

# Victims of sexual assault criminology essay



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Women have traditionally been seen as inferior to men and as the weaker sex. This image creates an environment for women to be treated with less respect than men. Subsequently, it may be easier for men to sexually assault women if they have internalized this view of women. Reinforcing this opinion of women is that “ many women and girls have been socialized to be victims of male violence.” (Belknap 2007: 243) Stereotyping starts early in children’s lives; boys are taught to be tough and girls are encouraged to be soft. As children grow up, they are often steered toward activities and careers that fit the traditional gender roles. Society plays a significant part in establishing and maintaining these stereotypes. The media, through television shows, advertisements, and music videos, show men being powerful, strong and sexually aggressive towards women. Men are traditionally seen as being the protectors of women which can have an adverse effect on women. In this position of power, men make women more vulnerable to them. Additionally, society keeps women financially dependent on men giving women fewer options for leaving abusive partners. Women who subscribe to the traditional stereotypical roles may be more susceptible of being abused by the men in their lives.

Susan Brownmiller (1975) ascribed to the fact that men use rape to control women by means of fear. In this line of thinking, rape reinforces a male dominant, female submissive society. Other researches view gender inequality the cause of rapes. (Russell (1984) & Visano (2002) as cited in Belknap, 2007: 245) While some offenders are in search of sexual gratification, more often than not, power, control and anger are the motivating factors. Women have held a position of relatively powerless in

society receiving fewer advantages and privileges than men, while the benefits of men are built into a patriarchal system. A women's less powerful position in society and/or relationship may cause them to give into the sexual demands of spouses, dates, or acquaintances. Resistance may lead to a more violent and humiliating attack. Women may also see it as their obligation to provide sex to their partners and if forced, may not interpret it as a sexual assault. This is an example of how women are conditioned to be submissive to men.

Sexual assault does not discriminate; victims can be found in any culture or economic level. They can be children or adults, young or old, fully functioning or physical or mentally disabled. Most sexual assaults are committed by someone of the same race; and according to the research, occurring more often African American communities. (Hampton & colleagues, 2003 as cited in Belknap, 2007: 252) From times of slavery to current day, African American women have been victimized by society and loved ones. They were abused by slave owners and now by spouses. African American women often have traditionally male dominating partners, fewer privileges and are less likely to involve the police in their situations.

Stereotypical roles for the African American women are that they are strong, private and more likely to withstand the abuse. They may be from lower economic status and have a fear of the criminal justice system.

Children, the elderly and the disabled are a high risk population for abuse. These types of victims are vulnerable and unable to communicate their assaults as would an adult. Children, often being under the care of the abuser, are most likely unable to determine what is happening to them and

more apt to see the sexual violation as an act of love. They are anxious to please their parent and do not have an understanding of the inappropriateness of the attack. Similar to the reason offenders assault adults, children are sexually assaulted because of the need for power and control by the offender over their victim. Being that children are emotionally, physically and financially dependent on the abuser, their ability to resist is low and their vulnerability high.

The elderly and disabled are similar to children in such that they too are dependent on people for the daily living needs. This population is also more at risk for assault because they are unable to defend themselves or verbalize the attack. Intimate partners and caretakers are most likely to be the abuser as they have access to a somewhat incapacitated victim which allows them to easily commit the assault. Sexual abuse can be used to control and humiliate the victims and cause embarrassment and isolation.

There are several different types of sexual victimization besides the familiar stranger rape such as date rape, marital rape, and sexual harassment. Date rape happens more often than is reported as women are unlikely to acknowledge it happened or are too embarrassed to report the attack. The passivity that makes women feminine is also what may lead them to go along with the assault to avoid being injured. In the ritual of dating, men and women have certain expectations as to how each will act based on cultural and societal training. Women are trained to dress a way that is appealing to the man, they expect the man will pay for the dinner and in turn, men are conditioned that paying for a night out, they will be rewarded sexually.

(Belknap, 2007: 287) Often these situations involve the use of drugs or

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alcohol, knowingly or unknowingly, which lead to the impairment and control of one or both parties. Date rape is most prevalent on college campuses and often gain steam with the camaraderie amongst male students.

Historically, most societies found it acceptable for men to force their wives to have sex. It wasn't until the 1990s that all states defined marital rape as criminal. Marital rape often occurs in relationships where other forms of abuse are present. Men use this form of abuse to gain control over their spouse as well as they feel entitled to have sex with their wife. Women feel obliged to comply because of their grooming; it is part of what a good wife does for her man. Women may also be threatened with violence if they don't comply with their spouses demands. Marital rape could be seen as more emotionally damaging than other types of sexual assault as it was administered by someone they trusted. Additionally, since the offender and victim live together, the victim is in constant fear of when another attack will take place.

Sexual harassment can be emotionally and financially damaging to victims. Harassment in the work environment can be disturbing and offensive and used as a form of control by perpetrators to humiliate their victims. (Belknap, 2007: 294) To the victims, it can threaten their livelihood. Being subjected to offensive material and language is one form of harassment; however, the quid pro quo is equally or more detrimental to victims. Quid pro quo is a type of bargaining; for promotions victims will perform sexual acts. This form of abuse can be damaging to a women's self-respect; it may cause them to fail courses in school, miss promotional opportunities, and/or change careers or

jobs. Victims may be reluctant to report the abuse as they may lose their job or be denied promotions.

In addition to the types of abuse victims suffer at the hands of their attacker, they are also subjected to the abuses of the criminal justice system. Many victims cannot bring themselves to go through the criminal justice system. When they do decide to pursue it criminally, they are forced to relive their experience through the reporting of their crime to the police, during the sexual assault examination, in conversations with attorneys, with the presenting of the facts to the judge and jury. Police require the story to be told again and again until they are convinced that the facts are consistent with those of a typical rape. For a solid case, everything has to match up and if prosecutors don't get a convincing set of facts, the case will be rejected. Prosecutors want to be sure they can win the case. They do not want to suffer the embarrassment of losing a case; therefore, only cases with a high likelihood of conviction are prosecuted.

Victims of rape and battering are more likely to be blamed than victims of any other crimes. The victims are blamed and judged by those that don't understand what they have experienced. They are told they were at the wrong place at the wrong time, blamed for dressing inappropriately and being out alone at night. Even after the offender is sentenced, they are repeatedly victimized with each parole hearing, forced to relive the experience of everything that was done to them, and they cannot move ahead with lives. " It's like sentencing family, as long as they come up for parole, they are sharing sentence with offender." (Sentencing the Victim, 2002)

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Rape must be viewed as a political issue as it keeps women powerless and reinforces a male dominant society. There has been significant progress made in the legal recognition sexual assaults. However, there needs to be more attention paid making the offenders responsible for their actions and less blaming of the victims. The court process needs to be simplified and the parole hearings more accommodating for the victim. As society moves toward gender equality, women should gain more power against potential abusers.