

## Rape Culture 101

Posted by Melissa McEwan at Friday, October 09, 2009

[Trigger warning.]

Frequently, I receive requests to provide a definition of the term "rape culture." I've referred people to the [Wikipedia entry](#) on rape culture, which is pretty good, and I like the definition provided in *Transforming a Rape Culture*:

A rape culture is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm.

In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. This violence, however, is neither biologically nor divinely ordained. Much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change.

But my correspondents—whether they are dewy noobs just coming to feminism, advanced feminists looking for a source, or disbelievers in the existence of the rape culture—always seem to be looking for something more comprehensive and less abstract: *What is the rape culture? What are its borders? What does it look like and sound like and feel like?*

It is not a definition for which they're looking; not really. It's a description. It's something substantive enough to reach out and touch, in all its ugly, heaving, menacing grotesquery.

Rape culture is encouraging male sexual aggression. Rape culture is regarding violence as sexy and sexuality as violent. Rape culture is treating rape as **a compliment**, as the unbridled passion stirred in a healthy man by a beautiful woman, making **irresistible** the urge to rip open her bodice or slam her against a wall, or a wrought-iron fence, or a car hood, or pull her by her hair, or shove her onto a bed, or any one of a million other images of fight-fucking in movies and television shows and on the covers of romance novels that convey violent urges are inextricably linked with (straight) sexuality.

Rape culture is treating straight sexuality as the norm. Rape culture is lumping queer sexuality into nonconsensual sexual practices like pedophilia and bestiality. Rape culture is privileging heterosexuality because ubiquitous imagery of two adults of the same-sex engaging in egalitarian partnerships without gender-based dominance and submission undermines (erroneous) biological rationales for the rape culture's existence.

Rape culture is rape being used as a weapon, **a tool of war** and **genocide** and **oppression**. Rape culture is rape being used as a **corrective** to "cure" queer women. Rape culture is **a militarized culture** and "the natural product of all wars, everywhere, at all times, in all forms."

Rape culture is 1 in 33 men being sexually assaulted in their lifetimes. Rape culture is encouraging men to use the language of rape to establish dominance over one another ("I'll make you my bitch"). Rape culture is making rape a ubiquitous part of **male-exclusive bonding**. Rape culture is ignoring the cavernous need for men's prison reform in part because **the threat of being raped in prison** is considered an acceptable deterrent to committing crime, and the threat only works if actual men are actually being raped.

Rape culture is 1 in 6 women being sexually assaulted in their lifetimes. Rape culture is not even talking about the reality that **many women are sexually assaulted multiple times** in their lives. Rape culture is the way in which the constant threat of sexual assault **affects women's daily movements**. Rape culture is telling girls and women to be careful about what you wear, how you wear it, how you carry yourself, where you walk, when you walk there, with whom you walk, whom you trust, what you do, where you do it, with whom you do it, what you drink, how much you drink, whether you make eye contact, if you're alone, if you're with a stranger, if you're in a group, if you're in a group of strangers, if it's dark, if the area is unfamiliar, if you're carrying something, how you carry it, what kind of shoes you're wearing in case you have to run, what kind of purse you carry, what jewelry you wear, what time it is, what street it is, what environment it is, how many people you sleep with, what kind of people you sleep with, who your friends are, to whom you give your number, who's around when the delivery guy comes, to get an apartment where you can see who's at the door before

they can see you, to check before you open the door to the delivery guy, to own a dog or a dog-sound-making machine, to get a roommate, to take self-defense, to always be alert always pay attention always watch your back always be aware of your surroundings and never let your guard down for a moment lest you be sexually assaulted and if you are and didn't follow all the rules *it's your fault*.

Rape culture is victim-blaming. Rape culture is **a judge blaming a child** for her own rape. Rape culture is **a minister blaming his child victims**. Rape culture is **accusing a child of enjoying being held hostage, raped, and tortured**. Rape culture is spending enormous amounts of time finding any reason at all that a victim can be blamed for hir own rape.

Rape culture is judges **banning the use of the word rape** in the courtroom. Rape culture is **the media using euphemisms** for sexual assault. Rape culture is stories about rape being **featured** in the Odd News.

Rape culture is tasking victims with the burden of rape prevention. Rape culture is encouraging women to **take self-defense** as though that is the only solution required to preventing rape. Rape culture is admonishing women to **"learn common sense"** or **"be more responsible"** or **"be aware of barroom risks"** or **"avoid these places"** or **"don't dress this way,"** and failing to admonish men to *not rape*.

Rape culture is "nothing" being **the most frequent answer** to a question about what people have been formally taught about rape.

Rape culture is **boys under 10 years old** knowing how to rape.

Rape culture is the idea that only certain people rape—and only certain people *get* raped. Rape culture is ignoring that **the thing about rapists** is *that they rape people*. They rape people who are strong and people who are weak, people who are smart and people who are dumb, people who fight back and people who submit just to get it over with, people who are sluts and people who are prudes, people who rich and people who are poor, people who are tall and people who are short, people who are fat and people who are thin, people who are blind and people who are sighted, people who are deaf and people who can hear, people of every race and shape and size and ability and circumstance.

Rape culture is the narrative that **sex workers can't be raped**. Rape culture is the assertion that **wives can't be raped**. Rape culture is the contention that **only nice girls can be raped**.

Rape culture is refusing to acknowledge that the only thing that the victim of every rapist shares in common is bad fucking luck. Rape culture is refusing to acknowledge that the only thing a person can do to avoid being raped is *never be in the same room as a rapist*. Rape culture is avoiding talking about what an absurdly unreasonable expectation that is, since rapists don't announce themselves or wear signs or glow purple.

Rape culture is people meant to protect you raping you instead—like **parents, teachers, doctors, ministers, cops, soldiers, self-defense instructors**.

Rape culture is a serial rapist **being appointed** to a federal panel that makes decisions regarding women's health.

Rape culture is a **ruling** that says women cannot withdraw consent once sex commences.

Rape culture is a collective understanding about classifications of rapists: The "normal" rapist (whose crime is most likely to be dismissed with a "boys will be boys" sort of jocular apologia) is the man who forces himself on attractive women, women his age in fine health and form, whose crime is disturbingly *understandable* to his male defenders. The "real sickos" are the men who go after children, old ladies, the disabled, accident victims languishing in comas—the sort of people who can't fight back, whose rape is difficult to imagine as titillating, unlike the rape of "pretty girls," so easily cast in a fight-fuck fantasy of squealing and squirming and eventual relenting to the "flattery" of being raped.

Rape culture is the insistence on trying to distinguish between different kinds of rape via the use of

terms like **"gray rape"** or **"date rape."**

Rape culture is pervasive narratives about rape that exist despite evidence to the contrary. Rape culture is pervasive imagery of stranger rape, even though women are **three times more likely** to be raped by someone they know than a stranger, and **nine times more likely** to be raped in their home, the home of someone they know, or anywhere else than being raped on the street, making what is commonly referred to as "date rape" by far the most prevalent type of rape. Rape culture is pervasive insistence that false reports are common, **although** they are *less common* (1.6%) than false reports of auto theft (2.6%). Rape culture is pervasive claims that women make rape accusations willy-nilly, when **61% of rapes** remain unreported.

Rape culture is the pervasive narrative that there is a "typical" way to behave after being raped, instead of the acknowledgment that responses to rape are as varied as its victims, that, immediately following a rape, some women go into shock; some are lucid; some are angry; some are ashamed; some are stoic; some are erratic; some want to report it; some don't; some will act out; some will crawl inside themselves; some will have healthy sex lives; some never will again.

Rape culture is the pervasive narrative that a rape victim who reports hir rape is readily believed and well-supported, instead of acknowledging that reporting a rape is a huge personal investment, a difficult process that can be embarrassing, shameful, hurtful, frustrating, and too often unfulfilling. Rape culture is ignoring that there is very little incentive to report a rape; it's a terrible experience with a small likelihood of seeing justice served.

Rape culture is hospitals that won't do rape kits, disbelieving law enforcement, unmotivated prosecutors, hostile judges, victim-blaming juries, and paltry sentencing.

Rape culture is the fact that higher incidents of rape tend to **correlate** with lower conviction rates.

Rape culture is silence around rape in the national discourse, and in rape victims' homes. Rape culture is treating surviving rape as something of which to be ashamed. Rape culture is families torn apart because of rape allegations that are disbelieved or ignored or sunk to the bottom of a deep, dark sea in an iron vault of secrecy and silence.

Rape culture is the objectification of women, which is part of a dehumanizing process that renders consent irrelevant. Rape culture is treating women's bodies like public property. Rape culture is street harassment and groping on public transportation and equating raped women's bodies to a man **walking around with valuables hanging out of his pockets**. Rape culture is most men being so far removed from the threat of rape that invoking property theft is evidently the closest thing many of them can imagine to being forcibly subjected to a sexual assault.

Rape culture is treating 13-year-old girls **like trophies for men regarded as great artists**.

Rape culture is ignoring the way in which **professional environments** that treat sexual access to female subordinates as entitlements of successful men **can be coercive** and compromise enthusiastic consent.

Rape culture is a convicted rapist getting **a standing ovation** at Cannes, **a cameo** in a hit movie, and **a career resurgence** in which he can joke about how he hates seeing people get hurt.

Rape culture is when **running dogfights** is said to elicit more outrage than raping a woman would.

Rape culture is **blurred lines** between persistence and coercion. Rape culture is treating **diminished capacity to consent** as the natural path to sexual activity.

Rape culture is pretending that non-physical sexual assaults, like peeping tommying, is totally unrelated to brutal and physical sexual assaults, rather than viewing them on a continuum of sexual assault.

Rape culture is diminishing the gravity of any sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, or culture of actual or potential coercion in any way.

Rape culture is using the word "rape" to describe something that has been done to you other than a

forced or coerced sex act. Rape culture is saying things like "That ATM raped me with a huge fee" or "The IRS raped me on my taxes."

Rape culture is rape being used **as entertainment**, in movies and television shows and books and in **video games**.

Rape culture is television shows and movies **leaving rape out of situations** where it would be a present and significant threat in real life.

Rape culture is Amazon **offering to locate "rape" products** for you.

Rape culture is rape jokes. Rape culture is rape jokes **on t-shirts**, rape jokes **in college newspapers**, rape jokes **in soldiers' home videos**, rape jokes **on the radio**, rape jokes **on news broadcasts**, rape jokes **in magazines**, rape jokes in **viral videos**, rape jokes in **promotions for children's movies**, rape jokes **on Page Six** (and **again!**), rape jokes **on the funny pages**, rape jokes **on TV shows**, rape jokes **on the campaign trail**, rape jokes **on Halloween**, rape jokes **in online content by famous people**, rape jokes **in online content by non-famous people**, rape jokes **in headlines**, rape jokes **onstage at clubs**, rape jokes **in politics**, rape jokes **in one-woman shows**, rape jokes **in print campaigns**, rape jokes **in movies**, rape jokes **in cartoons**, rape jokes **in nightclubs**, rape jokes **on MTV**, rape jokes **on late-night chat shows**, rape jokes **in tattoos**, rape jokes **in stand-up comedy**, rape jokes **on websites**, rape jokes **at awards shows**, rape jokes **in online contests**, rape jokes **in movie trailers**, rape jokes **on the sides of buses**, rape jokes **on cultural institutions**...

Rape culture is people objecting to the detritus of the rape culture being called oversensitive, rather than people who perpetuate the rape culture being regarded as not sensitive *enough*.

Rape culture is the myriad ways in which rape is tacitly and overtly abetted and encouraged having saturated every corner of our culture so thoroughly that people can't easily wrap their heads around what the rape culture actually is.

That's hardly everything. It's merely the tip of an unfathomable iceberg.