

Rape culture, Taylor Swift and silencing women who speak up

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Shanthi Marie Blanchard completed her MSc in gender, policy, and inequalities in 2012 at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In this post, she criticises the tendency to silence women who speak up about men who have done them wrong – especially women who bring charges of rape and abuse against men. Follow Shanthi @smblanchard.

Friday nights are a sacred space.

I enjoy coming home to do my laundry, tidy up my room...and shamelessly sing off pitched lyrics to ditties that are oddly reminiscent of my high school freshman diary while I simultaneously dance around in my running spankies and jump on top of my bed. Friday night is Taylor Swift 'n Sing Karaoke Clean-up Nights. Please knock before you enter.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my old roommate had a somewhat (understated) problem with this. No, no. It wasn't that he grew up in a land that knew no Dixie. Or that country was clearly not the blade of grass that got his John Deere sheers a 'spinnin. It was the fact that Taylor Swift hates men.

Yes. Taylor Swift hates men.

"She dates boys, then writes songs about all the bad things they've done." He said.

Writing about bad things men have done, implies an innate hatred towards them?

I mused the thought over in my mind. Then, I quietly pushed my open diary –haphazardly knocked onto the floor- under my bed with my foot.

I've since moved out of that apartment, but I have to wonder what my old flatmate thinks about Taylor's new song, "I knew you were trouble". Perhaps you've heard of it? It's a little number one tune in which Taylor

takes full ownership of her own choice to be in a relationship with a guy she knew was, well, trouble. And in the end she clearly states,

The blame is on me.

My old flatmate must be rejoicing in the now vocally vacant halls of our old flat. And he is not alone. I did a quick Google search of the term, Taylor Swift Hates Men. There were 8.75 million hits.

This hodgepodge hatred of Taylor is more troubling then the fact that I've played Trouble more than 277 times in the past month (okay, maybe I am that weirdo).

It's troubling because people aren't calling Taylor out because she often juxtaposes women in candy coloured depictions of virginal saints versus sexually active, boyfriend-stealing whores. It's troubling they are calling her out for being a man hater.

This is a problem. Aside from a few admittedly flippant attack songs, most of her songs don't do that at all. In fact, a lot of her songs talk about the challenges of fitting in with peers, the challenges of growing up, and yes...even the joys of being with a great guy.

But, there are songs that talk about the frustrations of dating, and her experiences with men... particularly men who've done her wrong. And apparently, if you're a female in America and you call men out on the things they've done to hurt you (as opposed to male singers/groups in America

whose breakup songs dominate the **top 9 of top 50 breakup songs** of all time) then you clearly hate the opposite sex.

We have a long history of silencing women who try to speak up about men who have done them wrong. We have a long history of telling them that they're just being whining, complaining and annoying. They're being emotional. They're taking things too seriously. They need to get over it. They need to shut up.

It would be one thing if this mentality simply resided in our criticism of Taylor Swift music. But it extends to across a wide network that encompasses every aspect of our culture- from the media to religion to our politics. And we are seeing some very serious repercussions in what this mentality in our legal treatment of women who have been sexually violated, and are trying to raise their voices in our legal and media sectors.

This past month, in a small sleepy town snuggled next the Mississippi river by the bluffs of downstate Illinois, Melisa Vestain walked up the stone steps of the Jackson County courthouse, and into her pre-trial for a felony conviction. Her crime? The false accusation of rape. Vestain's initial report stated that what started out as a consensual act quickly became unconsensual. This is the stance she maintains.

The then State Attorney Michael Wepsiec, however, deemed Vestain's case as consensual sex. In an unprecedented move, Wepsiec's reaction was to charge Vestain with a felony.

Wepsiec has since been replaced by Michael Carr. But the legal action move has caused over **20 rape crises centers state wide to draw together in support of Vestain**. Their stance is simple: **prosecuting a sexual assault victim is devastating for the victim, and chilling for current and future sexual assault victims**.

There has been a sound battle cry that State Attorney Carr and Wepsiec are using Vestain as an example for other women who bring sexual assault cases to the court that infringes of what counts as sexual assault. Their message is clear: Swift the incident under the consensual rug and put the blame on yourself. After all, you got yourself into a sexual situation with someone you knew was trouble. The legal blame is on you.

The most glaringly example of silencing in our culture can be seen in the Steubenville Trials. A young, intoxicated 16 year old girl was raped several times throughout a night by two prominent high school football players. Fellow teammate Erin Westlake walked in on his two boys in the basement, and found the girl naked on the floor. One perpetrator was slapping his penis on the girl's hip. The other perpetrator was behind the girl, violating her with two fingers.

The rapes were videoed, and then uploaded onto the Internet.

Many, including Westlake, have stepped up to defend his teammates and their violation, stating

"It wasn't violent," and thus, doesn't count as a 'real' assault.

This attitude tells the victim that her experience, her violation, isn't really real. It doesn't count, because no one jumped out of a bush to attack her. Clearly, any mental suffering she endured resulting in the conviction at a trial is just Jane Doe being emotional, and perpetuating a gross overreaction.

In fact, if you ask CNN correspondents Candy Crowley, Poppy Harlow and Paul Callan, the conviction of the two 16 year old boys who created irreparable damage to the life of another, is heart-breaking. Obviously, the punishment these two must face for their crime is much worse than the mental, emotional and social repercussions this young woman must face. Because Jane Doe



doesn't just have to deal with the emotions of sexual assault, her peers have socially ostracized her, and have threatened her life **multiple times** on online social media.

This past February, a University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill student faced suspension and expulsion because her report of rape was creating an '**intimidating environment**' for her rapist. Lets not forget about the lawsuit brought against **Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Beyers**, in which a junior partner accused another junior partner of sexual advances, and faced heavy work place ostracism as a consequence of her actions.

It is this mentality of finding excuses, pardoning those who have committed a criminal act and blaming a victim that tells the victim she does not have a right in our society to speak out against the perpetrator. It is this rape culture that tells victims like Melissa Vestain to shut up and don't cry that the sky is falling.

We live in a rape culture that punishes survivors who come forward with allegations of sexual assault or abuse by making an example of them through social, legal, and media driven platforms, we are creating an adversarial climate for future victims to bring forth their claims and undergo a just and due process by law.

So the next time you complain about a Taylor Swift song, do it because you can't stand her voice. Do it because you loathe country pop and if you have to put up with one more four-chord top 20 hit, you'll seriously rip your roommate's iPod out of the wall socket. Do it because you respectfully disagree with the way Taylor publically talks about her breakups. But don't do it because Taylor Swift hates men. She doesn't.

And neither does any the other woman who speaks up against a criminal act she experienced, especially if a man commits that act.

*A similar version of this post appeared as **When We Tell Women Their Voices Don't Count** on Generation-C.org and as **Taylor Swift's Troubles Are Real, But She Doesn't Hate Men** on PolicyMic.com. You can read some of Shanthi's other writing [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). She has written about **gender, sex, militarisation and post-9/11 America** for Engenderings.*

Shanthi grew up in downstate Illinois, where she fell in love with her first passion, long distance running. Before LSE she attended Santa Clara University on a cross country scholarship in 2006, graduating with a BS in political science in 2009. She went onto Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, earning a BA in psychology in 2011. Shanthi enjoys all the clichéd marks of self-discovery that come with being in her mid 20s, and finds her current passion project of helping small businessnes establish an online presence to be especially rewarding. You can find her wherever there's a running trail, hidden in the back corner of a coffee shop, or in an intense conversation with a random stranger who just happened to say something interesting as she was passing by.

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