



Support FOR Survivors

Training for Sexual Assault Counselors

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Rape Myths

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THE MORE WE LEARN about rape, the more we realize how many of our attitudes about rape are based on **myths** rather than facts. Myths about rape are widespread and believed by men and women from all segments of society. How these myths originated and why they persist is connected to the history of **patriarchy** and sexism.

Myths about rape serve to direct attention away from **masculine violence**. They are similar to myths about other forms of **oppression**, such as **racism**, in that they encourage us to believe that how things are today is the natural order of things, that those who are raped either deserved their fate or enjoyed their fate, and that only certain types of people get raped, so most people can pretend it doesn't concern them. The myths serve to minimize the seriousness of rape and, by focusing on particular women in particular circumstances, to shift the blame away from those who commit the crime. Blame is focused on the behavior of those who were raped or on particular men, targeted often because of their race or social class.

Myths keep us from understanding that rape is connected to our accepted social values of **masculinity**, **femininity**, and **sexuality**—that rape is common in everyday interactions. Myths keep us from understanding that we can change these circumstances, that rape is not inevitable.

Myth: *Men rape women because that is men's nature and biological role.*

This myth says that men force women sexually because men can't control themselves, that men are subject to biological forces out of their control or that they are fulfilling evolutionary needs for survival of the species. This myth has widespread support and is even taught at the university level in some sociobiology courses.

Fact: *There are many societies in which men never rape women.*

We now know that rape is not universal. Men rape women in some societies and under particular conditions but not in all societies. This fact has been well documented by Peggy Reeves Sanday.¹ There are connections between a high rate of rape, the glorification of violence, the **objectification of women**, the encouragement of tough and aggressive behavior in men, and the prevalence of war. That the rate of rape is high in some societies and low or nonexistent in others suggests that it is behavior that can be encouraged or discouraged, depending on the values of the society and, in particular, the values connected to masculinity and femininity and the power relations between men and women. As Sanday notes, societies that regarded the roles of women and men as equal in status, even though different, were societies with little or no rape.

Myth: *Only certain types of women get raped. It could never happen to me.*

This myth suggests that those who are raped are promiscuous or have poor judgment. It implies that only young, attractive women are raped. It has racist and classist overtones.

It serves to prevent some women from dealing with the threat of rape, and it increases the self-blame for others. A rape survivor who believes this myth may have a harder time healing from her own rape.

Fact: *Any woman can be raped.*

Women from the very young to the very elderly, women of all ethnicities, of all socioeconomic levels, and of all sexual orientations are raped. Although most studies show that the vast majority of rapes are committed against women under twenty-five years old, no woman is free from the threat of rape.² Women are raped because **misogynist** men take out their aggression on women in general. Women are not raped because they “put themselves in a dangerous situation,” as is so frequently stated, or because they wore certain clothes, or because they followed a particular lifestyle. These aspects are highlighted only to further blame the victim and excuse the violent behavior of the aggressor.

Myth: *Men rape women because they are sexually aroused or have been sexually deprived.*

This myth is also widespread. It serves as an excuse for male aggression, especially in a society where women are portrayed as the ones responsible for male sexual arousal. Witness the phrase “she turned me on.” It suggests that male sexual arousal is an uncontrollable urge that must be satisfied. It also suggests that a lack of access to sexual partners leaves no other choice but to rape.

Fact: *Men rape women to exert control and confirm their power.*

The motives for rape are complex and varied but often include hostility against women in general, the desire to feel and exert power and control, the desire to humiliate and degrade, and in some cases the desire to inflict pain. Most men who rape have available sexual partners at the same time they are raping other women.³ As Dr. Nicholas Groth has shown in his studies of imprisoned rapists, the sexual component of rape is frequently serving nonsexual needs for power, domination, and control. Erection and ejaculation are frequently absent.⁴ Men who rape usually regard women with contempt. They objectify women. They also regard with contempt any man who does not live up to the masculine ideal. These attitudes are constantly reinforced by the popular media. Video games, action films, advertising, teen magazines, and even the daily comic strips all contain strong messages reinforcing misogyny.

Even in those situations where sex rather than humiliation is the primary motive, the fact that the women’s wishes to not have sex are completely ignored suggests that rape is always an expression of power and control.

Sexual arousal is a strong urge in males and females, but it is a controllable urge. The difference lies in whether people feel they have a right to take what they want by force or whether they respect the wishes and feelings of the other person. In a society in which objectification of women and hostility toward women is common, it is also common for men to ignore a woman’s feelings and needs; they are basically not seeing her as a human being.

Myth: *Rapes are committed by strangers at night in dark alleys.*

This was most people’s image of a typical rape until women started to share their experiences and research revealed that it was far more common for a woman to be raped by someone she knew than by a stranger. The problem with believing that rapes are committed by strangers is that it shields women from facing the reality of rape. It suggests that one can be safe by avoiding certain places at certain times, and that is a false sense of security. It limits women’s freedom of movement. It also suggests that only those “types” of men who “frequent dark alleys” (the poor, the derelict) are rapists.

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Myth: *Men rape women because they are sexually aroused or have been deprived.*

Fact: *Men rape women to exert control and confirm their power.*

Fact: *Most rapes are committed by someone the woman knows and at any time of the day or night. Women are raped most commonly in their own homes.*

Most recent research documents that in approximately three out of four rapes, the survivors knew the person who raped them.⁵ Women are often forced into sex by their husbands, boyfriends, and partners. Men rape women in broad daylight. Often the woman initially trusts the person who subsequently rapes her and welcomes him into her home or accepts an invitation to go to his house. She is then blamed for his actions and, sadly, often blames herself, especially if her prior understanding of rape was based more on myth than fact.

Myth: *Most rapes are committed by black men raping white women.*

This myth is based on racism. The combination of rape and racism has a long and grim history. From the Civil War into the twentieth century, thousands of African American men were lynched, often with the false charge of rape used to justify the violence. During the time of slavery, it was legal for white men to rape African American women.

Research about rape before and during the early 1970s concluded that rape was most often committed by males from lower socioeconomic levels, many of them men of color. This erroneous conclusion was reached because research was conducted mostly using prison populations, which were, and are, not an accurate indication of who rapes in society at large. In general, conviction rates for rape are very low. Moreover, it is very unlikely for a white male from secure economic circumstances to be convicted of any crime, particularly rape. Those who are convicted are most frequently those who are unable to afford good legal help and those who are singled out because of their race and/or class.

Fact: *Men who rape come from all races, all ethnicities, and all social classes.*

In the last two decades, researchers have studied rape in the general population, greatly expanding our knowledge beyond prison populations. Studies conclude that men usually rape women from their own race, ethnicity, and social class. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice confirm that 80–90 percent of all violent crimes against women are committed by someone of the same racial background.⁶ The Department of Justice found no significant difference in the rate of rape and sexual assault among racial groups, although the rate of rape and sexual assault was higher among urban and low-income residents of all races.⁷ When men rape women of other races and ethnicities, it is more often a white assailant raping a woman of color than a man of color raping a white woman.

Myth: *Men who rape are “psychos.”*

Much of the early research and writing about rape viewed it as a rare occurrence committed by insane men. The media at the time reinforced this viewpoint with sketches of men who raped that emphasized crazed expressions and bizarre lifestyles. This myth gives a false sense of security because most rapes are committed by acquaintances. It limits our understanding of the causes of rape. It allows us to ignore the connections between “normal” aggressive masculinity and rape.

Fact: *Men who rape are mostly ordinary, everyday guys.*

Only a tiny percentage of men who rape would be considered clinically insane by standard psychiatric criteria. It is these cases that are often highlighted by the media. The vast majority of men who rape are indistinguishable from your friends. Some may even be your friends! The major difference between men who rape and men who don't rape is in their attitudes toward women. They believe that they have a right of sexual access to women whenever they please and therefore often don't view what they do as rape. They typically view women with contempt and sometimes deep hostility. Women are seen as

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The knowledge that there is the possibility and evidence for change is powerful. What can be learned can be unlearned.

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manipulative and needing to be “put in their place.” They believe the myths about rape. They have a firm belief in women’s rightful place as dependent, passive, and “in the home.” Women’s liberation and gay/lesbian liberation are very threatening to them. They believe men’s rightful role is to be in control, and they are often very jealous and controlling toward loved ones in their own lives. These attitudes are strongly reinforced by the popular media.

Myth: *Acquaintance rapes are not as serious as stranger rapes.*

This very common myth views acquaintance rape as more a matter of miscommunication than anything else—that if women would only speak up and make their needs clear, it would never happen; that women are hard to interpret, often changing their minds, making it confusing for a guy. This myth shows an ignorance of the legal definition of rape; it assumes that strangers are more violent than acquaintances. The myth reveals an ignorance of the source of the trauma of rape, which is the loss of control over one’s body, mind, and spirit, regardless of whether the assailant is a stranger or an acquaintance.

Fact: *Acquaintance rape is as serious as rape by a stranger.*

Women who are raped by someone they know experience a similar degree of trauma to those raped by a stranger. Some specific feelings may be different, but not the severity of feeling. Acquaintance rape has nothing to do with miscommunication. It has everything to do with people believing they have a right to take what they want and an inability to see the other person as a human being. The law is quite specific about the definition of rape and other forms of sexual assault and draws no distinction between an attacker who is a stranger and an attacker who is an acquaintance. In order to fit the definition of rape, the person who rapes has to be aware that the other person does not want it to happen (against consent) and, knowing this, proceeds to use force, threaten force, or cause the other person to fear bodily harm, or proceeds to exploit a person who is incapable of resisting because of being asleep, having a disability, or having consumed too much alcohol or any other substance. That so many men see nothing wrong in doing this is a comment on their attitudes, not on the level of trauma of the rape.

Myth: *Women secretly want to be raped.*

This myth serves to place the blame for rape on women and excuse male aggression. It is reinforced by the media, which often show women melting with desire when, and only when, the male takes control or becomes aggressive. It is a standard theme in romance novels. It is a story woven from centuries of restrictions on female sexuality and stereotypes about what women want sexually. It confuses sex with rape.

Fact: *Women never desire rape.*

No woman has ever expressed a desire to be raped! The belief that women secretly want to be raped is another form of placing the blame on women and justifying aggressive masculine behavior. Do some women fantasize about being sexually dominated? Yes, but it is important not to confuse the fantasy of a passive sexual role with the reality of rape.

Because women have been conditioned and limited to having a passive sexual role, waiting for the other person to initiate sex, not appearing too eager for sex, following rather than leading, and reading romance novels that are full of these stories, it is not surprising that some women’s sexual fantasies and sexual practices reflect these roles. The crucial difference between fantasizing about a sexual partner who takes control and the

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Men rape women because they can get away with it. Women's dress and behavior are not the cause.

reality of rape is that a fantasy is totally within a person's control, whereas rape is totally out of a person's control. The trauma of rape is caused by the stripping away of control and the unwanted, forceful imposition of another person's will.

Myth: *Women provoke rape by the way they dress or the way they flirt.*

This myth suggests that men wouldn't even think about rape were it not for women acting sexy. It expresses the belief that it is up to women to draw sexual boundaries. It suggests that men can't (or shouldn't have to) control their sexual appetites. It justifies the use of violence as a result of sexual arousal. It confuses rape with sex.

Fact: *Men rape women because they can get away with it. Women's dress and behavior are not the cause.*

There is no correlation between who is raped and the clothes they are wearing or their flirtatious behavior at the time. Women of all ages are raped. They are usually going about their everyday activities or simply interacting with someone they know. Rape is an expression of power and control. A man might justify his raping by pointing to the woman's behavior, but that is an excuse rather than a reason. It is a cruel irony that women are socially encouraged to be sexually attractive and seductive and then, if they are raped, are blamed for the other person's violent act.

Myth: *Women lie about being raped or use it to get even with their boyfriends.*

This myth is another variation on the theme of blaming the victim. It serves to increase hostility and suspicion toward women. One can find isolated cases of a woman lying about being raped, but this is not the norm. And such cases should not be confused with rapes that are not prosecuted; a lack of evidence for the district attorney to proceed is not the same as a lack of truth.

Fact: *Women do not lie about being raped.*

Rape is the most underreported crime of all. Most keep it a private nightmare. Reporting a rape is especially difficult because very intimate details have to be shared. The medical exam for the purposes of collecting evidence is long and grueling. Even though many police departments and district attorney's offices have greatly improved their practices, many have not, and the woman may be subjected to further trauma from uninformed and insensitive professionals. Once she has reported to the police, she may be harassed and intimidated by the rapist's friends, both male and female. She is often accused of ruining his life and faces the fear and threat of retaliation. It is not a course of action taken lightly.

Myth: *Men can never be raped.*

The assumption in this myth is that men are always in control. Also part of it is the denial that comes with the fear heterosexual men feel about male-to-male sexual contact.

Fact: *Men can be and are sexually assaulted.*

According to U.S. Department of Justice statistics from 1997, an estimated 9 percent of rape survivors are male.⁸ Their attackers are almost always other males. Sometimes the man who rapes another man is heterosexual and homophobic, and the rape is an expression of the contempt he feels for the other person, whom he views as not being sufficiently masculine in appearance and behavior. In other cases, the assailant is indiscriminate in his choice of a male or female victim. In all cases studied by Nicholas Groth and Ann Burgess, "the sexual assault was an act of retaliation, an expression of power, and an assertion of their strength and manhood."⁹ The survivor in such sexual assaults is not necessarily, nor usually, gay.

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Understanding the difference between the myths and the facts about rape is critical for anyone who aims to help support rape survivors as they put their lives back together.

There are different problems for men than for women after rape. Expectations around masculinity assume that rape is an impossibility. Gay men have particular fears about reporting, especially in conservative communities. It is important that male rape has been acknowledged. As more men are willing to talk about being raped and offer help to other male survivors, the trauma of the aftermath of rape for males will be eased.

Myth: *Women don't rape.*

The invisibility of lesbian relationships and the romantic myths about women's inherently gentle nature has made it difficult to accept the reality that women can force sex on their female partners or acquaintances. This myth also suggests that a woman could never sexually assault a male because of the difference in strength and power.

Fact: *Women are sometimes sexual aggressors.*

Much more attention is being given to same-**gender** rape than in past years. Accurate statistics are difficult to find, but as more research is done information should improve. Although all rape survivors have much in common, there are particular issues involved in women raping women that need careful attention. Often, in a relatively small lesbian community, privacy is difficult. Other people's reactions become a big issue. Heterosexist assumptions on the part of those in a position to help can also be a problem.

Women raping men is rare, but not unknown. Most situations reported involve a woman assailant in conjunction with a male assailant, a group of women targeting a male victim, or a woman exploiting a male's inability to resist because of too much alcohol or other conditions.

Note: The myths and facts about men being raped and about women being rapists do not include reference to the sexual abuse and/or molestation of children, which is a distinct issue.



Considerations for Counselors

Because we have grown up with myths, it is very important to learn the facts in order to be able to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of rape survivors. If you don't seriously examine within yourself the very common tendency to blame the victim, your judgmental attitude will creep into your choice of words or the tone in your voice.

It is also important to know that many rape survivors have **internalized** these myths. Healing is directly related to a survivor's understanding the difference between myth and fact about rape. As important as challenging your own myths about rape is recognizing the extent to which a survivor holds myths to be true. For example, if a survivor believes that only certain types of women get raped, rather than understanding that it could happen to any woman, her trauma will be intensified by her constant need to understand why it happened to her. Your knowledge of the myths and facts about rape and your ability to communicate the differences in a caring way will help a survivor in her healing.

Though rape is a universal trauma, people react to the trauma in different ways. Your sensitivity to the differing needs of survivors, depending on their ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, nationality, age, physical and mental abilities, and, in some cases, gender, will help in their healing. For example, it is important to be open to the possibility that the person who raped the survivor is female. In this case, assumptions about birth control would be inappropriate, cause the survivor to feel excluded, and undermine her trust in you. Issues around family involvement have different significance depending on the survivor's ethnicity. An older survivor may find it impossible to understand being raped if she believes it is a sexual act. Even the choice of words you use has great significance.

For example, many survivors who were raped by an acquaintance are deeply hurt when people label it “date rape” because they were not dating the person who raped them.

Understanding the difference between the myths and the facts about rape is critical for anyone who aims to help support rape survivors as they put their lives back together.

Definitions

Femininity. The qualities that a society believes to be characteristic of females.

Gender. Referring to biological sex differences, as in *male* and *female*.

Internalized. Believed to be true by a person.

Masculine violence. Term used instead of the term *male violence* in order to emphasize that the behavior is learned and socially conditioned rather than the biological result of male gender.¹⁰

Masculinity. The qualities that a society believes to be characteristic of males.

Misogynist. Describing someone who hates women.

Myths. As in made-up or fictitious stories. Not to be confused with the sense of *myth* as a means of passing on cultural heritage to future generations. The word *fiction* is an alternative for *myth*.

Objectification of women. The treating of women as not human, without feelings, as objects.

Oppression. The unjust, cruel use of power or authority by those in power to keep other groups of people from sharing power equally.

Patriarchy. A socioeconomic system whereby property and inheritance is passed down through the male line. Often used to describe any system of male domination and sometimes used interchangeably with *sexism*.

Racism. A system of domination against peoples of color.

Sexuality. The state or quality of being sexual.

Notes

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2. Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, *Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, November 1998).
3. A. Nicholas Groth with H. Jean Birnbaum, *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).
4. Groth, *Men Who Rape*.
5. Lawrence A. Greenfield, *Sex Offenses and Offenders: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).
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9. Nicholas A. Groth and Ann Wolpert Burgess, “Male Rape: Offenders and Victims,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 137, no. 7 (July 1980).
10. R. W. Connell, “Masculinity, Violence, and War.” Chapter made available by the author.