

Effects of Black Sexual Stereotypes on Sexual Decision Making Among African American Women

by

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Abstract

Sexual behavior is highly influenced by sexual stereotypes. The sexual stereotype most closely associated with African American women is 'Jezebel'. This study explores the influence of the sexual stereotype on the sexual decision-making of young African American women. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with 25 young African American women. Findings suggest that African American women see a connection between Black female sexual stereotypes and their sexual decision-making and connect it to increased risky sexual behavior. Respondents viewed hip-hop music videos as the primary conduit of this exploitation. Implications for culturally responsive content in HIV prevention education are discussed.

Key words: African American women, stereotypes, sexual decision-making, and HIV risk

Introduction

Over 65% of African American high school students report having had sexual intercourse, 15% had sexual intercourse before the age of 13, 29% had sexual intercourse with more than 4 persons, and 38% did not use a condom at their last reported intercourse (CDC, 2010). Risky sexual behaviors, such as these, increase the risk for HIV infection and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Weinstock, 2004; CDC, 2009; Martin et al, 2009). Currently, African American girls are one of the fastest growing groups to contract HIV, with rates even exceeding those of African American boys (Aronowitz, Rennells, & Todd, 2006). Some scholars have suggested that the negative sexual health statistics among African American girls are strongly influenced by sexualized images of African American women. For instance, Stephens and Phillips (2003) contend that the historic over-sexualized stereotypes of African American women publicized in the media and in broader society have helped to shape the perception of African American women's and girls' sexuality. These images, with their highly sexual undertones, may influence the way in which African American females view themselves (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 2006) as well as influence the way in which others value and interact with them (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The goal of this study is to explore how sexual stereotypes influence the sexual decision-making of young African American women.

History of the Black Female Sexual Stereotype

Historical Origins

Hammonds (1995) argues that the world's preoccupation with African American women's sexuality began when Europeans' made initial contact with the African continent. Hammonds posits that the nineteenth-century image of the African woman was linked to that of a prostitute through the capture and public display of the Hottentot Venus'. The Hottentot female was Sarah Bartmann, an enslaved African. Bartmann was objectified and placed on public display for exhibition to the masses because scientific experts considered her genitalia and buttocks sensational and extraordinary. Commentators considered the genitalia of Bartmann and other African women as 'primitive' and a sign of their sexual appetites. These beliefs became the foundation of Western thinking and treatment of the Black female body.

According to Hammonds' scholarship, at the end of the nineteenth century European experts in fields ranging from anthropology to psychology 'scientifically' concluded that black female body embodied the notion of uncontrolled sexuality. Enslaved Africans were labeled 'savage' and 'primitive', which justified the idea that they could not control their own bodies, and therefore validated the need for white ownership and domination. Over the years, several stereotypes about the primitive nature of women of African descent have emerged. For the purpose of this discussion, we will only focus on the sexual stereotype - Jezebel.

The Black Female Sexual Stereotype

Jezebel is a biblical figure in the Book of Kings. By manipulation or seduction, Jezebel was accused of misleading the saints of God into sins of idolatry and sexual immorality. In Christian lore, a comparison to Jezebel suggests that a person is a pagan or an apostate masquerading as a servant of God (Windsor, 2011). As a cultural symbol, Jezebel is associated with false prophets and fallen women. The Jezebel stereotype is the most overtly sexual image associated with African American women. She is depicted as a loose woman who is unable to control her sexual drives (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). When associated with enslaved African women, this image promoted the notion that these women had insatiable sexual desires.

The Jezebel image perpetuates misguided messages about the sexuality of African American women that persists today. Stephens and Phillips (2003) highlight the contemporary Jezebel mutations seen in popular culture, including freaks, gold diggers, divas, and baby mamas. This image is depicted in music video's, movies, Internet, and gaming (Medina, 2011; Rose, 2000). As mass media promotes negative female stereotypes that dominate the portrayal of African American females, society's bias becomes commonplace and internalized by both society and the object of desire (Collins, 2000; Gandy, 2001; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2005; Stephens & Few, 2007). Consequently, these representations seem real and foster a narrow view of African American women (Holtzman, 2004).

Consequences of the Black Female Stereotype

Researchers argue that as a consequence of sexual stereotypes, African American women have been, and are still, unable to effectively negotiate sexual encounters resulting in their increased susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Aral et al., 2008; Collins, 1998; McNair & Prather, 2004; Wingood & DiClemente, 1992).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed several HIV prevention education evidence-based interventions (EBIs) targeting African American youth (Townsend, 2010). The typical EBI offers 4 to 10 sessions lasting from 50 to 188 minutes. Most of these interventions focus on a combination of constructs including: intentions, environmental conditions, skills, positive attitude, perceived norms, consistency, positive emotional reaction, self-efficacy, risky behaviors, and HIV knowledge. While the results consistently show an immediate increase in HIV knowledge and skills, long-term risky behavior remains less effected. Townsend et al (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 54 research studies using seven EBIs with a majority African American population (51%). Researchers conclude that while all EBIs consistently addressed key constructs they do not devote adequate time or attention to environmental factors (such as culture, community and media influences), which may be necessary to produce behavior change.

In 2003, Wingood et al conducted a 12-month prospective study on the exposure to the highly sexualized content of rap music on African American females adolescents' sexual attitudes and choices. The study included 522 single African American females between 14 and 18 years old. Wingood et al (2003) found that African American adolescents exhibited higher rates of risky sexual behavior and laboratory confirmed STIs. Over the 12-month follow-up, 37.6% acquired a new sexually transmitted disease, 4.8% hit a teacher, 12.1% reported being arrested, 14.8% had sexual intercourse with someone other than their steady partner, 44.2% reported using drugs, and 44.4% consumed alcohol. Researchers conclude that women in rap music videos model behavior that is salient to young Black women. The highly explicit sexual images may have long-term effects on young African American women's self-perceptions and sexual decision-making.

These findings reinforce the importance of African American culture in HIV prevention (Davis et al., 2010; Nobles et al., 2007; Randolph & Banks, 1993). Understanding the influence of sexual stereotypes may help to explain differences in healthy and maladaptive sexual decision making among African American girls and women.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used to explore the influence of sexual stereotypes on the sexual decision-making of African American women. Given that current knowledge about HIV preventive behavior among African American women has not led to a reduction in the incidence of HIV infection in this population, there is a need to explore the influence of stereotypes on sexual decision making through the lived experiences of the women experiencing the phenomenon. Ultimately, we believed that a process based on critical reflection would promote insightful reflections and yield richer data.

Participants

Participant eligibility for the study included: being between 18 and 25 years old, African American, and having had sexual intercourse. Participants were recruited from advertisements posted at college campuses, churches, health departments, and Planned Parenthood clinics located in two zip codes in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Eligible women were enrolled in the study, which began with an informed consent process as approved by the University of Georgia's internal review board. Study participants consisted of a purposeful sample of 25 African American women. Data were collected using two approaches: in-depth individual interviews and focus groups. When potential participants responded to advertisements they were asked if they would be interested in participating in interviews as well as focus groups. Ten women participated only in the individual interviews, and 10 participated only in the focus groups. The remaining 5 women were participants in both the individual interviews and focus groups. Participants received \$20 for each data collection session.

All participants identified as African-American, heterosexual, Christian, and sexually active. All participants completed high school or obtained a GED, three completed some college, and four finished a Bachelor's degree. Participants' parents had varying levels of education. All indicated that both parents had completed high school or obtained a GED, with the exception of two who stated they did not know the level of education of their fathers.

Design

The researchers designed a two-pronged approach to the study design using in-depth individual interviews and focus groups. Both protocols included a series of questions meant to guide the interactive discussion and enhance the flow of the participants' responses. Participants were asked four broad questions about their HIV knowledge, perceptions of African American women's HIV risk, historical and social factors that influence their safe sex practices, and the intersection of race, class, and gender on their sexual decision-making. Individual interviews gave the study depth and detail while focus groups gave this study scope and connectivity. Ultimately, the goal of this study was not to be able to generalize in a statistical sense, but to gain in-depth information about sexual decision-making as it pertained to the women who participated in this study.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were held at a location amenable to both the participant and researcher. Focus groups, three in total, were held in a classroom on the campus of a local university. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and focus groups were conducted with four to five participants each. Each focus group lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. At the end of each data collection session participants were reminded that no personal identifiers would be used in the transcription or reporting of the study results. Each data collection session was audiotaped and transcribed in full.

Analysis

Researchers utilized the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in analyzing the data in this study. This method of analysis, simply put, involves the researcher “constantly comparing” the data as it is collected. As researchers collected data, they simultaneously performed data analysis tasks to increase understanding of various categories and their connections before moving forward with more data collection. As analysis continued, recurring categories were identified. During the final stage, after all data had been collected, we utilized the study transcripts to re-check the data. The first and second author addressed reliability by reviewing codes as they were developed. Differences in coding were resolved by consensus.

Findings

A number of questions were raised to gain insight into the participants’ risky sexual behavior and the influence of historical stereotypes on their sexual decision-making. From the broad research questions, three distinct themes emerged: “Everybody’s just sex, sex, sex, sex,” “Slavery’s Still Got Us,” and “Media Messages in Culture.” Each theme is discussed below.

Everybody’s Just Sex, Sex, Sex, Sex

The issue of heterosexual promiscuity was mentioned by all of the participants. Many women reported having sex with men whom they knew were having sex with other women. They also reported a collective inability to trust men because they are “out there” having sex with “every and anybody,” as Whitney so poignantly put it. Allyce, remarked:

I think it's sad. I think it's when a lot of women put their trust in a man as far him saying, "you're the only person I'm having sex with." 'Cause, you have some women that have a sexual partner and, originally, their sex partner didn't have it [HIV], but somewhere along the line, they got it and then gave it to their mate. So, it's kind of, like, you're putting your trust into this person and, you know, your mate may be saying, "You're the only person I'm having sex with," or "I use a condom all the time," and that's not always the case.

Although participants were virtually unanimous (24 of 25) in their belief that African American women were at great collective risk of getting HIV or a sexually transmitted infection (STI) only 16 (64%) acknowledged individual risk. They held to this belief despite reporting having had sex with men they were not in monogamous relationships with, occasionally not using condoms, as well as having had sex with partners they knew were sexually promiscuous in the past. In short, they did not see themselves as being "at risk" for contracting HIV.

Other participants also shared that they did not see themselves as being at risk because they were currently using condoms with their partners. Interestingly, Karen stated that even though she was sexually involved with more than one person and she knew at least one of those persons was sexually active with other women, because she used condoms, she was not at risk. She was not alone in her unwillingness to see herself as being at risk. Peace echoed this belief stating, "I am not at risk, I try to use condoms all the time and the times when I didn't it was with a boyfriend that I had a long time." She added, "I think a lot of people are at risk 'cause they don't know who they're sleeping with, but that is not me. I get to know a person before I even think about laying it down."

"Slavery's Still Got Us"

"Slavery's still got us," the verbatim words of Sabrina, denotes the fact that African American women are still affected in many areas, including that of sexual risk, by their history as descendants of slaves. Respondents discussed slavery in the context of being African American women. They acknowledged the impact that their race and gender had on the connectedness between their history and risky sexual behavior among themselves and their peers. Participants raised interesting issues as they discussed slavery and its impact on the sexual decision-making of their peers, but it is important to note that only the college educated women (11 participants) brought up slavery. Sabrina's remarks represent the thoughts of the other participants:

We can take it all the way back to slavery ... when we talk about Black women having their bodies taken by slave masters, and being, so desired by them and then hated by the mistress, and then complicating their own relationships with their counterparts that they actually did love and have feelings for, you know...talking about in the Black community, where, a lot of...it's a taboo, how a lot of Black females have been raped ... It's...it's very complicated, dealing with sexuality, and then ... it stems from way back then and it's still a major issue for us African American women and our sexuality. It's very, very complex.

Sabrina acknowledged that although she sees slavery as a topic worthy of discussion as it relates to the sexual risk taking of Black women today, it is not something that “permeates her mind.” She added, “if it weren’t for this interview I probably wouldn’t be just thinking about it and I definitely don’t think about it when I am about to have sex.”

Both Michelle and Ashley underscored Sabrina’s perspective, that had they not been participants in this study they would not be thinking about the relationship of slavery to risky sexual behavior. However, after Michelle paused to give the idea some thought, she shared:

Being Black and female it is hard because we are taught to take care of our family and trust our men. It’s like a slap in the face to ask him to wear a condom. I mean it really says, “I don’t trust you. I don’t trust where you’ve been.” It sounds stupid saying it out loud, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Female slaves had to stroke their man’s ego and remind him that he was still a man after the owners had belittled them. We still do the same thing. We ... still remind them they’re men and sometimes that means giving them our unwavering trust.

Echoing the same view Michelle stated, “It’s hard, you have to balance control with taking care of your man and that is definitely a result of ... slavery.”

Andrea had also given thought to the notion of slavery and its relationship to Black women, family, and sex. Interestingly, she emphasized that only a certain class of women link slavery to the sexual risk of Black women today as she suggested that only women of a certain “education level” would even think about such a connection. She stated:

I don't think people think about it. I think because I've been educated about the topic I know about it and I know its origins and I know it came from Africa with the whole history of how African women were stereotyped and then it transferred into African-American women with slavery and things of that nature. So I feel like once you reach a certain education level then you can connect to it, but the average woman on the street, who maybe graduated from high school or didn't graduate from high school, would not connect those two factors.

Andrea's statement is a microcosm of the participants' opinions, which holds that the average African American woman would not link slavery or its history to sexual risk. This is further emphasized by the fact that only the college-educated women even mentioned a connection between the two. It is also important to note that although all of the women who discussed slavery acknowledged that it still affects risky sexual behavior in the African American community they had a difficult time connecting it to their lived experience.

Sabrina further emphasized the disconnectedness between her generation and their enslaved ancestors stating that, "It really all relates to Black people becoming middle class. A lot of our connection to the past was when we were poor and in the struggle." She went on to add, "The more we get the more we forget. We think we are like everybody else, but we're not. After being asked to elaborate on her statements Sabrina noted:

It's almost like we have bought into the hype that the things in the past don't affect us today. We believe that being Black keeps us from getting jobs or keeps us from moving into nice areas, you know. But we can't believe that after hundreds of years society still wants to portray us as hoes. I don't know why people can't see that, and Black folks get a degree and a little money and they just go blind to that.

Essence, a freshman in college, was the youngest participant to share thoughts on the issue of slavery and its connection to sexual decision-making. Her thoughts were significantly different than some of the other participants who did not see a connection between slavery and the sexual decision making of Black women of her generation.

The whole thing is we are Black and women. We're used to getting bought and sold, so we do it to ourselves. I don't know if slavery will ever be over for us. We not picking cotton, but not much else has changed.

Media Messages in Culture

Participants agreed that media messages in popular culture have an impact on the sexual decision-making of African American women. All agreed that the portrayal of African American women in the media affects their decisions to take sexual risks. They emphasized that their race and gender are the primary focus of popular culture, expressing that men and no other race of women are portrayed in the media in the same way that they are, specifically as sex objects. They went on to explain that what they denoted as "status," which seemed to be how they articulated class, was very closely related to being involved in the "industry" or popular culture. Participants expressed that they are bombarded with sex. Sex is visible in party ads, club fliers, television, and especially music videos, which was the primary focus of the participants. Although we originally set out to capture multiple expressions of popular culture in the media, participants focused solely on music videos. Even after probing about their perceptions of the messages in magazines and in television shows, participants' attention consistently came back to music videos, specifically rap videos.

While many of the participants discussed the effect of videos on both themselves and their peers, Sabrina and Maria shared their views regarding the influence of videos on younger African American girls. Maria noted, "Young girls, they are definitely looking at the videos," whereas Sabrina similarly stated, "like teenagers and younger kids, it definitely affects their decisions." Essence readily admitted that despite its effect on younger girls the music video industry has an effect on girls in her age group as well:

Because, like, a lot of people see, like, that video girls or dancers on TV, and it's like, well, "I want to be a video girl"...well, "You've gotta have sex..." "Oh, I can have sex to be a video girl, that's no problem," you know what I mean?

Expressing a similar sentiment Stacy added:

Music videos are like the black girls' Hollywood. I mean White women have been turning tricks on some man's couch for decades trying to get a two liner in a movie. Young black girls do the same thing for videos ... they have sex, they let themselves be all loose, and they let dudes paint them as hoes. I remember in that Tip Drill video where some dude slid a credit card down the crack of a girl's butt. That was gross, but hey, that's what she was willing to do to be there, you know.

Many of the participants talked about being shocked by not only what people were willing to do to get into videos, but also about how much videos have changed since they were younger. Sharing her feelings about the changes in music videos since she was a child, Allyce's comments echoed that of many other participants and illustrate what they reported regarding Black women and sex in music videos:

Ooh, being Black and being female. It's crazy when you turn on the TV and everything is sex. Like, everything, like, the music videos. I know people always use that example, but it's like sex sells everything. And, it's like, you turn on BET and all these Black women are just selling sex and it's crazy because, I feel, for the – for the young girls that's growing up – 'cause, you know, when we were younger, you know, we had music videos, but the only girls, you know, for real that you see in a video was like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and, you know, like they doing their thing, but it's not – it's not revealing.

Fueled by Allyce's comments, Lilly added:

You got little girls that looking at Trina and Kalise. You got them looking at these women and they out here talkin' 'bout how "my milk shake brings all the boys to the yard" and then you turn and you even look at the guy performers, and all of a sudden now – all the songs that are heard now are glorifying stripping.

Several women commented on the theme of the stripper that is now a part of modern day rap. Karen noted, "Everything is about being a stripper now. It's all over the songs. Hell, girls even hang at strip clubs now. The favorite spots are Diamonds and Stokers." Angela said, "They are so brainwashed by the music. It's funny; people act like they aren't, but why else would you be hangin' at the strip club? I mean girls go in there with drinks and shit just to hang out. Whatever!"

Several participants stated that they were not surprised at the attraction of their peers to being in or watching videos. Sabrina shared:

It is really sad because they're [videos] degrading but it's one of the only places where we [Black women] are seen as sexy. We don't have to be a size two with no curves. You can have butt and hips and be juicy and that sells the video. There's nowhere else where that's sexy. So I am not surprised that people are willing to jump into the videos if they can.

Following Sabrina's comment Andrea added, "You are right it is sad, but true. Especially if you are the type of girl who needs somebody else to tell you, you are beautiful."

In addition to seeking approval regarding their appearance participants expressed that being a part of music videos had a lot to do with what they called "status." Peace reported, "You get the bling [diamonds] when you are a video girl" noting, "Everybody wants to wear Gucci or Prada and at our age how else are you going to have that kind of money?" Sabrina also emphasized that girls her age just "want to be known and have stuff." Although the participants did not use the word "class," their discussion regarding "status" and "being known" indicated that they are giving some thought to class and its impact on sexual risk.

The participants agreed that media messages play a major role in whether or not they make risky sexual decisions. It is important to note, however, that music and videos were the main avenues of media that participants discussed, which may show that these are the most influential media modes available to them today.

Discussion

The horrific ways that African American women were treated during the historical time of U.S. slavery still affect young women today, specifically in their sexual decision-making. The stereotype of the "Jezebel" exists presently and can be seen regularly in the popular media (Wallace, 1996). According to some participants in this study, this imposed stereotype has become internalized by many of their peers, and it heavily influences their sexual decision-making. Sabrina reported:

We can take it all the way back to slavery, you know what I'm saying, when we talk about Black women having their intimacies taken by slave masters ... So it's very complicated and it just is...it stems, you know, from way back then and it's still a major issue for us, African American women and our sexuality. It's very, very complex.

The complexity of the slavery issue goes far beyond the scope of this study, but the discussion of slavery among the participants definitely suggests that this is a multi-layered area of exploration. According to Leary (2004), who has written extensively on Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, there has been an intergenerational trauma that originated with slavery and has been affecting the African American community since that time.

Although Sabrina and others support the findings of Leary that the effects of North American slave experience still exist today, many participants underscored their belief that women are influenced by these historical references without any real knowledge or awareness of them. This sentiment aligns with the literature (Leary, 2004; Taylor, 1998) in that women do not have to be well read or historically astute to be affected by their history and that of their ancestors. There are behaviors that are passed down without knowledge of origin, yet are still passed down.

According to Wallace (1996), it was during slavery that the myth of the “Jezebel” was born. African American women were seen as “loose,” “whores,” by their oppressors. Regardless of their free or enslaved status, this myth followed African American women everywhere (Wallace, 1996). The data collected in this study support the notion that while young African American women don’t always link the “Jezebel” image to slavery, they still see those attributes being imposed on them by popular media today. As presented earlier, the participants explained that the media, specifically music and music videos, continue to portray them in this way, and the portrayal has become increasingly more prominent and impossible to miss. Young African American women participating in the music videos are often referred to as video “hoes” and, in large part, this is related to their apparel and connection to sex. The lyrics of “hip-hop” and “gangsta rap” songs are comprised of predominantly sex and violence, and contribute to the misogyny of women. Recording artist T.I. raps in his song “Get Loose”:

Ay shawty, bust it open for me; Let me see you get loose
If you really wanna show me that you love me, get loose
No Grey Goose, if you don't get loose
Get up out the coupe if you won't get loose
Bend it over, reach for yo toe, get loose
Hold on to the pole, drop it low and get loose
No x-o if you don't wanna get loose
No more dro unless you gonna get loose

This is only one example of how African American women are portrayed in the media, but it is an example of a major barrier to effective HIV prevention. For instance, the second line of this verse, “If you really wanna show me that you love me, get loose” suggests that in order to prove love in a relationship, sex must be present. If participants and their younger counterparts are influenced by the urge to “prove their love,” it is not difficult to imagine that HIV prevention education will not be enough to effect behavior change. The results of this study suggest that the inclusion of historically grounded theoretical frameworks in prevention initiatives with African American women is a viable one.

Implications

Social service providers struggle daily to both develop effective prevention strategies and provide services and support to individuals who have already contracted HIV. Working alongside other individuals interested in being change agents in the field of prevention, they have both studied and identified high-risk populations and prevention education models. HIV/AIDS is not just a medical issue, but a political, social, and ethical one as well.

This study impacts the HIV prevention education at several different levels. It provides practitioners with more information related to outreach gaps in the African American female community as well as beneficial information for HIV health educators regarding how to proceed further in their efforts of HIV/AIDS prevention in the African American female community. For example, the results of the study suggest that prevention strategies targeting African American women must address the issue of sexual stereotypes as influenced by media messages. As previously mentioned, some literature (Saul, Moore, Murphy, & Miller, 2004; Wingood & DiClemente, 1995) concludes that many African American women are at risk for contracting HIV based on their inability to reconcile the sexualized images of themselves. Whether or not the participants feel stigmatized by sexual stereotypes cannot be determined. However, the results indicate young African American women recognize that these images do impact them. The influence of sexual stereotypes must be addressed in prevention initiatives and channeled into a desire to practice safe sex. Apart from changes to prevention initiatives, the information gained from this study can also provide evaluators with some suggestions from which to work when evaluating the effectiveness of HIV education (i.e., measuring increases in knowledge is not sufficient to prove effectiveness).

The social service provider's emphasis on client empowerment can be extremely useful when working with a population akin to the one used in this study. The data collected in the interviews and focus groups showed a relationship between self-esteem and sexual decision-making. Some empowerment interventions implemented within this population could prove to be useful in efforts to decrease risky sexual behavior among young African American women.

It is important that public health educators use information, such as the results of this study and those similar to it, to create both culturally sensitive and gender-specific interventions, in hopes of reaching the enormously diverse population of African American young women. Utilization of components related to popular culture, especially music and music videos, discussions related to positive relationships, and the inclusion of lessons and struggles related to sexual stereotypes are some examples of steps practitioners can take to make programs more gender and culturally relevant.

Until there is a cure for AIDS, social service providers must continue working toward efforts that decrease risky sexual behavior among all populations, but specifically high-risk populations such as African American women. It is important that public health educators contribute to the literature on HIV/AIDS from a cultural as well as psychosocial perspective, so that studies continue to exist to aid program developers in their creation of new and innovative initiatives. Practitioners must be change agents in this society's "War on AIDS," which cannot be done without listening to the voices of Black women and understanding the factors that contribute to their sexual decision making.

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