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Rape Culture Rooted in Patriarchy, Media Portrayal, and Victim Blaming

Sexual violence is a major issue affecting women around the world. It occurs within homes, on college campuses, in times of conflict, and in times of peace. Society has developed a certain attitude towards sexual assault. It has been embedded within culture that women are lesser than men and viewed as subordinate. Sexual violence has been normalized by media, desensitizing society to actual assault and hindering action against it. Women often bear the responsibility and blame of their assault rather than their attacker. This failure to protect victims of sexual assault and shifting of the blame to women for their own assault is termed rape culture; it is when the traumatic assault of a woman is trivialized, when men are given a pass and women are scolded for what they were wearing at the time of the attack, and when a woman would rather stay silent than seek the prosecution of her assailant. Sexual violence and the consequences of rape culture are violations of human rights in which the dignity and equality of women are not recognized. Rape culture is a human rights issue rooted in patriarchal societies, the normalization of sexual violence in media, and victim blaming.

In 1993, a pioneering book on the discussion of rape culture was published. The authors of *Transforming a Rape Culture* define rape culture as, “a set of beliefs that encourages sexual aggression of men and supports violence against women. It is a society where women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself” (Buchwald et. al). This characterization includes the foundations and consequences of rape culture; it is embedded within society and victims of sexual violence experience the repercussions.

Beginning with the formation of the idea of human rights, Arati Rao discusses one of the main flaws in their development. This weakness is described by Rao as, “The dominance of men in the drafting, refinement, interpretation, ratification, and implementation of international human rights” (Rao 508). The control of well-off men in conceptualizing rights leaves the oppressed and marginalized without a voice. This skewed view of human rights due to patriarchal thought is detrimental to the rights of women. Rao describes the endless cycle in which a woman’s personhood is not recognized; first, a woman is not a legal person without a husband; second, if she is recognized as a legal person without a husband, society and its customs ultimately belittle it (510). The individuality of a woman is not acknowledged or appreciated because it has been embedded in various cultures that women are property. The treatment of women as property and when women are not viewed as equals within a marriage, the treatment of marital rape is skewed. In various instances, married women are expected to provide “sexual access” to their husband, therefore, rape is not considered legally possible (518). It is patriarchal views that prevent the protection of women from marital rape because they are seen merely as property of their husbands and are obliged by the male-controlled definition of marriage to provide sex. According to this belief, women do not have control over their own bodies. Marital rape and domestic abuse are in the “private sphere” rather than the “public sphere” and until the private realm is acknowledged as a place in which the rights of women are violated, little will be done to protect victims (507). Human rights must extend beyond closed doors and breakdown the protection that patriarchy has created under their own biased definitions of marriage and rights that allows for the rape and abuse of women to occur.

Catherine MacKinnon continues the conversation of crimes against women and the failure of society to recognize them as violations of human rights. She discusses the crimes

against women by men that occur in everyday life, such as domestic violence and the murder of prostitutes (MacKinnon 527). MacKinnon states, “When what happens to women also happens to men, the fact that those it happened to are *women* is not registered in the record of human atrocity” (527). As Rao describes the legal person of a woman being recognized only with her husband’s legal person, MacKinnon notes that the violation of the human rights of a woman is only acknowledged if the crime is done to men as well. These concepts parallel one another in that a woman’s personhood and humanity depend on men. Patriarchal thinking has dehumanized women; it has made being a woman and being human incompatible. This is why rape can be used as a tool for genocide by Serbians against Muslim and Croatian women and can persist with little intervention. These women are experiencing trauma and being murdered in ways that are sickening. Whether these acts occur in times of war or peace, men are never held accountable for these crimes. Their actions are rarely questioned and the dominance of men in positions of power lead to an understanding between men, or as MacKinnon puts it, they allow such crime to occur as “one man to another” (529).

MacKinnon presents the horrifying reality that sexual violence is allowed under domestic and international law and not one country recognizes the violation of the human rights of the victims (529). Patriarchal ideology forms the basis of rape culture within society. MacKinnon outlines the general consequences of rape culture (530). Women are blamed for their assault and viewed as bringing it onto themselves rather than their male attacker being held accountable. Society then penalizes women for their lack of trust in men as a consequence of abuse. Women are scrutinized for not viewing the sexual assault of men as urgent an issue as the sexual assault of women. Sexual violence towards women is extremely prevalent and is used as a weapon. MacKinnon provides an example of why both the public and private realm of sexual violence

must be recognized as a place where the rights of women are violated (533). While in war, men are taught how to abuse women and return home where they continue such practices. Men are present in both the public and private realm, therefore, abuse occurs and the rights of women are violated in both places. Patriarchy asserts that women are not human and crimes specifically against women, specifically rape, are not violations of human rights.

Rape culture is intensified by the portrayal of sexual violence in media. Hildebrand and Najdowski state a few of the common myths about rape that are perpetuated by rape culture. These myths put blame on the victims of assault by stating that the victim wanted it, asked for it, lied about the attack, and was not hurt in any real way (Hildebrand and Najdowski 1068). In the summer of 2013, Robin Thicke's song called Blurred Lines topped the charts. The lyrics conveyed a disturbing message, "I hate these blurred lines, I know you want it . . . but you're a good girl, the way you grab me, must wanna get nasty" (1067). These lyrics imply that when a woman says no, she actually means yes. It also implies that if a woman is flirtatious in any way, she must want to have sexual relations. Apparently, a woman is not allowed to change her mind either. She could decide to say no after having said yes, but the man often makes the decision for her. The rape myth that the victim was asking for it and wanted it stems from the normalization of rape, as shown by these lyrics.

Media is also guilty of objectifying women in shows and advertisements. A study found that women were sexually objectified about six times per hour during popular television shows among college students in America (Ferris et. al). Women are viewed as objects for the sexual use of men rather than human beings. Rape is trivialized by media. Another study found that viewing nonviolent pornography is positively correlated with rape being belittled and a loss of compassion for victims (Zillmann and Bryant). Women are objectified and rape is downplayed

across various forms of media, intensifying rape culture's myths in which victims are blamed. Rape culture affects how assault is dealt with legally. Hildebrand and Najdowski note that jurors are likely to conform to the ideas of rape culture and more likely to acquit defendants (1071). Altogether, this is the reason that a large number of women experience sexual violence in their lives, but a disproportionate number of attackers are prosecuted. Media maintains rape culture in society, ultimately silencing victims and protecting their attackers.

Rape on college campuses is widespread. A high profile case that sparked outrage of the public occurred at Stanford. Brock Turner, a freshman swimmer, sexually assaulted an unconscious woman behind a dumpster. Rape culture is well demonstrated by Judge Aaron Persky's light sentencing of Turner to six months in jail and the comments made by Turner and others defending him. The judge worried about the "severe impact" a longer sentence might have on Turner (Dockterman 1). Turner's childhood friend downplayed the assault as "idiot boys and girls having too much to drink" (1). His father did not want his son's life ruined over such a short period of action and Turner himself said he has been broken by "party culture" (1). Where was the consideration of the judge of the severe impact the attack had on the victim? Just because the victim was drunk at the time of the attack, it is insinuated by Turner's friend that the victim was responsible for the attack as well; this is victim blaming and holding women responsible for preventing their rape. The length of the attack should not matter, as his father thinks, rather the actions that occurred in that time are what should. As for Turner's cry of "party culture," it is an excuse and a way to cover up his crime. It is an attempt by Turner to shift the blame on alcohol and the atmosphere of a fraternity party.

What is unsettling about this case is that people fail to recognize the weight of and address rape properly when it occurs. The journalist covering the case for *Time* points out that

forced sex was not considered rape until the 1980's after a study found that one in four college women said that they had been sexually assaulted (Dockterman 1). Progression of the protection of women who experience sexual violence is clearly slow moving legally. However, the public outcry over this case, as indicated by the creation of a petition to get the judge on this case removed from the bench, is promising for advancements in how society views rape (1). People are trying to make changes on their campuses through increasing awareness and knowledge about the topic. It will most definitely be an immense challenge to break down rape culture because of its deep roots in misogyny, but it is promising that most of the public rejected Turner and his advocate's attempt to shunt responsibility away from him. Although the victim in this case did not necessarily receive legal justice, she did receive public support, which is a step in the right direction away from patriarchal views.

Recent events in Hollywood might also indicate the public's changing views of rape. Harvey Weinstein is known as one of the most powerful men in Hollywood and has used this power to sexually assault and harass women as early as the 1970's, according to recent allegations (Gabler et. al 1). The allegations against Harvey are pouring in and many of the victims feel ashamed and alone, which rape culture has contributed to (1). One of his victims, Cynthia Burr, was assaulted when she was in her early twenties and trying to make it as an actress. She says that she felt ashamed by what had happened to her and felt no one would have believed her (1). Hope Exiner d'Amore also worked for Weinstein and says that she was raped by him and fired after she refused further advances, but was relieved and never returned to the film industry (1). In 2004, Weinstein told Ashley Matthau that she should sleep with him in interest of her career before assaulting her. When she attempted to seek legal action, Weinstein's lawyer, Daniel Petrocelli, threatened that she would be depicted as promiscuous and that she

would be “dragged through the mud by [her] hair” (1). In the allegations described, Weinstein uses his power as a man and in his career to overpower women. He relentlessly harassed women and they either felt too ashamed to speak about it or would be intimidated into silence. The shame associated with assault is due to rape culture because it leads women to believe that their assault is their fault and that there was something that they should have done differently.

In these cases and many similar ones, rape culture is the reason women would rather stay silent. A male-dominated world has led them to believe that they are lesser. These victims most likely do not come forward because they feel like they are fighting a battle that they already lost. The public appears to be growing more protective of rape victims and receptive to rape allegations, as indicated by the outrage of the Stanford case. The floodgates of sexual violence that has been occurring in Hollywood for years has been opened by the victims of Weinstein. Women, celebrities or not, are sharing their stories of sexual assault, named the “Me Too Campaign” (Sini 1). This open discussion of sexual misconduct is a breakthrough for women. The public sphere appears to be becoming a safer place to discuss and address these crimes against women. Through the sharing of experiences of sexual assault, women are discovering that they are not alone in their trauma. Hopefully, in time, the shame and isolation of rape will be lifted and sexual violence will no longer be covered up or tolerated.

Numerous organizations have been created in an attempt to diminish sexual violence. Cultures of Consent, founded in 2013, attempts to raise awareness and educate youth on assault and rape culture. They recently lead a workshop on rape culture in a Brooklyn high school. The following curriculum modules are listed on their website; active bystander intervention, rape culture, understanding consent, media literacy, and healthy relationships (Cultures of Consent Website). Teaching young men and women about these issues is necessary in breaking down

rape culture in society. Since 2013, End Rape on Campus (EROC) has been directing their efforts through support of survivors, education, and policy reform (End Rape on Campus Website). EROC's vision is stated on their website as, "We envision a world in which each individual has an educational experience free from violence, and until then, that all survivors are believed, trusted, and supported." It is important that survivors know that they have a voice and that they are supported, not blamed. Education of men and women is a vital tool in preventing sexual violence.

Rape is a violation of human rights. Various articles within *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* support this claim (Hayden 353). Articles 1 and 2 state that all humans are born equal and that all are entitled to their rights without distinction between genders. Yet, women are viewed as subordinate and their trauma is overlooked. Articles 5 and 6 of the *Declaration* claim that no one should be tortured and everyone should be recognized as a person before the law. However, rape is used as torture in wars and women in many countries are grouped into the legal person of their husband. Article 7 calls for equal protection of all before the law, but violence against women in the private real is unrecognized. These are some of the declarations deemed central to human rights that are clearly violated by sexual violence and rape culture. Contradictions are present within this document as well. For example, Article 12 protects the random interference of "his privacy, family, home or correspondence" (355). How can the private sphere be considered a place where the rights of women are violated if a man's home is protected from intervention? Ambiguity remains in certain articles and allows for men in power to interpret them as they see fit. Clarity is needed and women need to be explicitly acknowledged as human, or else men in power will continue to take advantage of this vagueness.

Sexual violence and rape culture are violations of the human rights of women. The domination of men in positions of power leaves women voiceless. They are left out of the human rights conversation, which enforces patriarchal practices within society. Women are not viewed as human and crimes committed specifically against them are not considered violations of human rights. Media normalizes sexual violence and spreads myths about rape. This is dangerous, as media has the ability to distribute these ideas to masses of people. Women are blamed for their own attacks and are expected to prevent it rather than men being held accountable for their actions. Rape culture is a human rights issue stemming from patriarchal thought, the trivialization of sexual violence in media, and victim blaming. The public's adverse reaction to Brock Turner's light sentencing, the Me Too Campaign, and the work of organizations such as Cultures of Consent and EROC are all small steps in breaking down rape culture within society. Communication and openness are needed to continue this process. A major step would be the presence of women in law-making internationally in order to overcome the patriarchal bias that is currently present.

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