defending their interests against other forms of structural oppression.

Bringing about feminist changes will only be truly possible if mainstream feminism works to combat discrimination in all its forms, from gender to class and race. True equity starts with ensuring that everyone has access to the most basic of needs.

OF #FASTTAILEDGIRLS AND FREEDOM

Like a lot of others, I was a fast-tailed girl before I really understood what those words meant. It’s one of those colloquialisms you hear as a child in certain communities that is half-warning, half-pejorative. To be a “fast-tailed girl” is to be sexually precocious in some way. You are warned both not to be a fast-tailed girl, and also not to associate with “those fast-tailed girls.” Sometimes it is shortened to “fast,” but either way, it is presented as a bad thing. The elders who typically use it are often attempting to protect young women from being perceived as Jezebels. When I started the #FastTailedGirls tag on Twitter with my friend journalist Jamie Nesbitt Golden in December 2013, thousands of women came together in an outpouring of emotion. When you consider the long history of sexual violence perpetrated against Black women in America, the roots of this particular aspect of respectability politics are easy to grasp. Here respectability politics are not just about clothes or speech, they
are about governing how young Black women engage with their own sexuality as it is developing. This is meant to be protective, but it is often oppressive.

However well meaning, warnings about avoiding being fast are a deeply flawed response to the problem of sexual violence. Why? Well, you don’t actually have to be sexually precocious to be labeled a fast-tailed girl. Perception is everything, and so a host of perfectly normal, age-appropriate behaviors like talking to boys, wearing shorts, and wearing makeup, or even going through puberty early are enough to convince some people that you’re headed for trouble. And once that perception is entrenched, any bad things that happen to you are automatically your fault. Like other expressions of Madonna-whore complexes, there is an idea that bad things don’t happen to good girls.

Research done over the past decade by the Black Women’s Blueprint and the Black Women’s Health Imperative, two organizations that work to address the specific needs and concerns of Black women, show that some 40 to 60 percent of Black American girls are sexually abused before age eighteen. And those girls are likely to be labeled fast-tailed retroactively by people who need to believe that what happened to them was their fault. Because they must have done something to entice a man’s interest, the victims watch their abusers evade scrutiny and ultimately justice. This is nowhere more evident than in the recent condemnation of R. Kelly, whose marriage in 1994 to a then fifteen-year-old Aaliyah, as well as alleged video evidence of him urinating on another teenager, and his subsequent trial on child pornography charges weren’t enough to end his career, much less impact his freedom. In turn the girls were blamed for being near him, for not knowing better, for not being prepared to navigate interactions with an adult predator who had celebrity and wealth on his side. I can’t say that I’m surprised by Kelly’s ability to avoid consequences. Often it is easier for the community to focus on the girls than on potential predators.

My grandmother warned me at length about being fast and about hanging out with fast-tailed girls over the eight years that I lived with her. When I later moved in with my mother at the age of twelve, I learned that a pubescent body was enough to make me fast in the eyes of some people. I was something of a tomboy despite family efforts to turn me into a little lady, and while the lectures from my grandmother about who I should befriend remained the same, my mother wielded the term fast like a weapon. When a man stared at my suddenly prominent nipples on a windy day, I got in trouble for being fast. I never told my mother about the elderly family friend (truly old, he wasn’t much younger than my grandfather) who’d started hitting on me long before our miniskirt battles, or about the babysitter who’d molested me and whose nickname for me still makes me nauseous.

What my mother saw as me being fast-tailed was really the fumbling efforts of a survivor struggling to figure out my own sexuality without someone else’s input. Because everything I did was already wrong in her eyes, I was convinced I couldn’t tell her what had happened to me. That she would see it as my fault, much the way she interpreted my blossoming body as an invitation to grown men. Our already strained relationship deteriorated further over the years that followed as my body and my
interests developed past the boundaries of what she deemed acceptable. Clothes, friends, even phone calls were battlegrounds for a war with no winners and no hope of resolution.

As an adult I can look back and see that my mother was probably afraid for me, because I was so far from her idea of a respectable young lady. I hung out with boys, wore midriff-baring shirts and miniskirts when I could, and practiced flirting like some people breathe. I wasn’t Jezebel or Lolita, but she couldn’t see that, and I didn’t have the words to explain that I was fighting to control my own body. For young Black American girls there is no presumption of innocence by people outside our communities, and too many inside our communities have bought into the victim-blaming ideology that respectability will save us, not acknowledging that we are so often targeted regardless of how we behave. The cycle created by racist narratives and perpetuated by the myth of the fast-tailed girl is infinitely harmful and so difficult to break, precisely because of the ugly history of sexual violence against Black women and other women of color.

I was lucky enough to be a smart girl who could write, even if I was incredibly socially awkward, and while my teachers loved me, it was the kindness of the girls we often see framed in media as the Mean Black Girls that really gave me access to a wider, healthier life. I grew up with the boys who became gang members, but it was the girls who were in their path who taught me how to differentiate between who was dangerous in general and who was dangerous to me specifically. By the time we were ten years old we needed to be able to tell the difference, because no one was coming to save us but us.

Most of us had parents or guardians, had people who did their best to shelter us, but the first steps toward independence were also steps into a broader world full of danger. There we faced more than just the patriarchal church leaders, the grandfather who expected you to be ladylike, or even the teachers who hated everything from bracelets to silliness from girls like us. We had to worry about all the other social dangers of police and predators and learn to navigate a world where poverty meant that the street sometimes spoke to us, and sometimes outright shouted invitations.

For the girls who couldn’t code-switch, the ones who struggled with school and home, there was always the street. The girls who could run away often did, because they weren’t safe at home, and the swaggering braggadocio of the streets sometimes made them less anxious. They had internalized the stress, had found that the danger they might face at home was too much to stick out. Media always makes wild, violent girls out of the ones who resist the mantra to “stay home, be ladylike, be silent about your fears,” and it’s true some of them end up violent.

But girls and young women are far more often the victims of violence than the perpetrators of it. The fact that they are often in harm’s way because they have no other options is erased from discussions of what has happened to them, of what might happen to them again.

Yes, girls in that age category are sometimes complicit in those kinds of crimes, and are ultimately responsible for at least some of their choices. But that doesn’t begin to accurately reflect the extent of the ways that patriarchy influences girls in underresourced neighborhoods. Some girls end up trafficked; others
become so involved in gangs that the gang takes the place of their families. The hypermasculinity of gang culture can seem like protection if you've never been safe. And the lines between types of violence get very blurry when you are exposed to it constantly. The long-term emotional impact can be severe for girls who have been exposed to violence either as victims or as witnesses. Girls in violent areas can suffer from higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and substance use.

Girls of color in a patriarchal system have experienced more abuse, violence, adversity, and deprivation than protection. Yet programs that focus on “at-risk” girls tend to focus more on job skills and preventing pregnancy and not on equipping them with better coping mechanisms. We need to shift the conversation about systems from vague assertions that work is empowering and early pregnancy is bad to one where we support the healing and healthy development of girls and young women in every community.

While the suffragette and labor movements of the early twentieth century brought about great strides toward equality for white women, for Black women in particular and women of color in general, unpunished sexual violence was and remains a constant threat. Despite the narratives espoused by lynching advocates, white women were not the ones who were most at risk from sexual violence. Black women were expected to adhere to every aspect of respectability pushed on them by Jim Crow laws as well as by community norms established in the wake of slavery. However, it didn't really matter how Black women and girls dressed or behaved, because white men could and often did assault them for sport.

Unlike white women, Black women had not even the thin veneer of legal protection on their side. It wasn't until Recy Taylor, a twenty-four-year-old Black mother and sharecropper, was attacked in Abbeville, Alabama, on September 3, 1944, by six white men that the possibility of legal recourse for such crimes even entered the national discourse. The Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor was formed by Rosa Parks and several other civil rights leaders of the time to attempt to get some measure of justice for Mrs. Taylor. The crime, which garnered extensive coverage in the Black press, never saw the indictment of the accused, but it did help pave the way for women of color to be able to turn to the law for help.

From Rosa Parks and the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor to Korean feminists pushing for the Japanese government to pay reparations for victims of the wartime practice of “comfort women,” women of color have always organized to combat sexual violence. More recently groups like Incite! and the Human Rights Project for Girls have highlighted the reality that sexual abuse is a key factor in young women of color ending up in the school-to-prison pipeline. When the work centers on the most marginalized targets of sexual harassment and abuse, it benefits not only their communities, but all communities.

Although there was no real justice for Recy Taylor, we can look at the Daniel Holtzclaw verdict in Oklahoma and see the impact of a history of organizing: Holtzclaw, a former police
officer, was convicted of sexually assaulting twelve Black women and sentenced to 263 years in prison after organizers brought media attention to his case, and the police department actually held him accountable instead of trying to minimize or conceal his crimes. It’s not enough to focus on the most visible victims; we must use every opportunity to challenge rape culture at all levels. We must challenge violence from not only those we think of as rapists but also those who administer this system that privileges rapists over their victims, and that normalizes the harassment and abuse of the most vulnerable.

In any given week you can find articles from mainstream, ostensibly feminist sites that turn rape prevention into a circle jerk of not quite victim blaming. They’re filled with tips about how to fight a stranger, what not to wear or drink, and where not to go. Emily Yoffe’s 2013 Slate piece “College Women: Stop Getting Drunk” pushed for a dry campus life for women so they could avoid being sexually assaulted. Sometimes these articles even advocate for forcing victims to testify against their will, as illustrated in Amanda Marcotte’s 2014 Slate piece “Prosecutors Arrest Alleged Rape Victim to Make Her Cooperate in Their Case. They Made the Right Call.” Though these pieces are generally well meaning, they ultimately frame rape as something that a potential victim can prevent if they learn the steps of this peculiar dance that is trying to avoid being possibly assaulted, the immediate response is often one of several questions ranging from “What were you wearing?” to “Why were you there?” to “Had you been drinking?” The answers to those questions can never be relevant—ultimately victims are assaulted because someone chose to attack them.

Instead of tips on how to not be a rapist, how to teach people not to rape, or even on creating therapeutic outlets for potential rapists, we find a half dozen tips on preventing a mythical stranger from raping an able-bodied, alert, physically fit person with excellent reflexes and an exceptional amount of luck.

These tips never address disability, differences in flight-or-flight (or freeze) adrenaline responses, or even the reality that most assailants are known to their victims. Often, the articles are dissected and derided by readers within hours of being posted. So why do they keep showing up? The easy answer is that they make people feel better. After all, if you think you can stop someone from being hurt with a bit of advice, then you can also protect yourself by following the tips. It’s a tidy bit of feel-good magical thinking that absolves us all from confronting the reality of what it will take to end sexual assault. After all, no one has a quick and easy solution for any crime, much less for one like rape, that can manifest in so many ways and often leads to a victim being revictimized during the reporting process.

It’s easy to blame the patriarchy, to rightfully point at the men who rape and hold them accountable. What’s harder is to notice the women who sometimes passively direct rapists toward their victims by contributing to the hypersexualization of women of color under the guise of empowerment. That rape is always the fault of the rapist is true and accurate, but it is also an incomplete assessment of rape culture. Beyond the space that is cultural appropriation, or even the bizarre periodic “accidental” bouts of blackface, there’s the problem of theoretically feminist white women who think “sexy Pocahontas” is an em-
powering look instead of a lingering fetishization of the rape of a child. The same imagery they claim to find sexually empowering is rooted in the myth of white women's purity and every other woman's sexual availability.

There's nothing empowering about the idea that the road to their sexual freedom is making a fetish costume out of a culture. And I know that some will argue that these are just harmless costumes. While there's certainly no attire that will protect you from sexual assault, the cultural framework that positioned Black women as un-rapeable exists in a different but similarly dangerous way for other women who are not white. This isn't about respectability politics, because these outfits are rooted in a mockery of the source cultures that they claim to honor. It's imagery that is directly offensive in part because it plays on racist tropes that fetishize the bodies of women of color. Things like Victoria's Secret's Sexy Little Geisha lingerie campaign, where most if not all of the models were white women. Or any number of Instagram-popular festivals like Coachella, where a nude or nearly nude white woman will post pictures in a fake war bonnet with provocative captions mirroring everything from Chanel's cowboy-and-Indian-themed fashion show to ads for cologne. Defenders of the imagery will often argue that they mean to honor the nations they think they are imitating and that they are doing no real harm. But the rape statistics for Indigenous women don't match that argument.

One in three Indigenous women will be victims of sexual assault, and the abuser is most likely to be a white man. Moreover, white men are not only most likely to assault women from this group, they are also the demographic most likely to sexually assault white women. Statistically speaking, white men are most likely of all groups of men to commit sexual assault. But too often it is framed as though the attention of white men isn't dangerous for women who live outside that narrow range of protection white supremacist rhetoric affords some white women.

Objectification isn't harmless, and the ways it can play out span race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. When fetishization goes beyond consensual kink and into a green light to target communities, then we have to break down how sexual empowerment narratives can be twisted to feed into the problem.

When the humanity of women of color is erased by these dehumanizing tropes, the duty of feminists who claim to fight rape culture is to push back. Instead, all too often women of color are left to explain and fight on their own, because some of the same feminists who understand objectification and fetishization when it impacts them suddenly can't understand their role in the problem. And while the reasons for this vary, they can largely be attributed to the notion that the women donning the costumes feel "powerful, sexy, and exotic," as though their feelings matter more than the lives of those they are giving rape culture tacit permission to harm.

When we talk about rape culture, we have to think about who is at risk. Indeed, who is being put at risk by the ways that racist tropes are bolstered in feminist circles? We know that racism plays a role in every walk of life (well, we should know that), and that includes not only who is believed when they report being assaulted, but how much they have to fear reporting an assault.
Yet we know that resources like culturally competent counselors, safer spaces like shelters, even police officers who are equipped to take a report without doing further harm are lacking for sex workers, trans women, and many women of color—and still we see attempts to insist that reporting it will stop sexual assault. But if the people most likely to commit assault are also the ones most likely to be insulated from consequences, then what good are we really doing for victims?

We know that colonialism and imperialism rely heavily on the use of rape as a tool of genocide. That dynamic of racism and misogyny intertwined continues to haunt our culture even as we attempt to combat it. We know that women of color are more likely to be victims of police brutality and less likely to be supported, much less protected. When we encourage victims to turn to the police, but ignore that the second most common form of police misconduct is sexual assault, how are we helping victims feel safer?

While we don’t know how many police officers actually engage in sexual assault as part of police brutality, we do know from a report published by CNN in October 2018 that between 2008 and 2013, police officers were charged with at least four hundred sexual assaults. Additionally, during that same time span, officers were accused of over six hundred incidents of groping. What’s missing from these statistics is whether the officers were on duty; whether the numbers include domestic cases between officers and their own partners; and what percentage of all encounters are being represented. And we don’t have that information precisely because police departments do not make it available. It goes without saying, however, that these aren’t the kinds of numbers that can make a victim feel safe going to the authorities even before you get into the sad reality that reporting rarely leads to justice.

Rape is a violent act, but it is one of the final steps in the violence against marginalized people that is embedded in the fabric of human society. Like in any abusive relationship, the violence starts with manipulation, coercion, and propaganda. Rape has been used to repress, to undermine, and to control because power functions in the same awful ways in every generation. The fear of mythical Black rapists that was used after the Civil War to justify the white mobs that terrorized the Black communities has been subsumed into a broader anti-immigrant narrative under the current administration. Popular media continues to perpetuate racial stereotypes that were part and parcel of imperialist propaganda, particularly about women of color. Portraying Black women and Latinas as promiscuous, American Indian and Asian women as submissive, and all women of color as inferior legitimizes their sexual abuse. Portraying men of color as sexually voracious and preying on innocent white women reinforces a cultural obsession with Black-on-white stranger rape, at the expense of the vastly more common intra-racial acquaintance rape.

Justice is not served by racism, no matter how hard it is peddled by politicians and white supremacist narratives as a way to protect women. Not replicating these harmful narratives is part and parcel of ending sexual violence against women. It would be easy to claim the fallacy that “no true feminist thinks that
way" as a means to absolve the broader movement of responsibility. But the historical devaluation of some women's rights to sexual and reproductive autonomy has shaped the way we think about what it means to have the freedom to be safe from sexual violence.

Columbus revealed in his ability to assault Indigenous women with impunity, and that attitude permeates our culture to this day. The fact that enslaved Black women did not have the right to refuse the sexual demands of white men created the idea that Black women were un-rapeable, because, after all, they had no virtue to protect. Over and over, white women are held up by white supremacy as the only virtuous women, but then the tightrope narrows. How you're dressed, whether you were drinking, how developed your body is, and more become factors in justifying sexual violence. Ignoring the treatment of the most marginalized women doesn't set a standard that can protect any women. Instead it sets up arbitrary respectability-centered goal-posts against which all women are supposed to measure their behavior. That's not freedom; that's just a more elaborate series of cages that will never be comfortable or safe. Any system that makes basic human rights contingent on a narrow standard of behavior pits potential victims against each other and only benefits those who would prey on them.

Rape culture, a system that positions some bodies as deserving to be attacked, hinges on ignoring the mistreatment of marginalized women, whether they are in the inner city, on a reservation, are migrant workers, or are incarcerated. Because their bodies are seen as available and often disposable, sexual violence is tacitly normalized even as people decry its impact on those with more privilege. Rape culture doesn't happen in a vacuum; it is built consciously and unconsciously by societal norms. It requires everyone else to buy into respectability as safety, then immediately position every step away from that standard as culpability for being violated. Rape culture is normalized and ratified not only by patriarchal notions of ownership and disposability but also by attempts to combat it by buying into the framing that the patriarchy creates. Respectability politics, victim blaming, and fetishization can only create a fundamentally flawed and dangerous response.

To quote Gwendolyn Brooks, “We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.” But if we believe that only some people deserve safety, that the right to your own body has to be earned through adhering to arbitrary rules, then are we really seeing each other as equals? As human beings at all?

Obviously, the problem isn't going to be resolved by a hashtag like #FastTailedGirls, or by a few thought pieces, but the first step to finding a solution is admitting that there is something to be fixed. We'll need to keep having these conversations, keep being open to the idea of working against these socially ingrained notions so that we can stop them. The problem is not unique to Black communities, to the cisgendered, to heterosexuals, but as with every other community it touches, the internal work must be done so that the external problems can be addressed. This is a sickness that touches so many, and we need to work as partners with each other to heal it. Yet this is not a
call for outside assistance; this is a message for those outside our communities to address the racialized misogyny in their communities that perpetuates the idea of Black women as Jezebels. Any solution to this problem will require society to address all the racist, sexist tropes that frame women of color as sexually available and un-rapeable.

Freedom has a price that we all must pay together. It’s not going to happen if the stats used to combat rape culture are based on the harm done to marginalized women, but the beneficiaries of any advances are only those who have some measure of protection via white privilege. We know that trans women of color are especially vulnerable to violence; we know that whole communities of Indigenous women have nowhere to turn for safety. We know that danger comes from the very people who are supposed to be our protectors, whether that be the police or men in our communities. Rape culture is pandemic and must be fought unanimously or we will never defeat it.

We must look at the fact that even in emergency situations, white bystanders are less likely to help Black people than each other. We have to ask ourselves why the study “White Female Bystanders’ Responses to a Black Woman at Risk for Incapacitated Sexual Assault” shows that even young white women in college are less likely to help potential victims of assault if they are Black. We have to ask why white under grads said to researchers that they would be less likely to help Black women because they felt less personal responsibility for them. Or why they perceived Black victims as experiencing more pleasure in situations that they recognized as dangerous for white women.

Although white women are aware that they are also at risk because their privilege doesn’t protect them from sexual violence, a combination of racism and sexism lends itself to a significant number of them ignoring the consequences of their actions for other communities. Whether it is contributing to hypersexualized narratives around women of color, ignoring the dangers faced by those communities, or undermining those who come forward, they sometimes flex what power they do have in ways that are oppressive while they continue to imagine themselves as victims with no power to oppress.

When you can’t count on solidarity for women in danger, when bystander intervention isn’t a solution because white female bystanders may feel that a Black woman’s plight doesn’t deserve their attention because race has a more powerful effect than gender, then we aren’t really battling rape culture. And the battle will continue to evade us until we fight the internalized -isms inherent in the movement.

When Lena Dunham felt the need to dispute the claims of actress Aurora Perrineau, a victim of sexual assault who happened to be Black, because the accused was her friend, it had everything to do with race, whether Dunham admits it or not. Perrineau had accused Murray Miller, an executive producer on Dunham’s Girls show, of having sexually assaulted her, and Dunham flew to the man’s defense, citing “insider knowledge” that rendered the claim false. A year later, Dunham was issuing an apology, one that tap-danced around the ease with which she seemed to offer support to everyone who was the “right” kind of victim, or more accurately, the “white” kind of victim, until she
was challenged repeatedly. Most of the apology centers on herself, and even the part that specifically addresses Aurora Perrineau centers on Dunham and her own journey.

To Aurora: You have been on my mind and in my heart every day this year. I love you. I will always love you. I will always work to right that wrong. In that way, you have made me a better woman and a better feminist. You shouldn’t have been given that job in addition to your other burdens, but here we are, and here I am asking: How do we move forward? Not just you and I but all of us, living in the gray space between admission and vindication.

It’s painful to realize that, while I thought I was self-aware, I had actually internalized the dominant male agenda that asks us to defend it no matter what, protect it no matter what, baby it no matter what. Something in me still feels compelled to do that job: to please, to tidy up, to shopkeep. My job now is to excavate that part of myself and to create a new cavern inside me where a candle stays lit, always safely lit, and illuminates the wall behind it where these words are written: I see you, Aurora. I hear you, Aurora. I believe you, Aurora.

Public acts of racism appear bolder and more numerous in the Trump era, but it’s important to remember not only that they’re not new but also that the real harm is often done in private. When we ask why victims don’t report assault, why conviction rates are so low, and whose fault it is that rape culture persists, the answers are disheartening and interconnected. “They won’t get justice,” “We don’t care about protecting victims or punishing their attackers,” and “Everyone’s,” because ultimately it is all down to the insidious ways that rape culture is built and sustained in some of the same places, from homes to schools to churches, where it does the most harm.

And though I have largely focused on the objectifying narratives around the bodies of women of color and how mainstream feminism fails to engage them, I am in no way saying that sexual violence is only a concern of cis women. While cis women experience some of the highest rates of sexual assault, trans and gender-nonconforming people also face a heightened risk. And from a college campus to the military to a prison, no place is safe. Mingled among the victim-blaming tropes that position location as a factor for victimization is the reality that rapists attack in any environment where they think they can succeed.

And attempts to place bans on women in the military and trans women in bathrooms, or to assert that people who have been imprisoned deserve to be subjected to sexual violence, is just feeding into rape culture from different angles. Assertions that sex workers can’t be assaulted or that they exist as a release valve to prevent sexual violence are fundamentally rooted in narratives that render bodies disposable without interrogating how deep into rape culture these so-called feminist narratives have fallen.

We must remember that every victim of sexual violence does not deserve it, did not invite it, and is not responsible for the
culture that would blame the victim instead of the perpetrators. We must understand that not only do we have a responsibility to not blame victims, but that we must actively work against cultural memes that render it acceptable to foster the hypersexualization of potential targets based on skin color, gender expression, or age.

I'm not raising any young girls, but I do have plenty of them in my life. As part of my commitment to changing the way that we talk about young women's sexuality, rape culture, and gender, I've gone out of my way to teach my sons about consent. To talk to them about respect as well as the basic decency of not being a harasser. It's a tiny step, certainly not a solution to the problem. But it is a place where I can begin to intervene on a personal level. More important, as a whole, feminism has to focus on change inside individual communities as well as across the world. We have to shift the focus on anti-rape narratives away from what victims can do to prevent it and toward teaching people not to be predators in the first place. We have to stop ignoring the cultural messages we are complicit in transmitting that say some people deserve to be sexually assaulted.

Feminism must challenge these narratives, or risk yet another generation being told that respectability can save them while they watch admitted harassers and assailants face no consequences for their crimes. The problem has never been the ways that victims don’t tell, so much as it has been that some victims aren’t seen as valuable enough to protect.

I grew up with a traditional grandfather, and after my mother started dating the man who would become my stepfather when I was five, I became the daughter of an equally traditional man. They're the kind of men who opened doors and pulled out chairs and sometimes put their whole foot sideways down their throat when it came to gender. My grandfather wasn't a bad man, but he was every bit of what you might expect from someone born in 1919. He was at best benevolently sexist, and at worst sometimes outright misogynistic—though I didn't have that language for his behavior when he was still alive. I can look back, though, at the things he said about what women could or should do, the ways he balked at me being a tomboy, and see that he bought into the strict gender roles of his time, and then he had to deal with massive social changes over the course of his seventy years, as well as his daughters and granddaughters rejecting so much of what he expected from us. My dad is a little
ple in leadership roles in campaigns and in institutions that claim to be concerned with mental health. Above all, it's essential to do the work of lobbying legislators at all levels to improve access to quality mental health services in every area. We can't afford to keep pretending that mental health issues stop at the boundaries of whiteness. Instead we have to be ready, willing, and able to embrace those for whom mental health is a struggle and to make sure that we aren't contributing to their trauma under the guise of being helpful.

**THE FETISHIZATION OF FIERCE**

Depending on who you ask, I am either fiercely feminist or incredibly toxic. There's something about being willing to step into open conflict with anyone who tries you that can upset people, can confuse them. It doesn't help that my particular approach to conflict can be scathing. But for the people who are more likely to describe me as fierce than as toxic, they enjoy the knowledge that I have no problem speaking up. That I am always completely and totally willing to fight back. There seems to be a very thin line between fierce and toxic in feminist circles these days (I have been called both at various points, and honestly neither ever seemed to quite fit), but one of the things I have noticed about the term *fierce* is that it carries its own highly specialized baggage.

The women most likely to be called fierce are also those most likely to be facing the greatest social risks. The same tired tropes always end up being trotted out. The Angry Black Woman, the
Sassy Latina, and so on. What we ignore is that those narratives inform how we view the women we claim to venerate. We think of Beyoncé’s feminism as fierce right up until she turns out to be a human being who loves her spouse more than the idea of the Strong Independent Woman Who Doesn’t Need a Man.

We adore Serena Williams until she’s visibly angry while challenging a system that continually harasses her with drug tests and questionable calls from line judges. Then we think she’s too angry and needs to calm down. They’re warriors, but apparently not the right kind of warriors. Serena is castigated for her facial expressions during games, after games, when she talks about the sport at all, for responding to the sexism of referees, even for not being a good role model because she’s not polite enough in her responses to sexism and racism in her sport.

Yet their careers and their lives are amazing examples of the power to succeed as women in male-dominated industries. There’s something so wonderful about having the power to come from working-class roots to acquire not just fame and fortune, but the power to shape the culture. They give young Black women the power to delight in beauty and sexuality by having the kinds of careers that dominate mainstream media while still championing feminism as a powerful force for the good of girls. Yet when they have the audacity to not only claim feminism, but feel like they get to dictate and direct the way that they engage with it, there’s some sense that suddenly they are less qualified because they used their bodies—much maligned, much analyzed bodies—to achieve those careers.

Critics still question their idea of female empowerment. They want them to wear more clothes, to not be so strong or so sexy, or to not be so cheerfully, enthusiastically unconcerned with hitting a checklist of “appropriate” feminist milestones. But fiercely fighting your way past the boundaries that white supremacy might set isn’t for the faint of heart. We know, after all, that well-behaved women don’t make history. Still, as the criticism of both Beyoncé and Serena ramped up, as the backlash for them choosing to go their own way spread out to criticism not just of their careers, but of their personal lives, even of their children, it was clear that being so fierce had consequences.

And while those two women have the resources and the networks required to insulate themselves, the average woman fighting against the patriarchy is more likely to be far less privileged. Yet the demands that the risks be taken by those without the insulation of racial privilege never abate. Instead the narrative is one that lauds the courage of those who do take the risks, with very little discussion of the possible aftermath. Whether it is being outspoken about police brutality, harassment, and sexual assault in politics, entertainment, tech, or other industries, too often those who speak out are positioned more as sacrifices than saviors. When the seemingly inevitable backlash complete with harassment and death threats starts, some feminists will speak up; many will simply suggest contacting the police or the FBI, but they won’t offer anything else. And if anyone brings up the lack of meaningful support for victims, the conversation is quickly shifted to center on those who didn’t take the risk.

In my experience, when I have been targeted or other Black women have been the primary targets of harassment, Black
women have had to back each other up on social media. This is especially true on platforms like Twitter, where filtering out trolls is made more difficult by the lack of quality tools to handle the deluge of voices. When Jamilah Lemieux, then an editor at *Ebony*, was targeted by conservative trolls, it was Black feminist Twitter that backed her up. Whether the reason for the harassment is being pro-choice, a critique of the political choices of a GOP spokesperson, or something like what has happened to professors like Anthea Butler, Eve Ewing, and other Black academics, they are at best lauded for their fierceness from a distance by white feminist writers. More often they are ignored, or as has been the case with House representative Ilhan Omar, they are targets of white feminists like Chelsea Clinton, until the rhetoric spills over into actual physical violence.

Suddenly the same women who adore fierceness, who celebrate ideals like speaking truth to power, are all about their own personal fragility. After all, being fierce has its consequences. And besides, it’s not like they’re the police. They aren’t responsible for protecting anyone, for helping anyone access safety, or for connecting anyone with resources. Well, not anyone inconvenient, anyway. Not when there was a carceral solution that they could rely on at their fingertips.

We know that carceral feminism (a reliance on policing, prosecution, and imprisonment to resolve gendered or sexual violence) is most likely to be used against women who fight back. Particularly women of color. The state responds to public concerns around sexual violence by re-traumatizing victims. It rarely offers them anything approaching justice. The carceral impulse also informs how feminism responds to victims before, during, and after they attempt to press charges or otherwise combat the patriarchy. What has arisen repeatedly in feminism is a tendency to assume that once victims have gone to the state, their needs are all met. This is especially obvious in the responses to online harassment.

While many feminists have no problem arguing for criminalizing the behavior, they are light on ways to safeguard those experiencing it. Because of the impact of a carceral approach, we see a framework that restricts feminist horizons to structures that expect the individual to fight rather than the collective. This form of individualist feminism relies on the idea that an empowered woman can do anything. It ignores the economic and racial realities that some face.

What does individualist feminism look like in practice? While we stand on the sidelines cheering women on, largely there has been minimal collective efforts to fight oppression across multiple identities. We ignore the fact that the same structures affect us all (albeit differently), and we rely on the myths of strength rather than on any understanding of what it means to work together.

It doesn’t help that when welfare reform was enacted, politicians ignored the fact that victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and so on might not be able to go back to work immediately or at all. Without funding for public housing and other social safety nets, low-income survivors in particular found themselves “helped” right out of any measure of stability.

While we laud the strength of those who fight back, this
sometimes leads to victims being arrested for defending themselves. This is especially true in the case of sex workers, victims of domestic violence, and others who find themselves squeezed by the system that prioritizes imprisoning them over protecting them. The same carceral solutions that imprison them have taken the place of the infrastructure that allowed survivors some measure of freedom to live independently without having to rely on abusers. After all, if you can access affordable housing and welfare programs, your options are already broader than if you cannot.

It's not that the actions of survivors to defend themselves are necessarily bad or wrong. The state gives them very few options to prevent violence, and many ways to report the aftermath. For those who are not lucky enough to attract broader media attention, self-defense might open the door for them to lose years of their life to imprisonment. But when we only have carceral solutions to social problems, there is very little room for actual justice, much less healing.

In feminist circles the "fierce" warrior narrative is often held up as an honor given to the women who take the biggest risks in their careers or otherwise. "Oh, she's so brave to press charges," "It takes a strong woman to do what she did." It sounds great in passing, the idea of those who fought the patriarchy being stronger, braver, more ferocious than those who did not take the same risks. But what we don't talk about is what that costs victims. While they are fighting their way through whatever obstacles and feminism stands on the sidelines cheering them on, what happens when the coolness fades? Do we have a safety net, an idea of how to provide for the potential financial and social consequences?

Too often those who take the risks have very little in the way of a backup plan and are staring down the barrel of a life after activism with the same poverty and lack of social and emotional resources, and even more obstacles because of infamy and in some situations a criminal record. For everyone who might win a high-dollar settlement (money can't buy happiness, but it can buy some measure of stability), thousands more must figure out how to navigate life after losing. Some of our biggest icons die in relative obscurity, impoverished and alone, dependent on the kindness of strangers or the cold, clinical mercies of the state.

We love the idea of a Strong Black Woman, celebrate those who, like Anita Hill, manage to continue to have a successful career in the aftermath. But what about those who can't do that? For those without a pass back to middle class or the ivory tower, what resources are available? The same feminism that holds them up to fight the battles turns away when the war is over and doesn't bother to tend the wounds, emotional or otherwise.

Being strong or fierce or whatever appellation is applied to the ones who get brutalized, who sue, who wind up in the ground with those she leaves behind begging the world to #SayHerName sounds great, but the labels are cold comfort if we don't do more to solve the problems that they are fighting. For organizers and activists these frameworks are sometimes already in place, but for the average feminist trying to fight a local social ill, especially those living in low-income communities, society as a whole has failed to provide adequate resources. Equality is
great, but equity is better precisely because the emotional validation someone with financial security and the insulation of privilege might need is nearly useless for someone without those things. It's the Strong Black Woman problem writ large enough to include other communities, though still most likely to impact Black and Brown women.

We expect marginalized voices to ring out no matter what obstacles they face, and then we penalize them for not saying the right thing in the right way. We assign a level of resilience that is unparalleled and then once it is met, we assume that the person displaying it doesn't have feelings. Or more accurately, we decide that they don't need anyone to care about their feelings. In fact, mainstream feminism renders the feelings of white women as the primary concern, even in situations that are emphatically not about them. Take Jill Biden's announcement in support of her husband's campaign that it is time for people to move on from discussing his treatment of Anita Hill despite the clear evidence that he has his own legacy of inappropriate and unwanted contact with women. Or Alyssa Milano's response to the Georgia abortion ban with an abstinence-based "solution" that ignores the reality that those most likely to be negatively impacted are the Black and Brown women in Georgia who aren't part-time residents.

This is the dirty underbelly of the perceived fierceness of Black and Brown women. Ultimately, the fierceness narrative is a millstone around the neck, dragging them down and endangering their chances at survival. Because pop culture and media teach us that low-income women exist to serve, to be the workhorses, we don't consider what they may need.

We frame them as cold, undereducated, sassy, emotional, and actual servants to advance the cause of feminism. Quietly inserted into the narratives of their lives are idealized Mammy and Nanny expectations. Girls from the hood don't need help because they can protect themselves against everything, or so mainstream feminism believes. They are ready to brawl, to be hood rats and harridans who can force the world to change, but who clearly lack answers for the problems they face inside their communities. They are simultaneously the first responders and the last to get resources. The same fear of the hood that prevents mainstream feminism from entering it without gentrifying it also contributes to the idea that no one needs to care about the scary angry women who live there, unless they can be useful.

We must move away from the strategies provided by corporate feminism that teach us to lean in but not how to actually support each other. Organizations and initiatives are wonderful ways to tackle certain societal ills, but overwhelmingly they do little to provide care or access to care for those who need it. A victim-centered approach is more than just a phrase that looks good on paper; it has to be a key component of how we structure responses to those who fought to advance the causes that feminism holds dear. We don't even need to create a diagram in order to accomplish this goal; it already exists. We can look at existing victim-advocacy programs, can structure our responses both virtual and otherwise, to insulate victims.
In a victim-centered approach, the victim's wishes, safety, and well-being take priority. Victim-centered feminism would bring to bear specialized services, resources, cultural competence, and, ideally, trauma-informed perspectives toward caring for the needs of those who go through the trauma of testifying or pressing charges or filing lawsuits. We would provide a conduit to the professionals best able to assess survivor needs, and we'd provide critical support to survivors in the aftermath even if they were not eligible for traditional victim-support services that may exist in their area. These skills are imperative to building rapport and trust with survivors, meeting their needs, and assisting them in creating a sense of safety and security in their lives.

We need to be tackling the loss of critical community resources ranging from mental health-care clinics to housing. We need to understand that sometimes the fiercest warriors need care and kindness. We can't be afraid of their anger or their willingness to shout. We love that fierce energy in the moment, but we need to embrace it across time. We need to shift our ideas of who deserves support and move away from the idea that after the case everything is fixed.

The Hood Doesn't Hate Smart People

I have what my mother calls euphemistically a rebellious spirit. It's a nice way to describe a child who is not what you expected. This does not mean that I was always strong, always sure, or anything even remotely close to the narratives of inborn self-confidence often foisted on young Black bodies to excuse the premature expectations of adulthood. I was a cowardly child who (a) hated fighting—literally cried through a fight because I hated fighting; and (b) threw my whole self into the fight anyway. I wasn't a good fighter. I was just a child who understood that not wanting to fight is meaningless sometimes. There is a lot of research around young women of color and fighting, a narrative that lends itself to the idea that they are violent for the sake of violence. It ignores the fact that they are often the only people with an investment in their own safety outside their nearest and dearest.

I wasn't a cool kid. I was a nerd; my nickname was Books.
that the policies for one are not the policies for all. It means taking the approach that feminism can’t afford to leave any woman behind—not cis, trans, disabled, poor, sex worker, you name it—and their housing has to be treated as a priority by every organization that advocates for the rights of women.

It means that feminist candidates for public office have to commit not just to doing the popular thing and supporting the middle class but also to rolling out measures to combat homelessness, from pledging to increase spending on low-cost housing to requiring developers to provide more than a token handful of units in luxury developments. It means creating meaningful plans to control rent and to revitalize areas without displacing long-term residents. It means bolstering new-age solutions for new-age problems that allow for care at home, aging in place, and a dozen other programs that provide assistance for the women who may never earn a middle-class income, but who deserve the same level of care and concern from the candidates and the systems that rely on their votes and their labor.

My brush with maternal mortality came during my fifth pregnancy. Pregnancy has always been hard for me, and I have had more miscarriages than live births. I have been pregnant five times; three of those ended in miscarriages. My fifth pregnancy turned out to be my last. It was troubled from the start: I didn’t experience any of the normal indicators of pregnancy—no missed periods, and in fact I was seeing an ob-gyn who specialized in treating fibroids and endometriosis in part because of the increased heaviness of my cycle—so I found out about the pregnancy when I was already ten weeks along. When my husband and I heard the news (on account of that standard pregnancy test before surgery, which turned out to be necessary after all), we talked about it, and we debated aborting—I even got as far as the clinic—before we ultimately decided that we would try to make it work. We already had two sons, and while we weren’t sure we could afford a third child at
that precise moment, we wanted a daughter. My doctor advised me right off the bat that she wasn’t certain of a good outcome. I had large fibroids along with endometriosis, and my pregnancy would be very high risk. I did exactly what she said in terms of taking it easy, because I wanted to give that child the best possible chance. But after another eight weeks, the intermittent bleeding wouldn’t stop, and I knew that there was a high chance that I would not be able to carry the pregnancy to term.

I was taking an afternoon nap when the hemorrhaging started. Waking up to find blood gushing up my body is an experience I wouldn’t wish on anyone. The placental abruption that my doctor had listed as a possibility was happening, and I was going to have to do my best to take care of both of us. My husband was at work and my almost-two-year-old couldn’t dial 911 for me, so I had to make it to the phone and make my own arrangements. I’ll spare you the gory details of my personal splatter flick, but by the time I got to the hospital, I needed the abortion that would save my life. I didn’t get it immediately, despite the bleeding, and my attempts to tell the story of how flawed my care from the first doctor was led to a piece on Salon and months of harassment from so-called pro-lifers, including a group that follows Jill Stanek, a former nurse best known for claiming that premature babies were being left to die in a utility closet at a hospital in Oak Lawn, Illinois.

Her followers and others sent me death threats, claimed that I had no business being pregnant because of my status as a disabled vet (I never did figure out how my bum leg and my uterus are supposed to be connected), and generally did their best to make my life hell. Some even contacted my former employer in an effort to get me fired from a job I had already left. It was harrowing, and I did my best to stand up to it while still protecting my family. Meanwhile plenty of people who had not been in my shoes were opining on what I should have done, or whether I was telling the world enough of my personal medical details, and whether I was coping the right way, as though there’s a guidebook for the worst moments of your life.

I would like to be able to say that I felt supported by feminists. But it wasn’t my experience. Although mainstream feminists paid lip service to the idea that I deserved support, they mostly made demands. They wanted me to speak at rallies, to testify, to give them copies of my medical records. My article had gone viral, you see, and there was no shortage of attention, though the negative reactions far outweighed the positive. Amid the lawyers and activists reaching out, no one seemed to care that I was scared, that my family was being threatened, or that I couldn’t expect the same support from the police that they took for granted. I was supported by the hood. By the people who put my safety and sanity above whether I was a candidate to testify before Congress. The fact that the right to have an abortion is seen as innately feminist is accurate. But what gets obscured is that consistent access to quality health care is something everyone needs at every stage of their life. And that for many, when things go awry, the first step isn’t a lawsuit; it is survival.
Recently, the fact that the United States has a higher-than-average maternal mortality rate has brought more attention to the way racism impacts health care. We know that Black mothers in the United States die at three to four times the rate of white mothers, one of the widest racial disparities in women’s health, and that personal wealth does not protect Black mothers from that higher risk. Serena Williams’s story of having to demand necessary health care to prevent a pulmonary embolism or worse is a prime example. She’s wealthy and highly visible; the same is true of her husband. She’s well versed in her own health-care needs, and she still had to argue with the staff to get the necessary treatment.

However, while abortion is seen as a feminist issue, access to health care is not necessarily framed that way. Reproductive justice needs to be reframed to include the entire spectrum of choices surrounding every stage of women’s health, reproductive and otherwise. The United States is constantly facing a health-care crisis, and only some people seem to understand that the issues are related and reflect a systemic failure.

Some forty-five thousand people were dying each year from a lack of insurance before the Affordable Care Act. And that’s just from a lack of insurance. Add to that the people who die as a result of reaching lifetime maximums for care, or from unapproved treatments, and the number climbs. Now, as we talk about the disparity in maternal mortality rates by race, there has to be a shift in how we approach health-care access. It has to be seen as a right, not as a commodity or an option. And health-care providers have to interrogate what biases they have brought into the ways they approach patient care.

Persistent racist beliefs in medicine and otherwise are at the root of ongoing racial disparities in treatment and patient outcomes; this represents a challenge not only for twenty-first-century medical providers, but for those who fight for the access of marginalized communities to quality health care. Problems are amplified by unconscious biases that are embedded in the medical system, affecting quality of care in stark and subtle ways ranging from experiences like mine, where the pregnancy was not viable but there was plenty of judgment about what I should have done, to situations where motherhood is a death sentence because no one gets it together in time.

This is an issue that spans communities with Black, Latina, and Indigenous women facing similar complications as a result of bigotry. Alongside “Mississippi appendectomies” (which was another name for unnecessary hysterectomies performed at teaching hospitals in the South on Black women), there was the forced sterilization of Indigenous Americans, which persisted into the 1970s and ’80s, with young women receiving tubal ligations when they were ostensibly getting appendectomies. Ultimately an estimated 25 to 50 percent of Indigenous women were sterilized between 1970 and 1976. Forced sterilization programs are also a part of history in Puerto Rico, where sterilization rates are said to be among the highest in the world. Most recently, California prisons were alleged to have authorized coerced sterilization of nearly 150 female inmates between 2006 and 2010.
In countries where eugenics by way of coerced sterilization is not just a shameful history but sometimes still a current issue, we have to interrogate the lack of quality care available to the populations most impacted by eugenics. Driven by prejudiced notions, these programs informed policies on immigration and segregation, and now seem to be impacting maternal health care.

In a climate where society doesn’t value families of color, is it any wonder that the right to have children at all is still contested? Reproductive justice rightfully focuses on preserving the right to choose, but too often advocates center on access to contraception at the expense of communities that are still facing other obstacles. True reproductive justice involves not only access to affordable birth control, abortion, and health care but also providing access to those who are imprisoned, who are in immigration detention centers, who are seen as unworthy of controlling their own lives for a variety of reasons. And that’s before we get into the ways that trans, nonbinary, and intersex people are impacted by a framework that largely prioritizes the needs of cis white middle-class women.

Reproductive health care is about bodily autonomy, which is something trans people are often denied because of transphobia. Aside from being assigned a gender at birth that may not match their identity, they face obstacles in accessing medical care in general. Trans people can face ignorance or outright prejudice from medical professionals, who then become yet another barrier to quality care. Everything from accessing basic health care to safe hormone regimens can be difficult or even impossible depending on location and finances. Sadly, when some care providers discovered that their patients were trans people, their discriminatory attitudes increased to the point of refusing to write prescriptions or sometimes even see trans patients again. Others claimed they didn’t understand the needs of the transgender community, but also refused to seek out the education they lacked. That leaves trans patients in the awkward position of paying out of pocket for appointments they’ll spend providing free education to health-care providers.

A dear friend who transitioned outside the United States got breast cancer some years ago. Her care should have been fairly straightforward; she makes a good living, has excellent insurance, and lives in a state that has long had protections for LGBTQIA people codified in the law. But her excellent insurance routed her to a specialist who, while not outright discriminatory, had very little information about the transition process. So for a part of almost every appointment with her oncologist, my friend had to answer invasive questions that had nothing to do with her medical care. She wanted to be healed, needed this doctor’s help, and felt pressured into maintaining a cordial relationship while her doctor processed his feelings about gender in the midst of her treatment. It was incredibly unprofessional, and anytime she attempted to redirect the conversation he was quick to assert that he just wanted to be a better doctor. His prurient curiosity about how her wife had handled her transition mattered more to him than professional ethics. And yet, she was able to get the treatment she needed; she had to count that as a win.

With the recent proposal from the Trump administration to
roll back protections that prevent doctors from legally discriminating based on gender identity, the American government stands ready to not only allow doctors to refuse to treat trans patients, but to actively encourage this discrimination. That can mean someone who is gender nonconforming could go to the doctor for a persistent cough, and instead of their lung function being evaluated they could be turned away with no legal recourse. It won’t matter if the cough is bronchitis, tuberculosis, or lung cancer, because unless they can find a series of good doctors, their health is going to be compromised.

While being educated about your own health can lead to better care outcomes, this goes beyond advocacy and into an exploitation of a marginalized community as a walking unpaid resource. Because of bigotry, providers who refuse to see trans patients contribute to a medical culture where people who already have difficulty obtaining providers can’t easily seek out those who are better versed in their care. That means trans patients can be forced to repeatedly engage with situations that can trigger dysphoria in order to access any level of care.

And gender dysphoria can be fatal if untreated: a staggering 41 percent of the trans community has attempted suicide. Trauma in reproductive health services can drive trans people into fearing the health-care system as a whole. Between discrimination and the fear that keeps marginalized people out of doctors’ offices, trans people are less likely to get preventive care and more likely to develop complications from delayed care. This can include care during an abortion or during pregnancy. For nonbinary and trans people, access to reproductive care is already fraught because of limited access due to the economic and social barriers. Add in any health-care trauma, and the very place you should be able to get help becomes yet another emotional minefield.

It’s also critical to discuss the fact that a common reason given for a need to keep abortion accessible is fetal disability. On the one hand, no one should be forced to have a child they do not want; on the other, even though feminism as a movement is committed to eliminating discrimination, a central tenet of the right to choose should not hinge on discriminatory logic. Arguments that disability is a reason abortion needs to be legal frame being disabled as a condition incompatible with a healthy, fulfilling life. You can argue for the right to choose without arguing against the right of people with disabilities to exist.

Disability should not be a death sentence. Does that mean the right to choose should be abrogated? No. I firmly believe that abortion should be the decision of the pregnant person. But much of the concern around abortion rates has centered on the idea that abortion on demand is eugenics in action. Reproductive justice advocates should never parrot the rhetoric of eugenicists, especially around the idea that only some people are fit to exist.

Reproductive justice is fundamentally about agency and autonomy. Abortion rights should never be a fight over the value of disabled lives, because disabled people absolutely deserve to exist. Fetuses, who are potential life with no capability of surviving on their own, and are not the same as humans living on their own outside the womb, should be framed in conversations as exactly that.
Higher abortion rates in low-income communities are sometimes connected by anti-choice groups to eugenics as well. Because of environmental racism, limited access to prenatal care, and subpar nutrition and housing for many in marginalized communities, the risk factors for having a child with a serious disability are higher than average. Add in the fact that resources are limited not only for children with disabilities but also for adults with disabilities, and those higher rates of pregnancy termination make sense.

That lack of resources is what we should be addressing when we talk about reproductive justice. The mainstream reproductive rights movement does not talk about disability enough to even know how to address these concerns. Instead the pro-life movement has successfully centered itself as the movement concerned with the right of disabled children to be born. As that movement has seized control of this conversation, pro-choice activists have largely absolved themselves of the responsibility of advocating for reproductive options for disabled adults, and of getting into a discussion of what it means to screen for disability as standard medical care. In a reproductive rights framework that centers on autonomy and self-determination, there should be a clear connection with disability rights activism.

Instead, a coalition of misogynists, racists, and violent terrorists masquerading as people concerned with the right to life have made more visible attempts to include people with disabilities. And they are supported by people who assert that they truly believe in the right to life, and who may indeed mean the words they say with no consideration for the very real consequences of supporting anti-choice rhetoric for people who are not them. Anyone can be a hypocrite, including those who claim to rescue children via adoption. Does that mean that everyone who adopts a child with a disability is doing so from a cynical place? Absolutely not.

But there are some very real problems with the way that anti-choice groups will use children as props in their campaigns. They bolster their arguments by adopting children with disabilities, tell purple prose–laden stories about the miraculous love they have found by “saving” those children, and then vote for the candidates who will remove services for disabled people from their communities. More concerned with their public messaging than any real change, they undermine the health-care access that might provide the best chance at an independent, fulfilling life for people with disabilities. While fetal disability narratives are central to pro-life rhetoric, and pro-life feminists are quick to point to abortions of fetuses with disabilities as a form of eugenics, they falter at follow-up care and concern.

True reproductive justice advocates have done a better job of including a disability rights framework in the broader movement, but they too have faltered at being truly inclusive of people with disabilities and their concerns. It’s hard to have a conversation across these communities when an accessibility framework is lacking in choosing locations for meetings, meetings lack services to make them accessible for those who are hard of hearing or deaf, or other obstacles arise because activ-
ists are too used to speaking for communities instead of listening to them.

It's uncomfortable and sometimes enraging to consider a dialogue with the pro-life movement, but without it, they will be able to continue the wholesale appropriation of a disability rights framework for a movement that ultimately betrays everyone. No one in reproductive justice should want to identify as a eugenicist, not just because it is a false label the pro-life movement uses on people who advocate for abortion rights. They should want to avoid eugenicist rhetoric because it can ultimately only serve to undermine the work of reproductive justice.

When the pro-life movement brings up the women who abort fetuses with Down syndrome diagnoses, reproductive justice advocates need a better response than ignoring it. The conversation needs to be centered on resources, on support, and on countering ableist narratives. When they frame these statistics as proof of eugenics, as proof that the abortion rights movement doesn't care about people with disabilities, reproductive justice feminists must be ready to frame disability not just in terms of children and fetuses but also in terms of adults with disabilities. The conversation about the right to choose should explicitly include that right for people with disabilities. It has to talk about the infrastructure and the access that they might need. It has to talk about the rights of people with disabilities to control their own fertility and sexuality.

When mainstream feminists don't talk about the infrastructure that contributes to people aborting fetuses with disabilities, it leaves a ready-made space for those who would infringe on the right to choose. Like other people who have abortions, those who choose to abort fetuses with congenital abnormalities most likely do so because they already have children they're providing for, they live in poverty, and/or they experience other structural oppression that prevents them from being able to commit to caring for a child with a disability. It is important for reproductive rights and reproductive justice frameworks to recognize that the choice to carry to term or to abort is heavily influenced by class, race, and other obstacles created by marginalization. Parents with disabilities are stigmatized as being unable to appropriately care for their children no matter how many successfully raise families. Some people with disabilities are at risk of being sterilized as a result of that stigma. Others were sterilized without consent based on the idea that they would have children with disabilities and thus create an intergenerational cycle of dependency on the minimal resources available.

In general, having children is expensive, and the lack of substantial social safety in the United States makes it even more difficult for low-income parents already struggling to afford the basics of housing, childcare, and medical care. Children with disabilities may require expensive specialized health care, educational support, a specialized diet, and therapy, and reproductive justice has to address what happens after a child is born. By and large, parents can't afford to not work outside the home, which means that they must pay for childcare or attempt to cobbled together some form of at-home care with opposite work schedules. There is a devastating choice on the table: a lack of family time and caregiver support or a substantial loss of income. Because
institutions are not designed to help parents raise high-needs children, it becomes much easier to argue that children with disabilities are a burden to be avoided instead of addressing the paucity of resources.

Sympathy also bleeds away for parents of children with disabilities and parents with disabilities, particularly when those parents are of color, are LGBQTIA, or are anything outside the expected “traditional” middle-class, able-bodied, cis, white family dynamic. Their disability, race, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, or income level becomes the center of a debate over their right to have a family instead of plans to support those families. Because like race, disability has long been an excuse for the medical establishment to forcibly sterilize people, and any concept of reproductive justice must include an understanding of that history.

And a true reproductive justice framework has to challenge the rights of guardians of people with disabilities to request, without their consent, sterilization of those who depend on them. As Human Rights Watch notes, people with disabilities who are sterilized and are unable to comprehend or consent to the procedure are particularly vulnerable to abuse.

We must be careful to avoid contributing to a damaging narrative about people with disabilities. Feminism can’t parrot the idea that people with disabilities are a drain on resources and thus their lives are worth less. Instead of bolstering the eugenicist myth that people with disabilities are a burden on the community and undeserving of public funding, we must address the fact that it is so expensive for families to raise children with disabilities in a society that doesn’t provide for anyone’s needs adequately. We must push back against the idea that disability status is a predictor of fitness to exist, to be heard, to have a choice. Eugenics makes the argument that members of many communities are not worthy or capable of making their own reproductive choices, and thus are not fit to be parents. That rhetoric is carried from pop culture all the way through to medical science.

Though the primary focus of maternal mortality research has been on Black mothers in the United States because the rates of maternal mortality are highest for us (Black women are 243 percent more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes), the same factors rear their heads in many communities. The outcomes in those communities, however, are slightly better, because there’s less of a stake in the idea that they don’t deserve respect or care. For Black communities in the United States, even when factors such as physical health, access to prenatal care, income level, education, and socioeconomic status are controlled for, Black women are still far more likely to experience maternal mortality at rates that hark back to the days when Black motherhood was seen as a problem to be solved with sterilization.

Social and environmental risk factors that influence poor maternal health outcomes disproportionately impact marginalized communities. Poverty-based risk factors, from housing instability to increased exposure to toxins because of subpar
housing to increased exposure to violence, contribute to higher stress levels and lower access to quality health care, including comprehensive mental health services. Additional factors like workplace barriers and food insecurity can easily trap someone in a toxic environment and pregnancy in the United States.

In that same vein, we must be willing to confront the -isms that let people think maternity is only something to celebrate when the mother is white. If you read comments on articles about Black moms like Serena Williams, Beyoncé, or Meghan Markle, you notice a theme in the racism. A Black mom is somehow gross for cradling her pregnant belly, but the same posters find it adorable when white women do it. It's a passive form of racism, rarely examined, much less discussed. And yeah, comments are a cesspool, but medical staff make comments on forums too. So when you see people on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook claim the babies of Black moms are meal tickets or monkeys, or when they make hate into a hobby so thoroughly that they are profiled for it in the press, you have to ask yourself if they're the kind of medical professional who treats babies like puppets and calls them Satan for Snapchat points.

When someone like Serena Williams or Beyoncé Knowles-Carter shares her stories of pregnancy complications and concerns, it briefly pushes the problem of the maternal deaths of Black women front and center in mainstream feminist media. But it shouldn't take an impassioned story from one of the most famous Black women in the world to get it into everyone's head that America can no longer ignore the health of Black mothers.

Fully addressing the issue requires interrogation of not only the obvious flaws within the medical system but also all the other institutions that can affect various aspects of health-care access and quality for marginalized people. For too long, the same systems and institutions that oversaw slavery, Indian boarding schools, and eugenics programs have been allowed to operate without dealing with the biases rooted in their formation. Fully addressing maternal mortality calls for an acknowledgment that unexamined biases within the medical system and outside have been a key factor in the paucity of care for those communities where motherhood is perceived as a sin instead of a sacrament.

Imagery of white motherhood is standard in media, complete with the seemingly de rigueur write-ups from white feminists about the ways becoming a mother has changed their lives. Often hidden in those pieces is something casual about the caregivers they hire to help out. If you look closely, you can see the telltale marks of people who need to rely on communities of color for labor but who don't really engage with what that means in any meaningful way. In a way, that reaction is bolstered by the world around us: we see white moms on TV, on billboards, on posters, and more. No matter if the story is sextuplets or a family of nineteen, TV channels are happy to take us inside the lives of those families. To humanize and validate and valorize their choices. Yet despite a history of Black, Asian, Indigenous, and Latinx caregivers for the white children of those families, popular media would have you believe that every other group is unqualified to care for or raise their own children.
Mothers and children who are not white have long been devalued in American society. Entire Indigenous families were massacred to create what we now think of as America. During slavery, Black women were treated as chattel, their offspring human capital to fund the building of white wealth. The romanticized image of the plantation hinges on the idea that Black parents lacked the emotional capacity to care for their children. That myth persists today in Welfare Queen narratives that position children as checks and not as much-loved and wanted parts of a family. Whether the slur is “anchor babies” or something else, no one is safe from the racist lie that only white parents have the emotional capacity to actually want their children.

Indeed, despite the fact that assaults on marginalized bodies and their reproductive freedom have been well documented, mainstream feminist narratives often fail to engage with the consequences of that messaging on the culture or on the policies that come about in the wake of these constructs.

And while the most overt trappings of subjugation are no longer present in the public eye in America, the remnants can be seen throughout the very systems meant to be counteracting bigotry in the present day. Marginalized families have been torn apart due to state violence, whether that be mass incarceration or the impact of punitive policies toward the poor. Incarcerated women are still being sterilized without their consent; access to health care for migrant workers is impacted by public policy that punishes them for seeking help; those in low-paying jobs struggle not only to access care, but to be treated well once they receive it.

Stereotypical images and perceptions of marginalized people within the media aren’t just the province of conservative policy makers—even the way abortion access is discussed for low-income communities is framed in a manner that invokes sexual promiscuity and irresponsibility as reasons that access is needed. Only recently have we seen the idea espoused in the mainstream that poor people deserve to choose their family size. Far too often the need to limit family size is presented as a solution for resource issues that devalues those families and causes society to view them as less worthy to exist. The ripple effects of this attitude can be seen in how mainstream feminist organizations often neglect to respond to policies and programs that show minimal regard for the health of marginalized communities. The devaluation of families of color is manifested through the unchallenged structural racism of a system wherein public policies, institutional practices, and media representations not only work together to create the significant Black-white gap in maternal mortality but also contribute to the erasure of the maternal mortality rates in other marginalized communities.

Organizations led by marginalized communities are working to fix the problem, but challenging white supremacy in these spaces can’t just be the work of those most impacted. By confronting the role that racism plays in reproductive health spaces, feminism can help to reduce maternal mortality and in turn change the future for many communities.

Feminist programs that work toward increasing access to quality health care, along with addressing racial bias among healthcare providers, can address important aspects of a comprehensive
approach to reducing maternal mortality. Bolstering efforts to block proposals to strip maternity care from the list of essential health benefits is a great step. But so is protecting Medicaid, and challenging attempts to impose work requirements as a condition for health-care coverage through the program.

Reproductive justice means not just fighting to defend Planned Parenthood or the Title X family planning program. It also means protecting nutrition programs such as the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). As politicians rush to show their disregard for low-income people struggling to feed their families, feminism has to step up and support the work of advocates for all communities. For those already dealing with so many obstacles within their communities, it’s harder to find the energy to also fight for higher-quality care without support from those with more resources.

When I was eight years old, my uncle got drunk, showed up at my grandparents’ house, and waved a gun around for a couple of hours while making threats. It was some dispute over money that no one can really remember now, but what I do remember is that he wasn’t afraid to do it because he knew my grandfather wasn’t home. His wife (the aunt with whom he was having the money issues) didn’t live there, but he knew she had guns in her house. And since she had already responded to his earlier outbursts of violence by stabbing him or shooting at him, he knew better than to try her.

He thought that a houseful of women was an easy target as long as my grandfather wasn’t home. He was wrong. My aunt who did live there was more than willing to fend him off with her courage and a bottle ready to go upside his head. What I remember most about that night isn’t the gun or the drunken ranting. It’s that after he left, she sat down to do her homework.