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He says it didn't happen. Rob Porter, Donald Trump and How we Treat Abuse Allegations

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White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders was asked last fall how President Trump could indict Al Franken for his inappropriate sexual conduct given the numerous similar allegations against him. She responded: "Senator Franken admitted wrongdoing, the President hasn't. I think that's a very clear distinction." Similarly, President Trump distinguished Senator Franken from Roy Moore on the same grounds. Of allegations that Moore was a child sexual predator, Mr. Trump commented: "He totally denies it....he says it didn't happen."

And just last week, Donald Trump again threw his support behind another man who denied wrongdoing, now former White House staff secretary Rob Porter. Mr. Porter responded to domestic violence allegations by his two ex-wives by saying they are "simply false." Mr. Trump called the corroborated stories, which included a photograph of a blackened eye, "mere allegations" and noted Mr. Porter was being "falsely accused."

Mr. Trump has expected the same benefit of the doubt from others who assess the numerous allegations against him. By flatly denying that he has ever groped, grabbed, or molested unwilling women, Donald Trump fully expects he will be believed or, at the very least, that he will create sufficient doubt as to the veracity of the allegations so that he won't be held accountable.

Turns out that Mr. Trump is largely right – denial works. And Donald Trump is not alone in considering an accused perpetrator's denial as the end of the story. Mr. Trump merely echoes a dominant American attitude. We want to believe the denials of men who are accused of doing bad things – particularly bad things against women. A glance at several high profile celebrity domestic violence cases illustrates the prevalence of this attitude. When male celebrities deny abuse, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, we largely choose to believe them and their careers largely remain unaffected.

Look at boxing icon Floyd Mayweather, for example. Even after multiple guilty pleas to acts of domestic violence, Mr. Mayweather contends that, because there are no pictures, everything is a mere "allegation." Those denials and society's willingness to believe the denials even in the face of uncontroverted evidence have allowed Mr. Mayweather to become the highest paid athlete for many years running. Mr. Mayweather certainly hasn't been held accountable; we line his pockets and barely discuss his history as a serial abuser.

Charlie Sheen is another chronic abuser whose denials, in spite of multiple criminal convictions, have allowed him to succeed in the media industry. In one case, he pled guilty to third degree assault against his wife based on allegations that included grabbing her neck, holding a knife to it, and threatening to kill her. Despite these convictions, Mr. Sheen has maintained his innocence and sought to discredit the victims, claiming these “sad trolls” had ulterior motives or were drug abusers who could not be trusted. And what was the toll of these criminal convictions on Mr. Sheen’s career? Was he black-balled from the industry? Unable to find work? No and no. Shortly after one high-profile violent incident with his wife Brooke Mueller, Mr. Sheen was offered a two-year contract to return to *Two and a Half Men*, at reportedly \$1.8 million per episode. Mr. Sheen’s career continued unscathed in spite of the seemingly endless stream of allegations and arrests until he committed the ultimate crime – calling his boss at CBS a “clown.” With that, his career finally took a hit and he was fired from the show.

Most recently, actor Johnny Depp and his relationship with then-wife, Amber Heard, came under national scrutiny. Ms. Heard’s black eye dominated the cover of *People Magazine* in June 2016. Her abuse allegations involved corroborated claims of assaults and threats. Mr. Depp flatly denied all allegations, volleying back claims that Ms. Heard fabricated the stories to get a better divorce settlement. These allegations never got a full legal airing because the case settled out of court. However, in the face of Mr. Depp’s denials, his career has flourished, with another *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie released in 2017 and four films in post-production to be released in 2018.

We cannot allow denials to be the end of the story when it comes to domestic violence. First, this is bad way to assess the truthfulness of a claim. While we should listen to accused perpetrators as we take a hard look at *all* the evidence, they have strong incentives to deny allegations. Even in a domestic violence case, which often takes place behind closed doors, evidence often exists that corroborates the important stories that are told. In the case of Rob Porter, for example, his ex-wife Jennifer Willoughby, sought and obtained a protection order, showing her evidence met a probable danger standard. There is the photograph. Both wives have produced friends to whom they spoke contemporaneously about the violence. A full assessment of the available facts is the way disputes have been settled through the ages and the denials of the accused cannot end our inquiries.

Second, to accept a denial as proof of an alleged perpetrator’s innocence perpetuates the dynamics of domestic abuse. Abusive relationships rarely involve only physical violence. Instead, an abusive partner often psychologically torments his or her victim as well. Ms. Holderness wrote in an Op-ed in the *Washington Post* about Mr. Porter’s degrading tirades that chipped away at her self-confidence. Such belittling behavior is common in abusive relationships, and a refusal to credit a survivor’s story merely mimics that behavior. It discourages other victims from coming forward, and revictimizes those who do just when we should support them for taking the brave step to tell their stories.

Third, dismissing women's stories as lacking credibility, or even worse - irrelevant - sounds a lot like our attitude prior to the #metoo movement. These months of revelations by women who have finally dared to reveal stories of sexual harassment have taught us as a society to know better and to treat women with more respect.

Finally, incentivizing those accused of abuse to deny accusations discourages people from taking responsibility for their actions. We need to encourage perpetrators to do so and to make sincere efforts toward rehabilitation. Those who take such steps should be thoughtfully supported in their efforts to return to their jobs and to enjoy public approval. Only by incentivizing honest admissions by those who have committed these acts can our society take steps toward eradicating this behavior.

It is up to us to push back on Donald Trump's unquestioning belief in a perpetrator's denial. While not irrelevant, it is only one factor in our assessment. We must look deeply and thoughtfully at the evidence and listen to the victim's stories. Only then can we begin to take appropriate action. We can do better.