

Accepting the Unacceptable Rape Culture in America

On October 7th, 2016, a video surfaced of then-presidential-hopeful Donald J. Trump engaging in what would later be notoriously dubbed “locker room banter.” In the 2005 video, Trump vividly described groping, kissing, and making sexual advances towards unwilling women. Apparently oblivious to the microphone still recording on his lapel, he delivered the soon-infamous line of “grab them (women) by the pussy, you can do anything,” sparking outrage and backlash from women across the country. Thousands of them stood against his sexist language that overtly condoned sexual harassment and assault, and some even came forward with claims that they’d fallen victim to his physical attacks. Left and right, media outlets and political speculators condemned his actions, and Trump scrambled to clean up the PR mess created by the video leak.

It was not, however, that day in October that revealed the insidious nature of rape culture in America. It was not even in the subsequent days, when 12 women came forward to accuse Trump of raping or otherwise sexually assaulting them. No, that day came a month later, on November 8th, 2016, when Donald J. Trump was named the 45th President of the United States of America.

“Tremendous potential.” Trump said in his acceptance speech, “It is going to be a beautiful thing. Every single American will have the opportunity to realize his or her fullest potential.”

Surrounded by the fanfare of American politics, atop a stage adorned with American flags and men in suits- the seemingly unofficial symbol of America’s government- Trump looked the women of America in the face and revealed to them not only the disconnect between

his actions and his words, but also delivered a message that they'd faced the reality of their entire lives: you can get away with violent speech and behavior. You can thrive while you cause others to suffer. You can create an environment of fear for an entire population while still garnering the support of another. And, perhaps most importantly, Trump revealed the greatest answer we could have ever asked for to the question of what rape culture is: it is creating a world where unacceptable behavior is made acceptable, and in fact, where it is sometimes even rewarded.

The evident chosen ignorance of Trump's participation in creating this environment is just one example of rape culture. In a 2010 article for *Everyday Feminism*, Shannon Ridgway outlined "25 Everyday Examples of Rape Culture," beginning her article with the realization she had that some people, although exposed to the term, may not fully understand just what "rape culture" is. Ridgway draws upon examples from pop music lyrics about ignoring consent, quotes from politicians who distrust rape victim's testimonies, and rape jokes that have become so common in the age of internet anonymity that many of us hardly bat an eye at them anymore. Ridgway concludes her article by pointing out that her list is far from conclusive, and the examples could go on near endlessly.

More than simply providing concrete examples that help solidify our understanding of rape culture, Ridgway hints at the same devastating phenomenon witnessed in the 2016 election: rape culture exists not only to perpetuate the cyclical nature of sexual violence, but to legitimize, hide, and even condone the participation in these cycles. The very pop music Ridgway points to as a cog in the machine of violent acts is played in high school dances and races to the top of popular music charts. The politicians who blame victims of rape for crying wolf are elected and supported by the American public. The rape jokes that make light of a devastatingly heavy reality are ones that, whether we care to admit it or not, we may have laughed along with at some

point in our very own lives. The representation of sexual violence, something we claim to not condone legally, socially, or morally, is conveniently overlooked on an everyday basis- and it's in this insistence on turning a blind eye that we allow the cycle to continue.

Where does this phenomenon come from? As with most forms of oppression, the unpacking of this question can be aided by the understanding of the target and agent groups involved. By and large, the majority of sexual assault victims are women- particularly young women in college. According to a study by the National Institute of Justice conducted in 1997, “between one-fifth and one-quarter of women are the victims of completed or attempted rape while in college” (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000). This high risk of being a victim of violence, accompanied with a long history of similar reports regarding sexual attacks on women that dates back generations, places them firmly in the “target” group of rape culture. Although women are fully capable of rape- and *do* rape or assault both men and women- the perpetrators of sexual violence against women are majorly men. Of women who were sexually abused as children, 92% of their abusers were men, (Dube, Withfield, & Felitti, 2005) and 98.1% of those who rape adult women are men. (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, & Merrick, 2011). By contrast, only about 3% of men report experiencing rape in their lifetime (National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 1998).

Although these numbers may be somewhat skewed by the common underreporting of rape against men, the discrepancies are large enough to clearly identify men as the agent group of this form of oppression. Simply put, women must constantly live with the fear of sexual violence- whereas men do not. The effects of this oppression can be clearly seen in the difference of education and upbringing between men and women. Women are taught to avoid walking alone at night, taught to carry pepper spray or other forms of personal protection with them at all

times, and taught to not excessively drink at parties. Men, on the other hand, are rarely offered the same advice. It's this difference in treatment- which is upheld by a long history of reaffirming actions through the recorded violence of men and victimization of women- that creates a disconnect between the agent and target groups. Women are fully aware of the fear that the threat of sexual violence carries, whereas most men live the majority of lives never experiencing the same fear, effectively making them blind to both the existence of rape culture and their own participation in it.

A striking example of this is that despite the fact that one in four women report being the victims of rape or attempted rape in their lifetime (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006), only 9% of college-aged men admit to actions that meet the legal standards of rape (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004). Clearly, at least some percentage of men who commit sexual violence are unable to recognize their guilt. Perhaps the most infamous instance of this phenomenon is the 2016 trial of rapist (and conveniently successful swimmer and Stanford academic) Brock Turner for assault on an unconscious woman. Throughout the trial, and even after his highly contested sentencing, Turner refused to admit his guilt or express remorse for his actions on the night of the assault. Turner continuously blamed outside factors- including drinking and college party culture- for his actions, and lamented the loss of his swimming career far more than the loss of personal safety for the woman he attacked. "I am no longer a swimmer, a student, a resident of California, or the product of the work that I put in to accomplish the goals that I set out in the first nineteen years of my life," he wrote in his statement to the court in June of 2016, barely remembering to acknowledge the victim in a one-sentence semi-apology that admitted to "changing" the victim's life.

Not disturbing. Not attacking. Not violating. "Changing" her life.

Undoubtedly, the victim's life *was* changed, however, this fact was completely missed by Turner- a firm member of the agent group who experienced the privilege not only of his gender, but his social, economic, and athletic status throughout his entire life- who seemed completely unable to comprehend his own guilt. And in fact, this lack of ability to recognize his guilt was mirrored in his lenient sentencing to only six months in a county jail and subsequent early release. It is not difficult to draw parallels between Turner's experience and that of the election of Trump only a few months later. Both made statements or committed actions that exemplify rape culture, both refused to acknowledge the effects of their wrongdoings, and both were rewarded for doing so. Perhaps the only difference is that while one perpetrator faces a marr on their record and a few hurdles to employment, the other was handed the highest office in the American governmental system- and was handed it by the American people themselves.

The 2016 election is, regardless of policy or platform, proof that rape culture is alive and well in America. It is proof that rape culture is sustained by its ability to create blindness in the perpetrators as it harms the victim. It is proof that as long as we continue to tolerate, and even reward such behavior, it will continue to thrive. Targets of sexual violence have long struggled to have their voices pierce through the blackness that follows these crimes and actions that threaten their safety, only to be stifled by the cultural voice that rings through our collective acceptance of rape's pervasive normalcy. It's time that we address the biggest factor of what rape culture *is*: it is a protection of the agents who justify, and, beyond that, *refuse to recognize* their participation in the violence against women in this country. Until men like Brock Turner and soon-to-be President Donald J. Trump can be awakened to the effects of their actions, the vicious cycle will continue to drown out the cries of women victimized by the very culture they live in.

Works Cited

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