March is National Women's History Month, consequently for rest of this month, I will focus on issues that are important to my sisters (and the brothers who love them).

I would be remiss if I did not begin this conversation by stating the obvious. During the last few weeks, a national "back-door" debate has been taking place about *abortion and whether women continue to be the property of men.*
Yep, while very few people have out-and-out said the "A-word," the focus on abortion is a primary issue. You see, in order for a woman to have an abortion, a sexual encounter must have taken place that resulted in the fertilization of an egg. Because this fertilization process requires a man, men have historically believed that they have a right to the fruits of their implantation. In fact, in many cultures and religions, a man can "plant" multiple seeds, producing multiple babies and this process is considered a sign of virility, power, and status. The more women and babies that are produced, the more "manly" a man would be perceived as being. Women, and indeed the children that they birth, were considered property.

Consequently, it is not surprising that when it came to generating wealth, African slaves were also seen as "property." Black male and female slaves were bred to fertilize seeds that would yield strong "stock." The slave owners' intention was to breed offspring who were genetically designed for different tasks of labor-- just like horses. This white male racial frame of reference was used to demonstrate white male superiority, white male humanity, and white male power in our society. Psychologically, it would have been impossible to enslave "*people*" who were "*created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.*"
Therefore, relegating the less powerful and subordinate groups of slaves to a
"less than human"
status resulted in less cognitive dissonance, less anxiety and less shame among slave owners. As a result, slaveholders like George Washington, and even Thomas Jefferson found it easier to

face themselves in the mirror as long as they could marginalize those they oppressed.

Within this historical context, while white women and their children were second-class citizens, Black women, and children were not citizens at all. Clearly, African-American women have had a unique role in American history that stretches into the present. African American women, even in the new millennium, are haunted by a three hundred year legacy of slavery and the myths and images generated by this peculiarly American institution. Slavery and its aftermath created labels for Black women such as “Matriarch,” “Castrator,” “Superwoman.” Carolyn West (1995) notes that other historical images of Black women include “Mammy”, “Sapphire”, and “Jezebel”. Thus, while they have been over-sexualized, degraded and marginalized, African American women have simultaneously been placed at the juxtaposition of being nurturers and “mammies” to entire generations. The recent movie, *The Help,* depicts the “happy-go-lucky” distortion in image that was conjured up by white men and women who had Black women working as domestic servants. Again, the image of the nurturing and attached, abused yet caring, Black women in service supports the notion that marginalizing women and people of color makes it easier to abuse them.

For people who are oppressors, the creation of distorted imaging serves the purpose of maintaining one’s psychological integrity. It helps them feel all right about being awful. In addition, this distorted imaging process continues to affect our current dialogue about women’s health. Many of us think that the current debate has been about women and mammograms, women and birth control, or basic women’s health. It is true that women’s health would be sorely impacted by legislative restrictions on access to mammograms, birth control, and even abortions. Yet, that is NOT
the
deeper issue.
The deeper issue is one that is even more fundamental. The deeper issue is whether our country is one that honors the cultural value, power, and equality of women. The issue extends to whether our community, and in fact our country, is motivated to meet the needs of women rendering our needs as equally important as those of men.
The truth is that over the last year, the conservative members of both the Democratic and Republican parties have pushed an agenda that challenges women as legitimate human beings with our own power, agency, minds, and voices.

Denying our voices means denying our existence. Thus, when the young Georgetown law student, Sandra Fluke, was denied an opportunity to testify because she was deemed by Chairman Issa as being “unqualified” to talk about religion and the multiple medical uses of contraceptives, the “s *hut up and stay in your place meta-message* ” reverberated throughout the nation.

In fact, the image of the ***"wall of men"*** at Chairman Issa's hearing regarding religion and contraception provided strong evidence that there are those in our society who would love to push us back in time. Yes, that would like to push us back to a time when no Black man was President of the United States, when Black folks were not so "uppity" and when women were not in charge of their own bodies. There are those who would love to see us go back to a time when the "American way of life" reflected that the places for women were not in pulpits, not in government, and definitely not "in charge." For those individuals, relegating women back to the "*good old' day"* would mean that we, as women, would continue to go to back alleys with coat hangers, or choose to be barefoot, pregnant, unemployed, uneducated and in the kitchen!

Furthermore, individuals like Rush Limbaugh are not bashful about their beliefs in the marginalization of women. Since her testimony, Ms. Fluke was called a "slut" and "prostitute" by Rush. As if those insults were not enough, he went on to say that if she was going to "have so much sex" that she or others could not afford their birth control pills without government support for contraceptives, at least ***he*** should be allowed to watch videos of their sexual activities! Rush Limbaugh actually said ***"we"*** should be allowed to watch; however, I don't know to whom he was referring because most of us are not voyeurs and would not be interested. Besides, if *anybody* could be accused of having "so much sex" that they could not get their prescriptions filled it would be him. After all, he was the one escorted off a plane because he had a bag full of illegally obtained bottles of Viagra! It is comforting, however, to realize that over twelve of his program sponsors pulled their advertisements because of his egregious actions.

We all need to understand that there are multi-faceted psychological and political explanations regarding the rationale for challenging women's rights to their own bodies. First, it is critically important to understand the concept called the *"Hierarchy of Needs."* The concept was introduced in 1943 by a Jewish psychologist named Abraham Maslow, who as a child experienced oppression in the form of Anti-Semitism. Therefore, his theory addressed the basic needs that ALL people have in order to maintain their humanity. He surmised that people first need the basics of life and as core needs are met, people move up the ladder (hierarchy) to address meeting their more sophisticated needs. Thus, we all have *Physiological* needs (breathing, food, water, touch). Physiological needs are then followed by a need for *Safety/Security* (security of body, employment, resources), *Love/Belongingness* (friendship, family, intimacy),

Esteem
(self-esteem, confidence, respect for self and others), and finally,
Self-Actualization
(lack of prejudice, morality, spirituality, creativity).

When considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is clear that political strategists want to redirect our energies from meeting one element of our *Safety* needs to another. Consequently, women are stuck because our
physical survival depends on having access to adequate healthcare
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Additionally, the current strategy of challenging a woman's p
rimary right to wellness and control over her body
creates a political diversion from the economy, jobs/employment, and the right to work. It also creates a subliminal way to reinforce white superiority, male privilege, and class.

Thus, when the debate moves from one type of security (economics) to another type (security of one's body), it is essentially serving the purpose of redirection. For example, a recent bill in Virginia mandated that a woman receive an ultrasound (whether transvaginally or abdominally) that produces an image of the fetus prior to having an abortion. The rationale is "informed consent", not medical necessity. Additionally, the law mandated that a woman must wait 24 hours (like someone buying a gun) between the ultrasound and the abortion, which can produce undue stress and financial hardship for many women. Furthermore, a printout of the image must be placed in her medical record, and the woman would be charged for the "service." Such a practice treats women as if they are impulsive and unintelligent when it comes to making decisions about things like contraceptives, sexual activity, or abortions. Finally, such conditions are designed to be demeaning, create emotionally traumatic experiences, and produce financial burdens on women who cannot afford "extra" medically unnecessary procedures. For women who have histories of sexual abuse, or those whose bodies have historically been exploited by men and systems (like slavery and trafficking) such procedures are just one more piece of evidence that we women are not valued.

My message in this article is that women should make sure that we take charge of our lives. We should protect ourselves physically, sexually, emotionally, economically and most importantly, spiritually. Nobody has the right to hurt us, marginalize us or put us down. In addition, we should quit referring to ourselves in negative ways and not allow *anybody* the right to place us in positions less than Queens. I hope that my sisters (and the brothers who love them) will stand up for justice and fight the environmental pressure to sell us out on the auction block. Whether pro-life or pro-choice, lesbian or straight, I hope that women of all faiths, denominations, ethnicities, races, and creeds will recognize that when one of us is mistreated, we all

are mistreated. Finally,
I hope that we will not be complacent and remain silent
while our voices, our bodies, our needs, our beliefs and our spirits are made vulnerable to predatory, disrespectful, and heartless people or systems. We are women, and we have rights.

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