


Singer R. Kelly faces new sex abuse charges in #MeToo era

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - More than a decade ago, the singer R. Kelly was acquitted of child pornography charges after a trial in which the alleged underage victim did not testify against him.

Now the embattled Grammy-winning performer faces new sexual abuse allegations in an era when – thanks in large part to the #MeToo movement – victims are more willing to come forward, and their stories more likely to be accepted by both law enforcement and, eventually, a jury.

Prosecutors said the current case was brought on behalf of four victims, including three who were between the ages of 13 and 17 when Kelly allegedly abused them.

“One obvious difference is that there are now women who have come forward and who are willing to cooperate with the prosecution,” said Deborah Tuerkheimer, a professor at Northwestern University who studies sexual assault cases.

“In some ways, it really is a microcosm of what is happening in our culture. We’re moving toward this greater receptivity to accusations of sexual violence,” Tuerkheimer said.

Like the comedian Bill Cosby before him, Kelly weathered decades of sexual misconduct allegations before the #MeToo movement, which has exposed accusations of harassment and abuse against powerful men, provoked a high-profile public reckoning.

Concert venues canceled Kelly’s shows last year, while prominent activists and entertainers began calling for a boycott of the singer. In January, the Lifetime television network screened a six-part documentary series chronicling allegations of abuse from multiple women, a show that prompted Kelly’s longtime label, Sony Music-owned RCA, to drop him.

‘GREATER SENSITIVITY’

“The cultural atmosphere, inevitably, permeates our judicial system, and everyone connected to the system - including prosecutors, judges and jurors - inevitably have a greater sensitivity now to sexual assault,” said Rodney

Smolla, the dean of Delaware Law School at Widener University. "It's not a formal difference – the law is unchanged. It's the notion that the law is a human enterprise."

Eleven years apart, the two cases brought against Kelly by Chicago prosecutors differ in significant ways.

In 2002, a video emerged that allegedly showed Kelly engaging in sexual acts with a teenage girl. Prosecutors charged the singer with child pornography but did not file sexual assault counts, likely because the girl was not willing or able to testify against him, and a jury acquitted him after determining they could not be certain that Kelly and the girl were the ones depicted in the video.

Friday's indictment, however, suggests the alleged victims will testify at trial. Prosecutors also have fresh video evidence: A tape that purportedly shows Kelly and a 14-year-old girl engaged in sexual acts.

In addition to helping pave the way for the allegations, the #MeToo movement may make it more difficult for Kelly's legal team to defend against them, experts said.

Defense lawyers often take aim at the credibility of accusers in sexual assault cases that involve years-old allegations, questioning why they did not come forward sooner. On Saturday, Kelly's attorney, Steven Greenberg, did just that, noting that the adult accuser had waited more than 15 years to make her claim.

Advocates for victims of sexual violence have long said that such behavior is common for those who have suffered assault.

"I think people now understand that there are a host of reasons women don't come forward immediately," said Douglas Wigdor, a New York attorney who has represented sexual assault victims. "The typical defense tactics, in this environment we now live in, will to many be viewed as victim shaming, and will actually hurt the defense," he said.

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