1. **Introduction**

Studies have shown that African-American or “black” women are perceived as less feminine than their racial counterparts. Several circumstances have played a part in this ideology or worldly perception of black women however, these circumstances can be traced to two major factors: historical events and sociocultural influences.

It is a known fact that women of color, especially African-American or “black” women, have been treated unfairly throughout history; they were forced to slavery during the Transatlantic Era wherein several types of maltreatment were done to them, they were underrepresented and unfairly treated in court hearings during the Jim Crow Era, and they continue to experience prejudice from the government, the police, and the media. These factors have played a part in people perceiving black women as less feminine which, in turn, increase the bias and discrimination against them in modern society. This is evidenced by the many instances of police brutality and discrimination on famous black women today.

This study will discuss the origin of this ideology of black women being less feminine, the effects of historical events and sociocultural factors in promulgating it, and its implications in modern society.

1. **Thesis Statement**

Black women nowadays, despite the widespread support for diversity and racial equality, are still perceived as less feminine than their racial counterparts. This results to prejudice and unfair treatment in the form of greater violence, less empathy from their peers, lack of respect as victims of sexual abuse or violence, and are partially ignored when they express feelings of pain.

This is the result of historical events in America including the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Jim Crow Era as well as contemporary sociocultural influences. These together have impacted how black women are perceived in modern society.

1. **Historical Events and Sociocultural Influences on Black Women Femininity**

Studies have shown that Black women or African American women are not perceived as feminine. This is because the construct of femininity is typically Eurocentric and is not applicable to Black women given their unique experiences through history (Davis). These “unique experiences through history” are generally attributed to the era of slavery when the Strong Black Woman Ideology was widely adapted and culturally idealized. Looking into the history of Black women, we can see how this ideology came to be.

**Historical Events**

During the Transatlantic slave trade, black women were seen as manly because of their perceived ability to work as much as their male counterparts, which, truthfully, they were not given the choice to do otherwise. The workload on black women being imposed on their white female counterparts was unfathomable at that time as how Eurocentric ideologies of women and their femininity drew them as frail and delicate (Davis). Black parturian slave women were also even expected to work up until they give birth and after it, further strengthening the ideology of black women being manly or less feminine.

In addition to their toll as owned slaves and the punishments they received from their owners up until childbirth, black women were experimented on by white doctors. A book entitled Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology illustrates how medical doctors and slave owners who have formed close relationships with them practiced medicine on black women’s bodies (Owens 42). In these experiments, women were operated on without anesthetics (as well as without consent). This added to their image as “medical superbodies”. Owens further states that these circumstances led to the prevailing notion that enslaved women or black women were impervious to pain, to the point where slave owners would be surprised if their “slave” fainted from the pain they inflict on them (44).

Merriam-Webster defines femininity as “having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be suitable of women”. During the height of slavery, colonists sexualized black women as a form of otherization; giving them qualities as that of a man who is aggressive and lustful – not feminine at all. A figure of history which most exemplifies this is the black women slave Sarah Baartman who was hypersexualized. She was depicted by Europeans as promiscuous and aggressively lustful. A caricature of Baartman in a French print titled *La Belle Hottentot* depicted her “…nearly fully nude on a platform while men and women stare at her behind, mouths agape in expressions of shock. She covers one breast and stares directly out of the print, enticing the viewer in to participate in the act of voyeurism” (Sapiro-Gheiler).

These two historical events are the most prominent origin of the less feminine ideation of black women. These eventually led to its reinforcement in contemporary sociocultural factors.

**Sociocultural Factors**

Fast forward to the Jim Crow Era, both a historical and sociocultural factor affecting the black women’s perceived femininity, black women were treated less feminine than their racial counterparts in such a way that they were not respected for their womanhood. According to Basu, “the ways in which black women were discriminated against in the justice system overlapped with that of white women and black men, but black women faced a “double-discrimination” – both for their gender and their race. This was most evident in how criminal cases were approached such as in cases involving rape of black women by white men. In that era, “The conviction of a white man for the rape of a black woman was “virtually unthinkable”” (Basu). Also, because black women were severely underrepresented, black women rape victims typically lost their cases ranging from domestic violence to sexual assault, and police brutality.

Another instance wherein discrimination of black women was promulgated was during Ronald Reagan’s run for presidency in 1976. In one of his speeches, he was discussing how the federal government program on public assistance was encouraging waste and abuse. His most prominent example of this was of a woman who used “80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans’ benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare” to gain an income of $150,000 a year. This woman became known as the “welfare queen”, a term that was “designed to conjure racist stereotypes of a single black mother living large on the taxpayers’ largesse, collecting government checks while bedecked in diamonds and driving a Cadillac” (Brockell). This gave way to people developing stereotypes of black women as having uncontrolled sexuality and laziness.

Black women as slaves were, of course, not given the same medical attention as white women which is why maternal mortality is higher for black women. However, it was reported that from 1940-1990, overall maternal survival had improved but still the maternal mortality was higher for black women. The possible explanations for maternal mortality are pregnancy-related morbidity, access to and use of healthcare services, and content and quality of care (“Differences in Maternal Mortality”). This shows that, although not all, the majority of black women, post-slavery, still do not receive as much needed assistance as white women which results in their higher maternal mortality.

1. **Conclusion**

The origin of the ideology of women being less feminine than their racial counterparts came from the gynecological experiments performed by white medical doctors on black women slaves as well as their hypersexualization in society. This was reinforced during the Jim Crow Era wherein black women were suppressed in court and Ronald Reagan’s popularization of the “welfare queen”. These factors depicted black women as lazy, sexually-aggressive, and manly which collectively lessens their femininity. This consequently resulted in less respect given to black women as compared to how much is given to their racial counterparts. Therefore, modern black women still suffer the ideology of less femininity and its discriminatory consequences.