



The Justice Black Women Seek Will Not Be Found in the Courtroom

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December 18, 2015

Like many people, I waited with bated breath to hear the verdict in the case of Daniel Holtzclaw. Holtzclaw is a former Oklahoma City police officer who was convicted of assaulting women in his community while on patrol. Twelve of those women and one teenager bravely stood up in court and testified against him. Holtzclaw targeted them on suspicion of drug possession, they said, and then forced them into sexual acts.

I wanted to believe that he would have his day of reckoning.

I hoped these courageous women would feel that people believed them and took their pain seriously, that it was worth all they went through in order to see him pay for his crimes. I saw them as amazing women, as sisters, mothers, and grandmothers.

But I also know they are Black women and the system has not always been a place where we have seen justice. So I waited.

One victim said, “I did not think anyone would believe a Black woman.” I can see why she would feel that way. There is so much rhetoric that says Black women can’t be trusted. Laws are created that tell Black women when we can and cannot become mothers; policies are pushed based on stereotypes and insults about Black women as parents and as people. And when we are abused or assaulted, we are often ignored, devalued, or delegitimized by health, legal, and political systems.

Black women know what is best for our lives, and yet there are countless barriers put up to deny us the ability to make our own decisions or to seek help and support when we need it.

For every Black woman who reports a rape, there are at least 15 who do not. We are portrayed as promiscuous. Our lives are treated as *less than*—like we don’t deserve respect or that our voices do not need to be heard. We are both preyed upon and made more vulnerable because we exist at the intersection of racism and sexism.

There is so much violence against us in our communities: A small study found 60 percent of the Black women surveyed had experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18. And advocates consider intimate partner homicide one of the leading causes of death for Black women between the ages of 15 and 35. In spite of the rampant cruelty and violation of Black women, these issues have not been at the forefront of the conversations about the lives of Black people. While we

may not be killed by police at the same rate as our men and boys who are dying in the streets, ignoring or making invisible the violence aimed at Black women erases our pain and silences us in our own community.

There are likely other women out there who were hurt by Daniel Holtzclaw who did not come forward. They were too afraid—that they would not be believed and could not hope for any justice. When a young woman who was assaulted by Holtzclaw at 17 was asked why she did not report the rape, she answered, “What kind of police do you call on the police?”

The issue of police brutality is finally getting more attention due to protests and organizing by Black men and women throughout the country, and yet the very real issue of sexual violence by law enforcement is often left out of the conversation.

The unfortunate truth is that civil rights movements and protests responding to violence in the Black community have often prioritized the stories and the pain of men and ignored the suffering of Black women. This is in spite of the fact that the second most reported misconduct against police after excessive use of force is sexual misconduct, according to a 2010 report from the Cato Institute. About 9 percent of the total reports made regarding the inappropriate actions of police that year—the most recent year for which data is available—involved some kind of sexual misconduct. More than 350 officers were implicated in complaints that involved forcible non-consensual sexual activity such as sexual assault or sexual battery, many of them repeat offenders like Daniel Holtzclaw.

The majority of survivors who report rape and sexual abuse by police are women of color. This is a part of police brutality that this case brought to light and that Black men and women have to ensure does not get pushed aside in the media and in the movement for Black lives and racial justice. As we work to ensure that we #SayHerName and talk about women who have been killed, we also must talk about the sexual violence Black women experience. This violence comes at the hands of law enforcement when they are pulled over, detained, or in holding, as well as when they are in prison, where there is an epidemic of sexual misconduct.

Sadly, this violence extends to the juvenile justice system. Young girls of color are disproportionately incarcerated in juvenile facilities. A significant number of the young people in foster care and youth detention facilities experience sexual abuse and violence prior to entering the system, and then they are re-victimized.

Holtzclaw went after especially vulnerable women of color who are too often looked down and demeaned by our society and our systems, and who he knew feared what could happen if they were charged. This made his threats, his manipulation, and his violence that much more effective and horrific. Multiple women testified that he said he would let a charge drop or threatened them with jail time if they didn't comply. This also speaks to our broken criminal justice system. When a woman who is struggling with addiction and using drugs can be assaulted because she is afraid of being caught up in the system, it becomes even clearer that the war on drugs is a war on women of color.

It is with a heavy heart that I celebrate this verdict—not just because I struggle with the relentless focus on carceral solutions, but also because the effects of this case are far from over. It is not over for the women that Holtzclaw was accused of hurting. They likely will still be

grieving and healing for many years. And it is not over because Black women must continue to work not only to reform a system where justice too often eludes us, but also work to put an end to rape culture and the myths that dehumanize Black women. This is the justice that we seek and it will not be found in a courtroom. It will be found in the conversations and protests and the organizing and advocacy that we do to create social, cultural, and policy change.

Reproductive justice advocates need to continue the work to take down the billboards that disparage Black women and our families and make sure the media does not ignore violence against Black women and girls.

We must trust Black women and believe the experiences they share are valid.

I am grateful to the multiple women who bravely spoke out and pushed for the justice that has eluded too many of us. But they should not have to feel or be alone in calling out the violence that Black women face. Black women and Black men need to stand up and speak out and shut it down to ensure that the lives and the well-being of Black women and girls are not ignored in the efforts to ensure the rights, safety, and dignity of the Black community.