

Ten Plagues of Rape Culture

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

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

One of the most dramatic moments of the Passover Seder comes with the recitation of the 10 plagues that, the Bible says, God brought on the Egyptians to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites from slavery. In this Seder, we have reclaimed this ritual as a method of understanding rape culture. We purposely omitted actual rape from this list because we want to explore the many facets of our culture of permissiveness toward gender and sex-based violence that ultimately contribute to people's decisions to commit rape. As we recite each plague, we spill a drop of wine in recognition that these conversations can feel uncomfortable to us, especially those of us with gender, race, and class privilege.

1. Toxic masculinity: Cultural norms that stereotype men as unemotional, dominant, and aggressive, especially in a sexual context, both collectively and as individuals. The expectation that "real men" are stoic, that "boys will be boys", and that showing emotion is incompatible with strength. Relatedly, the idea that a Real Man cannot be a victim of abuse, or that talking about abuse is shameful. Toxic masculinity discourages men from becoming involved in the lives of their children, encourages household inequality, which is harmful to everyone involved, and perpetuates the idea of "emasculatation".

2. Toxic femininity: Women's feelings of competition over issues rooted in gender inequalities, to the point where they're willing to put other women down to get ahead, socially or professionally. Examples include vying for a man's attention or turning against their lifelong friends in favor of gaining acceptance or perceived power from men.

3. Rape jokes/trivialization of sexual violence: Rape jokes aren't funny. They make rapists and sexual predators feel validated. When rapists and sexual predators hear people making light of rape, they feel reinforced in their decisions to rape and harass others. Many rapists don't think of themselves as rapists because they don't FEEL that they have done anything wrong by having sex with someone who is unconscious, or continuing to make passes at people who communicate that they don't want the attention. Trivializing sexual violence perpetuates and normalizes it. This plague also includes jokes about rape and sexual violence in prisons, and "locker room talk".

4. The "Madonna/Whore" complex: The idea that men and women codify women into two camps: saintly "Madonnas" and debased "whores". The good girls – the Madonnas – are virtuous, innocent, pure (typically blond and light skinned) and virginal, almost to the point of asexuality. The bad girls – the whores – are sexually voracious, typically brunette and/or women of color, and aggressive (traits that traditionally define male sexuality). This is based in historical fear of female sexuality. Men are frequently portrayed as being absolutely at the mercy of their own sexual desires, leaving women as the guardians of morality. Slut-shaming – bashing or insulting a woman for being a sexual being – and excusing men from sexually assaulting women as just "boys being boys" springs from this dichotomy, and results in school dress codes that prohibit young women from wearing mini skirts, for example, rather than punishing young men for being sexually predatory. The Whore is meant to be punished for acting "like a man", the Madonna is to be preserved and worshiped for "acting like a lady", though her personhood is disregarded. Either way, she loses respect.

5. Victim/survivor-blaming: One reason people blame a victim is to distance themselves from an unpleasant occurrence and thereby confirm their own invulnerability to the risk. By labeling or accusing the victim, others see the victim as different from themselves. Victim-blaming attitudes marginalize the victim/survivor and make it harder to come forward and report abuse. Victim-blaming attitudes also reinforce what the abuser

has been saying all along: that it is the victim's fault this is happening. It is NOT the victim's fault or responsibility to x the situation; it is the abuser's choice. By engaging in victim-blaming attitudes, society allows the abuser to perpetrate relationship abuse or sexual assault while avoiding accountability for their actions.

6. Failure of the criminal justice system: According to RAINN (the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), perpetrators of sexual violence are less likely to go to jail or prison than any other criminal. Out of 1,000 rapes, 994 perpetrators will walk free. In addition, only 310 rapes out of 1,000 will be reported to the police for fear of: not being taken seriously by the police, mistreatment or further harassment by police, "messing up" the abuser's life, and that the abuser will eventually return and harm or kill the survivor.

7. The Male Gaze/sexist media: This theory was coined by film maker Laura Mulvey who argues that film audiences are forced to "view" characters from the perspective of heterosexual males, and that women exist as passive objects of male desire. As a result, women learn to identify personally with the male gaze, and then view other women through the male gaze as well. As a result, women not only learn to objectify other women, but they learn to uphold the male gaze in their own, real lives, and objectify themselves to the satisfaction of men.

8. Heteronormativity/cis-normativity/white-normativity: Rhetoric about sexism is often heteronormative and cis-normative. Further, the experiences of people of color are frequently ignored and/or misunderstood by white people in conversations about rape culture and sexual violence. Queer people, gender non-conforming people, and people of color experience rape culture and violence differently than straight, cis, white people, and this is often overlooked by healthcare professionals, policy-makers, social workers, and other people with power to help.

9. "Benevolent" Sexism: Because benevolently sexist attitudes appear positive (holding the door open for a woman, paying for a woman's meal, etc.), people often struggle to identify these beliefs as a form of gender-based prejudice. Furthermore, benevolent sexism may be seen by both men and women as reinforcing of the status quo, which some individuals may find comforting and familiar. While benevolent sexism may not appear to be harmful to women on the surface, these beliefs threaten gender equity and restrict women's personal, professional, political, and social opportunities. Both benevolent sexism AND hostile sexism reflect views of women as underdeveloped adults, providing justification for men to be authoritative and monitor, protect, and make decisions on women's behalf. Acts of chivalry AREN'T the problem. There is nothing inherently wrong with a man opening a door for you. What IS problematic is when neither party is able or willing to locate themselves in the histories and current realities of sexism. The result is that both parties end up perpetuating the attitudes and expectations associated with gendered expectations and social norms, and this feeds patriarchal oppression.

10. Catcalling/street harassment/telling women to "smile more": Street harassment (and the general expectation that women and girls should look pretty, be happy, and smile for men's enjoyment) reinforces the idea that women exist as sexual objects and for men's pleasure. It is another way for men to exert power over women.

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