



## Centering Women of Color Is Key to Understanding and Resisting Police Violence

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"Expanding our understanding of the forms and contexts of police violence experienced by women and gender-nonconforming people of color enables us to better understand the full shape and reach of state violence in ways that are essential to countering it," Andrea Ritchie writes in her essential new book, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*.

When police violence is publicized, of course, it's usually police violence against men. The violence inflicted on women of color is often minimized or completely erased. For that reason alone, this book is extraordinarily necessary. But Ritchie goes further: She emphasizes that devoting space and analysis to the impact of police violence on women and gender-nonconforming people of color is not simply about filling in gaps. She emphasizes that we cannot truly understand what state violence means in this country without wholly recognizing its gendered scope. And without that understanding and recognition, we cannot effectively resist it.

Police violence against Black women, Indigenous women and other women of color often takes forms that don't make their way into most conversations about police violence -- for example, sexual harassment, sexual assault and a failure to respond to domestic violence calls. In *Invisible No More*, Ritchie shows that these types of violence are not isolated events, but are, like killings, beatings and cagings, built into the fabric of policing. She demonstrates that policing is, fundamentally, a violent institution, and that effective resistance must ultimately mean building a "world without police," in which "safety and security will not be premised on violence or the threat of violence."

Bookended by a searing foreword and afterword (by Mariame Kaba and Charlene Carruthers, respectively), *Invisible No More* is a crucial read for anyone seeking to understand the full reality of state violence -- and what freedom from it would truly mean.

**Maya Schenwar:** While *Invisible No More* is largely focused on the current moment and the fairly recent past, it's deeply grounded in history. Why did you feel it was important to delve into the historical roots of police violence against women of color before discussing the present?

**Andrea Ritchie:** For a few reasons -- first, because, as James Baldwin said, "history is literally present in all that we do." Police interactions with Black women, Indigenous women, and other women of color continue to be deeply infused and informed by perceptions and power relations

rooted in colonialism, chattel slavery and Jim Crow policing. So it is important to learn more about the roots and operation of those perceptions and the structures they were created to justify and reinforce so that we can better recognize when and how they are operating in present-day policing, and more effectively dismantle them.

**Andrea Ritchie. (Photo: W.C. Moss)** Secondly, it felt important to highlight that police violence against women of color is by no means a recent phenomenon. In fact, it has been as much of a consistent, central and essential feature of US history, and of the daily reality in our communities, as it is for men of color, now and then.

Police have always engaged in gendered violence against Black women and women of color in service of larger projects of enforcing colonialism, maintaining chattel slavery, and policing race and poverty. They have also played a central role in policing the lines of gender -- through immigration laws, through laws prescribing what clothing people should wear, and through enforcement of prostitution laws and laws promoted as maintaining "order" in public spaces, including public restrooms. Tracing the evolution of racialized gender policing throughout history allows us to see how deeply entrenched it is in the very institution of policing, which tells us a few things: that it is unlikely to be "reformed" away, and that that it is as likely to manifest when police respond to violence and calls for help as when police are patrolling the streets.

**When it comes to both the drug war and broken windows policing, the impacts on women of color often go untold. As you point out in *Invisible No More*, Black, Indigenous and Latinx women have been affected by these moves toward mass policing and incarceration in hugely disproportionate numbers. Can you say a bit about the ways in which the drug war and broken windows policies and practices particularly impact women and gender-nonconforming people of color?**

Policing practices associated with the "war on drugs" and increased enforcement of "public order" offenses are largely responsible for a 14-fold increase in the number of women in jails over the past four decades, and for dramatic increases in the number of women incarcerated in federal and state prisons. Women now represent the fastest growing population of incarcerated people -- the rate of incarceration for women has outpaced that of men by 50 percent since 1980. Black, Latinx and Indigenous women -- many of whom are mothers -- make up a disproportionate number of incarcerated women, and Black women continue to be incarcerated at twice the rate of white women. One study found that nearly half of Black trans women and 30 percent of Native trans women surveyed been incarcerated at some point in their lives -- that's more than any other group, including Black men.

There are a lot of factors that contribute to these realities, foremost among them the ways in which police profile and target women of color as drug users and couriers, and the ways in which Black mothers' drug use is policed and punished in very different ways than white mothers' drug use. The kinds of prosecutorial practices being promoted by Jeff Sessions -- seeking the highest possible sentences for drug offenses unless a person is willing to inform on other players in the drug trade -- contribute to mass incarceration of women who often have no information to trade -- or face considerable risk of violence if they do.

Additionally, Native, Black and Latinx women, and particularly trans women of color, continue to experience the highest rates of poverty in the country, leading to high rates of criminalization in the context of "broken windows" policing practices targeting the presence of people who are,

or are perceived to be homeless, in public spaces, and involvement in criminalized activities like the sex trade and informal economies like street vending. As a result, a significant number of women locked up in jails are there on "public order" offenses.

*Invisible No More* focuses on uncovering the kinds of police violence against women of color enabled by the war on drugs and broken windows policing -- like the brutal public vaginal search Charneshia Corley was subjected to by Houston police on the grounds that they believed she was concealing marijuana. Or the violent arrest of Destiny Rios by a San Antonio police officer who had been instructed to "stop everyone in the area," after which she miscarried in police custody. Or the daily sexual harassment and abuse of "stop and frisk," of police interactions with trans women of color and of the racially discriminatory enforcement of prostitution laws. These are the kinds of things we need to be thinking about when we hear Jeff Sessions talking about further intensifying the war on drugs, promoting broken windows policing, instituting a "national" stop-and-frisk program.

**The relationship of police to sexual violence is such a deceptive one. People are actively encouraged to report sexual violence to the police. Yet, as you so vividly portray in *Invisible No More*, police often perpetrate sexual violence themselves. Plus, when called, their responses to such violence often exacerbate survivors' trauma. Why do you think these types of police violence are not as publicized as, say, shootings? What is happening now, in terms of efforts to build a wider consciousness around these issues (police-perpetrated sexual violence, and also violence against and criminalization of survivors)?**

Sexual violence in general remains a hidden issue that all too often goes underreported, no doubt more so when it is committed by the officials who, as you point out, we are supposed to report it to. It also tends to take place in private, away from public view and cop watching cameras, and so is literally less visible than police shootings or beatings. There is obviously more stigma and shame in coming forward to report it -- and much less support and outrage from mainstream police accountability movements for survivors: very few even mention the issue in their platforms or demands, or mobilize around instances of police sexual violence in the same ways that they do around beatings or shootings. So there is much less incentive for survivors of police sexual violence to come forward than for people subjected to other forms of excessive force. Plus, police officers tend to target women of color who are marginalized in society -- and in our movements -- women who are or are perceived to be drug users, involved in the sex trades, homeless, trans or gender-nonconforming.

And there is no official data collection on police sexual violence in the same way that there is for use of force, so we don't have numbers and quantitative evidence of racial disparities to point to. But even so, the data that does exist is striking -- for instance, the CATO Institute concluded in 2010 that sexual misconduct is the second most frequently reported form of police misconduct after excessive force. A 2015 study by the Buffalo News concluded that a law enforcement agent was caught in an act of sexual misconduct every five days over the preceding decade. Many more are never caught or held accountable.

Organizing in support of Black women survivors of sexual assault and rape by former Oklahoma City Police Officer Daniel Holtzclaw -- which was almost exclusively undertaken and led by Black women -- is an example of how things can and must shift, both in terms of organizing around police violence and in terms of advocacy around sexual violence. And we really cannot afford to have this conversation, like so many others around policing, focus exclusively on the

experiences of Black men and men of color, particularly given that this form of police violence in particular disproportionately impacts Black women and women of color. Likewise, our organizing around intensified immigration enforcement needs to more explicitly recognize that it is often accompanied by sexual violence and extortion targeting immigrant women -- both at the border and in the interior. Civilian oversight agencies and anti-violence groups need to start offering survivors the kinds of support they need and deserve, and very publicly accepting and investigating complaints of police sexual violence instead of dishing them to police departments. And movements against police violence and mass incarceration need to elevate, center and articulate explicit demands around police sexual violence -- against women, trans and gender-nonconforming people, and men -- while vocally supporting survivors. We simply cannot afford to allow what law enforcement officials and advocates alike acknowledge is a silent epidemic of police sexual violence to continue to go unaddressed.

**Throughout your book and particularly in the "Resistance" chapter, you encourage us to understand that this situation is not hopeless -- people are already (and always have been) pushing back against police violence that targets Black women and women of color, and are building new systems to deal with problems that policing purports to address. You emphasize that the people most affected by this violence are on the front lines of these efforts. I know it's extremely hard/impossible to choose, but would you mention a couple of important campaigns or organizations that folks can look to for inspiration and to get a glimpse of what's going on resistance-wise?**

You're right -- it is very hard to pick one or two to point to! There are so many examples in the book -- in fact, some folks recommend reading the book backwards, to start with the chapter on resistance as a strategy for self-care while reading, or starting each chapter at the end where examples of organizing addressing the issues raised in the chapter can be found.

A group of us recently put together a website at [inournamesnetwork.org](http://inournamesnetwork.org) that gathers information about campaigns, organizations, and resources for resistance which can serve as an organizing hub for people to find ways to take action and post calls for solidarity around police violence against Black women, trans and gender-nonconforming people. There's also a lot of information about organizations and sources cited in the book at [invisiblenomorebook.com](http://invisiblenomorebook.com). And, there's an organizer's toolkit that INCITE! put together a few years back that is still very relevant and has lots of resources and information about ongoing work. That also has some resources around non-police responses to violence -- you can find more on the Creative Interventions website. Check them out! And follow the book on Twitter at [@InvisibleNMBook](https://twitter.com/InvisibleNMBook) for more updates.

***Invisible No More* is the first book focused on police violence against women of color. What's your hope, in terms of how it'll influence conversations, organizing, policy, practices, the world?**

My hope is that by looking at racial profiling, police violence, criminalization and mass incarceration through the lens of women's experiences we can expand our understanding of these issues in ways that enable us to better understand and tackle them, and ultimately more quickly and effectively put an end to police violence -- as well as the structures that fuel it. And that, going forward, it will no longer be tenable for women's experiences, voices and leadership to be invisible in conversations about policing -- because the lives and experiences of women of color

matter, and because the ways in which we are policed and punished -- whether similar to those experienced by other members of our communities or uniquely gendered -- have something to teach *all* of us about policing, violence and safety, and, ultimately, about what is necessary to get free.