

R. Kelly's arrest barely scratches surface of a much-needed #MeToo reckoning for black girls

Analysis: What would it take for America to confront its ugliest and most complicated attitudes toward race, gender and sex?



R. Kelly performs in December 2016 in New York. Noam Galai / Getty Images file

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By Janell Ross

For Kenyette Barnes, last week was, in a word, strange. After years of rumors and allegations, police in Chicago arrested the singer and producer R. Kelly on charges that he sexually abused four women, three of whom were teenagers at the time.

Barnes is a co-founder of the #MuteRKelly campaign that pushed the music industry, law enforcement and Kelly's own fans to hold Kelly accountable for what they say is decades of crime against black women and girls, which Kelly denies. The questions started pouring in from news outlets across the country: Wasn't Kelly's arrest a victory? How was she celebrating?

But celebrating was the last thing on Barnes' mind. As details of the allegations against Kelly continue to emerge, and with the ultimate outcome unclear, Barnes wondered: What would it take for America to confront its ugliest and most complicated attitudes toward race, gender and sex, so that the #MeToo movement could finally extend more fully to black women and girls?

"People assume these micro victories – R. Kelly in court, R. Kelly in cuffs – are the endgame," Barnes told NBC BLK after the media frenzy around Kelly's recent court appearances abated. "But for us, this is not a time of celebration."

Those who want to celebrate, Barnes said, "don't understand how much work there is to do, how widespread these problems are, how deep the justifications for them run. Sure, something has shifted, but only some of us are fully awake."

In the midst of a national reckoning about the treatment of women and girls, some patterns remain undisturbed. [Black rape victims remain less likely to see their rapists prosecuted, whether the assailant is a stranger or a member of the family](#). [Black girls are twice as likely to be sexually abused](#) as their white peers. [Black children make up 57 percent of those arrested for prostitution and they are a disproportionate share of domestic sex trafficking victims](#). Activists and experts say those children are more likely to be blamed or silenced when they tell their stories.

These disparities are fed by a combination of history, law and stereotypes about innocence and sexuality that operate inside and outside black America. Even in the #MeToo era, [public comments about black girls and women who make allegations of rape and abuse can sound like something from another time](#). They are ideas prosecutors, juries and the general public will have to understand if the benefits of #MeToo are to ever apply fully to black women and girls.

"Routinely dismissing and ignoring the violence which is directed at black women and girls is simply the way things are done, a way of operating that just feels normal," said Carolyn West, a clinical psychologist and psychology professor at the University of Washington, who researches intimate forms of violence and sexualized images of black women. "That means those who refuse to participate in that system face tremendous backlash. Institutions – law enforcement, family – with a duty to protect may not be willing to do that job. And that combination is just profoundly damaging."

In Kelly's case, it took a much-watched six-hour documentary series, "Surviving R. Kelly," which aired on Lifetime, for public outrage to climb and prosecutors in two cities to [make public that they had launched investigations](#). The series wove the known facts together with new interviews, then revealed a potentially disturbing pattern.

[In the early 1990s](#), when Kelly was 27, he [married his 15-year-old protégé](#), the singer Aaliyah. Her debut album, produced by Kelly, bore a revealing title: "Age Ain't Nothin But a Number." In the decades since, Kelly has repeatedly been accused of molesting girls, recording this activity on videotape and physically and sexually abusing women. He was acquitted of child porn charges in Illinois in 2008 and has settled multiple civil suits over the years filed by women, many of whom say they were underage when Kelly [groomed](#) and then began having sex with them.

None of it seemed to alter his career.

Kelly and his lawyers have denied all of the allegations, and he pleaded not guilty to the 10 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse now pending in Chicago.

The sexual exploitation of black women and girls has a long, dark history in American life. From the moment that the slave trade began, West explains, rape was a part of the experience for black women. Stereotypes insisting that both black men and women were driven by an animalistic, insatiable and dangerous sexuality proliferated, justifying inhumane treatment.

[Those ideas were baked into laws](#) barring black people from giving testimony in court against white people and, eventually, [court rulings](#) rendered black women and girls above a certain age legally “unrapable,” people against whom sexual offenses were not punishable by law. By the mid-20th century, the scourge of unpunished sex crimes committed by white men against black women and girls was so widespread that the NAACP employed people to investigate these alleged crimes. Among them: [Rosa Parks, known to most Americans as a woman whose civil rights activism](#) began on a bus.

At the same time, black men accused of even the slightest familiarity with and certainly the rape of any white woman were subject to severe punishment, most often torture and lynching.

Those twin realities – that black women and girls are a low-risk group to target and that even unfounded accusations against black men could cost them their lives – profoundly shaped the way that black Americans think about sexual crimes, said Huberta Jackson-Lowman, a clinical community psychologist who studies the way systems affect people.

“Our natural instinct, because of our treatment, is to encircle people who are being subjected to potential injustice,” said Jackson-Lowman, who is also the president of the Association of Black Psychologists. “So even when people have done the worst, that reticence is often there.”

Kelly is not the first man accused of wrongdoing to play on that reticence. He has repeatedly painted himself as a victim of false accusations, and last year [his team likened the experience to being lynched](#). Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, comedian Bill Cosby and Virginia Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax have also used lynching as a metaphor after they were accused of sexual misbehavior or assault.

Stereotypes about black girls also play a role in who is seen as a victim, West said. Both black and nonblack Americans are more likely to view black girls as older and less innocent than their white peers. [A 2017 survey of almost 400 adults across races and ethnicities](#) conducted by researchers at Georgetown University found that large shares believe black girls need less nurturing, less protection and less comfort, and are more independent and know more about adult topics, including sex, than other girls. Those ideas begin to shape the way black girls are seen around age 5.

Related themes show up in pornography, said West, who is presenting her research in that area to a conference of women psychologists this week.

When West and her team reviewed 6,000 porn films featuring black performers, they found that a popular genre that centers on sexual inexperience rarely features black performers. Instead, black women are most often depicted as animal-like, sexual hustlers capable of nothing else.

The popularity of those themes suggests the thinking behind them is not uncommon, West said.

“It concerns me that we are having conversations about celebrities when we also need to be looking within our own families,” West said. “I don’t know there is an easy answer there. But there are lots of conversations needing to happen, uncomfortable conversations – very uncomfortable conversations.”

One man who knows this well is John Eaves, former chair of the Fulton County Board of Commissioners in Georgia, one of the places Kelly lives.

“Let’s just say the court of public opinion wasn’t very strong on R. Kelly,” Eaves said. “It was like no one wanted to really look, to really see.”

In 2017, the #MuteRKelly campaign asked the commission, which was already [working to address](#) Fulton County’s [large-scale sex trafficking](#) problem, to stop Kelly from performing at a county-owned concert venue. The commission tried. When it failed for legal reasons, Eaves, who is black and a Democrat, went public with the commission’s view. That was not a popular move in Atlanta, where the city’s hip-hop and R&B DJs called Eaves, who was running for mayor, an opportunist. He came in [eighth in the November 2017](#) mayor’s contest.

Those who surface accusations against men are often unwelcome. Dream Hampton, the “Surviving R. Kelly” documentary maker, told the [NPR program “Fresh Air”](#) that she’s faced so many threats since the documentary aired that she’s had to move.

When reports of sexual abuse, rape and relationships between teens and grown men become public – whether the men are famous or not – the blame tends to go everywhere but on the men themselves, said Barnes, the co-founder of the #MuteRKelly campaign. People blame greedy, neglectful parenting and allegedly “fast” or precocious children who, it’s often said, “knew what they were doing,” Barnes said. They question why a black offender is facing legal consequences and presume the girls or women are seeking fame, attention or money at any cost, she said.

“I wouldn’t say we have arrived at our destination,” Barnes said. “You know we are still like the Greeks, killing the messenger who delivers the bad news. But we are coming to a place of reckoning.”

Whether that reckoning arrives for Kelly remains to be seen.

When Kelly was released from jail Monday to await trial, he [made his way to a nearby Chicago McDonald’s](#), a once music-themed location where [previous reports have indicated Kelly often visited and sometimes picked up teenage girls](#).

[Waiting in the parking lot](#): a collection of Kelly fans, [blasting his music from their vehicles](#).