

We Need to Wake Up: Challenging “Rape Culture”

Written By Debra Darmata, M.S., WAVE Operations Manager and appeared in the Roundup the second week of March

“Boys will be boys.”

“Men are just naturally more aggressive; they are just born that way”

“Why would she take a drink from a stranger?”

“Why would she be alone with a man on a first date?”

“If she dresses like that, she certainly deserved ...”

Inevitably, in a society where sexual assault and gender differences exist, these statements are bound to be overheard in conversations across college campuses in discussions about why something as inexplicable as sexual assault even exists. Unfortunately, these comments are common place and typify the concept of “rape culture” which includes victim blaming, trivializing, and sexual objectification. At the heart of any discussion of rape and sexual assault, statistics should help direct our conversations.

Ninety-seven percent of reported sexual assaults in college are perpetrated by men. Eighty three percent of college victims are women. Why are vast majority of perpetrators men and the victims overwhelmingly women? This is a very complex question because there is no single cause and likewise no single solution, however, examining the role of cultural norms and gender oppression seems necessary given the enormous gender discrepancies when it comes to sexual assault.

Rape culture is a society in which movies, magazines, books, attitudes and comments such as those listed above, inundate people with images of sexual violence perpetrated by males against females. Media situate women as sexual objects through pictures and imagery, and in which men are situated to “naturally” behave in ways that *normalize* sexualized violence against women. When society condones, normalizes, excuses, or otherwise encourages sexualized violence through media and social expectations, a rape culture exists without people even recognizing it and thus unconsciously “buying” into destructive behaviors and attitudes.

Another strong but sometimes salient piece of rape culture is victim blaming in which the “reasons” for the sexual assault is focused on something that the victim did wrong that lead to the assault such as take a drink from a stranger or walk alone at night. Unfortunately, early attempts at sexual assault prevention inadvertently exercised a great deal of victim blaming by focusing on a females’ behaviors rather than a males’ behaviors. Working in the field of sexual assault prevention, I think that it is important to teach students things that they can do to make it *less likely* that they will be sexually assaulted and *completely unlikely* that they will sexually assault someone. Sexual assault can be completely prevented but only by the person who is contemplating that assault.

At WAVE we talk about risk reduction, i.e., reducing the risk that you may become a victim of sexual assault by taking logical precautions. However this concept of risk reduction should never be confused with who is 100% responsible for the assault. Moving away from a Victim-Focused Risk Reduction to a Perpetrator- Focused Risk Reduction is a helping to clarify this confusion about blame and responsibility. An example of Victim Focused Risk Reduction is telling women something like: “Be clear about what’s okay for you. Don’t expect your date to read your mind.” Perpetrator Risk Reduction would instead promote the following message: “Allow your partner to make their own decision. If your partner is unsure about whether he /she wants sex, emotional coercion or “guilt-tripping” is a form of sexual abuse.” Another example might be “Stay in control. Alcohol is the most common date-rape drug.” A less victim blaming and perpetrator focused message is “Consent means having the ability to make a decision. Engaging in sexual intercourse with a person who is mentally or physically incapable of giving consent (drunk, for example) is rape. If a woman or man has passed out, or is not in control, having sex with him/her is a crime.”

At the heart of our work, must be a direct message that rape happens because a small minority of men rape (approximately 1%), most of them repeatedly (average of 5.5 times) and not because some women aren’t “careful” enough. To drive the point a bit further in an almost exaggerated satirical fashion and taken from 9gag.com:

TEN RAPE PREVENTION TIPS

- 1. Don't put drugs in women's drinks.*
- 2. When you see a woman walking by herself, leave her alone.*
- 3. If you pull over to help a woman whose car has broken down, remember not to rape her.*
- 4. If you are in an elevator and a woman gets in, don't rape her.*
- 5. When you encounter a woman who is asleep, the safest course of action is to not rape her.*
- 6. Never creep into a woman's home through an unlocked door or window, or spring out at her from between parked cars, or rape her.*
- 7. Remember, people go to the laundry room to do their laundry. Do not attempt to molest someone who is alone in a laundry room.*
- 8. Use the Buddy System! If it is inconvenient for you to stop yourself from raping women, ask a trusted friend to accompany you at all times.*
- 9. Carry a rape whistle. If you find that you are about to rape someone, blow the whistle until someone comes to stop you.*
- 10. Don't forget: Honesty is the best policy. When asking a woman out on a date, don't pretend that you are interested in her as a person; tell her straight up that you expect to be raping her later. If you don't communicate your intentions, the woman may take it as a sign that you do not plan to rape her.*

Although the above is outrageously witty and simplistic, it creatively address the need for change in terms of moving away from Victim- Focused Risk Reduction to a more Perpetrator- Focused Risk Reduction.

Another important movement in the field of violence prevention is bystander training. This training, which we plan to bring to NMSU sometime in the near future, will help students learn the skills necessary to effectively intervene should they witness a potential perpetrator-victim situation.

Sexual Assault and NMSU: A comparison of national trends

