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LEARNING NETWORK

# LearningNetwork Brief 21

## **Sexual Violence Prevention –**

**Are we increasing safety or reinforcing rape culture?**

**Good Intentions ... and Unintended Bad Consequences**

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*Facilitate. Educate. Collaborate.*

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## Rape Culture

Many prevailing societal attitudes justify, tolerate, normalize and minimize sexual violence against women and girls. While subtle, these persistent attitudes are integrated with and rooted in [rape myths](#), stereotypes, and oppressive beliefs. This phenomenon is popularly referred to as ‘rape culture’.

While there are many stereotypes and misconceptions about sexual assault, most flow from a few root rape myths such as:

- Women provoke sexual assault.
- Sexual assault is perpetrated by strangers.
- Sexual assault cannot or does not occur in intimate relationships.
- No physical evidence of sexual assault means it did not happen.
- Women lie about being sexually assaulted.

Despite a body of empirical evidence debunking rape myths, rape culture persists. For instance, rape culture is evident every time someone thinks or says some version of the following: *What did she expect to happen when she dresses like that? “She was making out with him at the party – when did she decide she didn’t want it – it’s got to be pretty confusing to a guy!” “I’m sorry she was hurt but what was she thinking jogging in the park?” “Wouldn’t she have some bruises or something if it was assault?” “He’s going out with somebody else – I think she is crying rape just to get back at him.”*

The intransience of rape culture is undeniable and extremely concerning. In general, rape culture gives rise to a cascade of harmful consequences for sexual assault victims and, by extension, for all women, which include:

- women’s experiences are trivialized;
- sexual assault is minimized;
- victim/survivors are blamed;
- the meaning of consent is distorted;
- disclosures/reports of sexual assault are doubted;
- perpetrators are excused;
- gender stereotypes are reinforced;
- the onus for safety from sexual assault is placed on girls and women.

We also know that rape culture impacts various groups of women differently. For instance, rape culture sets up some groups as more likely to be targeted for sexual violence, as less likely to be believed, and more likely to be blamed for the violation they experience. Women who experience these added elements of stigmatization include women of colour, impoverished women, women living with disabilities, trans-identified women and other marginalized women.

### Well Intended Messages that Reinforce Rape Culture:

Our concern is that communications telling what **women can do** to prevent being sexually assaulted inadvertently reinforce rape culture. We preface this discussion with our assertion that such communications are well-intended and share an extremely worthwhile goal – that is, creating safety for women. Indeed, this goal is embraced by most women and men in our society. The problem with messages instructing women what to do or not do to avoid sexual assault is that they place the onus for safety on girls and women. And when the onus for safety is placed on girls and women, we lose sight of the social issues that actually gives rise to sexual violence: gender inequality, socialization of boys that promote masculine identities built on notions of power and control, and persistent discrimination against woman and other equity-seeking communities. At an individual level, we end up viewing a woman as largely responsible for another’s sexual violence – that is, a criminal act -- against her.

Messages of this sort appear in prevention brochures and in the media. For instance, in a column in the [Globe and Mail](#) (published Tuesday, October 22, 2013, 7:00 AM EDT), Margaret Wentz offers this advice to women on campus and in high schools: “Don’t get drunk.” Wentz goes on to say that “Advising young women to watch out for themselves at drunken parties is not the same as saying it’s their fault if they get assaulted.” She parallels this to advice on avoiding dark alleys where muggers lurk, stating that, “If you walk down the alley and get mugged, obviously it’s not your fault – but you’ll probably be more prudent next time.”

The flaw in rationales like Wentz’s (above), is that the safety advice is being communicated within a rape culture. The message cannot be isolated from the social context in which it is being delivered and heard. That context justifies, tolerates and minimizes sexual violence against women and girls, and differentially disbelieves or blames some women for the violation they experience.

Fortunately, we do not have a mugging culture. Many may think it was foolish and risky to walk down that dark alley, but they are unlikely to question whether a crime was committed. While the victim/survivor of the mugging may wish s/he had not taken the shortcut through the alley, it is unlikely that societal attitudes will minimize the crime. It is even less likely that societal attitudes will suggest that the individual wanted to be mugged, didn’t experience it as mugging until it was to his/her advantage to do so, or lied about it to get the “mugger” in trouble. Victims of mugging are not constructed as complicit in the crime committed against them. Yet sexually violated women are routinely constructed this way.

In a rape culture, safety advice that places responsibility on women and girls to avoid being sexually assaulted reinforces the very rape culture that contributes to the need for prevention efforts in the first place. Wentz says that placing the onus for safety from sexual assault on women is not the same as “blaming” them if they are assaulted. While “safety” (and our pursuit of it) may describe the intent behind the message, the reality is that this kind of safety strategy adds to the shaming and blaming of violated women. The shaming and blaming of victims also decreases the likelihood that victims/survivors will access support and report this severely [under-reported crime](#).

### **The Question Remains – What do we do?**

Systemic social change takes a long time and requires a multifaceted, comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of violence against women. How do we increase safety for girls and women in the meantime? More specifically, how can we promote safety for girls and women while working towards transforming our culture to ensure women have the right to sexual integrity, equality and justice? Is it possible to increase awareness about risk without reinforcing rape culture?

We do not have the answer as to the best way forward. We do think these questions and thorny issues need to be addressed through knowledge exchanges and open and inclusive discussions with a broad range of stakeholders. In the meantime, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Develop a national, multifaceted, comprehensive sexual violence awareness and prevention strategy to address this systemic social problem.
2. Invest resources in social marketing campaigns to change societal attitudes that justify, tolerate, normalize and minimize sexual violence against women.
3. Carefully review and widely test all messages in sexual violence public education and prevention campaigns to ensure they do not reinforce rape culture.
4. Dedicate resources to develop an evaluation strategy to monitor, enable midcourse corrections, and assess outcomes of social marketing campaigns.

We end this Brief with an alternative to safety tips often given to young women. These safety tips are aimed at changing men’s behaviour :

- ◆ Make it your business to understand consent.
- ◆ Don’t put drugs in drinks.
- ◆ Don’t buy drinks for women with the intent of incapacitating them.
- ◆ Don’t “take advantage” of drunk women.
- ◆ Know that a women’s clothing has nothing to do with consent.
- ◆ Know that no one wants to be sexually assaulted.
- ◆ Don’t think you can have sex with her just because you made out with her.

- ◆ A woman alone at night is not “asking for it.”
- ◆ A woman who accepts a ride from you is not “asking for it.”