

## Chapter 6

# RAPE CULTURE

Exploring rape culture is critical to understanding the social or environmental context in which sexual violence is perpetrated and in which survivors seek healing. Rape culture shows us the ways sexual violence is normalized in our culture. We must understand how it is connected to other forms of oppression.

Rape culture tends to uphold all of the ‘-isms’ and while it affects all of us, it often disproportionately targets and impacts people from marginalized communities. When we talk about rape culture, we need to use a critical lens that also considers the unique ways rape culture impacts people across race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ability, immigrant status, HIV status, incarcerated or institutionalized status, and much more.

Though individuals within a society may hold very diverse perspectives, social groups as a whole tend to share many common beliefs, attitudes, and values. These are developed and reinforced by influences in the environment such as family, community, schools, and the media. Cultural beliefs seep into every level of thinking. It is important for advocates to acknowledge that everyone carries assumptions that, to some extent, influence actions. Awareness of these assumptions will prepare advocates to avoid them when speaking with callers.

Cultural attitudes about gender play an important role in shaping violence and our beliefs about it.

**Understanding rape culture makes us better able to support survivors. It also means recognizing that there are deeply held, socially reinforced ideas in our culture that not only are unsupportive and harmful to survivors, but that also excuse and even promote sexual violence.**





# CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVOCATES



Cultural beliefs seep into every level of thinking. It is important for advocates to acknowledge that everyone carries assumptions that, to some extent, influence actions.

In every culture, beginning at birth, individuals learn society's expectations about acceptable behavior and gender roles.

In mainstream American culture, most men have been taught characteristics that establish power in society. Some examples of these characteristics are strength, assertiveness, and aggression. Men are typically praised for being in control of themselves and their emotions. In line with this, boys are often told not to cry. Men may also be expected to be in control of those around them. For example, husbands and fathers are often assumed to be the "heads of the household."

The socialization of women, on the other hand, has historically taught passivity and compromise. Women are socialized to take care of the needs of others, especially those of men, before their own. They are taught that to be feminine is to be quiet, polite, passive, and dependent. A woman who is assertive or aggressive is believed to be "bitchy," a negative trait. Men, in contrast, are teased for having "feminine" qualities. Additionally, the gender binary is still the framework for

gender in our culture – the idea that one is either male or female. This framework excludes nonbinary and agender individuals.



These messages extend into our ideas about sexuality. Males are socialized to always want sex and to be good at it. They are taught that it is their right to have sex and that they should want to do so as much as possible. Men also learn

that they are expected to be the pursuer when it comes to initiating sex and that they should try to overcome resistance.

Women are socialized to be the sexual gatekeepers, and are expected to set the limits on how far to go during sexual encounters. Those who participate in sexual activities outside of a relationship are considered easy or promiscuous. Society views women as being of lesser value if they have had many sexual partners. These

social messages about sexuality can be particularly difficult for individuals who struggle with their own gender identity.

## The Role of the Media

Sexual violence plays a major role in all media formats, and media is an influential teacher in our society for people of all ages. Violence presented as entertainment is projected every day through television programming, movies, video games, music, and other media. Most often, people are depicted in stereotypical male/female gender roles where men are strong, macho, and violent and women are often regarded more for their beauty and sexual appeal. Women and young girls are commonly portrayed as victims of sexual violence while men are commonly portrayed as offenders.

Media impacts how people view themselves and others and also how they determine what is right and wrong. Witnessing sexual and physical violence repeatedly through the media also desensitizes viewers. While media in all its forms may not directly cause violence, it creates a culture that objectifies women and encourages and ultimately can create acceptance of men's violence towards them.

## Examples of Rape Culture

Some of the most overt behaviors and practices that create a rape culture are acts of sexual assault, but there are others that also play significant roles in creating such a context. These include:

- Sexualized online harassment and bullying.
- Harassment/intimidation of and threats made toward women and girls. This includes those that are framed by aggressor(s) as "playful" or a "joke."
- Denying that rape is a widespread problem.
- Trivializing the trauma and violence of rape and sexual assault.
- Victim-blaming.
- Accusing survivors of lying.
- Sexual objectification of women and girls.
- Violence, including sexual violence, targeted at members of trans and queer communities.
- Joking or bragging about sexual assault.
- Equating masculinity with sexual dominance.
- Revenge porn, both independent of physical assault and post-assault.
- Ignoring the sexually violent crimes of celebrities or people in power or authority.



- Support for accused men and boys over the welfare of victims.
- Systems having low/poor response rates for taking reports of sexual violence seriously. For example, unlikelihood to investigate cases of sexual violence and hold those who commit sexual violence accountable.

### Rape Culture: Beliefs, Assumptions, Myths, World Views

- Cultural expectation that men have to coerce women into having sex, and that women and girls want to be coerced.
- Belief that men and boys are entitled to the bodies of women and girls.
- Socialization of girls that they have a duty to serve the demands of male sexuality.
- Socialization of girls that sexual violence and aggression are the norm.
- Belief that discussions of sexual activity and affirmative consent are not sexy.
- Belief that rape and sexual violence are the inevitable expressions of masculinity.
- Belief that rape is an everyday occurrence that cannot be changed.
- Fears that victims will be stigmatized and further traumatized by reporting rape.
- Belief that rape is just rough sex.
- Belief that rape is just one party “regretting” sex.
- Belief that women and girls provoke sexual assault with their behavior and/or how they dress.
- Attitude that is women's responsibility to defend themselves and prevent rape.
- Hyper-sexualization or purity myths used to stereotype and misrepresent women of color.
- Belief that only “bad men” rape and only “bad women” are raped.
- Belief that intimate partner rape isn't real.
- Slut-shaming women and girls who pursue or engage in consensual sex.

- Attitudes that only certain survivors are believable (often tied to age, race, class, and other forms of status).

### Rape Culture: Language & Discourse

- Language minimizing rape by calling it sexual intercourse, nonconsensual sex, or inappropriate behavior.
- Using terms like “acquaintance rape” or “date rape” and “real rape” to make false distinctions.
- Calling trafficked child rape victims “child prostitutes.”

### Rape Culture: Representations of Rape in Culture

- Rape jokes and memes that mock rape.
- The use of rape as a plot point or for economic gain in films, TV shows, and books.
- Video games with rape scenarios.
- Songs and music videos that glamorize sexual coercion.

### Rape Culture & Primary Prevention

Primary prevention, or stopping sexual violence before it begins, works to shift these deeply engrained cultural beliefs through education and conversation.

Topics like boundaries, bodily autonomy and safety, communication, empathy, healthy relationships, and consent provide people the opportunity to take ownership over the fact that they are the bosses of their bodies and also that everyone’s boundaries deserve to be respected.

Something as deeply rooted as rape culture is going to take time to eradicate. However, the more we shift towards consent and healthy sexuality, the more we start to break down the stereotypes, societal expectations, and harmful rhetoric that leads to sexual violence.



### Chapter 6

Rape culture is a demonstration of the ways sexual violence is normalized in our culture.

Understanding rape culture makes us better able to support survivors. It also means recognizing that there are deeply held, socially reinforced ideas in our culture that not only are unsupportive and harmful to survivors, but that also excuse and even promote sexual violence.

The traditional gender binary sets the stage for the beliefs in male dominance and female submission, further promoting and condoning sexual violence.

Something as deeply rooted as rape culture is going to take time to eradicate. However, the more we shift towards consent and healthy sexuality, the more we start to break down the stereotypes, societal expectations, and harmful rhetoric that leads to sexual violence.

Rape culture may affect the survivors you work with in these and other ways:<sup>1</sup>

- They may blame themselves for being sexually abused or assaulted.
- They may not identify what happened to them as sexual violence.
- They may believe they don't have the right to say "no" in an intimate relationship.
- They may encounter disrespect from service providers.
- Family and friends may react to their disclosure of victimization with skepticism or blame.
- They may not disclose because they are aware of how poorly survivors may be treated.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> VALOR. (2021). *VALOR's support for survivors: Training for sexual assault counselors/advocates*. Retrieved from: <https://www.valor.us/publications/valor-support-for-survivors-in-english/>

