There’s an intersection in almost every hood that teaches young girls lessons about power, racism and sexism. In the projects, where I grew up, I had to pass it almost every day to get home from school.

This intersection is where some of the guys from the neighborhood would stand around, play music, trash-talk about which artist should hold the title of greatest rapper, and then, suddenly, turn into dangerous predators when young girls walked by. This is where young girls like me learned to shrink into ourselves and remain silent.

On this intersection, like so many others in the world, your body and sense of safety were both up for grabs. On a good day, if you and a girlfriend remained silent, walking past the group of “corner dudes,” who were all about 15 years your senior and screaming about what they would do to your 12-year-old body, would be a short-lived experience.

On other days, especially if you were walking alone, things would escalate quickly. One of the men would grab your butt and you would pretend you didn’t feel it. Fighting back would make things worse: If you resisted, they would scream at you, curse at you and, in one particular case, attempt to follow you home until you ran inside a store and waited them out. But cross this intersection enough times and such things start to feel normal.

The normalization of predatory behavior manifests itself in many forms. It’s not yet clear how the black community will respond to the news that icons like Russell Simmons and Tavis Smiley are among those men who have been accused of sexual misconduct. (Both deny the accusations.) Unlike when the accusations were made against Harvey Weinstein, however, we have yet to see a flood of prominent figures publicly stand with the victims. What is clear is that too many of us still perform mental gymnastics, of the sort deployed during Woody Allen movies, to justify attending R. Kelly concerts, despite years of reports about him victimizing young girls. For some of us, the basis for this cognitive dissonance was established at a very young age.

From my years passing through that intersection, I came to believe — wrongly — that a person can be a victim only if those committing the offenses against her had great power. By any definition, the corner guys had very little power — and they themselves were victims of those who did. They were victims of a type of power that drove through that same intersection,
snatched people away from their families and out of the community for decades. This type of power could stop and frisk them, and return to its patrol cars and proceed with its day. On a good day, if these guys were alone and remained silent without resisting, the consequences wouldn’t be as severe. A few cops would pull up, pat them down, curse at them, beat them up and scream for them to get off the corner. On other days, especially if the corner guys were in a large group, things could escalate quickly. Sometimes a corner dude wouldn’t make it home that night.

This state-sanctioned abuse at the hands of police evoked, and continues to evoke, a community response that literally and figuratively calls for the protection of these young men, and rightfully so. A community is right to fight against over-policing and brutality. It should encourage victims of police violence to speak up and put pressure on local politicians to take a stand.

But when your community fights for those same people who terrorize you, it sends a very complicated and mixed message. Even worse, sometimes the community members fighting back consist of young women who were once the little girls walking home from school doing their best to be invisible in hopes of avoiding what nobody ever called sexual assault. This sends the message that your pain is not a priority. It tells you that perhaps you are not a victim, because those who are harming you are also being harmed and we need to focus our energy on protecting them. After all, their lives are at stake.

#MeToo is triggering memories of that corner that I’ve tucked away for 20 years because I’ve been taught there are greater needs in the community. Perhaps this is part of the reason studies indicate only one in 15 African-American women report being raped. We’ve seen the unchecked power of white men ravish our communities, and we carry the message of “not right now” when it comes to addressing our pain if the offender is black.

Maybe this is why more victims of sexual assault within the hip-hop community have not come forward. Is it possible that black women who work in hip-hop are silent victims, with pain they have been conditioned not to prioritize? I suspect this is true — but I can’t say with certainty.

How can these women who live at the proverbial intersection of race and sexism, who grew up crossing that corner, ever be a part of the national #MeToo conversation when they can’t be heard in their own community? The intersection of race, class, sexism and power is dangerous, and the most vulnerable women among us must navigate it alone. They are terrorized, then expected to fight for those who terrorized them because a seemingly greater predator is at large. Their faces will never grace the cover of Time magazine, and in some cases their silence will never be broken, if they hold the same false notions of power and victimhood that I once clung to when the cognitive dissonance became too strong.

Shanita Hubbard is an adjunct professor of criminal justice at Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania, a writer, a speaker and a social justice advocate.
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