Rihanna Interview Inspires Domestic Violence Conversation

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Pop superstar Rihanna spoke out for the first time last week about being violently attacked by former boyfriend Chris Brown. Her words resonated with many viewers, including some who have been victims of domestic violence themselves. They had plenty to say about Rihanna’s honesty and the lessons people can learn from her story.

"Rihanna seemed very composed, and I think she seemed sort of more empowered by this experience," viewer Dede Brown said.

Francoise Olivas agreed.

"What she's doing about it is not only raising awareness but ... that pattern needs to be broken, and it's not acceptable," she said.

"When I realized that my selfish decision for love could result into some young girl getting killed, I could not be easy with that part," Rihanna said in an exclusive interview that aired on "Good Morning America" and "20/20."

"I couldn't be held responsible for going back. ... If Chris never hit me again, who is to say that their boyfriend won't?

"Who's to say that they won't kill these girls?" she continued. "And these ... are young girls. And I could not ... I just didn't realize how much of an impact I had on these girls' lives until that happened."

Viewer Jean Sung said she could relate to Rihanna's message.

"I stayed in a relationship with my abuser because he repeatedly threatened to kill himself if I left him," she said. "And I didn't feel like I had any choice. And I think one of the things that I -- I know this is with Rihanna, too, is ... that there's a level of control that something you love can have over you and you don't think of yourself as a victim when you are one."

What hit home for viewer Gabby, who asked that her last name not be used, was Rihanna’s speaking about her parents and the abuse she witnessed as a child.

"They had a very abusive relationship. My dad was the abuser," Rihanna said. "[He hit her] on numerous accounts. ... It was like ... I don't want to say normal, but it wasn't a surprise when it happened. She never went to the hospital. ... He broke her nose one time. So she would never go to the hospital. Domestic violence is not something that people want anybody to know."

Rihanna's Lesson: Educating Young Women on Dating Violence

Gabby also grew up watching her mother battered and was 13 when her boyfriend started abusing her emotionally and physically.
"I grew up saying it, too, and I told myself the same things," Gabby said. "And then I ended up getting into a relationship the same way. It's really the difference between knowing what a healthy relationship is and what an unhealthy relationship is. Even if you have the wrong example at home, you can come to school or you can go outside, and somebody will tell you, "This -- this is not right."

Lauren McBride was in an abusive relationship in high school and said that is where the message needs to get out.

"If I had people in my school, people around me who ... were witnessing things to tell me what was happening, it would've helped so much,' she said. "Because we ... keep it quiet from our parents. We keep it quiet from the people who are closest to us, that can help us."

Many viewers said Rihanna's message could help young girls.

"Seeing her leave, she's setting the right example right now," Gabby said. "Before, I don't think that she really set the best example going back to him. And ... that's the process that you need to go through in order to get over it."

Sil Lai Abrams was battered for five years, even while she was pregnant. She recorded the interview and watched it with her 14-year-old daughter "to really educate her" and check in on her awareness of dating violence. Abrams sees Rihanna's experience as a teachable moment.

"Knowing that, you know, what she's acknowledging is being beaten, and it just makes me so angry when people think about abuse as an isolated incident," Abrams said. "It is a pattern of behavior. A man who is a batterer doesn't just beat you up once. He beats you down every single day, for a period of time before he ever puts his hands on you."

**Escaping Violent Relationships**

For Abrams, those who defend Chris Brown "don't understand what he's doing.

"They're again looking at it as an isolated incident, as if she provoked him," she said. "They're shifting the blame."

Jean Sung said, "Why are we always blaming the victim? Like whether or not we know the whole story, we do know that she was physically abused."

All the women agreed that young girls need to have the power to get out of violent relationships.

"I think that it's great to have school programs, and it's great to have ... a place where you can get involved," Sheryl Cates, the CEO of the National Domestic Violence Hotline said.

"And make a difference. Make your voice heard. I mean, all of you that are here with us ... are making that huge difference ... by using your voice to say ... we've got to stop it. We can't ignore this any longer."