

Why I Speak Up for Black Women

By Megan Thee Stallion



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In the weeks leading up to the election, Black women are expected once again to deliver victory for Democratic candidates. We have gone from being unable to vote legally to a highly courted voting bloc — all in little more than a century.

Despite this and despite the way so many have embraced messages about racial justice this year, Black women are still constantly disrespected and disregarded in so many areas of life.

I was recently the victim of an act of violence by a man. After a party, I was shot twice as I walked away from him. We were not in a relationship. Truthfully, I was shocked that I ended up in that place.

My initial silence about what happened was out of fear for myself and my friends. Even as a victim, I have been met with skepticism and judgment. The way people have publicly questioned and debated whether I played a role in my own violent assault proves that my fears about discussing what happened were, unfortunately, warranted.

After a lot of self-reflection on that incident, I've realized that violence against women is not always connected to being in a relationship. Instead, it happens because too many men treat all women as objects, which helps them to justify inflicting abuse against us when we choose to exercise our own free will.

From the moment we begin to navigate the intricacies of adolescence, we feel the weight of this threat, and the weight of contradictory expectations and misguided preconceptions. Many of us begin to put too much value to how we are seen by others. That's if we are seen at all.

The issue is even more intense for Black women, who struggle against stereotypes and are seen as angry or threatening when we try to stand up for ourselves and our sisters. There's not much room for passionate advocacy if you are a Black woman.

I recently used the stage at "Saturday Night Live" to harshly rebuke Kentucky's attorney general, Daniel Cameron, for his appalling conduct in denying Breonna Taylor and her family justice. I anticipated some backlash: Anyone who follows the lead of Congressman John Lewis, the late civil rights giant, and makes "good trouble, necessary trouble," runs the risk of being attacked by those comfortable with the status quo.

But you know what? I'm not afraid of criticism. We live in a country where we have the freedom to criticize elected officials. And it's ridiculous that some people think the simple phrase "Protect Black women" is controversial. We deserve to be

protected as human beings. And we are entitled to our anger about a laundry list of mistreatment and neglect that we suffer.

Maternal mortality rates for Black mothers are about three times higher than those for white mothers, an obvious sign of racial bias in health care. In 2019, an astronomical 91 percent of the transgender or gender-nonconforming people who were fatally shot were Black, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

Beyond threats to our health and lives, we confront so much judgment and so many conflicting messages on a daily basis.

If we dress in fitted clothing, our curves become a topic of conversation not only on social media, but also in the workplace. The fact that Serena Williams, the greatest athlete in any sport ever, had to defend herself for wearing a bodysuit at the 2018 French Open is proof positive of how misguided the obsession with Black women's bodies is.

I would know. I've received quite a bit of attention for appearance as well as my talent. I choose my own clothing. Let me repeat: I choose what I wear, not because I am trying to appeal to men, but because I am showing pride in my appearance, and a positive body image is central to who I am as a woman and a performer. I value compliments from women far more than from men. But the remarks about how I choose to present myself have often been judgmental and cruel, with many assuming that I'm dressing and performing for the male gaze. When women choose to capitalize on our sexuality, to reclaim our *own* power, like I have, we are vilified and disrespected.

In every industry, women are pitted against one another, but especially in hip-hop, where it seems as if the male-dominated ecosystem can handle only one female rapper at a time. Countless times, people have tried to pit me against Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, two incredible entertainers and strong women. I'm not "the new" anyone; we are all unique in our own ways.

Wouldn't it be nice if Black girls weren't inundated with negative, sexist comments about Black women? If they were told instead of the many important things that we've achieved? It took a major motion picture, "Hidden Figures," to introduce the world to the NASA research mathematician Katherine Johnson. I wish I'd learned in school about this story as well as more earthly achievements: that Alice H. Parker filed the patent for the first home furnace, or that Marie Van Brittan Brown created the first home security system. Or that Black women, too often in the shadows of such accomplishments, actually powered the civil rights movement. It's important to note that six of the Little Rock Nine students whose bravery in 1957 led to school integration were Black girls. And that Rosa Parks showed incredible bravery when she refused to move to the "colored section." I wish that every little Black girl was taught that Black Lives Matter was co-founded by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi.

Walking the path paved by such legends as Shirley Chisholm, Loretta Lynch, U.S. Representative Maxine Waters and the first Black woman to be elected to the U.S. Senate, Carol Moseley Braun, my hope is that Kamala Harris's candidacy for vice president will usher in an era where Black women in 2020 are no longer "making history" for achieving things that should have been accomplished decades ago.

But that will take time, and Black women are not naïve. We know that after the last ballot is cast and the vote is tallied, we are likely to go back to fighting for ourselves. Because at least for now, that's all we have.

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