

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “rape” as: “*noun*- the crime, typically committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with the offender against their will.” But there is no definition of “rape culture” in the dictionary. What is rape culture? In a rape culture people are surrounded by images, language, laws, and other everyday phenomena that validate, excuse, and perpetuate rape. This includes jokes, media, advertising, legal jargon, laws, words and imagery that make sexual violence against women and coercion seem so normal that people believe rape is inevitable and “just the way things are” (upsettingrapeculture.com, wikipedia.com “Rape Culture”). How many times have you heard a young person say something along the lines of “I just raped that test!” or, “Wow, he totally got *raped!*” I hear those sorts of jokes almost daily.

Behaviors symptomatic of a rape culture include victim blaming, slut-shaming, sexual objectification, trivialization of rape, and rape apologists. It is obvious that we live in a rape culture in America. Some deny this, but I will touch upon why rape culture does exist in America, what rape culture commonly intersects with, and what perpetuates it. I’ll discuss the deniers of rape culture and patriarchy, anti-porn feminism vs. sex-positive feminism, and how we can change the conversation about sexual assault and even prevent it through sex education and laws.

## I. Slut Shaming and Victim Blaming

Slut-shaming and victim-blaming are two methods of trivializing assaults by saying that a victim was “asking for it” or “had it coming” because of her attire, behavior, or consumption of alcohol. This puts responsibility on the victim to not be raped. Those that slut-shame or victim-blame will sometimes use a survivor’s past sexual history as an excuse for rape. These people usually have many misconceptions about what rape is, usually referred to as “rape myths.” Some common myths are:

- ❖ *Rape is sex.* Rape is not sex. The victim is not “having unwanted sex” because it is a one-sided violent sexual act. It is more about power, humiliation, hate, revenge, etc than lust or passion.
- ❖ *Women incite men to rape them.* Rapists rape because they are rapists, not because the victim was the victim.
- ❖ *There is a “right way” to respond to a sexual assault.* Whether she was silent, incapacitated, or fought kicking and screaming, if she was raped, there was nothing she could have done to not have been raped. The attacker is the only one in control of that.
- ❖ *Sexual assaults are rare deviations and affect few people.* Every 2 minutes, someone in America is sexually assaulted. Each year, there are about 207,754 victims of sexual assault (rainn.org “Statistics”).
- ❖ *Women often make false reports of rape.* False reports of rape are extremely rare. In fact, 54% percent of rapes are never reported to the police at all. And 97% of rapists will never spend one day in jail (rainn.org “Statistics”).
- ❖ *If a victim really defends themselves, they won’t get raped. i.e. rape can be prevented by the victim.* Like I said previously, whether a victim is raped or not has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with the attacker.

Slut-shaming usually occurs without direct relation to rape, but still perpetuates rape culture. When one girl calls another a “slut” or “whore” she makes her into something less than a woman capable of her own sexual agency, and when a woman is less than a woman, therefore less than a *human*, she is just an object- there for the use and pleasure of others. I firmly believe in not demonizing other females for their sexuality, but instead accepting all women as individuals completely capable of making their own sexual choices. By doing so, women will have better self-esteem and self worth. Victims are more likely to report assaults if they aren’t afraid that they’ll be blamed for their attacks.

## II. Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification is treating another person as an instrument meant for one’s own use or sexual pleasure. This can be everything from women in media and advertising being portrayed as sexual objects in submissive positions, to men catcalling them on the street or making assumptions about them because of their attire. If a woman is dressing in a way that one might find “slutty” or “sexy,” chances are she is doing it for herself. Women have the right to dress in a way that makes them feel good about themselves and comfortable without being persecuted by the male gaze.

## III-. Trivialization of Rape, Rape Apologists, and Entitlement

Rape is trivialized by excuses made that the victim was to blame for her rape. Common responses to rape include: “She shouldn’t have worn that,” “She shouldn’t have gotten drunk,” or that the circumstances were such that it couldn’t have been avoided (“Well what did you expect?”). Also, rape is trivialized by giving the rapists excuses: “Boys will be boys!” and letting them off the proverbial hook. Rape apologists are usually people saying that a rapist couldn’t control his sexual “desires,” or that he was provoked. An example of this behavior is the football coach at Steubenville High School in Ohio. On the night of August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012, an incapacitated 16 year old girl was publicly and repeatedly sexually assaulted by her peers at a party. The perpetrators were star football players, Ma’lik Richmond and Trent Mays. Their coach Nate Hubbard said, “The rape was just an excuse, I think. What else are you going to tell your parents when you come home drunk like that, and after a night like that? She had to make something up. Now people are trying to blow up our football program because of it” (Jezebel.com “Steubenville’s Legacy”). We are bombarded by the trivializing of rape and rape apologists constantly. Conservative republicans, lawmakers, and pro-lifers trying to define what constitutes rape and putting restrictions on a woman’s right to her body all trivialize rape. One example is from senator Todd Akin; “It seems to be... what I understand from doctors, that’s really rare. If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try and shut that whole thing down.” This completely and outrageously false statement perpetuates an idea that certain types of sexual assault are “legitimate” while others may have been provoked or enjoyed by the victim.

Rape culture is very much about a societal sense of entitlement, arrogance, and disregard for others. When a woman rejects a “nice guy’s” advances, she “friend-zones” him. What the friend-zoned seem to not understand is that how someone feels about you is entirely up to her, and just because a man is “nice” to a woman doesn’t mean he *deserves* sex. She is going to have sex with him if she *wants* to have sex with him. And no matter how many compliments he showers her with, or chivalrous or nice he may be, one can’t expect to be repaid with sex. The

entitlement and aggression that this attitude can lead to is unfair and sometimes dangerous to women. According to rainn.org, two-thirds of assaults are committed by someone known to the victim, and 38% of rapists are a friend or acquaintance.

#### 1V. Consent and Consent Laws

Most sexual assault cases hinge on consent. This requires that the alleged victim say “no” forcefully and repeatedly and fights back. Even though today’s society is considered progressive in comparison to other countries, it is built on the society of yesterday. Vestiges of a more conservative America still hold true. Women are still encouraged to stay “pure” and virginal until they enter in to a monogamous relationship and/or are married. There is an underlying assumption here that sex is a transaction- something that men always want and women can either give or withhold. This leads to the idea that sex isn’t a thing that both parties should have to say “yes” to, it’s a thing that women have the obligation to refuse. Consent shouldn’t be defined as an absence of “no,” but a definite and mutual “yes.”

#### V. Rape Culture and Sports

The rape, and subsequent media frenzy, that occurred at Steubenville High School in Ohio is a prime example of masculine group mentality, rape culture, media rape apologists and sports intersecting. The act was documented and spread widely on different social media, and laughed about by other Steubenville high school students. When the boys were sent to juvenile detention centers, the media covered only that. Reporters lamented their lost futures, and talked about how heart wrenching it was to see two young boys lives collapse in front of them. CNN’s Poppy Harlow said, “I’ve never experienced anything like it, Candy. It was incredibly emotional and incredibly difficult even for an outsider like me to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students, literally watched as they believed their lives fell apart...” The media focused on the “shattered lives” of these “poor boys” turning them into martyrs and making the victim the guilty party.

Societal stereotypes of masculinity are big contributors to rape culture, and team sports are at the core of this. Team sports are institutionalized encouragement of entitlement and aggression. Our society places huge importance on men who are able to dominate each other. Some argue that not all men feel the need to fulfill their patriarchal role as men, but a large portion do. The boys in Steubenville were put on pedestals for being star football players and bringing money into their small town. They felt entitled and above the law. They thought that they could use another human being for their own amusement with absolutely no consequences, and I’m not surprised: rape cultures promote that exact sort of mindset.

#### VI. Rape Culture and Pornography

Pornography has been at the center of the rape culture debate for years. Some feminists believe that porn is a form of violence against women, therefore promoting rape culture, and others embrace it as a form of sexual expression. I will admit that both are valid arguments. Catherine Mackinnon is a staunch anti-porn feminist. Robert Cavalier describes her views in his article on pornography and feminism, “Catherine MacKinnon argues that pornography is not

simply a form of expression with potentially bad effects, it is also a practice...not only 'words' but 'actions' involving treatment of real woman in real situations. And, in the sex industry, this treatment is essentially abusive. Furthermore, pornographic materials, in the hands of consumers, is a form of two-dimensional sex. Men (mostly) act on the woman in the pictures. The abuse is doubled.” I disagree. I find that pornography, if recognized as a form of performance and entertainment, and alongside informative and honest sex education, can be innocuous. I identify as a sex-positive feminist. Wikipedia defines “sex-positive feminism” as a movement that began in the early 1980’s that centers on the idea that sexual freedom is an essential component of women’s freedom. I believe that by judging other women’s kinks or choice to work in the sex industry, and condemning them as “wrong” or “bad” for all women, we are not making any progress in fighting rape culture. Former adult film actress Sasha Grey stated in response to criticism about her career choice, “What one person sees as degrading and disgusting and bad for women might make some women feel empowered and beautiful and strong.” Instead of condemning some consensual and legal sex acts and “wrong” and others as “right” we should be focusing on acceptance and how to make women’s lives safer, no matter their occupation or sexual preference.

I believe we can begin changing rape culture by changing the way we educate and raise our youth. Growing up, most boys know that beating a girl and forcing them to have sex is rape, but the boys in Steubenville didn’t see penetrating an incapacitated partygoer as a crime. We should not teach young people how to not get raped, but how not to rape. We should teach respect for others, and define consent as a resounding “yes” instead of the lack of “no.”

Abstinence-only sex education is a popular form of sex-ed in America. It teaches abstinence from sex until marriage and usually avoids discussion of contraceptives and safe sex. I think this form of education is just about as effective for teenagers as prohibition was for alcohol. We should teach the honest truth about sex in our schools, not force morals rooted in religion. Resources and information about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases and infections should be provided, instead of pretending neither exists. By condemning all sex as wrong, a young person may assume that no form of sex is right, and this can eventually lead to assaults and rape. If you want to become involved in changing rape culture and promoting feminism, here are some good organizations that are changing the conversation:

- ❖ *mencanstoprape.org*, whose mission is to “mobilize men to use their strength for creating cultures free from violence, especially men’s violence against women”
- ❖ *rainn.org*, The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization
- ❖ *whoneedsfeminism.com*, a group started at Duke university to educate people about what feminism is
- ❖ *fembotcollective.org*, an expanded research interest group within the Center for the Study of Women in Society, a collaboration among faculty, graduate students, media producers, artists, and librarians promoting research on gender, new media and technology
- ❖ *whereisyourline.org*, a “non profit organization and movement that is committed to empowering young leaders to create a world without sexual violence”
- ❖ *makelovenotporn.com*, started by Cindy Gallop, stresses that it is “not about judgement, or what is good vs what is bad. Sex is the area of human experience that embraces the widest possible range of tastes. Everyone should be free to make up their own mind about

what they do and don't like. MakeLoveNotPorn is not anti-porn. MakeLoveNotPorn is simply intended to help inspire and stimulate open, healthy conversations about sex and pornography, in order to help inspire and stimulate more open, healthy and thoroughly enjoyable sexual relationships”

- ❖ *Force: [upsettingrapeculture.com](http://upsettingrapeculture.com)*, whose mission statement is, “FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture is a creative activist effort to upset the culture of rape and promote a culture of consent. We believe that a more difficult and honest conversation needs to happen in America to face the realities of sexual violence, and we envision a world where sex is empowering and pleasurable rather than coercive and violent. As activists, we are here to force the issue.”

Though we may live in a rape culture today, I believe that we can change society by changing people. People make up society and if we relearn our group mentality, we can begin to erase the rape culture we live in.

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