

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<https://oversight.house.gov>

Opening Statement of Rep. Robin Kelly Hearing on “The Neglected Epidemic of Missing BIPOC Women and Girls” March 3, 2022

First, I would like to thank the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee for holding this important hearing.

I would also like to thank the panelists for appearing here to speak on such a critical issue, and especially Ms. Foster and Mr. Wilkinson for sharing your stories. I know this is not easy for you.

The issue of missing Black, Brown, and Indigenous women and girls in America is truly an epidemic, and critically important to me.

Just under a month ago, the Caucus on Black Women and Girls, hosted a roundtable discussion in my district on this very issue. We heard from a number of experts on the topic, families of victims, and victims themselves. Resources were shared and made available for victims, including a toolkit so people could keep themselves and their communities safe. We heard suggestions and ideas on how federal and local agencies could work together to improve the reporting and solving of missing persons cases and better protect BIPOC women and Girls. It was a productive conversation, but it was clear that more work needs to be done.

Black women and girls are too often ignored when they go missing, and they go missing at much higher rates than white women. Even with these cases being underreported, Black women made up a little more than 1/3 of all missing women reported last year, which is far higher than the nearly 15 percent of the population we account for nationally.

Human trafficking also disproportionately affects Black women. The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation issued a report on human trafficking and found that 40 percent of sex-trafficking victims were Black women.

All of these factors contribute to the disproportionate number of missing Black women. Unfortunately, the same can be said for many other minority populations.

These shocking numbers are likely lower than reality as crimes against Black women, and BIPOC women in general, are underreported. It is horrible that these cases do not receive more attention.

The media reporting of these women pales in comparison of white women. As in the tragic case of Gabby Petito, which received nearly 24-hour coverage until her body was found. You could not scroll through Twitter or read the news without seeing coverage of the story. Yes, she deserved to have this kind of media attention, but so do Black women, Brown women, and Indigenous women.

Much of this can be contributed to biases towards women of color, and what Dr. Julia Jordan-Zachery calls hypervisibility of Black women. When women of color are talked about in the media, it generally perpetuates negative stereotypes, creating a vicious cycle where we get less positive media attention.

But this is not just about media attention. The issue of disproportionate missing BIPOC women and girls is one that needs more national attention by law enforcement policy makes as well.

States such as Minnesota have created task forces to better coordinate to crack down on the factors contributing to missing BIPOC women and girls. **At the federal level, we need better coordination as well. This is why I introduced the Protect Black Women and Girls Act. This bipartisan bill would establish an Interagency Task Force to examine the conditions and experiences of Black women and girls in the United States and inform policy makers on how we can better respond to this epidemic.**

We must also reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act which has not been reauthorized since 2013 and expired in 2018. The House has done its job and now the Senate must act. Lives are on the line.

We need better coordination among federal and state law enforcement. Better funding to community organizations that report on missing persons cases and support in the finding of these women.

I am grateful that the committee is having this hearing and bringing light to this issue. I am hoping for a productive hearing that will produce solutions to finding our missing women and girls.

###

Contact: Nelly Decker, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181