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## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

# Monica Lewinsky has been mocked in Beyoncé, Eminem lyrics. Is it time for us to apologize?



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### Key Points

Monica Lewinsky urged Beyoncé to change a lyric using her name to reference her affair with Clinton.

Decades after the scandal, Lewinsky continues to be slut-shamed with relentless sexist jokes.

It's time to revisit the mistreatment of Lewinsky.

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At 24 years old, Monica Lewinsky made a life-changing mistake that would reduce her to the punchline of relentless jokes. In newspapers and on talk shows, she became "that intern." "That woman."

More than two decades have passed since the infamous extra-marital affair in the Oval Office study. And yet we're not done crucifying her.

Most recently, Lewinsky urged Beyoncé, who removed an ableist slur from a new song last week, to also rewrite her 2013 lyric referencing the salacious details of the affair— and Lewinsky's name— in her song "Partition." (USA TODAY reached out to Beyoncé's rep for comment about the tweet). Some extended compassion and empathy to the former White House intern, but many critics on social media continued to respond in an all-too-familiar manner: by slut-shaming and victim-blaming Lewinsky for her "reputation."

"Anytime someone finds themselves in the public eye, it begs a larger cultural question: under what circumstances is it ok to rob someone of their dignity?" Lewinsky said in a statement to USA TODAY. " It goes beyond song lyrics, late night hosts' jokes (and) memes ... While I personally know it's easier said than done, I encourage everyone to think about these power dynamics when they engage with others online and off."

Much has changed since 1998. With the #MeToo movement, the public revisited the way they mistreated women in Hollywood, and the TV world re-evaluated the exploitation of Lewinsky earlier this year in FX's "Impeachment: American Crime Story" starring Beanie Feldstein. Still, sexist jokes and lyrics continue to sexualize Lewinsky in order to satisfy a cultural appetite for scandal: aside from Beyoncé, Kanye West and Eminem have rapped about it; Miley Cyrus re-enacted it; G-Eazy dedicated a whole song to her.

**Original story:** Beyoncé called out by Monica Lewinsky over 'Partition' lyric after ableism controversy

To this day, her name – not former President Bill Clinton's – is synonymous with a lewd sex act despite, as she's pointed out, its inaccuracy. ("Thanks, Beyoncé, but if we're verbing, I think you meant 'Bill Clinton'd all on my gown,' not 'Monica Lewinsky'd,' " she wrote in 2014). It's a classic example of misogyny in a culture plagued by gendered double standards, says Shira Tarrant, an associate professor of gender and sexuality studies at California State University Long Beach and author of "Gender, Sex, and Politics: In the Streets and Between the Sheets in the 21st Century."

"We're savvier now and try to address workplace harassment, sexual harassment and avoid victim blaming. But with Monica Lewinsky, she remains the butt of this gendered bullying," she says – a phenomenon that "says more about us as a culture than her as a person."

"If you scratch the surface, there's just so much sexism that still infuses our everyday lives."

**The mistreatment of women of the '90s:** Why Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton are triggered by Britney Spears doc

## **The public shaming of Monica Lewinsky**

At the time of the scandal, the American public was primed to judge Lewinsky, while giving her former boss, the President of the United States, a free pass – and even a high five.

The 90s, according to feminist expert Leora Tanenbaum, were the pinnacle of "overt, unapologetic vulgar slut shaming." When Anita Hill, in 1991, exposed alleged sexual harassment from then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, she was doubted, ridiculed and maligned as "a little bit nutty, a little bit slutty." When Clinton was accused of having extramarital affairs, this time with news reporter Gennifer Flowers, it was the latter who bore the brunt of criticism and was painted as a "bimbo."

Lewinsky wasn't exempt from the victim shaming, and people treated her like a malicious villain who deserved humiliation, rather than a vulnerable and relatively powerless intern, Tarrant says.

"There was a lot of conversation about how 'she set off to D.C. with the intention of doing X. Or she was X years old and old enough to know better,'" Tarrant explains. "Pointing to Lewinsky's intention or her age at the time is irrelevant, because that is victim blaming. That is like saying 'look what she's wearing,' and what that does is pull away from the issues of power and authority, which Clinton had."

**More on slut-shaming:** Bella Thorne, 'slut-shaming' and the consequences of policing women

More recent research about slut-shaming has revealed there are serious physical and emotional repercussions to being reduced to your sexuality and stripped of your humanity: depression, body image issues, thoughts of suicide and sexual recklessness just to name a few.

"It sends the message that if you are sexually active, if you were coerced into sex you didn't want or even if you're just existing as a woman, there is something deviant about you. Something not fully human," says Tanenbaum, who authored the book "I Am Not a Slut: Slut-Shaming in the Age of the Internet."

**Interview:** Beanie Feldstein recounts 'shocking and painful' prep to play Monica Lewinsky in 'Impeachment'

## **Monica Lewinsky is a human reminder of a sexist double standard**

Clinton was a married man. He was not only Lewinsky's employer, but also the nation's leader holding the most powerful position in the country. As a result, he dealt with impeachment and a pile of legal bills, but experts argue Lewinsky endured something just as, if not more, damaging.

"The way Monica Lewinsky has been treated is a perfect case study of the sexual double standard in action," says Tanenbaum. "Many people may have opinions about Clinton as a political leader, as a person, but nobody looks at him as somebody who is less than human because of his relationship with Lewinsky."

The reverse was not the case, Tanenbaum says: In the court of public opinion, Lewinsky was no longer human, nor was she seen as a victim of a fraught power dynamic; instead, she was a "little tart" in the words of the Wall Street Journal. Or a "portly pepperpot," according to the New York Post.

This double standard sent a "subtle yet very powerful message" to girls and women: "to remind us to stay in our place. That we will be dragged publicly if we don't watch ourselves," Tarrant says. "Also it sends messages to boys and men and our sons that

says, 'Oh, you don't have to worry about this. It's not your problem, not your issue. It's her issue.'

**Review:** 'Impeachment: American Crime Story,' despite stellar cast, is disappointing treatment of Clinton/Lewinsky saga

**More:** The problem with Sarah Paulson's fat suit in 'Impeachment: American Crime Story'

## **What we miss with Lewinsky sex jokes: Her strength**

In retrospect, experts agree Lewinsky deserves many apologies – from the politicians and media outlets who dehumanized her, the musicians who profited off of her and the public who made a mockery of her. But she also deserves a chance at redemption.

Lewinsky has turned herself into an anti-bullying activist, public speaker and Vanity Fair columnist; she launched an Emmy-nominated campaign praised for its "outstanding" message about compassion; she vulnerably shared her experiences and the price of shame in a 2015 TedTalk with over 20 million views; she's been an advocate for feminism.

"Like I've said before, learning to laugh about things which have hurt or humiliated me is how I survived," Lewinsky continues.

Altering a Beyoncé lyric or retiring the term "Lewinsky scandal" seems futile in the larger macrocosm of sexism, misogyny and slut-shaming. But words matter, and allowing Lewinsky to transcend her past is an important start.

**Overcoming mistakes gets easier with age:** Monica Lewinsky shares advice to young girls

