

## Men Speak Out About Sexist Coverage of Rape: A Call to Action

April 2011

In the struggle to stop rape and all forms of men's violence against women, it is time for men to leave the sidelines and get in the game. One important step we can take is to raise our voices and insist that the spotlight in media coverage of rape turns away from a fixation on victims and their behavior and instead focuses on abusive men and boys – and the culture that produces and makes excuses for them. We make this demand not only as concerned citizens and responsible members of our communities – but as men from virtually every cultural/racial/ethnic/religious background.

There is some progress to report, albeit progress in response to yet another depressing reminder of how far we still have to come. Consider this: reaction to the victim-blaming in a recent *New York Times* story about a brutal gang rape in East Texas has been fast and furious. Over the past several weeks, columnists, bloggers, victim advocates and anti-rape activists – women and men – have criticized the March 8 *Times* story for the way its use of selective quotes suggested that an 11-year-old girl in effect contributed to the assault against her by “wearing make-up and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her twenties.” In addition, critics have responded to the perception conveyed in the article that among the residents of Cleveland, Texas there is greater concern for the nineteen men and boys facing allegations of rape than for the young girl.

*The Times* Public Editor Arthur Brisbane agreed with much of the criticism of the piece: “My assessment,” he wrote just a few days later, “is that the outrage is understandable. The story dealt with a hideous crime but addressed concerns about the ruined lives of the perpetrators without acknowledging the obvious: concern for the victim.” (The *Times* front page follow-up story on March 28 did a lot better, offering an extended portrait of the girl, whom they described as having been “an honor roll student, brimming with enthusiasm.”)

This tragic case will provide lessons for future news writing classes and journalistic ethics seminars. Clearly, news operations need guidance about how to cover sex crimes without perpetuating misogynous cultural attitudes.

But for those of us who work to end men's violence against women, this incident is less about the specific details of one horrific act of rape in a distressed community in Texas, and more about the broader themes of power, privilege, misogyny, class and race that the act itself—and the coverage it generated – so poignantly exemplify.

We have to ask some difficult questions: why would a group of men and boys sexually violate a vulnerable 11-year-old girl? What does this say not only about them or the small community where they live, but about the society – our society – that raised them? “What are we teaching men and boys about their attitudes and behavior towards girls?” and even further... “What are we teaching men and boys about themselves?”

Because of the class, ethnicity, and race of those involved, some people will predictably attribute this atrocity to the effects of poverty and fatherlessness, which is a coded reference to family dysfunction in communities of color. But gang rapes and the attitudes behind them are perpetrated by wealthy and middle-class white men and boys, too, including boys from “intact” families with present fathers. Just last October at Yale University, DKE pledges marched on Old Campus-- home to the

majority of Yale's first-year female students--chanting "No means yes" along with graphic sexual slurs that both demeaned women and glorified sexual violence. White men with privilege routinely perpetrate unspeakable sexual crimes against women in their own families, as well as other women and girls. What's the explanation for *their* sexist violence?

It seems to us that while questions of class and race are germane in this and many other cases, they are far less relevant than questions of gender. In particular, unless we believe that males across the board are born genetically deficient, we need to ask some fundamental questions, i.e.: How do we socialize our boys? How do we assign certain attitudes and behaviors as "normal?" And, ultimately: What does it mean to be a man in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?

For too many young men, communal rituals of sexism perpetuate negative notions of manhood. Most of us are rightly horrified when we read about gang rape. But group sexual assault is best understood as being at the extreme end of a continuum of behaviors that normalize men's sexist treatment of women. What about college guys hiring strippers for private parties and openly calling those women "bitches and hoes"? And let's not forget – an entire genre in pornography is devoted to simulated scenes of gang rape which in many quarters is considered socially acceptable entertainment for men, who sometimes watch it in groups.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this gang rape (as in others) is how often the alleged perpetrators videotape the event. In the Cleveland, Texas assault, the police investigation was prompted, according to the *Times*, when an elementary school student alerted a teacher to a cell phone video that included one of her classmates. Why would men videotape an incident that *literally* documents their commission of a first-degree felony unless they thought 1) there was absolutely no chance of them being caught or 2) they weren't doing anything wrong?

It is this last possibility that is most disturbing, because it implicates not just the men and boys who have been charged with the crime, but all of us. What role does each of us play in defining and perpetuating social norms? Moreover, what is the responsibility of adult men not only to girls, but to boys? What is the responsibility that each of us has to teach, mentor and model for younger men and boys non-sexist attitudes and behaviors toward women?

It is important to emphasize that we can primarily be concerned about the actual victim in this case *and* be empathetic with the boys and young men who are charged with this awful crime. How many of them were coerced to participate by older adolescents and young adults? How many of the younger boys acquiesced because they wanted to fit in and be respected as "one of the guys?"

Like other gang rapes, the East Texas case furnishes a powerful metaphor about silence and complicity, because gang rapes can often be prevented if just one guy takes a stand. Can it really be true that there wasn't one guy – or more -- in the group who knew this was terribly wrong? If so, then what were the internal dynamics of the group that prevented anyone from interrupting or stopping the process? Are men (and boys) so scared of each other that no one will speak out for fear that other men will think less of them, or worse, turn the violence on them?

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. But while awareness about sexual assault is a crucial first step, it is not enough. For men in particular, we need more of a willingness to act – both locally and globally. When men speak out about rape and other forms of violence against women, we make it clear

to other men that we do not tolerate or condone the mistreatment of women. We also send the message that men who mistreat women will face seriously negative social consequences for doing so – not just legal consequences. Join us and the women who have been doing this work for years. Stand up and speak out for an end to sexual violence!

In peace and gender justice,

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