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Spotlight shines on spousal abuse following Ray Rice incident

By CARLY WEEKS

Rice family drama forces us to look at our collective failure to deal with domestic violence

This week, as many debated how much blame and responsibility former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice should shoulder for knocking his wife unconscious in an elevator in February, what the NFL could have done differently and why his then-fiancée decided to marry him shortly thereafter, a woman was murdered by her partner somewhere in Canada.

In fact, every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by the person she is dating or to whom she is married. And every night, about 3,300 other women, along with thousands of children, sleep in emergency shelters to escape violence.

Watching the Rice controversy unfold at a distance, through the lens of the celebrity-sports superstardom machine, has a desensitizing effect. Online comment boards are filled with sympathetic notes of understanding for Rice, lamenting how a promising career is being unfairly sidelined by a blip in judgment months ago. Others shake their heads at his wife, either because she decided to stick with the man who abused her or because they suspect she will do anything to stay in close proximity to the money and status of his NFL career.

Yet, while many people are shocked at the graphic video depicting Rice's assault on his wife, very few are surprised at the idea of a man assaulting his partner. Perhaps it's easier to focus on theories of blame than it is to confront the sad reality of domestic violence: It's everywhere, no one is immune and there is a collective failure to do much about it.

Earlier this month, the Ending Violence Association of B.C. released a report revealing that so far this year, 18 people have died as a direct result of domestic violence in that province alone. Of those, 12 were women and one was a child. Five were men, four of them being the offenders in domestic homicides who then took their own lives.

Each year across Canada, there are about 100,000 reported incidents of spousal or dating abuse, according to Statistics Canada. While men are also victims of domestic abuse, the vast majority of abuse incidents are against women, as well as children. Given that only a small fraction of domestic abuse incidents are ever reported, those numbers are just the tip of the iceberg.

According to experts in the field, rates of domestic violence have remained steady – not rising, but not falling – for several years. Although the situation for abused women has improved greatly in the past few decades, with more support systems available and more women having a source of income, making it possible to leave, there are still thousands of women dealing with physical and emotional abuse every day.

The unfolding Rice family drama seems like a good opportunity to ask why so many women and children still live in fear, and what can be done to raise awareness of the brutal reality of the problem. But so far, a great deal of conversation is focusing on what the NFL knew and when, whether league commissioner Roger Goodell should lose his job, what to make of Janay Rice's statement blasting the media for trying her family's case in the court of public opinion.

Let's not forget that it was reported widely back in February that Rice knocked his fiancée unconscious during the altercation. Video emerged that month showing him dragging her limp body out of the elevator. And for that, the NFL handed down a two-game suspension. The only thing that changed this week was that the entire incident could now be seen on video from beginning to end.

It's time to consider why, in 2014, any form of domestic violence remains acceptable.

It's time for all of us to consider why there have been nearly 1,200 cases of murdered and missing aboriginal women in Canada in the past 30 years yet the federal government refuses to acknowledge there may be a systemic sociological element at play, or call an inquiry to address the issue.

Or why, on average, more than 200 women are turned away from abuse shelters across Canada each night, in many cases because there are no beds to spare.

It's time to take the discussion of domestic violence out of the celebrity-sphere and come to grips with the fact that it is everywhere – from remote, underprivileged communities to our cities' toniest neighbourhoods. Talking about it openly might not solve the problem, but it certainly can make it easier for those living with it to do something about it.

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