

## The media furore surrounding Rihanna and Chris Brown is a missed opportunity for helpful discussion about intimate partner violence



*In this post, Harriet Gray, first year PhD student at the LSE Gender Institute, discusses how the public discourse surrounding Chris Brown's abuse of then-girlfriend and singer Rihanna has turned in to a discourse of victim blaming rather than being used as something constructive to publicly discuss the issues surrounding domestic violence.*

Singers Rihanna and Chris Brown are back in the public eye again after it was revealed that they have collaborated on two new tracks – a remix of Rihanna's Birthday Cake, and one of Brown's Turn up the Music. Their relationship, broken off in the aftermath of Brown's infamous violence against Rihanna three years ago, **is now widely assumed to be back on.**

The violent attack on 8 February 2009 that landed Rihanna in the hospital and Brown with convictions for assault and making criminal threats is well known. At the time, many predicted that Brown's career was over; he lost a number of endorsement deals, his album sales suffered, and some radio stations refused to play his music. **He issued an apology via YouTube** saying, "I wish I had the chance to live those few moments again... what I did was inexcusable... I'm truly, truly sorry that I wasn't able to handle the situation both differently and better... I will do everything in my power to make sure that it never happens again."

Rihanna, widely criticised for rekindling the relationship after the attack, split with Brown a couple of months later, telling ABC News "I realised that my selfish decision for love could result in some young girl getting killed... I couldn't be held responsible for telling them go back.... [Even] if Chris never hit me again, who's to say that their boyfriend won't? Who's to say that they won't kill these girls?" **She said that she felt "humiliated" for having fallen so deeply in love with an abusive man.**

Brown's return to glory at the Grammys earlier this month has rekindled the furore. On Twitter, Brown has celebrated his win ("Hate all u want becuz I got a Grammy now! That's the ultimate f\*\*k off!"), fans have urged us all to stop blowing Brown's "one mistake" out of proportion, and **a number of women have expressed their willingness to be on the receiving end of the star's violence** ("ok not gonna lie i'd let chris brown beat the eff out of me"). A 'Twitter war' between Brown and WWE wrestler CM Punk has broken out, with **CM Punk expressing his belief that women are to be "revered" and his desire to fight Brown.**

**Public discussion about domestic abuse** is something that **campaigners have been urging for years**, and a widely publicised case of domestic abuse involving two very popular celebrities could, in theory, serve as the starting point for this. However, although the discussion is happening, the manner in which it is occurring is largely destructive, reinforcing damaging myths and silencing those voices trying to speak about the realities of abuse.

Ongoing discussions about Rihanna yet again reveal the deeply engrained belief that a victim-survivor is at least partly to blame for the abuse she suffers. In a survey of 200 teenagers aged 12-19 carried out by the Boston Public Health Commission shortly after the attack, 46% of respondents responded that Rihanna was responsible for what had happened. In a recent article in the Huffington Post Dr Gilda Carle, "relationship expert to the stars", says that **if a reunion is on the cards, she hopes that Rihanna has "learned not to push his hot buttons"**. In addition to shouldering blame for provoking the attack, Rihanna is also perceived to be at fault for failing to immediately leave Brown and for any impending reunion. Not only is she "stupid" and therefore deserving of future violence against her ("Don't worry Rihanna if you didn't learn your lesson about being with an abuser the first time. **Chris Brown will punch you in the face again**"), her fame **leaves**

her open to accusations of **setting a bad example for young girls**. There does not seem to be a comparable concern that Brown is setting a bad example for young men.

Such attitudes are not of course not unique to Rihanna: victim blaming attitudes about domestic violence are common. For example, half of young men and a third of young women surveyed for a 2000 Scottish study said infidelity, nagging and disrespect are justifiable causes of a man's use of physical or sexual violence against his female partner.

In the midst of all this blame, there is little space to speak about the commonalities of Rihanna's experience with that of so many other women. **A victim-survivor puts up with an average of 35 assaults before she seeks help**; reconciliations with abusers are common. Granted, Rihanna's situation is different from that of many victim-survivors; she doesn't have to worry about losing her home or her only source of income or about making her children fatherless, fears that keep many women with abusive partners. But like most victim-survivors, she may have feared future violence whether she ended the relationship or not, and she may have felt conflicted emotions such as continuing love, hope that he would change, responsibility for his wellbeing, and humiliation that this has happened to her. Asked by ABC news why she didn't leave Brown immediately, she replied, "He was my best friend, we were in love, it just takes time. Love doesn't go away right away, you know.... I had to protect him. The whole world hates him now? His fans, his career? I just need[ed] to let him know, don't do anything stupid." Labelling Rihanna's choices "stupid", we lose the opportunity to discuss why so many women find it so hard to leave abusers, and to explore how we can empower ourselves to make safe choices.

Secondly, our imagination of Brown as either a monster with no control over his violent actions or capacity for reform, or as a kid whose accidental loss of control should be forgotten, makes it difficult to talk about motivations for abuse. Brown himself, in his 2009 apology, fails to take full responsibility for his use of violence. The statement "I will do everything in my power to make sure that it never happens again" serves to erase the fact that the decision to use violence was always in his power, that domestic abuse is not, as commonly assumed, about a loss of control but about a taking of control within a relationship. It silences those voices trying to question why it is that some men feel entitled to use violence against their partners: as masculinities scholar Raewyn Connell<sup>[1]</sup> reminds us, although most men do not perpetrate domestic abuse, those that do rarely think of themselves as deviant; they feel that their behaviour is entirely justified. It also closes off any possible space to think about the ways in which the widespread existence of violence against women helps to maintain patriarchy, a system in which even (most) men who do not perform violent or hegemonic masculinity are able to benefit from the patriarchal dividend. Our vilification of Brown and his abdication of responsibility thus denies us the opportunity to think about the gendered systems of power which underpin intimate partner violence against women.

Furthermore, CM Punk's world, in which women are to be "revered", relies on a conceptualisation of women as essentially different and weak; disempowering victim-survivors, erasing the incredible strength it takes to live with an abusive partner, and making it difficult to talk about how systematic abuse is wrong no matter who it is perpetrated against.

When we label Rihanna "stupid" and Brown a "monster", when we reinforce the idea that beating your female partner is wrong because she is innately weak rather than because it is wrong to manipulate and abuse those who love you, and when we belittle the pain of abusive relationships with 'light hearted' offers of submission on Twitter, we lose the opportunity to really talk about domestic abuse. There is no vocabulary within this discourse to talk about how domestic abuse operates, about how an abuser's desire for power and control over their partners leads them to gradually build up regulation of their everyday lives, instilling fear and self-doubt until their victims feel trapped in a psychological cage<sup>[2]</sup>. Indeed, far from providing the space to talk about these things, this discussion shrinks this space by filling it with the old myths of abuse: victim blaming, othering of perpetrators, playing down the impact of violence and of control. The media hype over Rihanna and Chris Brown, then, is not just a missed opportunity to really talk; it is a reinforcing of destructive social assumptions that contribute to victims' feelings of being isolated, alone, and trapped.



[1] Connell, R.W. “The Social Organisation of Masculinity”, in *The Masculinities Reader* by Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank Barrett (eds), (2001), Malden, MA: Polity Press, pp 30 – 50 (p. 44).

[2] Williamson, E. (2010) ‘Living in the World of the Domestic Violence Perpetrator: Negotiating the Unreality of Coercive Control’, *Violence Against Women*, 16(12), 1412-1423.

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