapshot of the efforts over the last several centuries to support survivors and end sexual violence.

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The history of rape in the United States is a history of racism and sexism intertwined.

Indigenous communities experienced sexual violence by European colonizers beginning in the 16th century when they came to what is now known as the United States. "Rape was uncommon in traditional matrilineal Native societies, but that changed with the arrival of Europeans who misconstrued nudity and sexual autonomy for promiscuity and immorality" (Gerolami, 2016). Rape and other forms of sexual violence were used as tools of oppression and conquest against Indigenous communities, with this legacy of violence against Native communities continuing today.

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Raping a Black woman was not a crime for the majority of this Nation's history.

The slave owner's exploitation of the black woman's sexuality was one of the most significant factors differentiating the experience of slavery for males and females. Rape was used as a tool to both force enslaved women into submission and to further the profit of slaveholders through breeding.

Today, there remains a deep connection between centuries of institutionalized slavery, Black women's bodies, and current anti-black racial oppression.

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1848 — The Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 was the first major national organizing event around women’s rights in the United States. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone and Lucretia Mott, organizers and participants of the event, are considered among the mothers of the early feminist movement. Delegates attending the convention voted and passed the Declaration of Sentiments calling on women to organize and petition for their rights. Women of color in attendance at the Women’s Rights Convention were not permitted to vote in the passage of the declaration. That discriminatory decision contributed to a disconnect between white women and women of color within the women’s rights movement that continues to have an impact today.

1851 — Sojourner Truth delivered her famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, powerfully demanding that the experiences of black women be heard and included in the larger discussion about women’s rights.

1866 — The Memphis riots of 1866 in Tennessee were ignited by racial tensions following the Civil War. Mobs of white civilians and white policemen attacked Black neighborhoods, assaulting and killing Black men, women, and children. During a Congressional investigation of the riots, a group of Black women survivors testified before Congress about gang rapes perpetrated by white mobs during the riots. These women were perhaps the first to break the silence of rape.

1885 — The issue of rape, race, women, and slavery was addressed by a significant Supreme Court case, *Missouri v. Celia*. Celia was an enslaved Black woman who was convicted of murdering her owner, Robert Newsom. Celia’s case was appealed to the Supreme Court of Missouri, with the argument that she had killed Newsom to protect herself from being raped by him. The Supreme Court refused the appeal, declaring Celia to be the property of her owner with no right to defend herself against sexual assault.

1890s — Black women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett took leadership roles in anti-lynching campaigns to combat existing rape laws that did not protect black women, but did justify the lynching of a black man when they were accused of raping white women. At that time, rape was a capital offense only when Black man raped a white woman — the rape of a Black woman was not even considered a crime.

1896 — The hundreds of Black women’s clubs that had formed across the country were organized into the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), in response to the anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells and the need for a more powerful national group. Through the NACW, thousands of clubwomen across the country devoted their efforts to a range of political, social, and economic reforms, including housing, education, health care, childcare, job training, wage equity, voter registration, and the anti-lynching campaign.

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From the earliest days of America to today, African American women have been at the forefront of movements against sexual violence and rape. Long before Rosa Parks became the “patron saint of the Bus Boycott”, she was an anti-rape activist and investigator.

1944 — Recy Taylor, a Black woman living in Alabama, was kidnapped and raped by six white men. Although the men admitted to the rape, the investigation was undermined by local law enforcement and two grand juries declined to indict the men, meaning no charges were ever brought. After an outcry by the local Black community, Rosa Parks formed the Committee for Equal Justice for Ms. Recy Taylor and conducted nation-wide awareness campaigns, rallies, boycotts, and advocacy to demand support and justice for Recy Taylor and other Black women who had experienced sexual violence. The case mobilized activists nationally more extensively than ever before and was an early spark leading toward the Civil Rights Movement.

The 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott was in many ways was the last act in a decades-long struggle to protect Black women from sexualized violence and rape since they also were sites of sexual and racial violence for Black women, who made up the majority of the riders. Buses became the target of Black activists’ protests because they were the most visible vehicle of the system that abused African Americans daily. Organized, led and sustained by these very women, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was rooted in black women’s demands for bodily integrity.

1955 — Emmett Till, a Black teenage boy, was brutally murdered for allegedly grabbing, menacing, and being sexually crude towards Carolyn Bryant, a white woman. Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted on an open casket funeral to bring attention to the brutality of the murder and to the violence and racism experienced by African Americans more broadly. Tens of thousands attended his funeral or viewed his casket, and his murder was another pivotal spark of Civil Rights Movement. The men who murdered Emmett Till were acquitted, but later confessed to the murder with no consequences. Years later, Carolyn Bryant admitted that she had fabricated her testimony that Emmett Till had made any verbal or physical advances toward her.

In 1959 Florida A&M University student Betty Jean Owens was raped by by four white men. It had an impact on an entire student community. Although one student was assaulted, the racial motivation of the crime and the many stories of rape of Black women by white men before it, left the student body as a whole feeling unsafe, helpless, and violated. This history is essentially an exposition on community and race-based traumatic stress inherent in a quote from a student at the time: “It was like all of us had been raped.”

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1967 — A group of women involved in the group “New York Radical Women,” including Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt, Kathie Sarachild, and Carol Hanisch, began the first Consciousness-Raising group in New York City. These groups gave women a place to speak about issues in their own lives, including sexual violence, child abuse, and intimate partner violence, and they quickly spread throughout the United States. In the early 1970s, 100,000 women were involved in Consciousness-Raising groups nationally.

1970s — A growing campus rape movement brought attention to the concept of “date rape,” demanding that rape other than assault by a stranger be recognized and addressed. This movement led to the establishment of many awareness events such as Take Back The Night, Denim Day, Clothesline Project, and the Vagina Monologues.

1972 — The first rape crisis centers were established- Bay Area Women Against Rape and Washington DC Rape Crisis Center. These rape crisis centers provided services to survivors and were seen as “networking hubs” for the national anti-rape movement.

1974 — Joan (pronounced Jo-Ann) Little, a Black prisoner in the Beaufort County Jail in North Carolina, was attacked and raped by a white guard at the jail, Clarence Alligood. Joan Little broke away from him, killed him in self-defense, and then broke free from the jail. She turned herself in a week later and was charged with murder. There was a national outcry for justice for Joan Little, involving prominent civil rights and women’s rights activists, such as Angela Davis. A jury acquitted Joan Little of killing Clarence Alligood. She was the first woman in United States history to be acquitted using the defense that she used deadly force to resist sexual assault.

Mid 1970s — The National Organization for Women began advocating for policy changes to create stronger protections for survivors of sexual assault, including marital rape laws, rape shield laws, redefining consent, and striking down requirements that a witness be present to be able to prosecute sexual assault.

Mid 1970s — The Combahee River Collective was formed as a Boston-based organization of Black feminists, many of whom were lesbians. Active between 1974 and 1980, the Collective was critical of mainstream white feminism, pointing out the discrimination and bigotry that many White feminists directed toward women of color, poor women, LGBTQ women, and others during the second wave period of feminism. The Combahee River Statement was released in 1977, an approach to community organizing that centered the most marginalized group (in this particular case, Black women) in liberation work because their freedom guarantees everyone’s freedom, and would mean the dismantling of all oppressive systems. This framework continues to be used today in movements such as Black Lives Matter.

1978 — The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault was established to advocate

at the national level for public policies and increased resources to improve the lives of sexual assault victims.

1979– WCSAP was created by a group of local rape crisis centers and survivors to be a policy voice and to advocate for funding for sexual assault on the statewide level.

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1982 — The Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant was the first federal allocation of money for rape crisis services and prevention distributed to sexual assault centers.

1985 — The Federal Victims of Crime Act was passed, establishing a central source of federal financial support for direct services to victims of crime, including sexual assault.

1980s — The 1980s saw an increase in the public conversation about sexual violence. In 1981 “The Bridge Called My Back” featuring Cherrie Moraga was released. In 1988 the film “The Accused” starring Jodie Foster was released.

1990s — Beginning in the 1990s, more public conversations about men and boys who experience sexual violence started. Despite increasing conversations about sexual violence in the 1980s, up until this point, most discussion of victimization was limited to acknowledgment that women and girls could experience sexual violence. In 1997 Michael Scarce released the book “Male on Male Rape: The Hidden Toll of Stigma and Shame.”

1991- Anita Hill became a national figure when she testified at U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas’ confirmation hearing about the pattern of sexual harassment she experienced while he was her boss.

1994 — The first federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed, creating new penalties for sexual violence and establishing the Rape Prevention and Education Program and S.T.O.P. grant funds. This legislation has provided significant visibility, funding, and stability to sexual violence services and prevention work for the past twenty years. Sadly, the legislation was supported by the mainstream sexual and domestic violence movements, in spite of the concerns voiced by women of color about the consequences of the ways that the legislation aligned the work of anti-sexual and domestic violence advocacy so closely with the criminal legal system. The unintended consequences they pointed out- such as barriers to services for marginalized communities, weakened activism within the field, and contributing to mass incarceration — as well as the consequences of downplaying their voices, continue to have impact today

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2000 — The Trafficking Victim Protections Act was passed, establishing human trafficking as a federal crime. The TVPA also established the T Visa and the U Visa, both of which are pathways for victims of human trafficking and/or sexual violence to become temporary U.S. residents.

2000 — INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence formed after the Color of Violence Conference at the University of California Santa Cruz.

2001 — Arte Sana was established in response to the racial and ethnic disparities and lack of language justice in the victim services field. Arte Sana continues to hold the anti-sexual violence movement accountable and advocates for more racial equity and language justice in service provision as well as the national anti-sexual violence work. Arte Sana is the Spanish phrase for “art heals.”

2003 — After significant advocacy by organizations like Just Detention International, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the NAACP, and faith-based organizations, the Prison Rape Elimination Act was passed. PREA is the first federal legislation in the United States that addresses sexual violence against people who are incarcerated.

2004 — FORGE, a national organization that supports and educates and advocates for the rights of transgender individuals, expanded its mission to work on behalf of transgender individuals who experienced sexual violence.

2006 — Amnesty International released its report Maze of Injustice, highlighting the horrific levels of sexual assault perpetrated against Native Women in the US, and the jurisdictional “maze” that simultaneously keeps those women from accessing justice, emboldens perpetrators and maintains an environment of fear and despair in many Native communities.

2007 — Activist and community organizer, Tarana Burke, started the “me too” movement as a grassroots way to connect with and show support from one survivor to another among communities of color. In 2017 the hashtag “#MeToo” became popularized by actresses and celebrities using social media to build community and give voice to survivors of sexual violence. After #MeToo gained national-wide recognition in 2017, celebrities were critiqued for co-opting Tarana Burke’s work without credit. Tarana continues to speak across the nation about sexual violence.

2009 — President Obama is the first U.S. President to declare April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

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2011 — The SlutWalk movement began in Toronto, Canada, after a Toronto Police officer made the comment during a talk about campus rape that “women should avoid dressing like sluts” as a precaution against sexual assault. Three thousand people gathered to protest the victim-blaming and slut-shaming comment and culture. While SlutWalk rallies and marches have since spread internationally, SlutWalk has also been criticized for not being inclusive of Black women and other women of color. In an open letter to SlutWalk organizers, Black Women’s Blueprint stated, “Women in the United States are racially and ethnically diverse. Every tactic to gain civil and human rights must not only consult and consider women of color, but it must equally center all our experiences and our communities in the construction, launching, delivery, and sustainment of that movement.” (Black Women’s Blueprint, 2016)

2012 — The Invisible War, a documentary film exploring the alarming rates and stories of sexual violence in the military, was released. The film won multiple awards and gained the attention of a number of lawmakers and military leadership, prompting a number of legislative and policy changes to address the issue. The Invisible War has been credited with encouraging more survivors of military sexual assault to come forward and with forcing the military to deal more openly with the issue.

2013 — Organized and connected by survivor activists like Annie E. Clark and Andrea Pino, university students across the country filed a wave of federal Title IX and Clery Act complaints against their universities, after their reports of campus sexual assault were ignored and mishandled. Some of their stories were told in the documentary film The Hunting Ground, released in 2015. Their stories and advocacy inspired legislative changes, the founding of organizations such as Ending Rape on Campus and Know Your IX, and national initiatives such as It’s On Us.

2013- During the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, Tulalip Tribal Member Deborah Parker successfully campaigned both for the reauthorization and for the inclusion of provisions which gave tribal courts jurisdiction over violent crimes against women and families involving non–Native Americans on tribal lands.

2014 — Daniel Holtzclaw, an Oklahoma City police officer, was arrested and later charged with sexual assaulting 13 women, all while on duty and in many cases by explicitly threatening arrest if they did not comply. All 13 women were black, and many of them had previous warrants or arrests, had substance abuse issues or were found with drugs, or were sex workers. When the trial received almost no attention from the media or mainstream anti-sexual assault advocates, local activists and national organizations like Black Lives Matter, the African American Policy Forum, and Black Women’s Blueprint organized local support and a national response, much of which focused on the lack of

media and national attention of sexual violence against Black women and girls. Daniel Holtzclaw was found guilty and sentenced to 263 years in prison.

2016 — The first Tribunal of the Black Women’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, organized by Black Women’s Blueprint, was held in New York City, the first event of its kind in the nation to focus on rape and sexual assault against Black women in the United States. The Truth Commission declared sexual violence as a human rights atrocity against women and girls of African descent past and present, which has never been acknowledged or sufficiently addressed.

2016 — A thirteen-year-old boy working at a Dollar General store on tribal lands of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians was sexually assaulted by a manager. The survivor and his family, members of the tribe, sued the manager and Dollar General in tribal court. Stating that tribal courts did not have jurisdiction over people who were not Native, Dollar General sued the tribe in district court. The case made it to the Supreme Court, over the question of whether tribal courts could hold non-Native people responsible for particular crimes, such as this sexual assault, occurring on tribal lands. The Supreme Court was equally divided, which meant that the ruling that allowed tribe to have jurisdiction would stand.

2016 — Three leading anti-sexual violence agencies — the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, the National Sexual Assault Resource Center, and Prevent Connect — announce the creation of RALIANCE — a collaborative initiative dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation. The initiative was made possible by a \$10 million commitment from the National Football League, the first-ever major corporate funding of sexual violence prevention initiatives.

2018- Almost 30 years after Anita Hill, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testifies at Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Justice Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination to tell her story of sexual assault by Kavanaugh and his friend decades earlier. In a national setting she discussed the neurobiology of trauma as experienced by sexual assault survivors as well as herself. These hearings spurred huge protests of sexual assault survivors who occupied the senate halls.

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The hard work and courage of countless women led to the establishment of rape crisis centers and advocacy as we know it today. You may draw on this history as you encounter the difficult work of advocacy. As you support survivors, educate your community, and dream of new approaches to ending sexual violence, you can know that you are part of a movement and your voice is an important one.

We have come a long way and we continue to struggle with a legacy of challenges. In society at large, survivors are still blamed for the violence they suffer.

Within the field, 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 pivotal in this history, their efforts and struggles were largely invisible because of racism within and outside the movement.