

Let's Stop Calling Bill Cosby's Victims 'Accusers'

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Wednesday, January 21, 2015

More than two dozen women so far have alleged sexual misconduct against the iconic comedian. When journalists and bloggers call these victims "accusers" it perpetuates a culture of victim blaming.

(WOMENSENEWS)--One of the latest developments in the ongoing news and entertainment spectacle surrounding the iconic comedian Bill Cosby's alleged serial sexual predation has to do with how his lawyers and handlers have decided to double down on their long-time, aggressive strategy of insulting his alleged victims, and raising questions about their character and motives.

For years Cosby's team has responded to allegations of sexual assault against the famed entertainer by claiming the women who came forward were engaged in a "shakedown," according to a recent New York Times article. In at least one case they presented a newspaper with "damaging information" about an alleged victim, and in other instances threatened news organizations with defamation suits and other consequences if they published or broadcast damaging information about Cosby's alleged behavior.

All of this appears to be part of an attempt by the Cosby team to discourage victims from coming forward, and to intimidate media companies from covering the story thoroughly and accurately. But a reinvigorated level of anti-rape activism and technological changes in media has made the job of Cosby's defenders much more difficult.

In the pre-digital era, sexual assault allegations made by women against famous men were often marginalized or ignored by the ideological gatekeepers of mainstream media, most of whom were men. But social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr now provide unprecedented opportunities for women -- and men -- to publicly share their stories, and the painful truths, of sexual victimization.

Inspired in part by what appears to be a sense of responsibility to support the allegations of fellow Cosby victims, a stream of women have been speaking up -- more than two dozen so far. Presumably, many of these women find comfort and safety in numbers, especially because the high number of victims means that each one is more likely to be believed and less likely to be vilified. This is not an uncommon pattern in multiple-victim sexual assault scandals; a similar process occurred in the early days of the Catholic Church sexual abuse debacle more than a decade ago.

All of this provides evidence of our society's growing ability to acknowledge and come to terms with the widespread problem of sexual violence.

But one aspect of old and new media coverage of the allegations against Cosby takes us backward: the widespread journalistic and social media convention of referring to Cosby's alleged victims as his "accusers."

Important Legal, Moral Principle

The presumption of innocence is an important legal and moral principle, and it is always worth emphasizing that allegations of assault are not proof of it. The roiling controversy surrounding the recent infamous Rolling Stone magazine article about an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia in 2012

stands as a stark reminder that rape accusations are a very serious matter, and responsible authorities -- journalistic and legal -- need to proceed with extreme caution when leveling them.

It is also important to be especially cautious when the alleged rapist is a man of color, due to our society's shameful legacy of African American men being falsely accused of sexual crimes.

Nonetheless, calling the alleged victims of sexual violence "accusers" is an act of subtle but profound victim blaming that has the potential to silence future victims and set back the momentum of the growing anti-rape movement.

The mechanism by which this victim-blaming plays out comes at the intersection of gendered belief systems and linguistic practices. It reflects both pre-existing cultural biases about issues of male sexuality, sex and power, as well as deeply rooted misogyny and mistrust of women.

Let's consider how people respond when they hear about allegations of sexual violence. Regrettably, when it comes to certain sexual assault cases, many people's reflexive victim-blaming attitudes prevent them from reacting sympathetically. This is especially true in cases where beloved men -- including celebrities -- are the alleged perpetrators.

But apart from those scenarios, generally speaking, the preponderance of public sentiment lies on the side of concern and compassion for the victims of rape and other forms of abuse. Many people directly identify with them: it could have happened to someone I know and love. It could have happened to me.

Shifting Public Support

Referring to the alleged victim as the "accuser," however, reverses this process. She -- or he -- is no longer the sympathetic victim to whom something horrible was done. She is now the one who is doing something to him -- she's accusing him. It is her actions -- not his -- that become the object of critical scrutiny. And he is transformed into the victim -- of her accusation. Thus the use of the word "accuser" effectively shifts public support from the alleged victim to the alleged perpetrator.

Since this latest chapter in the Cosby scandal broke, hundreds of reporters and commentators who are clearly sympathetic to the victims' experiences have nonetheless contributed to the perpetuation of victim blaming by referring to the women as "accusers." Whether they know it or not, the media's use of this word fuels doubts about the motives of the alleged victims: Why would she accuse him of committing such a heinous crime? Why would she try to ruin a man's life?

Focusing on the victims' motives then makes it more difficult to ask the truly relevant questions about the alleged perpetrator, such as: How is it possible that a man who seemed so friendly and loving in public could act so reprehensibly in private? To what extent are we as a culture complicit when we deny, overlook and excuse away acts of abuse and violence committed by men whom we otherwise admire and respect?

It is understandable that Cosby's attorneys and spokespeople would use the word "accuser." After all, it deflects attention off their client and his alleged criminal acts. But for others, using the word is antithetical to the goal of transforming the victim-blaming beliefs that help to sustain rape culture.

There are many reasons why rape is radically under-reported: victims are routinely disbelieved, shamed and shunned. It's been going on for thousands of years. And now, as if all those other disincentives

weren't enough, widespread use and acceptance of the term "accuser" makes it even more difficult for victims to come forward, and therefore less likely.

Fortunately, there is a simple solution at hand. People need to stop using the word "accuser." This is especially true of journalists, including headline writers, whose frequent and repeated use of the term over the past decade has normalized it in public discourse.

People who report to the authorities or the media that they have been sexually assaulted should be described as "victims," or, if more caution is necessary or desired, "alleged victims."

A society that is serious about dramatically reducing the rate of sexual violence does not put even more roadblocks -- linguistic and otherwise -- in the way of victims coming forward.

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