

## Rihanna/Chris Brown: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

(The Remix)

By Kevin Powell

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### Writer's note:

Given all the hype and controversy around Chris Brown's beating of Rihanna, I feel compelled to post this essay I originally wrote in late 2007, so that some of us can have an honest jump off point to discuss male violence against females, to discuss the need for ownership of past pains and traumas, to discuss the critical importance of therapy and healing. Let us pray for Rihanna, first and foremost, because no one deserves to be beaten, or beaten up. No one. And let us also pray that Chris Brown gets the help he needs by way of long-term counseling and alternative definitions of manhood rooted in nonviolence, real love, and, alas, real peace. And let us not forget that Rihanna and Chris Brown happen to be major pop stars, hence all the media coverage, blogs, etc. Violence against women and girls happen every single day on this planet without any notice from most of us. Until we begin to address that hard fact, until we all, males and females alike, make a commitment to ending the conditions that create that destructive behavior in the first place, it will not end any time soon. There will be more Rihannas and more Chris Browns.

In my recent travels and political and community work and speeches around the country, it became so very obvious that many American males are unaware of the monumental problems of domestic violence and sexual assault, against women and girls, in our nation. This seems as good a time as any to address this urgent and overlooked issue. Why is it that so few of us actually think about violence against women and girls, or think that it's our problem? Why do we go

on believing it's all good, even as our sisters, our mothers, and our daughters suffer and a growing number of us participate in the brutality of berating, beating, or killing our female counterparts?

All you have to do is scan the local newspapers or ask the right questions of your circle of friends, neighbors, or co-workers on a regular basis, and you'll see and hear similar stories coming up again and again. There's the horribly tragic case of Megan Williams, a 20-year-old West Virginia woman, who was kidnapped for several days. The woman's captors forced her to eat rat droppings, choked her with a cable cord and stabbed her in the leg while calling her, a Black female, a racial slur, according to criminal complaints. They also poured hot water over her, made her drink from a toilet, and beat and sexually assaulted her during a span of about a week, the documents say. There's the woman I knew, in Atlanta, Georgia, whose enraged husband pummeled her at home, stalked her at work and, finally, in a fit of fury, stabbed her to death as her six-year-old son watched in horror. There's the woman from Minnesota, who showed up at a national male conference I organized a few months back with her two sons. She had heard about the conference through the media, and was essentially using the conference as a safe space away from her husband of fifteen years who, she said, savagely assaulted her throughout the entire marriage. The beatings were so bad, she said, both in front of her two boys and when she was alone with her husband that she had come to believe it was just a matter of time before her husband would end her life. She came to the conference out of desperation,

because she felt all her pleas for help had fallen on deaf ears. There's my friend **from** Brooklyn, New York who knew, even as a little boy, that his father was hurting his mother, but the grim reality of the situation did not hit home for him until, while playing in a courtyard beneath his housing development, he saw his mother thrown from their apartment window by his father. There's my other friend **from** Indiana who grew up watching his father viciously kick his mother with his work boots, time and again, all the while angrily proclaiming that he was the man of the house, and that she needed to obey his orders.

Perhaps the most traumatic tale for me these past few years was the vile murder of Shani Baraka and her partner Rayshon Holmes in the summer of 2003. Shani, the daughter of eminent Newark, New Jersey poets and activists Amiri and Amina Baraka, had been living with her oldest sister, Wanda, part-time. Wanda was married to a man who was mad abusive—he was foul, vicious, dangerous. And it should be added that this man was “a community organizer.” Wanda tried, on a number of occasions, to get away from this man. She called the police several times, sought protection and a restraining order. But even after Wanda's estranged husband had finally moved out, and after a restraining order was in place, he came back to terrorize his wife—twice. One time he threatened to kill her. Another time he tried to demolish the pool in the backyard, and Wanda's car. The Baraka parents were understandably worried. Their oldest daughter was living as a victim of perpetual domestic violence, and their youngest daughter, a teacher, a girls' basketball coach, and a role model for scores of inner city youth,

was living under the same roof. Shani was warned, several times, to pack up her belongings and get away from that situation. Finally, Shani and Rayshon went, one sweltering August day, to retrieve the remainder of Shani's possessions. Shani's oldest sister was out of town, and it remains unclear, even now, if the estranged husband had already been there at his former home, forcibly, or if he had arrived after Shani and Rayshon. No matter. This much is true: he hated his wife Wanda and he hated Shani for being Wanda's sister, and he hated Shani and Rayshon for being two women in love, for being lesbians. His revolver blew Shani away immediately. Dead. Next, there was an apparent struggle between Rayshon and this man. She was battered and bruised, then blown away as well. Gone. Just like that. Because I have known the Baraka family for years, this double murder was especially difficult to handle. It was the saddest funeral I have ever attended in my life. Two tiny women in two tiny caskets. I howled so hard and long that I doubled over in pain in the church pew and nearly fell to the floor beneath the pew in front of me.

Violence against women and girls knows no race, no color, no class background, no religion. It may be the husband or the fiancé, the grandfather or the father, the boyfriend or the lover, the son or the nephew, the neighbor or the co-worker. I cannot begin to tell you how many women—from preteens to senior citizens and multiple ages in between—have told me of their battering at the hands of a male, usually someone they knew very well, or what is commonly referred to as an intimate partner. Why have these women and girls shared these experiences

with me, a man? I feel it is because, through the years, I have been brutally honest, in my writings and speeches and workshops, in admitting that the sort of abusive male they are describing, the type of man they are fleeing, the kind of man they've been getting those restraining orders against—was once *me*. Between the years 1987 and 1991 I was a very different kind of person, a very different kind of male. During that time frame I assaulted and or threatened four different young women. I was one of those typical American males: hyper-masculine, overly competitive, and drenched in the belief system that I could talk to women any way I felt, treat women any way I felt, with no repercussions whatsoever. As I sought therapy during and especially after that period, I came to realize that I and other males in this country treated women and girls in this dehumanizing way because somewhere along our journey we were told we could. It may have been in our households; it may have been on our block or in our neighborhoods; it may have been the numerous times these actions were reinforced for us in our favorite music, our favorite television programs, or our favorite films.

All these years later I feel, very strongly, that violence against women and girls is not going to end until we men and boys become active participants in the fight against such behavior. I recall those early years of feeling clueless when confronted—by both women and men—about my actions. This past life was brought back to me very recently when I met with a political associate who reminded me that he was, then and now, close friends with the last woman I

assaulted. We, this political associate and I, had a very long and emotionally charged conversation about my past, about what I had done to his friend. We both had watery eyes by the time we were finished talking. It hurt me that this woman remains wounded by what I did in 1991, in spite of the fact that she accepted an apology from me around the year 2000. I left that meeting with pangs of guilt, and a deep sadness about the woman with whom I had lived for about a year.

Later that day, a few very close female friends reminded me of the work that some of us men had done, to begin to reconfigure how we define manhood, how some of us have been helping in the fight to end violence against women and girls. And those conversations led me to put on paper *The Seven Steps For Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*. These are the rules that I have followed for myself, and that I have shared with men and boys throughout America since the early 1990s:

1. *Own the fact that you have made a very serious mistake*, that you've committed an offense, whatever it is, against a woman or a girl. Denial, passing blame, and not taking full responsibility, is simply not acceptable.
2. *Get help as quickly as you can in the form of counseling or therapy* for your violent behavior. YOU must be willing to take this very necessary step. If you don't know where to turn for help, I advise visiting the website [www.menstoppingviolence.org](http://www.menstoppingviolence.org), an important organization, based in

Atlanta, that can give you a starting point and some suggestions. Also visit [www.usdoj.gov/ovw/pledge.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/ovw/pledge.htm) where you can find helpful information on what men and boys can do to get help for themselves. Get your hands on and watch Aishah Shahidah Simmons' critically important documentary film *NO!* as soon as you are able. You can order it at [www.notherapedocumentary.org](http://www.notherapedocumentary.org). *NO!* is, specifically, about the history of rape and sexual assault in Black America, but that film has made its way around the globe and from that very specific narrative comes some very hard and real truths about male violence against females that is universal, that applies to us all, regardless of our race or culture. Also get a copy of Byron Hurt's *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, perhaps the most important documentary film ever made about the relationship between American popular culture and American manhood. Don't just watch these films, watch them with other men, and watch them with an eye toward critical thinking, healing, and growth, even if they make you angry or very comfortable. And although it may be difficult and painful, you must be willing to dig into your past, into the family and environment you've come from, to begin to understand the root causes of your violent behavior. For me that meant acknowledging the fact that, beginning in the home with my young single mother, and continuing through what I encountered on the streets or navigated in the parks and the schoolyards, was the attitude that violence was how every single conflict should be dealt with. More often than not, this violence was tied to a false sense of power, of being in

control. Of course the opposite is the reality: violence towards women has everything to do with powerlessness and being completely out of control. Also, we need to be clear that some men simply *hate* or have a very low regard for women and girls. Some of us, like me, were the victims of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse at the hands of mothers who had been completely dissed by our fathers, so we caught the brunt of our mothers' hurt and anger. Some of us were abandoned by our mothers. Some of us were sexually assaulted by our mothers or other women in our lives as boys. Some of us watched our fathers or other men terrorize our mothers, batter our mothers, abuse our mothers, and we simply grew up thinking that that male-female dynamic was the norm. Whatever the case may be, part of that "getting help" must involve the word *forgiveness*. Forgiveness of ourselves for our inhuman behavioral patterns and attitudes, and forgiveness of any female who we feel has wronged us at some point in our lives. Yes, my mother did hurt me as a child but as an adult I had to realize I was acting out that hurt with the women I was encountering. I had to forgive my mother, over a period of time, with the help of counseling and a heavy dose of soul-searching to understand who she was, as well as the world that created her. And I had to acknowledge that one woman's actions should not justify a lifetime of backward and destructive reactions to women and girls. And, most importantly, we must have the courage to apologize to any female we have wronged. Ask for

her forgiveness, and accept the fact that she may not be open to your apology. That is her right.

3. *Learn to listen to the voices of women and girls.* And once we learn how to listen, we must truly *hear* their concerns, their hopes and their fears. Given that America was founded on sexism—on the belief system of male dominance and privilege—as much as it was founded on the belief systems of racism and classism, all of us are raised and socialized to believe that women and girls are unequal to men and boys, that they are nothing more than mothers, lovers, or sexual objects, that it is okay to call them names, to touch them without their permission, to be violent toward them physically, emotionally, spiritually—or all of the above. This mindset, unfortunately, is reinforced in much of our educational curriculum, from preschool right through college, through the popular culture we digest every single day through music, sports, books, films, and the internet, and through our male peers who often do not know any better either—because they had not learned to listen to women’s voices either. For me that meant owning the fact that throughout my years of college, for example, I never read more than a book or two by women writers. Or that I never really paid attention to the stories of the women in my family, in my community, to female friends, colleagues, and lovers who, unbeknownst to me, had been the victims of violence at some point in their lives. So when I began to listen to and absorb the voices, the stories, and the ideas of women like Pearl Cleage, Gloria Steinem, bell hooks, Alice Walker, of the

housekeeper, of the hair stylist, of the receptionist, of the school crossing guard, of the nurse's aid, and many others, it was nothing short of liberating, to me. Terribly difficult for me as a man, yes, because it was forcing me to rethink everything I once believed. But I really had no other choice but to listen if I was serious about healing. And if I was serious about my own personal growth. It all begins with a very simple question we males should ask each and every woman in our lives: Have you ever been physically abused or battered by a man?

4. *To paraphrase Gandhi, make a conscious decision to be the change we need to see.* Question where and how you've received your definitions of manhood to this point. This is not easy as a man in a male-dominated society because it means you have to question every single privilege men have *vis-à-vis* women. It means that you might have to give up something or some things that have historically benefited you because of your gender. And people who are privileged, who are in positions of power, are seldom willing to give up that privilege or power. But we must, because the alternative is to continue to hear stories of women and girls being beaten, raped, or murdered by some male in their environment, be it the college campus, the inner city, the church, or corporate America. And we men and boys need to come to a realization that sexism—the belief that women and girls are inferior to men and boys, that this really is a man's world, and the female is just here to serve our needs regardless of how we treat them—is as destructive to ourselves as it is to women and girls. As

I've said in many speeches through the years, even if you are not the kind of man who would ever yell at a woman, curse at a woman, touch a woman in a public or private space without her permission, hit or beat a woman, much less kill a woman—you are just as guilty if you see other men and boys doing these things and you say or do nothing to stop them.

5. *Become a consistent and reliable male ally to women and girls.* More of us men and boys need to take public stands in opposition to violence against women and girls. That means we cannot be afraid to be the only male speaking out against such an injustice. It also means that no matter what kind of male you are, working-class or middle-class or super-wealthy, no matter what race, no matter what educational background, and so on, that you can begin to use language that supports and affirms the lives and humanity of women and girls. You can actually be friends with females, and not merely view them as sexual partners to be conquered. Stop saying “boys will be boys” when you see male children fighting or being aggressive or acting up. Do not sexually harass women you work with then try to brush it off if a woman challenges you on the harassment. If you can't get over a breakup, get counseling. As a male ally, help women friends leave bad or abusive relationships. Do not criticize economically independent women because this independence helps free them in many cases from staying in abusive situations. Donate money, food, or clothing to battered women's shelters or other women's causes. Do not ever respond to a female friend with “Oh you're just an angry woman.” This

diminishes the real criticisms women may have about their male partners. American male voices I greatly admire, who also put forth suggestions for what we men and boys can do to be allies to women and girls, include Michael Kimmel, Jackson Katz, Charles Knight, Mark Anthony Neal, Jelani Cobb, Charlie Braxton, and Byron Hurt. Of course standing up for anything carries risks. You may—as I have—find things that you say and do taken out of context, misunderstood or misinterpreted, maligned and attacked, dismissed, or just outright ignored. But you have to do it anyway because you never know how the essay or book you've written, the speech or workshop you've led, or just the one-on-one conversations you've had, might impact on the life of someone who's struggling for help. I will give two examples: A few years back, after giving a lecture at an elite East Coast college, I noticed a young woman milling about as I was signing books and shaking hands. I could see that she wanted to talk with me, but I had no idea the gravity of her situation. Once the room had virtually cleared out, this 17-year-old first-year student proceeded to tell me that her pastor had been having sex with her since the time she was four, and had been physically and emotionally violent toward her on a number of occasions. Suffice to say, I was floored. This young woman was badly in need of help. I quickly alerted school administrators who pledged to assist her, and I followed up to make sure that they did. But what if I had not made a conscious decision to talk about sexism and violence against women and girls, in every single speech I gave—regardless of the topic?

This young woman might not have felt comfortable enough to open up to me about such a deeply personal pain. My other example involves a young male to whom I have been a mentor for the past few years. He is incredibly brilliant and talented, but, like me, comes from a dysfunctional home, has had serious anger issues, and, also like me, has had to work through painful feelings of abandonment as a result of his absent father. This, unfortunately, is a perfect recipe for disaster in a relationship with a woman. True to form, this young man was going through turbulent times with a woman he both loved and resented. His relationship with the young woman may have been the first time in his 20-something life he'd ever felt deep affection for another being. But he felt resentment because he could not stomach—despite his declarations otherwise—the fact that this woman had the audacity to challenge him about his anger, his attitude, and his behavior toward her. So she left him, cut him off, and he confessed to me that he wanted to hit her. In his mind, she was dissin' him. I was honestly stunned because I thought I knew this young man fairly well, but here he was, feeling completely powerless while thoughts of committing violence against this woman bombarded his mind and spirit. We had a long conversation, over the course of a few days, and, thank God, he eventually accepted the fact that his relationship with this woman was over. He also began to seek help for his anger, his feelings of abandonment, and all the long-repressed childhood hurts that had nothing to do with this woman, but everything to do with how he had treated her.

But what if he did not have somebody to turn to when he needed help? What if he'd become yet another man lurking at his ex's job or place of residence, who saw in his ability to terrorize that woman some twisted form of power?

6. *Challenge other males about their physical, emotional, and spiritual violence towards women and girls.* Again, this is not a popular thing to do, especially when so many men and boys do not even believe that there is a gender violence problem in America. But challenge we must when we hear about abusive or destructive behavior being committed by our friends or peers. I have to say I really respect the aforementioned political associate who looked me straight in the eyes, 16 long years after I pushed his close female friend and my ex-girlfriend into a bathroom door, and asked me *why* I did what I did, and, essentially, *why* he should work with me all these years later? American males don't often have these kinds of difficult but necessary conversations with each other. But his point was that he needed to understand what had happened, what work I had done to prevent that kind of behavior from happening again, and why I had committed such an act in the first place. Just for the record: No, it has not happened since, and no, it never will again. But I respect the fact that, in spite of my being very honest about past behavior, that women and men and girls and boys of diverse backgrounds have felt compelled to ask hard questions, to challenge me after hearing me speak, after reading one of my essays about sexism and redefining American manhood. We *must* ask

and answer some hard questions. This also means that we need to challenge those men—as I was forced to do twice in the past week—who bring up the fact that some males are the victims of domestic violence at the hands of females. While this may be true in a few cases (and I do know some men who have been attacked or beaten by women), there is not even a remote comparison between the number of women who are battered and murdered on a daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly basis in America and the number of men who suffer the same fate at the hands of women. Second, we men need to understand that we cannot just use our maleness to switch the dialogue away from the very real concerns of women to what men are suffering, or what we perceive men to be suffering. That's what step number three in the seven steps to ending violence against women and girls is all about. So many of us American males have such a distorted definition of manhood that we don't even have the basic respect to *listen* to women's voices when they talk about violence and abuse, without becoming uncomfortable, without becoming defensive, without feeling the need to bring the conversation, the dialogue, to us and our needs and our concerns, as if the needs and concerns of women and girls do not matter.

7. *Create a new kind of man, a new kind of boy.* Violence against women and girls will never end if we males continue to live according to definitions of self that are rooted in violence, domination, and sexism. I have been saying for the past few years that more American males have got to make

a conscious decision to redefine who we are, to look ourselves in the mirror and ask where we got these definitions of manhood and masculinity, to which we cling so tightly. Who do these definitions benefit and whom do they hurt? Who said manhood has to be connected to violence, competition, ego, and the inability to express ourselves? And while we're asking questions, we need to thoroughly question the heroes we worship, too. How can we continue to salute Bill Clinton as a great president yet never ask why he has never taken full ownership for the numerous sexual indiscretions he has committed during his long marriage to Senator Hillary Clinton? How can we in the hip-hop nation continue to blindly idolize Tupac Shakur (whom I interviewed numerous times while working at *Vibe*, and whom I loved like a brother) but never question how he could celebrate women in songs like "Keep Ya Head Up?" and "Dear Mama," on the one hand, but completely denigrate women in songs like "Wonda Y They Call U Bitch"? What I am saying is that as we examine and struggle to redefine ourselves as men, we also have to make a commitment to questioning the manifestations of sexism all around us. If we fail to do so, if we do not begin to ask males, on a regular basis, why we refer to women and girls with despicable words, why we talk about women and girls as if they are nothing more than playthings, why we think it's cool to "slap a woman around," why we don't think the rape, torture, and kidnap of Megan Williams in West Virginia should matter to us as

much as the Jena 6 case in Louisiana, then the beginning of the end of violence against women and girls will be a long time coming.

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