



Rape, A Loaded Issue for Black Men

By Byron Hurt

[December 5, 2013] One of the most stressful and challenging conflicts that affect me during a rape case occurs when the alleged perpetrator is a Black man. As one of many Black males who consistently speaks out against all forms of violence against girls and women, I'm always torn and somewhat hesitant to take a strong stance or make an early rush to judgment.

The pushback that I receive from other Black men can be swift and strong. This country's history of Whites falsely accusing Black men of raping White women – only to be proven innocent years after they've paid a heavy price – makes it difficult for many Black men to believe allegations of rape, especially when the victim is White.

Countless Black men, like Alabama's the Scottsboro boys, Chicago's Emmett Till, the Central Park Five in New York City, and more recently Brian Banks in Atlanta, GA, have shamefully suffered the injustice of a racist criminal justice system that rushed to judgment, with little or no evidence. As a result, numerous innocent Black men were executed or and sent to prison to serve long sentences.

White men who do anti-sexist work may know and understand this history, but they probably don't share the same tension I feel. I'm sure that my Black brothers who do gender violence-prevention work better understand this inner battle. The dynamics always become a little more complicated when it comes to Black men and rape.

Even more complex is having conversations with other Black men who believe in their hearts that the victim is lying, or that the Black man is being framed – a highly sensitive issue amongst us Black men. However, it must be said, without equivocation or cowardice, that Black men, like all men, do commit rape against women. We live in a rape culture that transcends race.

Tragically, men from every racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic background perpetrate acts of sexual violence that hurt and traumatize women – including Black women. We must address rape with honesty and with courage and must not be dissuaded by pushback, denial, or defensiveness by Black men or any other group of men.

When a high-profile athlete like Jameis Winston is accused of rape, I force myself to separate my love for him as a quarterback and open myself up to the possibility that even though he is an outstanding football player worthy of this year's Heisman Trophy, he may, in fact, be a rapist.

Please, lower your defenses and hear me. I totally understand that Winston has not been charged with a crime. I understand that he is a frontrunner to win the Heisman. I know you may want to see him and his teammates at Florida State University compete for the national championship. I'll be the first to admit that I enjoy watching Famous Jameis play on Saturdays. But we must resist the temptation to assume that Jameis Winston falls into the category of Black men who have been falsely accused of rape – a lamentable historical pattern. To do so would be unfair to the rape victim. We shouldn't automatically assume that he did not commit the crime because he is being set up, or that his team's championship season is being sabotaged, or that there is a witch hunt against Winston and his Heisman campaign.

It is true that Black men continue to be cruelly stereotyped as rapists. As a Black man, I carry that label – and all of the other stereotypes associated with Black men – wherever I go in our country. However, it is also a stereotype that women lie about being victims of rape more often than not. According to FBI statistics, less than 3% of all rapes are falsely reported.

I also know what my reaction would be if my daughter approached me and told me a boy or man raped her. Race, class, social standing in the culture would mean nothing to me. My only concern would be to ensure that my daughter felt supported and safe, and that she began the healing process from her pain and from her trauma. Beyond that, I would expect the perpetrator to be punished to the full extent of the law and would advocate for him to receive extensive gender violence prevention training in prison.

That's tough to say if you believe that most women lie about rape. If your defenses are up, you are resistant to hearing the truth, or you've been scarred by history, you won't hear the voice of a fellow Black man.

Going back to the premise of this piece, when you are a Black man and you speak out against the sexual violence of other Black men, it can feel completely isolating and lonely. Your racial loyalty and your manhood get called into question by other Black men.

What Black man would go out of his way to have his Blackness and his manhood challenged by his Black brothers? What Black man wants other Black men to lose respect for him? What man wants to be dismissed, or have his man card revoked?

I don't. But I also want to be fair, and compassionate, and supportive to victims and survivors of rape, no matter who their rapist is, or what he looks like. And ultimately, I want be on the right side of justice.

What kind of man *wouldn't* want that for his own daughter?



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