

What is Rape Culture?

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Source: Revenge of Dinah: A Feminist Seder on Rape Culture in the Jewish Community

Our definition

Rape culture is the combination of underlying themes and commonalities that normalize and perpetuate rape, sexual assault, and violence through: cultural norms, sexist media, victim-blaming, slut-shaming, objectification and commodification of queer people, people of color, and women's bodies. Rape culture trivializes sexist behaviors that are infrequently condemned by various institutions and people with privilege for fear of losing power. Rape culture exists independently of rape itself. The overwhelming majority of society acknowledges that rape is not acceptable, yet the majority of society is implicated in and perpetuates rape culture, whether benevolently or hostilely.

Different Aspects of Rape Culture

RAPE MYTHS which contribute to victim blaming, are a key component of the larger rape culture. According to the article *It's Her Fault: Student Acceptance of Rape Myths On Two College Campuses*, "Rape myths are defined as attitudes and false beliefs held about rape that deny or minimize victim injury and/or blame the victims for their own victimization" (Hayes, Abbot, & Cook 2016). Furthermore, rape myths are falsehoods that contribute to the normalization and justification of rape. Rape myths are harmful because they discredit victims and excuse the behavior of the assailant. Rape myths can go so far to impact women's own beliefs, and can cause them to believe that they weren't really raped, or that even if they were, no one would believe them. This makes it extremely hard for survivors to gain the courage to come forward about their experiences of rape and assault.

BENEVOLENT SEXISM is the concept that seemingly polite or chivalrous attitudes men may have towards women are in reality sexist because these types of behaviors further the societal notions that women are weak or inferior to men. For example, the expectation that a man should always hold the door for a woman seems outwardly polite and chivalrous. But in reality, it is societal concepts like this that perpetuate rape culture by furthering the notion that women are the inferior gender and need men to care for and protect them. RTI Cohort 1 interns collected data on what Jewish girls in Chicago would like their male peers to know about their lived experiences of sexism, and that data remains totally relevant to us in Cohort 3 as we think through the perpetuation of rape culture in our community. Below are some of their responses:

My body is not yours. it is not an object available for you to comment on or look at like a piece of meat.

Rape is not funny... It's not funny to joke about abusing us... Stop being ignorant.

Your approval does not define how much I value myself.

Just because I'm mad does not mean I'm on my period.

It's okay I'm not a stick and my big boobs don't belong to you.

I instantly feel objectified when their first comments are about my physical appearance.

Another aspect of rape culture is the **NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE** and violent rhetoric. Rape and violence (especially against women, and even more especially against women of color) is an underlying theme in many advertisements, jokes, music, and popular culture. For example, the popular Robin Thicke song "Blurred Lines" has become notorious for promoting rape culture and suggesting that men have control over a woman's sexuality. When the song states "I know you want it" a message is being sent that it is to the man's discretion to decide what to do with a woman's body. Thus, this promotes rape culture by endorsing violence and normalizing the idea that men are sexually aggressive and predatory by nature. Additionally, 90% of mainstream porn features violence against women (Bisignani). This is a clear example of violence being normalized and has serious implications. The objectification of women's bodies, or viewing women

simply as sexual objects (also known as “The Male Gaze”) is not just present in mass media, but in the everyday lives of women. A 2008 study of 811 women revealed that 99% of women have experienced catcalling or other forms of street harassment. (Hairston). Street harassment reinforces the idea that women exist as sexual objects and for men’s pleasure. Street harassment is also another example of benevolent sexism. As it may seem as though a random man on the street “complimenting” a teenage girl on her clothing choice is harmless, in reality this action perpetuates permissiveness around harassment, reinforces unfair gender roles, and naturalizes unsafe public spaces.

Understanding **TOXIC MASCULINITY** is another critical part of thinking through rape culture. Toxic masculinity is a cultural perspective which emphasizes the ideology and importance of men maintaining a dominant, aggressive, unemotional and sexually aggressive attitude, both collectively and as individuals. Toxic masculinity contributes to rape culture by providing a cultural norm and phenomenon that men are supposed to or need to be aggressive and dominant. Therefore, toxic masculinity contributes to the idea that men are strong, and women are weak. This stereotype is unfair to men and makes violence acceptable toward all genders in our society.

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