



## **When Victims become Villains and Victimizers Claim they are Victims**

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I've noticed a disturbing phenomenon that often happens when a victim of abuse speaks out and tells the truth about what's going on at home. Or, when she asks for help, protection, and/or justice from those who are mandated by God to protect her.

In public cases, such as the recent Stanford University rape case or the mounting accusations against Bill Cosby for sexual abuse, what happens in the public eye is that the victim is repeatedly discredited, scrutinized, and eventually portrayed as the villain.

We often hear things like, "She is lying" or "She is ruining his life, his career, or the family."

In the Stanford University rape case that was all over the news last year, the freshman swimming star Brock Allen Turner was found guilty of three counts of sexual assault. Yet his father wrote an impassioned letter to the court stating, "Brock's life is ruined, his swimming future forfeited for 20 minutes of action." <http://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/stanford-sexual-assault-letters/485837/>

Notice the twist of language. Brock has now become the victim. In his father's letter, Brock is portrayed as being inexperienced with alcohol and his behavior described as promiscuous rather than abusive. Sympathy was sought for the victimizer (reflected in the sentencing of only 6 months) and turned against the victim, portraying her as the villain who "ruined" his future. What about her future?

If you've paid attention to the unfolding story of Bill Cosby, I hope you've noticed a similar strategy. Initially, most people did not believe the women who accused Cosby of drugging and raping them, even though their stories were eerily similar.

People said, "Surely these women were opportunists, looking for attention and money from one of America's most beloved icons."

The female victims were painted as villains, their lives scrutinized, and Bill Cosby was the victim of their lies and money grabbing motives.

Yet as more and more sordid details come to light, it looks like most people judged these women too harshly. One woman will have the opportunity to tell her story before a jury as Cosby is finally going to trial. And you can see these cases for yourself by googling them. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/24/us/bill-cosby-hearing/>

I share these incidents because I often see the same thing happening with women who seek help from their church leaders for marital abuse.

There is the sad and public story of Naghmed Abedini, who fiercely advocated for three years for her husband's release from an Iranian prison. She was Christianity's darling until she exposed that her hero husband, Saeed, had regularly abused her during their marriage.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/02/01/the-strange-case-of-the-pastor-released-from-iran-and-his-wifes-abuse-allegations/>

Suddenly she was no longer Christianity's darling. She was not believed or supported by some prominent Christian leaders who had been very involved in her crusade to have her husband released.

Now her words were questioned, her mental health and morality suspect. She became the villain and her spouse looked like the victim of an angry and/or unstable spouse.

I've seen this happen over and over again in my work with women in destructive marriages. Why is it so hard for us as Christian people helpers and leaders to believe her and so easy for us to dismiss her and make her the villain? I'd be curious to hear your opinions, but in my experience, there are three main reasons we do this.

1. Victims are imperfect and sinful. When we look at the Stanford University rape case we see a woman who drank too much alcohol and left the party highly intoxicated. What was she thinking? Or we say to ourselves why would women go to Bill Cosby's home or be with him unless they were also mutually guilty of sexual sin.

It's all too easy to look at the victim's flaws and failures, question her story, and believe those who subtly or boldly discredit her character.

For those of us in the church, a female victim slides into the villain role, especially if she is angry, acts a little rough around the edges, or implements tough consequences such as separation, or divorce. She's told, "You are the problem here. You have a hard heart, you are unforgiving, you are ruining the family, you must be having an affair, you want to break up the home, you've been listening to worldly influences, you are ungodly, you're crazy, you're un-submissive, you're rebellious" – and on and on.

2. The second reason we find it so easy to misjudge what's really happening is because the one who is being accused of abuse, serial adultery, or other destructive patterns is very often a very charming and convincing liar. He may also hold a position of power in the church or community and no one could imagine him guilty of the things his wife accuses him of. Or, if the evidence is irrefutable, he now becomes penitent, "sorry" for what he's done and that's supposed to make everything better.

Church folks rally around the seemingly "repentant" one and he now becomes the victim of her hard heart and firm boundaries. He receives the church's love and support and she gets shunned and disciplined for not falling into line with what the church leaders think she should do.

Even when she tells her church leadership that his innocence or repentance is bogus and his behaviors haven't changed, she is often vilified and discredited. She's told she's judgmental, hard-hearted and lacking grace. Somehow they know him better than she does, even though she's lived with him for years.

3. The third reason is that we're uneducated on the dynamics of abusive behaviors and destructive relationships, and too proud or too busy to really dig deeper to see, over time, what's really going on.

We're also afraid to do or say anything that would make it look like we are endorsing a marital separation or divorce, so it's just easier to tell the victim to be quiet, forbear, forgive and make the best of things. AND, when she refuses and gets louder, or more demanding for justice, she becomes the villain.

In the Bible, there is a horrific story of a victimizer turned victim and the leaders of Israel fell for his story without investigating what really happened. A Levite husband shoved his concubine wife out the door to an angry crowd to do as they pleased in order to save his own skin.

Raped and beaten all night long, she crawled to the doorstep of the house in the early morning and died. The Levite callously tossed her broken and battered body on his donkey, took her home, and later cut her up into twelve pieces. He sent one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, portraying himself (not his wife) as the victim of a horrible injustice (see Judges 19:1-30). And the scary and horrible thing is that they believed him.

As Biblical counselors and well-meaning church leaders, let's not get duped. Let's not forget that there are wolves in sheep's clothing that are excellent liars and do a very good job of pretending they are sheep, when in fact they are wolves.

And there are imperfect and sinful people out there who are true victims that we need to believe and protect.

I am so glad you are on this site. It shows me that you care about people who are true victims and want to help. [Contact us](#) to find out how can you be a better counselor or advocate for those who need our help.