

Rape Culture in Society and the Media

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Abstract

Sexual violence is a pervasive problem not only in the United States, but also throughout the world, with women and young girls being assaulted every day. Rape can occur at the hands of a stranger, an acquaintance or intimate, family member, or be used as a tool of war. In fact violence against women is one public health issue that transcends all borders – women and girls of any socioeconomic class are affected dissimilar from many public health issue, which are divided into global north and global south.

Definition of rape and rape culture

Rape statutes have changed throughout the years and can vary in definition; however is essentially defined as vaginal, oral, or anal penetration by the penis, finger, or any other object without consent of the other person. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (F.B.I.) recently changed its definition of rape for the Uniform Crime Reports, which collects reported crime data from police around the country.

The definition of consent is also imperative in understanding rape, as there are different legal definitions of consent and when someone can give consent. The law recognizes two kinds of consent: expressed and implied. Expressed consent is one that is directly given, either verbally or in writing, and clearly demonstrates an accession of will of the individual giving it. Implied consent is indirectly given and is usually indicated by a sign, an action, or inaction, or a silence that creates a reasonable presumption that an acquiescence of the will has been given.

The U.S. Department of Justice defines rape as: Forced sexual intercourse including both psychological coercion as well as physical force.

Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal, or oral penetration by the offender(s). This category also includes incidents where the penetration is from a foreign object such as a bottle. Includes attempted rapes, male as well as female

victims, and both heterosexual and homosexual rape. Attempted rape includes verbal threats of rape (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012).
The International Criminal Tribunal has defined rape for the Former Yugoslavia (ITCY)

As rape is a form of aggression and that the central elements of the crime of rape cannot be captured in a mechanical description of objects and body parts. . . . The Chamber defines rape as a physical invasion of a sexual nature, committed on a person under circumstances, which are coercive. Sexual violence which includes rape, is considered to be any act of a sexual nature which is committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive (McHenry III, 2003:1308).

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda defined rape as physical invasion of a sexual nature, committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive” (Scharf, 1994).

Regardless of definition, what remains constant about rape is that rape myths and aspects of victim blaming are going to play a role in how society views rape and how the victim and perpetrator(s) will be viewed and treated. Rape myths come in many forms and have been defined first as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists by Burt (1980) and later as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false, but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Gidycz, & Gidycz, 2011).

They can include:

- *Husbands cannot rape their wives*
- *Women enjoy rape*
- *Women ask to be raped*
- *Women lie about being raped*
- *No woman can be raped against her will*
- *No means yes*

These rape myths are all rooted in a patriarchal system that gives men higher status over women and holds certain ideals about the roles of men and women as well as sex. Rape myths place not only the responsibility of preventing rape on women, but also the responsibility of the rape, because to have been raped means the woman must have done something wrong, leading to the phenomena of victim blaming, a hallmark of rape culture. The rape myth of “women ask to be raped” includes ideas such as “she was walking alone at night”, “she is promiscuous”, and “she was dressed provocatively.” A British International Amnesty International poll conducted in 2005 found that 22% of those surveyed thought that a woman was partially or totally responsible for rape if she had many sexual partners, and 26% thought her partially or totally responsible for rape if she was wearing sexy or revealing clothing. In some societies, victim blaming can become severe, with women being shunned by her family or community, facing criminal charges, to the most extreme, being killed for being raped.

This social construction of rape in which rape myths and victim blaming are used to justify and legitimate violence against women is why for so long, rape as a tool of war was not considered a war crime, why it was once legal to rape your wife and why there are still legal exemptions to marital rape, and is why so many women and girls become victims of rape, -- because those who rape do not view women as people and are able to legitimate their actions. This is also why rape is a severely underreported and under prosecuted crime, as women fear not being believed and further victimization at the hands of authority if they do try to report their rape and all of this will be demonstrated in my examination of rape globally, nationally, and locally.

Global Perspective

There is a long history of rape being used as a weapon of war and while rape has been used as such a weapon in numerous countries, this paper will focus on the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, the estimates of the number of women raped range from 10,000 to 60,000 (World Health Organization, 2012), while refugees fleeing violence and war torn regions also become the victims of rape and attempted rape. The 1994 Rwandan genocide is another well-known conflict in which acts of sexual violence were inflicted against women and girls on a massive scale. The exact number of those who were raped will never be known, but in the aftermath of the conflict, testimony from survivors confirmed the widespread infliction of rape, describing how thousands of women were individually raped, gang-raped, or raped with objects, such as sharpened sticks or gun barrels (Human Rights Watch, 1996).

Even in countries not torn apart by war and violence and in times of peace, women still face rape and attempted rape every day. In a 1993 international telephone survey of 12,300 women, it was found that 1 in 3 women experienced sexual assault (CWASU). According to a British Crime Survey, 80,000 women are the victims of rape each year (Rape Crisis, 2012), yet this is most likely a low estimate, as in the United Kingdom rape goes largely unreported as in other parts of the world. A Ministry of Justice report that analyzed sexual offending in England and Wales found that of the 72% who reported telling someone, only 15% of those had told the police and 28% of all respondents had not told anyone (Ministry of Justice, 2013). The report was based on results of self-completed questions from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) where a representative sample of adults (aged 16 to 59), were asked about an individual's experiences of sexual offences in the last 12 months. A Swedish study of

men's violence against women found that only 1 in 10 (8%) of women reported sexual violence to the police (CWASU). Lack of reporting is not the only issue that is prevalent among rape, attrition; the process by which reported rape cases are lost from the legal process, and thus do not result in a criminal conviction, is another serious problem that affects rape victims every day.

Rape in United States

While women living in the United States do not face the threat of rape as a weapon of war, everyday sexual violence remains a pervasive problem in American society. 1 out every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime and 17.7 million American women have been the victim of attempted or completed rape (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Research shows that 10-14% of all women are raped by their husbands in their lifetime and the number rises to 40-50% among battered women (Edwards, et. al., 2011), however until the mid-1970's, a man could not legally rape his wife. Though all states now have laws forbidding marital rape, 31 states plus Washington D.C. have partial or qualified exemptions to their sexual assault laws, including that marital rape is prosecutable only if the spouses are living apart, legally separated, or divorced, if physical force is used, or if the wife cannot consent due to mental impairment or incapacitation (National Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women, 2009).

Women are also more likely to be raped by someone they know, with approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of rapes being committed by someone known to the victim. Of these $\frac{2}{3}$, 38% were a friend or acquaintance, 28% were an intimate, and 7% were a relative (RAINN, 2013). There is a misconception that strangers primarily commit rape, but the

reality is that majority are committed by someone known to the victim. This misconception comes about as a result of the social construction of rape and the way that women are taught to think about rape. Women are told that they should not go out alone at night, to avoid isolated areas, to avoid doing things that will make you look vulnerable, such as carrying a lot of grocery bags, all things that one, place the responsibility of preventing rape on women, and two, assume that women are most vulnerable when they are outside their homes and at risk of a stranger attacking them.

The misconception about what rape is and the way women are taught to protect themselves is part of the commonly held rape script that involves a blitz attack; the stranger jumping out of a bush, an isolated location late at night, the use of violence by the assailant, and the resistance of the victim. Holding this kind of script can be why women who are raped by an acquaintance or intimate often do not label their experience as rape. As Ryan (2011: 776) notes, a woman's "belief that rape involved high levels of violence may have led them to label their personal experience with a relatively non-physically violent sexual assault as something other than rape" and holding this type of script can put women at risk for sexual assault that is not consistent with their idea of real rape (Ryan, 2011:776). This type of script can also help to explain why women do not report their rapes, because if their assault does not match up with the real rape script, they fear that they will not be believed or that nothing will happen to their rapist.

Their fears are not unfounded, as out of every 100 rapes, 46 get reported to the police, 12 lead to an arrest, 9 get prosecuted, 5 lead to a felony conviction, 3 rapists will spend even a single day in prison, and the remaining 97 rapists will go free (RAINN, 2013). The culture of rape in American society in which this script exists causes women

to be victimized by their rape and later on, when they agonize over whether or not to report their rape and have to deal with the trauma of their assault.

Rape in North Carolina

According to the Uniform Crime Report of the 2011 Annual Summary, there were 1,949 reported rapes in North Carolina in 2010 and 1,942 reported rapes in 2011. The statewide crime index rate per 100,000 persons for 2010 was 21.4% and 20.8% for 2011, with North Carolina seeing a 2.8% decrease in the rate of rape or more specifically, the rate of reported rapes. The total arrests for forcible rape in North Carolina during 2010 were 88 for juveniles under 18 and 572 for adults 18 and over. For 2011, the total arrests were 50 for juveniles under 18 and 511 for adults 18 and over. Between 2010 and 2011, North Carolina saw a 43% decrease in arrests for juveniles under 18 and a 11% decrease in arrests for adults 18 and over. (NCDOJ, 2012).

A report on rape in North Carolina completed in 2003 found that “one out of every eight women, or nearly 393,000 adult women in North Carolina, has been the victim of forcible rape sometime in her lifetime” (Kilpatrick & Ruggiero, 2003), however this number does not include those who experienced alcohol- or drug-facilitated rape, incapacitated rape, statutory

rape (i.e., rapes in which the perpetrator had sex with an underage child or adolescent without

using force or threat of force), or attempted rape. In North Carolina during the fiscal year 2010-2011, 186 cases of second-degree rape were disposed and of those, about 38% were dismissed according to court data. From 2007 to 2012, there were 37 cases of rape, attempted rape, and sexual assault reported to the Chapel Hill Police Department, 8 of

which resulted in an arrest, however none led to a rape conviction (Smialek, 2012).

Seeing the dismal prospects they face if they go to the police, there is little wonder that women do not report their rapes, for fear that even if their rapist is arrested, they will spend little, if any days in prison.

In 1995, 71-year-old North Carolina State Rep. Henry Aldridge gained national notoriety after telling the N.C. House Appropriations Committee, “The facts show that people who are raped—who are truly raped—the juices don’t flow, the body functions don’t work and they don’t get pregnant. Medical authorities agree that this is a rarity, if ever” (Powers, 2012). Though this comment was made nearly twenty years ago, this legacy of victim blaming continues on, where the legitimacy of a woman’s rape is called into question, has continued the victimization of women.

Solutions

Media Literacy

The media is an influential medium, with the power to influence men and women’s understandings of gender norms and roles, as well as sexual and rape scripts. As discussed previously, women can become at risk for acquaintance or date rape, because they do not understand the warning signals, holding a certain script in mind of what a rape attack looks like. The media helps to perpetuate this misconception about rape by continuously reporting on stranger rapes in news stories, promoting the stranger rape script in television shows and movies, and the use of certain images in advertisements. This perpetuation can result from the fact that only 7% of directors, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers are female, which means that males outnumber females working behind the cameras nearly 5-to-1 (Geena Davis Institute). The lack of a female influence

in the creation of media results in women and girls and the issues that predominately affect them to be incorrectly represented. This incorrect representation causes women to view themselves and their world from a misguided lens, leading them to fear incorrect things, such as being raped by strangers, taking extreme precautions to avoid this fate, yet do not trust their instincts when it comes to people they know.

One way to help women become more educated about the realities of rape and how to be more aware of the way in which the media influences their behaviors and ideas is to promote media literacy. Media literacy refers to the analytical tools required to critically evaluate and communicate messages in various mediums. Media literacy as an educational tool will help to empower young girls and women to become users and producers of media, to help shape a digital world that promotes fair, balanced, and truthful depictions of women and girls.

The Girls Incorporated Model: *Media Literacy*

Girls Incorporated is a non-profit organization that seeks to empower young girls ages 5-18, has impacted girls on national scale, with over 1,400 sites and reaching 150,000 girls nationally (Girls, Inc). Though the program originally came about to produce “homemakers of the future”, the Girls, Inc. model underwent significant change and now its current mission statement is to “inspire all girls to be strong, smart, and bold”. The Girls, Inc.’s media literacy program seeks empowers girls to analyze and create new media to help combat representations that seek to reinforce gendered stereotypes through a series of programs. First, Girls, Inc. works with its youngest girls to encourage greater critical analysis of media and its influences, helping participants to examine and overcome media-based biases. Participants then develop media-production

skills, seeking inspiration from women produced media. In the final stage the girls in the program apply their newly learned skills by producing public service announcements and facilitating community discussion around their topic. The girls also explore the business elements of media production and investigate media career options.

MissRepresentation.org Model: *Media Literacy*

MissRepresentation.org is a non-profit social action campaign and media organization created to “shift people’s consciousness, inspire individual and community action, and ultimately transform culture so everyone, regardless of gender, age or circumstance can fulfill their potential”. A part of this campaign is the *Miss Representation* documentary that exposes how mainstream media contributes to the underrepresentation of women in positions of power and influence in America. To better grasp the role of the media and to help promote the mission statement of the organization, MissRepresentation has a curriculum available to K-12 schools, universities/colleges, and libraries that gives media literacy a gendered focus. Through the curriculum students learn to:

- Identify different types of media and understand that media communicates and teaches individuals ideas.
- Think critically about how stereotypes of femininity and masculinity limit girls and boys.
- Examine the impact media has on a woman’s ability to see herself as a leader and obtain a leadership position.
- Understand how behind the scenes decisions affect the way gender is represented in media and impact our culture.
- Become engaged in efforts to influence positive change in media and advertising industries.

Using this curriculum, educational institutions can work to develop media literacy programs to educate girls, boys, women, and men about the necessity of critically thinking about the images and messages put forth by the media.

Implementing on global scale

While these two media literacy programs originated in the global north and are focused on the type of media found mostly in Western cultures, media can originate in many forms, such as television shows, commercials, songs, tales, or art. No matter the form that media takes in a country, it is important to educate youth about how to evaluate and understand the messages that arise from the form of media they are exposed to. The principles and tools of these media literacy programs can be altered to fit whatever culture or society is using them because the basic idea is the same: to teach both boys and girls to think critically about the things they see and hear as well as about stereotypes surrounding men and women that are portrayed through the various mediums.

Conclusion

Rape is a pervasive problem throughout the world, one that is perpetuated by a culture of rape that promotes rape myths, stereotypes about what rape is, and certain ideas about men and women. One way that rape culture comes about is through the media, which contributes to and perpetuates the aspects that make up rape culture. The underreporting and attrition of rape cases result from women fearing that they will not be believed and those involved in the criminal justice system believing or being influenced by rape culture. Our society is greatly influenced by the images and messages we receive from the media and thus it is important young girls and women are taught to be empowered and to think critically about the media, so that they can trust their instincts, be strong, and stand up for justice if raped. Media literacy is important educational tool that should be implemented at all levels of education, to teach young girls and women how to think critically about media messages and images as well as how they can become producers of media, to put forth better images about women. The models and programs

created by Girls, Inc. and *Miss Representation* are ones that can be seen as powerful tools that have already helped hundreds of girls and can be used to develop programs here in the United States and around the world.

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