

## Why Study Rape Culture?

Contributed by [JUF Chicago / DePaul - Research Training Internship](#)

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

Rape is "the most underreported violent crime in America" (National Victim Center). Although many programs are created with the intent of educating students about rape and rape prevention, these programs are more heavily aimed at teaching people how to avoid rape, rather than teaching not to rape. Although the intent may be to prevent sexual assault by instituting programs that teach women avoidance, in reality these programs are simply reinforcing benevolent sexism and permitting a culture of victim-blaming, which only serves to increase sexual assaults and under-reporting. As all of us will be college-bound soon, we feel particularly concerned about rape culture because statistically speaking, 5 out of 10 of us will experience sexual harassment or violence on a college campus (National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism). Sadly, many campuses won't offer much support, and the programs that do exist are uninformed and actually perpetuate permissiveness around sexual violence.

For example, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has implemented a sexual assault prevention program called ICARE, which, "helps people intervene in sexually disrespectful situations, and set a group norm in which sexually disrespectful behavior is recognized as a problem and active bystander behavior is promoted." Indiana University mandates bystander training in their new student orientation, "During New Student Orientation, each new Hoosier is introduced to the importance of creating a culture of care on campus... [and offers] bystander intervention, campus resources, and how to get consent for sexual activity." While both of these programs sound like they are on the right track, the common theme is teaching young adults to be able to recognize when violence is happening and ways to help intervene after it has already begun. The implied message is: *You might get assaulted on campus, but we will help train your friends to help you afterward, assuming they are in the vicinity and also happen to give a shit about creating a culture of care at the moment.* It's not good enough, and we don't believe any of this will actually prevent rape and assault from happening, never mind address the culture of permissiveness toward sexual violence it is caused by.

It is also important for us to acknowledge that our topic of "rape culture in the Jewish community" surfaced for us during the 2016 presidential election cycle. As a cohort, we spent significant time and energy processing the media storm that covered the overt, hostile sexism between candidates and pundits, the "locker room talk/pussy-grabbing" video recorded in 2005 and released during the campaign season, and the many allegations of sexual assault and violence surfaced before and after the election. **This haggadah is not about electoral politics, but the topic was motivated by the news we read, watched, and processed together this year.** Our research process, personal writing, and community-building helped us think through and make meaning of it all.

Another part of the reason that we are focusing on rape culture is because of the impact that it has on Jewish teen girls. Growing up in the Jewish community, **many girls feel the need to be the "Perfect Jewish Girl"** and to fit common beauty and gender roles set for them by societal pressures. Although the definition of the "Perfect Jewish Girl" may vary, there is a generalized, yet sometimes contradictory, commonality about what that girl looks like and does in regards to her Jewish identity. In a survey from RTI Cohort 1, many Jewish girls explained some stereotypes that they commonly experience in the Jewish community such as,

*Women aren't as smart or as tough as men.*

*In men's eyes a woman is either a prude or a whore,*

*but can almost never be anything in between.*

*We're all expected to act in a feminine manner all the time.*

*All women who have children bear the responsibility of being their sole caretaker, and that none of that responsibility falls on the father.*

Pressures to be the "Perfect Jewish Girl" are present in daily life and perpetuate a society of rape culture within our community. **Some of our community members hear the message that women are "less than men" in Jewish religious and domestic spaces,** and this allows for rape culture to ingrain itself in our community. Jewish teen girls are clearly aware of the sexist rhetoric that is present in our community, but they often do not have the language or resources to help prevent it. Without a way to solve the issue of rape culture in the Jewish community, pressures to be the "Perfect Jewish Girl" will continue to harm girls and continue the extent to which rape culture is present. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between Jewish teen girls and their parents regarding these societal pressures. RTI Cohort 2 collected data from 103 teenage girls and 62 parents. **Their results suggested that almost all Jewish teens are aware of the idea of a "perfect Jewish girl", but their parents were overwhelmingly oblivious to the idea, even though they were the ones largely perpetuating this paradigm.**

As such, we want this haggadah to spread to our peers, who are also questioning their safety on college campuses and processing the world around them. We think that there is a large disparity between what people know about rape culture and how it is dealt with, in contrast with how serious it actually is. Many teenagers are affected by rape culture, but do not understand to what extent they are being affected. We chose to focus our haggadah on rape culture because of how much it is integrated into our daily lives. Rape culture embodies many of the injustices that we have studied this year, and we feel that it is important to bring to light these societal injustices. The culture around unfair gender roles/expectations, sexual violence, and sexism in general is so integrated into our world, but our society, and **our Jewish community institutions, are not doing enough to stop or address it. This haggadah is not just a feminist analysis of our community. It is an invitation to those with privilege, resources, and power to join us in changing the rape culture around us.**

