

Sexual Violence on Campus

Rape culture is a society where institutions, social practices, and cultural ideologies condone, trivialize, and normalize sexual violence. In a rape culture, sexual violence is so normalized in the TV shows and advertisements we see and the music and jokes we hear, by the post-secondary institutions we attend and by our municipal, provincial, and federal governments that this violence is rendered invisible and perceived as inevitable rather than a problem that needs to change.

Consent culture is a culture in which the prevailing narrative of sex is centered on mutual consent. It is a culture that does not force anyone into anything, respects bodily autonomy and is based on the belief that a person is always the best judge of their own wants and needs. A consent culture is one in which mutual consent is also part of social life.

The Gendering of Sexual Violence

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recognizes that violence against women is an ongoing barrier to gender equality and access to human rights and freedoms. While men have been victim to many serious incidences of violence, research has shown that sexual violence in homes, communities, workplaces and campuses disproportionately targets women. In addition to the physical effects of violence, survivors experience long-term mental harm. Indeed, the United Nations defines violence against women as “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

While the vast majority of incidents go unreported, women account for nine out of ten police reported sexual assaults in Canada.⁴ In nearly all cases of sexual violence against women, the abusers are male.⁵ Furthermore, the offender is known to the victim in three-quarters of reported cases, with a large proportion of these people being casual acquaintances or friends. Almost one in five reported sexual offences against women occur with an intimate partner, with 97 percent of all sexual offences by intimate partners being reported by women.

Young women aged 15 to 24 experience higher instances of sexual violence in Canada. The police-reported rate of violent crime against young women is significantly higher than older women – 42 percent higher than the rate for women aged 25 to 34, and almost double for women between 25 and 44 – and instances of sexual violence echo this trend. According to the most recent Statistics Canada General Social Survey, 70 percent of self-reported sexual assaults were against women and almost half of all self-reported sexual assaults were against people aged 15 to 24. Young women report the

highest rates of being stalked, with stalkers being known to victims in over two-thirds of cases.

It is important to note that some groups are targeted in even greater numbers by gender-based violence. Aboriginal women in Canada are 3.5 times more likely to have violence perpetrated against them than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. It has also been reported that 60% of women with disabilities experience some form of violence. There are also reports of immigrant women being more vulnerable to domestic violence as a result of economic dependence, cultural and language barriers and a lack of knowledge of available resources. In 2011, The American-based National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) found that “... transgender women, people of color, and youth and young adults are at a disproportionately high risk of being victims of...hate violence”.

Sexual Violence on Campus

Post-secondary institutions are meant to be safe spaces with the mission to educate students and engage the community in critical thought and discussion. While college and university campuses are places where students are heavily engaged with academic and social activities, they are also places where women can face sexual violence.

“Silence is the enemy of consent.”
- Staceyann Chin, at Consent Culture Forum, 2015

Many on-campus sexual assaults occur during the first eight weeks of classes. More than 80 percent of rapes that occur on college and university campuses are committed by someone known to the victim, with half of these incidences occurring on dates. One national survey revealed that four out of five female undergraduate students said that they had been victims of violence in a dating relationship and of those women, 29 percent reported incidences of sexual assault.

In a campus survey of undergraduate students at the University of Alberta, 21 percent of students reported having at least one unwanted sexual experience at some point in their life, with 15 percent after age 14. Of those students, 42 percent said that it took place while being registered at university. Furthermore, over one-third of those who experienced unwanted sexual experiences said that their most serious experience happened while being a student at university, with over one-half reporting that it happened in their first year of studies.

In the face of these statistics, surveys of male students have shown extremely problematic attitudes regardless of whether or not they have been a perpetrator of sexual violence. One survey showed that 60 percent of Canadian college-aged males indicated that they would commit sexual assault if they

were certain that they wouldn't get caught. Another national survey found that 20 percent of male students believed forced sex was acceptable if someone spent money on a date, if the person's date was stoned or drunk, or if individuals had been dating for a long time.

These attitudes hint at a deeply rooted systemic issue that, if left unaddressed, will only exacerbate a tremendously threatening and increasingly unsafe environment. In a climate that is meant to promote education and progressive thought, universities have the opportunity to expose these trends and address and challenge the perceptions that are enabling them. With increasing attention being directed towards incidences of violence against women on campuses and those perpetrating them, we are poised to work collectively to address systems of inequity and violence to fulfill the true purpose of universities: create a safe educational environment, planting the seeds for a safe, progressive and equitable future for all.

Issues of Reporting

Most statistics related to sexual and gendered violence are often based on incidents that are formally reported to police. However, less than one in ten sexual assaults are reported to police, which is a significantly lower rate compared to other types of crimes. This high level of under-reporting shows that statistical reports are a large underestimation of the prevalence of sexual violence and the true extent of the problem.

It is estimated that four out of five women who are sexually assaulted do not report due to feelings of humiliation or the fear of being re-victimized in the legal process. Barriers like this re-victimization, personal financial risk of litigation, and the emotional strain of trial keep many survivors away from the legal system. These barriers are multiplied for international students, for whom both support and reporting may seem entirely inaccessible based on language, cultural, or financial barriers.

There have been recent cases in which judges and police made comments stating a survivor was "asking for" sexual violence based on clothing choices or past events. Victim-blaming within our judicial and justice systems is an intersectional part of a rape culture that must be dismantled and replaced with consent culture.

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THE VISION

Since 1981, the Canadian Federation of Students has been at the forefront of the fight against rape culture and sexual violence on our campuses.

It is time that post-secondary institutions and governments take action to combat rape culture and help build a culture that promotes and prioritizes consent.

The Federation has identified education, support and policies as the three key components of a strategy to build consent culture on our campuses.

Education

A strategy needs to be proactive rather than just reactive. Education needs to take place on what a consent culture looks like. This education needs to be done through an equity, anti-colonial and anti-oppression framework that mindful of the violence marginalized bodies face every day in our communities.

Support Services

A strategy needs to include protocols and services to respond to instances of sexual violence. These services must be: free and accessible, mindful and inclusive to various identities and cultural backgrounds, developed with the input of students, survivor-centric and challenge victim blaming.

Policy

A strategy needs to include developing policies to guide the work post-secondary institutions do to prevent and respond to instances of sexual violence. These policies need to be written with the leadership of students in accessible language, provide a variety of options for those who will be relying on them, be reviewed and updated regularly and be allocated staff and resources to ensure they are adequately implemented.

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