



Who is Helping Rihanna?

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It is fascinating to those of us who are working in the battered women's movement to listen to the talk about singers Rihanna and Chris Brown. The first week when we saw Rihanna's battered and bruised face, public sympathy was for young, beautiful Rihanna. Then when Rihanna behaved like most battered women and forgave Chris Brown, her boyfriend, for his violence, the public became more critical and started asking the age old question, "Why does she keep going back to him?"

In a national statement from the Women of Color Network, Harrisburg, PA, they ask,

"Who is helping Rihanna? Where is her time to emotionally heal? To think about what has happened to her? Where is the opportunity for her to just breathe? Does she have an advocate? Does she know that she is entitled to one? Who is helping her determine what is in her own best interest as a survivor?"

As advocates in the anti-violence against women movement, we recognize the coercive tactic of the whirlwind that often occurs after battering... "Baby, I'm sorry"; "Let's reconcile"; "Let's show the public you are not harmed"; "Let's fix my reputation"; "Let's keep me out of jail"; "Let's save my career"; "Let's keep you isolated from people who can help you." This is just another extension of the abuse.

As a young woman of color, there is a lot of pressure being placed on Rihanna to serve as a model for others, and she is receiving harsh public warnings from prominent talk show hosts and critics of all races to "leave him". She is also hearing from parents and youth that they are disappointed with Rihanna for "taking him back". ...blaming her for continuing to be involved with Brown takes the attention away from his actions. "

Domestic violence is an equal opportunity destroyer, yet we are still surprised when celebrities are terrorized by someone who purports to love them. We think that fame and fortune insulates them from dating or domestic violence. Then, we act as judge and jury and convict victims like Rihanna for not immediately doing what we think they should do....just leave.

Relationships between people that love each other are special and complex. We invest in our relationships. We spend precious time together. We introduce each other to our respective families and friends. We begin to co-mingle our lives and have shared experiences. We develop trust and have faith in each other. We begin to build a life together. We depend on each other to be there for us emotionally and physically.

The crimes of domestic violence, dating violence and stalking are also special. A bank robber does not know everything about his victim like an abuser. Bank robbers do not know where the banker shops or where the victim's mother lives or where he sends his children to pre school. The domestic violence abuser knows all of these things and much more about his victim.

When shared life is shattered by violence that is initiated by one (most often male) partner, we are shocked. We forget that relationships can also be fragile, even frightening. Trust that took weeks, months and years to build can be shattered instantly. When trust is broken by someone who is supposed to love us, we are initially shocked and surprised. The human psyche does not want to believe what our eye sees. Our head doesn't overrule our heart. We believe the apologies. We hope. We forgive. We try again.

When does our sympathy for Rihanna shift over to Chris Brown? Why do we blame Rihanna for her own abuse? Why are we disgusted when Rihanna forgives Chris Brown and reconciles with him?

She must have provoked him. She's lying and she made it up. She is ruining his career. Why did she call the police? It can't be that bad! She probably feels bad that it was her fault so she took him back. Shame on you Rihanna! These are all statements heard from the public and many from teenaged girls.

This public sentiment makes it harder for Rihanna and all victims to take back their lives. Many know that if they leave that they will be in more danger. The abuser tries to regain control using more and more violence. Abusers are dangerous and manipulative. Life revolves around abusers who rarely think about how their behavior could affect others even their own partners. They make promises they will not or cannot keep like, "This will never happen again."

Most abusive behavior does not start as physical violence. Many abusers are only occasionally physically violent. Some abusers are never physically violent. But' there is always the threat of violence hanging in the air.

Most victims do not want to leave the person they love. They just want the violence to stop. They want the threats to stop. They want the arguments to stop. They want to stop being afraid. The abuse they experience is only occasional and intermittent. It is not usually like the worst abuse they have seen in the news or on TV so women do not identify what is going on for them as domestic violence.

Complicit with all of this is the news that reports domestic violence as a fight or an argument when it was a beating.

When domestic violence involves celebrities, beautiful people, we think it is a movie script or a cartoon. When the make-up comes off we expect not one but two beautiful stars, Chris Brown and Rihanna, to emerge unscathed and unblemished.

Unfortunately, celebrities have real lives like all the rest of us. Their pain is just as real and we can only hope that someone is helping Rihanna as she sorts through all the pressure and public comment to find herself and her safety from what was never her fault. Violence is a choice that Chris Brown made. The public and the community must

hold him accountable. His decision to beat Rihanna may affect his career. That is not Rihanna's fault. He may need help. It is not Rihanna's responsibility to find help for him. We can hope that Chris Brown will recognize his battering behavior and seek help to change. He is young and it is not too late for him but he has to make the changes for himself, not for Rihanna. No matter what Rihanna says or does, he has the choice to walk away. We can only hope that Rihanna has the counsel of a domestic violence center advocate. She deserves safety and freedom from violence. I hope we are all helping, supporting and encouraging Rihanna.