

Sexual Violence and Rape

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Sexual violence is defined as any unwanted sexual activity. Acts of sexual violence include, but are not limited to: rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rape within marriage or other relationships, forced marriage, so-called honor-based violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking, sexual exploitation, and ritual abuse. Sexual violence can be perpetrated by a stranger, but is most often perpetrated by someone known and even trusted, such as a friend, colleague, family member, partner, or ex-partner (Rape Crisis n.d).

Rape has a worldwide prevalence rate of 21–25 percent in industrialized nations, increasing to 43–90 percent in nonindustrialized ones. Anyone can be raped but, globally, women and girls are raped disproportionately more frequently. There are no known risk factors for rape except the perpetrator being male (Koss, Heise, and Russo, 2006). Rape creates an enormous global health burden on societies in its aftermath in terms of the psychological, sociocultural, somatic, and reproductive health consequences. Legal definitions of rape vary country by country but most include the penetration by a penis of the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person although many scholars constantly seek to widen these definitions to account for the chronic underreporting of rape frequently observed in many societies. Most laws also define rape in relation to consent and a belief in consent whereby a person consents to sex if she or he agrees by choice, and has the

freedom and capacity to make that choice. Most laws do not require evidence of the victim's physical resistance in order to prove a lack of consent.

Several social theoretical perspectives exist as to the etiology of rape and sexual violence such as perpetrator individual factors (drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, etc.) or family factors (e.g., violent childhood). However, the two most frequently debated and polarizing explanations are the sociobiological theories of rape, encapsulated most prominently in Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer's (2000) book *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*, and feminist theories of rape. Thornhill and Palmer argue that rape is an evolutionary adaptation, which evolved as an alternative mating strategy (to consensual sex). They contend that rape is a "natural, biological phenomenon and a product of our evolutionary heritage." This perspective has been heavily criticized on ethical, religious, scientific, and political grounds.

The most prominent critique of the sociobiological theories of rape derives from feminist theorists. Rape as a violent act as opposed to a sexual act first entered widespread public consciousness in 1975 with the publication of Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. Brownmiller contended that "Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men keep all women* in a state of fear" because "rape is a crime not of lust, but of violence and power."

Cultural relations such as economic, sociopolitical, and cultural dominance of men underpin sexual violence in most societies. Feminist theorists have also observed that many societies blame the victims, rather

than the perpetrators of rape. The blame is often attributed to victims as a result of attitudinal beliefs in myths about rape, first defined by Martha Burt (1980) as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists.” Examples of rape myths include “real victims have signs of injury to prove it,” “only attractive and young women are raped,” “most women secretly want to be raped,” “women often lie about being raped,” and “real rapes are stranger rapes.”

Feminist theorists explain the near-global cultural acceptance of myths about rape as predicated upon a rape-supportive culture, a term used to describe a culture in which sexual assault, rape, and violence are frequently observed and in which prevalent attitudes, norms, practices, and media normalize, excuse, tolerate, or even condone these behaviors. A rape-supportive culture exhibits victim blaming, the sexual objectification of females, valuing females only in accordance with standards of beauty, rape-justification and excuse making, and the trivialization of all forms of violence against females. It also encompasses many forms of sexually violent actions such as not only those described above but also stalking, molestation, street harassment, voyeurism/peeping, and verbal violence.

Feminist theorists argue that a rape-supportive culture is bound up with societal definitions of gender, sex, and sexuality and that in order to understand sexual violence, it is imperative to first understand normative heterosexual practices. Specifically, sexual violence can be explained by societies’ views of sex as a biologically driven imperative in males. The socialization of boys in many world cultures to be sexually aggressive, active, dominant, and conquering, as a way of affirming their masculinity, while the socialization of girls as shy, passive, feminine, coy, demure, and game-playing, particularly

in relation to sex, underpins the global observations of gender-based sexual violence. Males, in accordance with the biological sex drive discourse, are positioned into initiating and persisting in sexual encounters while females act as the “gatekeepers,” setting the limits. This classical “sexual script” is readily available and popularized through the media, literature, film, and pornography. Here, the man is represented as making several sexual advances, which are at first rejected by the woman before finally acquiescing. The implication is that the woman’s protests are perfunctory, part of a game, and will be overcome with enough persistence. In this way, a rape-supportive culture condones, legitimizes, and justifies sexual violence. Men do not believe that a woman’s sex refusal is genuine; and they are given entitlement to continue in pressuring, coercing, and forcing a woman into sex. The more traditional the society, the closer the adherence to this sexual script. Measures to equalize men and women along economic, socio-political, and cultural lines may help alleviate the burden of rape.

SEE ALSO: Aggression; Attribution Theory; Domestic Violence/Violence Against Women; Feminisms; Sexism; Violence

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FURTHER READING

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