

Sexual Assault: The issue is power. The method is violence.



Sexual assault is a violent crime. Rape is a felony. The underlying issue is power. And as women living in the United States of America, we are affected by the crimes, the pervasive atmosphere of violence we live in, and the fact that none of us is immune. We are all potential victims.

Michelle Campbell, Sergeant of the Albuquerque Police Department, Sex Crimes Unit, says “The issue is power—the offender has some kind of power over the victim.”

“The issue is assault, not sex,” Robin Brassie, Community Education Coordinator of the Albuquerque Rape Crisis Center, says.

Dr. Bill Foote, forensic psychologist, however, says, “It is more complicated because it is also sexual. It is an act of power, but it is power exerted in the most intimate way. It is more than assault, being overpowered. It is injury and assault on the sense of self. The combination of power, violence, and sexuality—is the worst thing you can do to someone besides killing them.”

Consent, implied or otherwise, is a subtle and important factor. Campbell adds, “I don’t want to place blame on the victim... Just because they don’t say no does not mean they are willing participants.”

“If there’s consent, it’s not rape,” says Carolina Yahne, the president of the New Mexico Psychological Association. “But it’s hard to give consent when overpowered.” She then asks, “What constitutes appropriate consent?”

The sexual aspect of these crimes is particularly harmful and the effects are often long-lasting.

Brassie says, “It’s using our bodies against us... our sexuality is affected.”

“We’ve come full circle in some respects,” Foote says. “Susan Brownmiller and the Queen’s Bench Study helped us see it as power... It is a power crime. But it’s also sexual. In its dynamic, in the event, and experience of the victim. It goes to the core of who we are. It’s not just post traumatic stress syndrome. The person can change, not be the same person.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE/ SOCIETY/ MYTHS

The United States is a violent place, and rape is a violent crime. We are among the most violent of the industrialized nations. And rape is more common here than in many other countries. There are societies in the world where rape is non-existent, and places where it is even more prevalent.

Foote says, "I have a real concern that we have lost our moral center (it's not nice to hurt other people). It bothers me that violence so permeates our culture. Women have always had less power than men. Rape is a way of keeping women in their place."

"In a society that fosters these kinds of attitudes—'might makes right,' 'carry a big stick,' even 'Gone with the Wind,' where Rhett carries Scarlett upstairs against her will and she wakes the next morning With this ... 'glow,'" Brassie says. "We have a problem. All of us."

We have very progressive laws in New Mexico, but it depends on the mores of society to enforce them.

Social scientists are beginning to look at research in new ways. New interpretations of older research suggest that the incidence of rape depends in particular on cultural factors such as the status of women, the values that govern the relationships between the sexes and the attitudes taught to boys.

"We've come a long way... yet I still hear the same myths," says Brassie. "Guys feel sex is an entitlement... boys, men, believe if a woman says no, you can get what you want with power, manipulation... a double standard still exists."

In Lakewood, California, a group of young men, mostly high school students, have been accused recently of various sex crimes stemming from their "scoring competition" among themselves. They developed a scoring "contest" based on accumulating points for having sex with different women. Consent was not necessary, nor was more personal involvement. Making points was the only point. The women were almost irrelevant. Many parents mouthed the old "myths"—"Boys will be boys" and "Those girls are trash." One male student was quoted in *Time* magazine (4/5/93) as saying "It's all the moms that are freaking out about this stuff... but that's probably that Freudian thing. You know, penis envy." And when the young men were released and returned to school they were cheered, while many of the young women were called "sluts."

As sex becomes increasingly depersonalized and dehumanizing, it's not good for men or women. And all women, of all ages and all classes, of all economic conditions, are subject to these pressures.

Brassie adds, "In a society that fosters these kinds of attitudes, women are property, objects... And power differentials create the opportunity to objectify."

When women go after real power, political power, they are also assaulted. During Ann Richards' 1990 gubernatorial campaign in Texas, her Republican opponent, Clayton Williams (a wealthy cattleman), was reported to have said he would "head her and hoof her and drag her through the dirt" and joked with reporters that "bad weather's like rape—if it's inevitable, relax and enjoy it."

Brassie still hears these myths—"Women ask for it," "Lie back and enjoy it," "You can't rape the willing." We have been fighting these myths for centuries. Approximately one hundred years ago the "rule of thumb" was instituted as compassionate reform. A man could no longer beat his wife with a stick bigger than his thumb. It wasn't until this century that women got the right to vote. And not too long ago, Anita Hill sat in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and millions of viewers, and did not have her testimony about sexual harassment taken seriously.

THINGS ARE CHANGING

In spite of the bad news—that we are a violent society, and some believe we are becoming more violent, things are not all bad.



Sgt. Campbell believes more victims are pursuing the process, even though it's difficult. "Women aren't taking full blame anymore. More and more victims feel—they had no right. I did not ask for it."

The judicial system is slow and imperfect. The defense counsel will still try to put the victim on trial. And, more than other crimes, sexual assault is still often difficult to "prove."

Neil Candelaria, supervisor of the Violent Crimes division of the District Attorney's Office says, "Juries still carry baggage about sex. Bernalillo county is pretty good. Yet there still is —'She dressed like that.'" Yet, he cites a recent Albuquerque verdict: a jury of all men convicted a man of criminal sexual penetration in spite of a lack of physical evidence. Women are being listened to more and more often, even though the double standard still exists.

And sentencing is getting tougher. Candelaria says, "'Just probation' doesn't happen anymore. They get prison time. Judges are just as outraged. Repeat sex offenders are getting much longer prison terms."

Bill Foote, the forensic psychologist, is concerned, however, about change. "Change is real hard. Violence tends to go up... Day to day there is a real increase in power for women. A gradual shift. The question is—how much change can we handle at one time?"

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Brassie believes education is important. "The more educated a person is in terms of their natural rights and their body rights, the more likely they are to prosecute, pursue the process, and not blame themselves."

Dr. Yahne, psychologist, agrees that education, increasing our collective awareness of our rights, developing deep beliefs that physical or psychological violence is unacceptable, is important. But, she also believes women need financial independence. Many women stay in sexually violent relationships because they believe they must to survive economically.

Catherine MacKinnon, a national feminist, legal scholar (University of Michigan Law School) believes women need to be more outspoken. That we have been conditioned to be silent, and that silence, that 'being nice,' keeps us bound. Yet, speaking out is not easy.

"Successful prosecution provides vindication of being believed. Of retribution. Having the offender held responsible, accountable... For the victim, however, life is changed. And there is no balance for this loss," says Sandy Dietz, director of the Victim Impact Program of the District Attorney's Office.

Sexual violence is a part of the world we live in. As women gain more real power, as we demand our rights, and speak out against wrongs, we will make a difference.

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