Myths About Sexual Assault

Sexual assault myths give people a false sense of security by minimizing, legitimizing, and/or denying the occurrence of sexual assault. They often accomplish this by blaming the victim and making excuses for the perpetrator. In effect, these myths perpetuate sexualized violence because they fail to address the realities of sexual assault. Many myths about sexual assault are connected to oppressive patterns of thought including sexist, classist, homophobic, racist, and heterocentric attitudes (as well as many other types of oppression).

**myth 1: Women lie about being sexually assaulted to get revenge, for their own benefit, or because they feel guilty afterwards about having sex.**

**reality:** Women rarely make false reports about sexual assault. Acquaintance sexual assault is the most underreported crime in Canada. Only 6% of sexual assaults are reported to the police. As well, false accusations of sexual assault happen no more often than false reports of other types of crime: about 2 to 4%, which means 96 to 98% of the reports are true. (1)

**myth 2: The best way for a woman to protect herself from sexual assault is to avoid being alone at night in dark, deserted places such as alleys or parking lots.**

**reality:** Most assaults occur in a private home (60%) and the largest percentage of these occur in the victim’s own home (38%). (2)

**myth 3: Women who are sexually assaulted “ask for it” by the way they dress or act; rape only happens to young “sexy” women.**

**reality:** Reports show that there is great diversity in the way targeted women act and dress. According to accounts of rape, rapists chose women based on their vulnerability, not their physical appearance. Women from two months old to ninety years old have been sexually assaulted. However, most women who are assaulted are between the ages of 14 and 24.

**myth 4: If a person consents to have sex at the start of making out with their partner, then changes their mind but their partner keeps going, it is not an assault.**

**reality:** Legally, a person has the right to change their mind about having sex at any point of sexual contact. If a sexual partner does not stop at the time a person says ‘no’, this is sexual assault. If a person is in a relationship with someone or has had sex with a person before, this does not mean that they cannot be assaulted by that person. Consent must be given every time two people engage in sexual contact.

**myth 5: If a person has had many sexual partners then she cannot be sexually assaulted.**

**reality:** The number of sexual partners a person has had does not forfeit their right to say ‘no’ at any time.

**myth 6: If a man pays for dinner or a movie, the other person on the date owes him sex.**

**reality:** “No” means “no”, whether a man pays for the date or not. No one is ever obligated to have sex.

**myth 7: When a woman says ‘no,’ she really means ‘maybe’ or ‘yes.’**

**reality:** Although a person may believe they are receiving mixed messages, this is no excuse for sexual assault. When a person says ‘no,’ their partner should stop; they should never assume that ‘no’ means anything else but ‘no.’ If someone is unclear about what their partner wants, they should ask. The onus for obtaining consent is on the person initiating sexual contact. Ignorance or pleading misunderstanding is not a legitimate legal defence for sexual assault.

**myth 8: If the attacker is drunk at the time of the assault then they cannot be accused of sexual assault.**

**reality:** The attacker is responsible for their actions no matter how intoxicated they are. Being drunk is not an excuse to force anyone into having any sexual contact. A person accused of sexual assault cannot use being drunk as a legitimate legal defence.

**Myth 9: Women secretly want to be raped.**

**reality:** There is a big difference between fantasizing about aggressive sex and wanting to be raped. A woman is in control of her fantasies; however, women are not in control when they are being sexually assaulted. Rape is a violent, terrifying, and often humiliating experience that no person wants or asks for.

**myth 10: If a person does not scream or physically resist they were not sexually assaulted; it is only sexual assault if a person is physically injured.**

**reality:** Force or the threat of force is often used by attackers to assault their victims. Attackers will often choose victims they believe they can physically overcome. It is important to know that no matter what a person does during an assault, whether they physically resist or not, the assault is not their fault. They did what they had to do in order to get out of a dangerous and traumatic experience alive. Also, most people who are sexually assaulted do not have visible injuries. This does not make the experience less of an assault; nor does it mean that a person will not have any negative effects from the assault.

**myth 11: You can tell if a someone has been sexually assaulted by the way they act.**

**reality:** It is important to remember that, although reactions like anger, mistrust, and sadness are common, not all survivors experience the same emotions or express them in the same way. How a person responds after a sexual assault can be influenced by factors such as their cultural background, whether they know the attacker or not, their support system, their gender identity, and many others.

**myth 12: Sexual assault does not occur often.**

**reality:** Statistics show that one in four Canadian women will be sexually assaulted during her lifetime. (3) In BC this number is almost double (47%). (2)

**myth 13: Sexual assault is committed by strangers.**

**reality:** Over 80% of sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim. (2)

**myth 14: Men who sexually assault women are either mentally ill or sexually starved; when men become sexually aroused they have to have sex and cannot stop.**

**reality:** Studies of men convicted of sexual assault show that they are “ordinary” or “normal” men. The majority of attackers assaulted for the emotional gratification they received from the violent act, not out of sexual frustration. (4) Although a man may want to have sex, there are no negative consequences if he does not have sex when he is aroused. One person’s desire is never more important than another person’s right to choose who they do and do not have sex with.
**myth 15:** Rape is a sexual act that is taken too far.
**reality:** Rape is an act of violence; it involves asserting control over another person and taking their power away from them. Rapists are not people who cannot control their sexual desires; rape is often a premeditated crime.

**myth 16:** Men of certain races and backgrounds are more likely to sexually assault women.
**reality:** Men who commit sexual assault come from every economic, ethnic, racial, age, and social group. As well, women who are sexually assaulted are from every economic, ethnic, racial, age, and social group.

**myth 17:** It is only sexual assault if weapons are used.
**reality:** Sexual assault is any unwanted touching of a sexual nature that one person imposes on another. A weapon and visible physical injuries do not have to be present in order for a person to have experienced sexual assault.

**myth 18:** Women cannot be sexually assaulted by their husbands or boyfriends.
**reality:** Legally, a person has the right to say ‘no,’ to any form of sex with anyone, including their spouse or the person they are dating. Sexual assault within relationships has been illegal in Canada since 1983.

**myth 19:** If a person is drunk or passed out from drinking too much it is okay to have sex with them.
**reality:** If a person is unconscious or their judgment is impaired by alcohol or drugs, legally, they are unable to give consent. Having sex with a person when they are intoxicated and unable to give consent is sexual assault.

**myth 20:** It is okay for a person to pressure someone else into having sex.
**reality:** Any type of verbal or physical coercion that is used to obtain sex is legally considered sexual assault.

**myth 21:** Men cannot be sexually assaulted.
**reality:** The majority of sexual assaults are committed against women and are perpetrated by men; however, anyone can be sexually assaulted. The FBI estimates 1 out of 8 men will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime and these men need support as well.

**myth 22:** Women cannot rape other women.
**reality:** Again, the majority of sexual assaults are committed by men against women, but anyone can be sexually assaulted and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse does happen in same-sex relationships. Often when women are assaulted by other women they fear others will not believe them. It is important to realize that women who are assaulted by other women experience trauma as well.

**myth 23:** In abusive relationships between women, the butch woman is always the abuser and the femme woman is always the victim.
**reality:** Anyone can be an abuser. There is not always one butch and one femme in relationships between women. This myth is based in hetero-normative assumptions and can be used to deny that sexual assault has occurred.

These are only a few of the many myths about sexual assault. If you, a partner, a friend, or a family member has been sexually assaulted it is important to know that it is never a survivor’s fault. Myths about sexual assault are often internalized, which can intensify a survivor’s feelings of self-blame, shame, and not being believed. The response a survivor experiences when they disclose a sexual assault can greatly impact their healing process. We all need to challenge the attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that we have learned from our society, which helps perpetuate and normalize violence.

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1. ‘Sexual Assault and the Law in Canada’. Available at: http://www.ualberta.ca/dept/health/public_html/healthinfo/sacan.htm
5. Volunteer Training Manual. Sexual Assault centre of Edmonton, 1992

**Supporting All Survivors of Violence**

**SASC**

**Myths About Sexual Assault**

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