Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
Wednesday, 29 April 2009 15:50

Last week, the Bennett College for women community came together to provide information on sexual assault awareness. We were aligned with many who recognize the month of April as sexual assault awareness month. Indeed, President Barack Obama issued a proclamation on April 8 marking the month and making important comments on issues that are raised when we look at sexual assault.

Women who are 18-24 are especially at risk for sexual assault. According to the President's proclamation, more than 10 percent of high school students, and more than 13 percent of college students are victims of sexual assault. This comes from reported data – many do not report their attacks to the police.

Every two minutes in the United States, someone is sexually assaulted. Yet, these are crimes we do not take seriously enough. In an effort to understand "both sides" of the story, too often the young men who sexually assault women are excused as immature and unknowing. Why would we ruin the life of a promising young man, I was once asked, because he simply made a "mistake"?

The answer is that there is a young woman living with the mistake, living with the scarring that comes from a sexual assault. She is too often pressured by friends and colleagues to view her assault as a misunderstanding, too often asked to think of her own culpability.

Yet, President Obama has made it clear that there must be compassion in dealing with victims. In his proclamation, he says, "Victims need an array of services to heal from the trauma of sexual assault, including crisis intervention, 24-hour sexual assault hotlines, medical and criminal justice accompaniment, advocacy, and counseling.

Victim service providers are essential to this effort and work tirelessly to help victims cope with the trauma of sexual assault and transition from victim to survivor."

The federal government has helped stem the tide of sexual assault by providing the essential services the President mentions in his proclamation. The Violence Against Women Act of 2005 authorized the Sexual Assault Services Program, which represents the first federal funding for sexual assault services. Additionally, the Crimes Victims Fund, authorized in 1984, provides money for services to the victims of sexual assault.

Still, it is amazing that sexual assault is treated differently than other kinds of assault, that the word "sexual" in front of the description of a vicious crime often makes it more understandable, even acceptable.

While the analogy is not perfect, our willingness to accept the assault of women by men is much like the public discussion of the alleged assault of Chris Brown on Rihanna. Did she provoke it? Did she deserve it? Don't even surf the Internet to plug into this drama. Scratch a young woman who will tell you the story, from her perspective, of why young Chris Brown should not be incarcerated.

Then look at the photos of the bruised and battered Rihanna and wonder what young women

think is acceptable!

According to President Obama's proclamation, 18 percent of women have been raped at least once in their lifetime.

That is nearly one in five women, and that is only the women who have reported their assaults! The racial breakdown on data is not clear, but it is likely that Black women are more likely than others to be victims of sexual assault.

Because of our complex relationships with law enforcement, too many Black women may choose not to report their assaults, yet our entire community suffers from the pain that women feel when they are assaulted. We collectively swallow the pain, the anger, and the scarring that comes from these sexual assaults.

The African American community must be as serious about assaults against women as we are about police brutality. These assaults are not lesser because they happen in our community. Indeed, they may be greater because they hit us where we live – in the lives of the women that are the very backbone of our community. There is a pain that has been infused into the fabric of African American life; the pain is partly an historical pain, but is also the very present pain of the pervasive violation of our sprits.

The beloved former Essence editor Susan Taylor says, "hurt people hurt people." Can we really afford to have one in five African American women carry the burden of sexual assault into our community and into our worlds? In her pain, who does the assaulted woman hurt? What can we do to support her?

Even as President Obama has lifted April up for sexual assault awareness, so must we be mindful of the effects of these crimes, mostly against women (men are also sexually assaulted). I am appreciative of the presidential proclamation and hope our nation is equal to the challenge of making sexual violence so phenomenally unacceptable that we take aggressive action against it.

Julianne Malveaux is president of Bennett College for Women. She can be reached at presbennett@bennett.edu

.