

Why is Sexual Violence a Feminist Issue?

Rape and sexual abuse are crimes that are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women. Therefore, sexual violence is a feminist issue.

Sexual violence is prevalent in our community; yet little is being done to recognise, address, or prevent it. We believe this is due to the victims primarily being women; that it is seen as too hard; that it is often perpetrated by people known to the victim; and because addressing the issue is seen as women's responsibility rather than a community responsibility. The public response to sexual violence is often to encourage women to be safer. As a community, we never respond to sexual violence by asking "why do men rape?" or "how we can stop them?"

Sexual violence affects men and women differently. Men are not controlled due to the threat of sexual violence in the way that women are. *All* women are affected by sexual violence whether they have experienced rape and sexual abuse or not. The existence of rape and sexual abuse shapes and controls all of our lives. We learn from a very young age to fear, not to trust others, to be weary of strangers, and to behave 'safely'. Girls and women are told that if we take precautions we can keep ourselves safe and avoid sexual violence. Such precautions include: not wearing provocative clothing (whatever that is!); choosing our friends and partners carefully; not going out alone after dark; not drinking; not flirting; etc. However, sexual violence is an opportunistic crime that can happen to any women at any time, whether she behaves 'safely' or not. Despite this, women make decisions every day in the hope of keeping themselves safe. Such decisions often place limits and restrictions on our lives, and serve to create a society in which women experience a cultural curfew. These decisions have become a way of life so we forget to acknowledge them as unfair, controlling, and an utter breach of our freedom and human rights.

'Safety rules' set women up to fail as, even if women follow all the safety rules, they can still be raped. The rules allow women to be blamed when they experience sexual violence and they can lead to questions such as: "Why were you there?" "Why didn't you fight back?" "Why did you accept that drink?" etc. Many of the ideas about 'safe' behaviour are based on myths about rape and sexual abuse. Examples of such myths include, "all women really want to be raped"; "women ask for it"; "sexual violence is about men's need for sex"; and "once men start they can't stop". Many people believe that rapists are dodgy looking strangers who hang out in dark alleys. However, the fact is that most survivors of sexual violence were abused by someone they know – by a family member, intimate partner, sports coach, colleague, etc. Statistically, it is far more dangerous to go home than it is to go out alone at night!

As sexual violence is often perpetrated by people known to their victim, it has been regarded as a private matter. This is particularly the case when rape occurs within intimate partner relationships. Law and culture have supported men's rights to have control in the home without interference. Rape in marriage only became illegal in 1985! Though the law has changed, the social expectation that women should be available for sex still exists, as does the belief that women owe sex to male partners.

Rape and sexual abuse are (generally) accepted as bad things that happen in the world. It is treated as something that we need to accept and take precautions to avoid. There isn't an expectation that we should be able to live free from sexual violence. In 2006, it is abhorrent that sexual violence still exists! As a community we do not ask who rapes and sexually abuses or how we can stop sexual violence. This lack of questioning allows us to accept sexual violence as something that happens rather than something we can understand, be outraged about, and stop. Rape and sexual abuse must be eradicated. Unless we acknowledge the reality of the situation, that this is a crime perpetrated by men against women, then we lose our ability to understand how and why it happens and therefore our ability to end it.

Acknowledging that rape and sexual abuse are gendered crimes, or talking about sexual violence as a feminist issue, is increasingly unaccepted. A shift away from gendered analysis, to approaching sexual violence as a gender neutral issue, is occurring. This is part of the general backlash against feminism, which is informed by the belief that feminism has gone too far and tipped the balance of equality so that it is now men who are disadvantaged. Many people consider feminism to be an outdated idea whose time has passed. This argument supports society's general shift towards gender neutrality and reinforces the presumption that sexual violence is something that is committed by people against people. There isn't the same kind of feminist movement that existed in the 1970's. Therefore, the backlash isn't being responded to adequately. There is insufficient public challenging around sexist advertising, pornography, and other forms of sexism. This helps support a culture where degradation and the sexual objectification of women is considered acceptable, which in turn supports male violence against women.

In order to end sexual violence the feminist movement must be regenerated and sustained. The gendered nature of rape and sexual abuse *must* be acknowledged – if we do not recognise the issue we cannot stop it. Sexual violence is a symptom of patriarchy – therefore patriarchy must be confronted in order to eradicate rape and sexual abuse. We need a feminist groundswell in order to challenge this pervasive and harmful social issue. We need to actively oppose the oppression of women in all areas of society in order to create a climate where rape and sexual abuse can no longer occur.

We must stop blaming women for being raped or sexually abused and stop putting the responsibility for safety on women alone. We must start asking, "Why do men rape and sexually abuse women?" "How can we as a community stop this from continuing to happen?" and "How can we ensure women and children's safety?" We must say NO to sexual violence, recognise it as the crime that it is, and acknowledge our responsibility as a community to stop it. We deserve to live in a safe world.

Tanya Newman and Georgina Thompson
(Both Tanya and Georgina work at Wellington Rape Crisis)
1075 Words

Sexual Violence is a Feminist Issue – Some Stats

“One in three women around the world is likely to suffer physical, sexual or other abuse in her lifetime, usually at the hands of a family member or someone she knows. Half of the sexually assaults in the world are on girls of 15 or younger.”

Boseley, S. (2005). Guardian Weekly, October 28-November 3. p. 33

“The NZ Youth 2000 study found that 22.2% of girls and 11.3% of boys reported an experience of unwanted sexual behaviour.”

McGregor, K. (2004). Women talk about childhood sexual abuse. Women’s Health Update. Volume 8 No 2, October 2004, p. 1-2

“In 48 population-based surveys around the world, between 10 and 90 per cent of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their lives. In some countries, one in four women report sexual violence by an intimate partner.”

Van der Gaag, N. (2004). The No-Nonsense guide to Women’s Rights. United Kingdom: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, p.101

“Sexual, physical and psychological violence causes as much of a burden of ill health and death among women aged 15 to 44 as cancer – an more than malaria and traffic accidents combined.”

Van der Gaag, N. (2004). The No-Nonsense guide to Women’s Rights. United Kingdom: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, p.101

Stats – 215 words