



The "Other" Sexual Assault

Published in the Martinsburg *Journal*, June 02, 2019

It must have been depressing for those female state representatives when---in a final request to include an exemption for rape in an abortion policy being debated on their legislative floors---they stood before their male colleagues and confided on public record that they too had been a victim of rape, only to discover that their extraordinarily personal statements had not swayed a single vote.

That is what happened in South Carolina, Georgia, Ohio and Michigan, where the predominantly male delegates refused to exempt rape in a proposed ban on abortion. It's a dramatic example of the minimization of a traumatic event experienced by so many women; when men hear first-hand about sexual assault, even from a colleague they respect, it evidently changes absolutely nothing---not their votes; not how to prevent or punish; not how to legislate so that the consequences of rape are not the sole authority of more men.

It begs the question: What do men understand about rape, and more importantly, do they hear it as a term that is primarily the ownership of women? Does the word "rape" imply a ploy that women hide behind when convenient, like the "race card," just with one letter changed? After all, many women fear sexual assault from an early age; just witnessing the balance of power between our parents can teach girls that men demand dominion over us, and expect submission from us.

But before the movie "Deliverance" came out in 1972, striking fear and shock in audiences everywhere, there was little awareness that boys and men could be sexually assaulted in the same manner as women. Now, the "National Alliance to End Sexual Violence" states that men constitute 14% of reported rape victims, and that the majority of their perpetrators are white and heterosexual.

Anywhere there is a sequestered male population, statistics show that there are even higher rates of male sexual assault, whether it be among the 414,000 priests of the Catholic Church, the 2 million men in our prison population, or our 1.5 million military servicemen. According to a 2013 Pentagon survey collected anonymously from service members, of an estimated 26,000 unreported sexual assaults, 14,000 of the victims were men. One VA psychologist was clear in stating that "very few of the rapists are gay."

Given these numbers, men with political power would do well to include their own sons, brothers or fathers as potential victims of sexual assault. At the time of this Pentagon study, Congress was 80% male; they could have found ways to make prosecution of sex offenders a priority. However, it wasn't until 2014 that two women Senators, McCaskill and Gillibrand, pushed through a major change in how the military processes sexual assault. Another woman, Senator Shaheen, sponsored the Sexual Assault Survivors Rights Act in 2016. Needless to say, both legislations were written to clearly apply equally to both men and women.

THE BYSTANDER



But most importantly, in 2012, the very definition of rape as used by the FBI's "Uniform Crime Report" was expanded to be gender-neutral, and also to include "penetration with objects." The previous definition, "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will," had been in use since 1927. This change, which officially made sexual violence against males a categorized criminal offense, was initiated by the *Office on Violence Against Women* and allowed the DOJ to collect, analyze and report data about same-sex rape more accurately. Many states have even stopped using the word "rape," substituting it with "criminal sexual conduct," because it continues to carry the connotation of a crime against women---which is why it was purposely not used in the title of this article.

I'd like to think that men could understand women better if they knew what it feels like to be a perpetual victim, and potentially be forced by the government to birth the consequence of rape. I'd like to think that women could understand men better if we acknowledged the comparable vulnerability that men face, and in the process, discover that we have a common ground. And I'd hope that men could understand themselves better if they could recognize their own fear of sexual assault and how it affects them, in much the same way it affects women.

For every time I've heard the phrase that someone was being "bent over the desk," the oft-used crude military lingo for a harsh verbal punishment by a superior, I wish I could have translated it on the spot as the offense to men that it is. "Good old boys" may trivialize something that is horrendously humiliating for themselves, but women know that there are no good "rape" jokes, phrases, analogies, slang, metaphors, or excuses.

They also know there is no place on earth for a law that would make it a crime to terminate a pregnancy that was created through sexual violence.

But in our endless fight against crimes that are literally weaponized sexual acts, it's important for women to have the support and understanding of men, and likewise, for men to count on the same from women, should they ever need it.