The Rape Culture

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Culture is vital in the human species, but some cultural patterns are destructive. Dianne Herman argues that, by linking sexuality and violence, the United States is a "rape culture" that undermines healthy relationships. Although "date rape" has always existed, it has only recently been seen, by social scientists and practitioners, as a form of violence. However, many young adults—including college students—still view date rape as a "normal" part of dating.

When Susan Griffin wrote, "I have never been free of the fear of rape," she touched a responsive chord in most women.1 Every woman knows the fear of being alone at home late at night or the terror that strikes her when she receives an obscene telephone call. She knows also of the "minirapes"—the pinch in the crowded bus, the wolf whistle from a passing car, the stare of a man looking at her bust during a conversation. Griffin has argued, "Rape is a kind of terrorism which severely limits the freedom of women and makes women dependent on men."2

Women live their lives according to a rape schedule....

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Because of the aggressive-passive, dominant-submissive, me-Tarzan-you-Jane nature of the relationship between the sexes in our culture, there is a close association between violence and sexuality. Words that are slang sexual terms, for example, frequently accompany assaultive behavior or gestures. "Fuck you" is meant as a brutal attack in verbal terms. In the popular culture, "James Bond alternately whips out his revolver and his cock, and though there is no known connection between the skills of a gun-fighter and love-making, pacifism seems suspiciously effeminate."3 The imagery of sexual relations between males and females in books, songs, advertising, and films is frequently that of a sadomasochistic relationship thinly veiled by a romantic facade. Thus, it is very difficult in our society to differentiate rape from "normal" heterosexual rela-
tions. Indeed our culture can be characterized as a rape culture because the image of heterosexual intercourse is based on a rape model of sexuality.

LEGAL DEFINITIONS OF RAPE

If healthy heterosexuality were characterized by loving, warm, and reciprocally satisfying actions, then rape could be defined as sex without consent, therefore involving either domination or violence. Instead, rape is legally defined as sexual intercourse by a male with a female, other than his wife, without the consent of the woman and effected by force, duress, intimidation, or deception as to the nature of the act. The spousal exemption in the law, which still remains in effect in most states, means that a husband cannot be guilty of raping his wife, even if he forces intercourse against her will. The implication of this loophole is that violent, unwanted sex does not necessarily define rape. Instead, rape is illegal sex—that is, sexual assault by a man who has no legal rights over the woman. In other words, in the law's eyes, violence in legal sexual intercourse is permissible, but sexual relations with a woman who is not one's property is not.

From their inception, rape laws have been established not to protect women, but to protect women's property value for men.

Society's view of rape was purely a matter of economics—of assets and liabilities. When a married woman was raped, her husband was wronged, not her. If she was unmarried, her father suffered since his investment depreciated. It was the monetary value of a woman which determined the gravity of the crime. Because she had no personal rights under the law, her own emotions simply didn't matter. Because rape meant that precious merchandise was irreparably damaged, the severity of the punishment was dependent on whether the victim was a virgin. In some virgin rapes, biblical law ordered that the rapist marry the victim, since she was now devalued property. The social status of the victim was also important, as a woman of higher social status was more valuable. . .

Due to pressure from feminist groups, the legal definition of rape has been broadened in many states over the last decade. Evidentiary rules requiring corroboration, cautionary instructions, psychiatric examinations, and prior sexual history have been eliminated or revised in most states. A survey of 151 criminal-justice professionals in Florida, Michigan, and Georgia found that these types of reforms in rape-law legislation have received widespread acceptance and approval. “Further, the findings suggest that law reform need not generate the confusion, uncertainty, or antagonism predicted by some early analysts.”

Some jurisdictions have established categories of sexual offenses that allow for sex-neutral assaults, taking into account that men and children, as well as women, can be victims. Others have allowed prosecution when sexual assaults include acts other than penetration of the vagina by the penis, such as sodomy or oral copulation. The latest struggle has been to remove the spousal exemption in the laws, so that husbands are not immune to prosecution for rape by their wives. Each of these changes reflects an evolving understanding that rape laws should not be in existence to regulate control of virginal female bodies for sole ownership by one man; rather, rape should be defined as a sexual assault and crime of violence by one person against another.

HOW COMMON IS RAPE?

There was a steady increase in the rape rate between the mid-sixties and 1980, when it leveled off. In 1964, 11.2 rapes and attempted rapes were reported nationally per 100,000 inhabitants. That figure climbed to 26.1 reports per 100,000 by 1974, and, in the 1980s, has fluctuated between 33.5 and 37.9. Since male victims rarely report rape, this means that, in 1987, 73 of every 100,000 females in the United States reported
that they were victims of rape or attempted rape.¹⁰

These statistics are based in reported rapes. Victimization surveys indicate that for every reported rape, an additional one to three rapes have occurred but have not been reported.¹¹ Diana E. H. Russell’s 1978 study of 930 San Francisco women found that 44 percent reported at least one completed or attempted rape.¹² Only 8 percent, or less than one in twelve, of the total number of incidents were ever reported to the police. Using Russell’s findings, the actual incidence of rape is twenty-four times higher than FBI statistics indicate.

In addition, a woman is probably less safe from rape in this country than she is in any other developed nation. The United States has one of the highest rape rates in the world.¹³ In 1984, the United States had 35.7 rapes per 100,000 people. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found European nations had an average of 5.4 rapes per 100,000 inhabitants in that same year.¹⁴

**VICTIMS OF RAPE**

Many myths surround the crime of rape, but perhaps most common are those that imply that the victim was responsible for her own victimization. Projecting the blame on the woman is accomplished by portraying her as a seductress. The conventional scenario is one of a man who is sexually aroused by an attractive, flirtatious woman. But the image of the rape victim as seductive and enticing is at odds with reality. Rapes have been committed on females as young as 6 months and as old as 93 years. Most victims tend to be very young. In one study in Philadelphia of reported rapes in 1958 and 1960, 20 percent of the victims were between 10 and 14 years of age; another 25 percent were between 15 and 19.¹⁵ According to data compiled in 1974 by Women Organized Against Rape, 41 percent of rape victims seen in hospital emergency rooms in Philadelphia were 16 or younger. The category with the highest frequency of victims was the range between 13 and 16 years of age.¹⁶ A comprehensive review of the literature on rape victimization published in 1979 noted that the high-risk ages are adolescents (aged 13 to 17) and young adults (aged 18 to 24).¹⁷ In 1985, The National Crime Survey, based on findings from a continuous survey of a representative sample of housing units across the United States, reported that the rape rate is highest for those white women between ages 16 and 19, and for those black women between ages 25 and 34.¹⁸

...Rape is a crime commonly committed by an assailant who is known to the victim. Even in cases where women do report to the police, victim and offender are frequently acquainted. In a study of 146 persons admitted to the emergency room of Boston City Hospital during a one-year period from 1972 to 1973 with a complaint of rape, 102 of these rapes were reported to police. Forty of these victims who reported the assault knew their assailant.¹⁹ Burgess and Holmstrom believe that victims who know their rapists are less apt to report the crime. Their study found that victims who reported rapes by assailants known to them had more difficulty establishing their credibility than did victims raped by strangers, and these cases had a higher likelihood of dropping out of the criminal-justice system.²⁰...

In 1982, Ms. magazine reported a series of studies on college campuses confirming that, even given new and more liberal attitudes about premarital sex and women’s liberation, date rape and other forms of acquaintance rape may be reaching epidemic proportions in higher education. In some cases, women have even been assaulted by men ostensibly acting as protective escorts to prevent rape.²¹ A 1985 study of over 600 college students found that three-quarters of the women and more than one-half of the men disclosed an experience of sexual aggression on a date. Nearly 15 percent of the women and 7 percent of the men said that intercourse had taken place against the woman’s will.²² The victim and
offender had most likely known each other almost one year before the sexual assault. Date rape occurred most frequently when the man initiated the date, when he drove to and from and paid for the date, when drinking took place, and when the couple found themselves alone either in a car or indoors. In these instances, it appears that college men may feel they have license to rape.

In explaining date rape, one set of authors has stated,

women are often seen as legitimate objects of sexual aggression. Rape can be viewed as the logical extension of a cultural perspective that defines men as possessors of women. The American dating system, in particular, places females in the position of sexual objects purchased by men. Women are groomed to compete for men who will shower them with attention and favors, men are socialized to expect sexual reward (or at least to try for that reward) for their attention to women. This perspective presents the woman as a legitimate object of victimization: If a man is unable to seduce a woman, and yet has provided her with certain attention and gifts, then he has a right to expect sexual payment. Only the situation of rape by a total stranger escapes the influence of this reasoning. In any other case, if a woman knows her attacker even slightly, she is likely to be perceived as a legitimate victim of a justified aggressor.

The tendency to dismiss rape allegations when victim and offender know each other has contributed to the silence that surrounds marital rape. Finkelhor and Yllo in their study of marital rape found that only one textbook on marriage and the family of the thirty-one they surveyed mentioned rape or anything related to sexual assault in marriage. These authors cite studies that indicate that at least 10 percent of all married women questioned on this topic report that their husbands have used physical force or threats to have sex with them. Marital rape may be the most common form of sexual assault: More than two times as many of the women interviewed had been raped by husbands as had been raped by strangers. Husbands’ desires to frighten, humiliate, punish, degrade, dominate, and control their spouses were found to be the most common motivations for the sexual assaults. In their 1980–81 study of Boston area mothers, Finkelhor and Yllo found that about half of the marital rape victims were also battered. Many cases were uncovered in which wives were tortured through sadistic sexual assaults involving objects. Many more were humiliated by being forced to engage in distasteful or unusual sexual practices. One-quarter of the victims in their survey were sexually attacked in the presence of others—usually their children. Many times, the rape was the final violent act in a series of physical and emotional abuses or the payback when a woman filed for separation or divorce. Sadly, many women suffer years of abuse thinking that the assaults are caused by their failure to be good wives or feeling that they have no way out and that this is the lot of the married woman. Too often, their husbands justify their attacks on their wives by blaming the wives for causing their loss of control, or by saying that they are entitled to treat their spouses any way they choose.

Because rape so frequently involves people who know each other, most rapists and their victims are of the same race and age group. In 1985, approximately 80 percent of all rapes and attempted rapes were intraracial. One reason that the myth that rapes are interracial dies hard is that cases of this type frequently receive the most publicity. In a study of rape in Philadelphia, researchers discovered that the two major newspapers, when they reported on rape cases, mentioned mainly interracial offenses. Intraracial rapes were only occasionally mentioned. Gary LaFree examined the effect of race in the handling of 881 sexual assaults in a large midwestern city. He found that black males who assaulted white women received more serious charges, longer sentences, and more severe punishment in terms of executed sentences and incarceration in the state penitentiary. Although black women are three times more likely to be raped than are white women, rape is least prose-
executed if the victim is black. The rape of poor, black women is not an offense against men of power.

**WHY MEN RAPE**

... One of the most surprising findings of studies on rape is that the rapist is normal in personality, appearance, intelligence, behavior, and sexual drive. Empirical research has repeatedly failed to find a consistent pattern of personality type or character disorder that reliably discriminates the rapist from the nonrapist. According to Amir, the only significant psychological difference between the rapist and the normal, well-adjusted male appears to be the greater tendency of the former to express rage and violence. But this finding probably tends to overemphasize the aggressive personality characteristics of rapists, since generally only imprisoned rapists have been studied. Those few rapists who are sentenced to prison tend to be the more obviously violent offenders. In fact, studies by some researchers have found one type of rapist who is fairly meek and mild-mannered. What is clear is that the rapist is not an exotic freak. Rather, rape evolves out of a situation in which “normal” males feel a need to prove themselves to be “men” by displaying dominance over females.

In our society, men demonstrate their competence as people by being “masculine.” Part of this definition of masculinity involves a contempt for anything feminine or for females in general. Reported rapes, in fact, are frequently associated with some form of ridicule and sexual humiliation, such as urination on the victim, anal intercourse, fellatio, and ejaculation in the victim’s face and hair. Inversion into the woman’s vagina of broomsticks, bottles, and other phallic objects is not an uncommon coup de grace. The overvaluing of toughness expresses itself in a disregard for anything associated with fragility. In the rapist’s view, his assertion of maleness is automatically tied to a violent repudiation of anything feminine.

Most rapes are not spontaneous acts in which the rapist had no prior intent to commit rape but was overcome by the sexual provocations of his victim. Statistics compiled from reported rapes show that the overwhelming majority are planned. In one study, 71 percent of all reported rapes were prearranged, and another 11 percent were partially planned. Only 18 percent were impulsive acts. Planning is most common in cases of group rape. Even when the rapist is acting alone, a majority of the rapes involves some manipulations on the part of the offender to place his victim in a vulnerable situation that he can exploit...

Most convicted rapists tend to project the blame on others, particularly the victim. Schultz found that the sex offender is twice as likely to insist on his innocence as is the general offender. “In two-thirds of the cases one hears, ‘I’m here on a phoney beef,’ or ‘I might have been a little rough with her but she was asking for it,’ or ‘I might have done it but I was too drunk to remember.’” They also rationalize the act by labeling their victims “bad” women. Some rapists excuse and deny their crime by portraying the victim as a woman of questionable sexual reputation or as a person who has placed herself in a compromising position, thus “getting what she deserved.”

American culture produces rapists when it encourages the socialization of men to subscribe to values of control and dominance, callousness and competitiveness, and anger and aggression, and when it discourages the expression by men of vulnerability, sharing, and cooperation. In the end, it is not only the women who become the victims of these men, but also the offenders themselves, who suffer. These men lose the ability to satisfy needs for nurturance, love, and belonging, and their anger and frustration from this loss expresses itself in acts of violence and abuse against others. The tragedy for our society is that we produce so many of these hardened men.
SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO RAPE

... The police have considerable discretion in determining whether a crime has been committed. In 1976, according to a study by the FBI, 19 percent of all forcible rapes reported to the police were unfounded. Unfounding simply means that the police decide there is no basis for prosecution.

According to many studies, one of the most frequent causes of unfounding rape is a prior relationship between the participants. In the Philadelphia study, 43 percent of all date rapes were unfounded. The police, according to the researcher, seemed to be more concerned that the victim had "assumed the risk" than they were with the fact that she had not given consent to intercourse.

Another common reason police unfound cases is the apparent lack of force in the rape situation. The extent of injuries seems to be even more important in the decision to unfound than is whether the offender had a weapon. There is no requirement that a male businessperson must either forcibly resist when mugged or forfeit protection under the law. But proof of rape, both to the police and in court, is often required to take the form of proof of resistance, substantiated by the extent of injuries suffered by the victim. Yet local police departments frequently advise women not to resist if faced with the possibility of rape.

In a confusion partially of their own making, local police precincts point out contradictory messages: They "unfounded" a rape case because, by the rule of their own male logic, the woman did not show normal resistance; they report on an especially brutal rape case and announce to the press that the multiple stab wounds were the work of an assailant who was enraged because the woman resisted.

The victim is told that if she was raped it was because she did not resist enough. But if she fights back and is raped and otherwise assaulted, police blame her again for bringing about her own injuries because of her resistance.

One reason physicians are reluctant to diagnose injuries as caused by a sexual assault is due to their reluctance to have to give up their valuable time to testify on behalf of the prosecution. In the early seventies, the District of Columbia newspapers reported that doctors of D.C. General Hospital were intentionally giving negative medical reports of rape victims so they would not be called to court. In one case that reached the appeals court, the doctor had reported absolutely no injuries even though police photographs showed bruises and scratches on the victim's face. As a result, the trial court dismissed the rape charges and the defendants were only found guilty of assault with intent to commit rape.

For many women, the experience of having their account of the events scrutinized, mocked, or discounted continues in the courtroom. Women have often said that they felt as though they, not the defendants, were the persons on trial. According to Burgess and Holmstrom, "Going to court, for the victim, is as much of a crisis as the actual rape itself." They quote one victim shortly after she appeared in district court: "I felt like crying. I felt abused. I didn't like the questions the defense was asking. I felt accused—guilty 'til proven innocent. I thought the defense lawyer made it a big joke." They relate how one twelve-year-old girl had a psychotic breakdown during the preliminary court process.

The victim, by taking the case to court, incurs extensive costs, both psychological and financial. Expecting to testify just once, she is likely to have to repeat her story at the hearing for probable cause, to the grand jury, and in superior-court sessions. To convey the discomfort of such a process, feminists have recommended that individuals imagine having to tell an audience all the details of their last sexual experience. In addition to exposing themselves to public scrutiny, rape victims may be subject to harassment from the friends or family of the perpetrator.
Financially, the time away from work nearly always stretches beyond expectations. According to Burgess and Holmstrom, the victims they accompanied to court were often forced to sit three to four hours in the courthouse, only to be told that the case had been continued. After they and their witnesses had taken time off from work and, in some cases, traveled great distances, they were less than enthusiastic about the idea of seeing justice done. Wood has said, “Due to the traumatic experience which a victim must go through in order to attempt to secure the attacker’s successful prosecution, it is amazing any rape cases come to trial.”

Even if the victim is resilient enough to pursue her case, she may encounter prejudicial attitudes from judges and juries. Shirley Feldman-Summers and Karen Lindner investigated the perceptions of victims by juries and found that, as the respectability of the victim decreased, the jury’s belief that the victim was responsible for the rape increased. In a sense, juries have created an extralegal defense. If the complainant somehow “assumed the risk” of rape, juries will commonly find the defendant guilty of some lesser crime or will acquit him altogether. “A seventeen-year-old girl was raped during a beer-drinking party. The jury probably acquitted, according to the judge, because they thought the girl asked for what she got.” In one case, according to Medea and Thompson, “a woman who responded with ‘fuck off’ when approached lost her case because ‘fuck’ is a sexually exciting word.” If the victim knew the offender previously, especially as an intimate, juries will be reluctant to convict:

In one case of “savage rape,” the victim’s jaw was fractured in two places. The jury nevertheless acquitted because it found that there may have been sexual relations on previous occasions, and the parties had been drinking on the night of the incident.

...Despite attempts to educate the public about the dynamics of rape, myths still persist. Martha Burt, in a study of almost 600 Minnesota residents, found that most believed that “Any healthy woman can resist a rapist.” “In the majority of rapes, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation.” “If a girl engages in necking or petting and she lets things get out of hand, it is her fault if her partner forces sex on her.” “One reason that women falsely report a rape is that they frequently have a need to call attention to themselves.” Burt found that rapists also subscribed to these myths in attempts to excuse and rationalize their behavior. The implication of her study is that the general population’s attitudes toward women who are raped is very similar to the rapist’s view of his victim.

During the 1986–87 school year, a survey was taken of over 1500 sixth to ninth graders who attended the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center’s assault-awareness program in schools across the state. The results of the survey strongly indicated that even the next generation of Americans tends to blame the victim of sexual assault. For example, 50 percent of the students said a woman who walks alone at night and dresses seductively is asking to be raped. In addition, most of the students surveyed accepted sexually assaultive behavior as normal. Fifty-one percent of the boys and 41 percent of the girls stated that a man has a right to force a woman to kiss him if he has spent “a lot of money” on her. Sixty-five percent of the boys and 57 percent of the girls in junior high schools said it is acceptable for a man to force a woman to have sex if they have been dating for more than six months. Eighty-seven percent of the boys and 79 percent of the girls approved of rape if the couple were married. Interestingly, 20 percent of the girls and 6 percent of the boys taking the survey disclosed that they had been sexually abused.

In cases of rape, judges, juries, police, prosecutors, and the general public frequently attribute blame and responsibility to the victim for her own victimization. Unfortunately, these negative responses are often compounded by reactions from family and friends. Encounters with par-
THE RAPE CULTURE

As long as sex in our society is construed as a dirty, low, and violent act involving domination of a male over a female, rape will remain a common occurrence. The erotization of male dominance means that whenever women are in a subordinate position to men, the likelihood for sexual assault is great. We are beginning to see that rape is not the only way in which women are sexually victimized, and that other forms of sexual exploitation of women are rampant in our society. Feminists have raised our consciousness about rape by developing rape crisis centers and other programs to assist victims and their families, by reforming laws and challenging politicians, by training professionals in medicine and in the criminal-justice system, and by educating women and the general public on the subject. They are also enlightening us about pornography; sexual harassment on the job and in higher education; sexual exploitation in doctor, dentist, and therapist relations with patients; and sexual assault in the family, such as incest and rape in marriage.

Rape is the logical outcome if men act according to the “masculine mystique” and women act according to the “feminine mystique.” But rape does not have to occur. Its presence is an indication of how widely held are traditional views of appropriate male and female behavior, and of how strongly enforced these views are. Our society is a rape culture because it fosters and encourages rape by teaching males and females that it is natural and normal for sexual relations to involve aggressive behavior on the part of males. To end rape, people must be able to envision a relationship between the sexes that involves sharing, warmth, and equality, and to bring about a social system in which those values are fostered.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. According to Herman, what is the link between sexuality and violence in U.S. culture? Why is it sometimes difficult to differentiate rape from normal heterosexual relations in our culture?
2. Why does date rape occur? What about marital rape?
3. How do rapists rationalize their behavior? How does our society respond to rape?

NOTES

2. Ibid., 35.
3. Ibid., 27.
5. Ibid., p. 5.
8. Tong, op. cit., pp. 90-123.
9. Forensic Rape: An Analysis of Legal Issues, 2. Table 1 reports the rape rate for each year from 1960 to 1975. Figures for subsequent years can be found in Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.) for each year.
11. Duncan Chappell, “Forensic Rape and the Criminal Justice System; Surveying: Present Practices and Reporting Future Trends,” in Sexual Assault ed. Marcia J. Walker and Stanley L. Brodzky (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1970), p. 22. Annual surveys by the federal government report that from 1973 to 1986, between 41 and 61 percent of all rapes and attempted rapes were reported to the police. Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics Bulletin, Criminal Victimization—1986, Table 5, p. 4. However, the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice reported in Forensic Rape: Final Project Report, March 1987, that “the actual number of rapes in the United States is approximately four times the reported number” (p. 15).
17. Russell, op. cit., p. 70.
20. Ibid.
21. Karen Barrett, "Date Rape, a Campus Epidemic?" *Ms.*, 11 (Sept 1982), 120.
25. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
27. Ibid., pp. 22, 113.
28. Ibid., p. 133.
32. *Criminal Victimization*—1985, Table 7, p. 17.
40. 1976 Uniform Crime Reports, 16.
43. Ibid., p. 291.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., p. 211.
48. Ibid., p. 200.