



Tackling the myths about sexual assault

Myth: It could never happen to me.

Fact: Any woman can be raped.

There is an implication in this myth that a woman who is young, attractive, flirty, and/or promiscuous brings a sexual assault onto herself. This attitude toward rape creates self blame as well as preventing women from acknowledging the threat of rape. A good example of this would be if a female dresses revealing and becomes intoxicated, it increases the chance of assault. Some men would say “she is asking for it.” The truth is, women of all sexual orientations, ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic levels are at risk of being raped. One in four female college students will be raped or sexually assaulted in her college career, and one in three women will be raped in her lifetime. Most people know a survivor. The personal characteristics of the survivor do not justify the criminal motives of the perpetrators. No one deserves or asks to be raped.

Myth: Rapes are committed by strangers

Fact: Most rapes are committed by someone the woman knows and at any time of the day or night, in their own homes.

This myth suggests that one is safe at certain times or in certain places and at danger in other times and places. Women can easily be led into a false sense of security and let their guard down. Believing that one can only be raped in dark alleys falsely implies that those who are found in these places are rapists. About 95% of rape committed are acquaintance rapes and take place in the survivor’s home. Only 5% of rape is committed by strangers. This does not mean that one should not trust one’s acquaintances; it merely emphasizes being aware of oneself and one’s surroundings. Acquaintance rape is often seen as miscommunication and misunderstanding. There is a lot of victim blaming, in which people believe that the woman should have spoken up and said “No.” Under a strange and horrifying situation such as rape, it is hard to decide the best way to defend oneself; it is difficult to remain calm and do the most rational thing. There are instances in which a perpetrator will threaten the survivor by saying, “if you scream, I will kill you.” Also, survivors can be too terrified to fully comprehend what is happening to them. The number one thought going through a survivor’s head is “I am going to die,” or “I do not want to die.” Death is on the survivor’s mind during the assault in many more occurrences than STDs and fear of pregnancy. In short, sexual assault is unwanted; just because the victim is too fearful to vocalize her feelings does not mean she enjoys the act. Also, there is the belief that strangers are much more violence than acquaintances, which is not necessarily true. Although the feelings a woman experiences because of rape by a stranger can be different from the feelings of a woman raped by an acquaintance, the amount of trauma can be the same. Both cases are very severe. In the law, lack of consent is the definition of rape, regardless if the perpetrator was known or unknown by the survivor.

Myth: Most rapes are committed by black men raping white women.

Fact: Men who rape come from all races, all ethnicities, and all social classes.

This myth has a historical background, dating back to the Civil War in which racism toward blacks flourished. Studies showed in the 1970s that lower socioeconomic level men raped women more; however, the men who were interviewed were prisoners, making the population non-represented, and therefore, invalid. Statistics confirm that 80-90% of perpetrators come from the same racial background as the survivor in all violent crimes. The rate of sexual assault throughout all racial groups contains no significant difference. However, the rate of sexual assault, regardless of race, is higher among lower income, urban residents. If the perpetrator is of a different race than the assailant, he is more likely to be a white man sexually assaulting a woman of color rather than a man of color sexually assaulting a white woman.

Myth: Men rape women because they are sexually aroused or have been sexually deprived.

Fact: Men rape women to exert control and confirm their power.

This myth implies that rape is the only alternative to lack of a sexual partner, since men's sexual urges are uncontrollable and must be satisfied. This allows for male aggression by blaming the survivor for making the man sexually aroused in the first place. Because most perpetrators have available sexual partners, the motives for rape include the want of power and control and hostilities against women, the men, in some instances, enjoy inflicting pain to fulfill their desire for domination. Studies have shown that erection and ejaculation are many times absent, with the only motivation being to objectify and degrade women.

Myth: Women secretly want to be raped and are "asking for it" by the way they dress and act.

Fact: Women never desire or ask to be raped.

This myth creates the assumption that since men cannot control their sexual desires, they would not assault women if the women did not dress provocatively. Women of all ages, regardless of how they dress or behave, are raped. Although a man may use a woman's "wiles" as justification for his actions, this is merely an excuse. Even though women fantasize and will sometimes consent to sexual domination, they never wish to be raped. There is a difference between fantasy and reality. A woman has control over her fantasies, but she has no control over being raped. Sexual assault is about taking away a woman's power, forcing her to submit to another person's will.

Myth: Women lie about being raped or use it to get even with their partners.

Fact: A very large majority of women do not lie about being raped.

This myth creates suspicion and doubt toward women. It isolates survivors by claiming that they are lying. It is important to remember that even though a sexual assault case does not go to trial, it does not mean that the sexual assault did not happen. Rape is the most underreported crime. Intimate and painful details must be shared, in terms of both medical exams and police reports and questionings. Women can experience further trauma from sharing details to untrained, insensitive professionals. If the case does not go to court, there is the chance that she can be harassed by others, including the perpetrator, as well as accused of ruining his life.

Myth: Women cannot rape other women or men.

Fact: Women are sometimes sexual aggressors.

The stereotype that women are weak and gentle creates the impression that women would never be sexual perpetrators. Same-gender rape does occur. Women can and do rape other women, as well as men. These instances are much less common than men raping women, but they do exist and therefore need attention and acknowledgement.

Myth: Men cannot be raped.

Fact: Men can be and are sexually assaulted.

The belief that men are always in control is false. There is also the stigma in regards to male to male sexual contact, which leads heterosexual male survivors to deny being sexually assaulted. Male sexual assault is very common; 1 in 6 men become victims.