

Understanding the Continuum of Sexual Violence

Sexual assault is not an exclusive act of aggression but should be considered as part of a continuum of attitudes, beliefs, and actions that support sexual violence. It should also be understood that sexual violence is an outgrowth of the larger issue of sexism. In order to have an impact on sexual violence a community must take steps that address smaller issues as they relate to the larger issue. This article focuses on the belief systems that support sexual violence as well as briefly discussing types of sexual violence, in an effort to bring about an understanding of this issue that will ultimately lead to addressing the sexism that promotes it.

Sexual violence is supported by the attitude or viewpoint that women are sex objects, and often takes the form of suggestive looks or actions, sexist comments, and sexual exploitation. All too often our society treats objectification of women as a cultural norm that does no real harm. Men whistling at and calling out to women on the street is tolerated, jokes or rude comments are the daily fare of talk shows and other media venues, and sexually pornographic material proliferates under the guise of freedom of speech and expression. All too often, none of this is considered “criminal” but is part of a largely accepted societal attitude towards women.

The level to which our society accepts sexual objectification creates a foundation where this becomes the absolute value of women. This acceptance manifests into a belief that there is little significant purpose for women beyond procreation and gratification, and makes it easier for men to justify invasive of actions and behaviors toward women.

Personal and legal boundaries are pushed when sexual actions are clearly directed toward a particular individual. Verbal harassment, often using slang references to female body parts coupled with derogatory commentary, is used on the street, in relationships, and in the workplace. This includes obscene phone calls, unwanted sexual advances, retaliatory insults for rejected advances, slanting comments with sexual overtones, and relentless flirting. Groping and inappropriate touching are also invasive actions that objectify women and qualify as sexual violence. Groping and inappropriate touching include grabbing and pinching women’s bodies, making unwanted sexual contact whether in private or publicly in front of friends, and include touches that make women feel uncomfortable. Unfortunately, events like these occur often enough that most adults have either experienced or witnessed such incidents.

At this point on the sexual violence continuum, the perpetrator of such actions usually suffers few consequences for his behavior. Most of these consequences are social. He may be ignored, avoided, or chastised by the woman he’s targeted or others that witness the incident, or he may be kicked out of a public place, such as a restaurant or bar. The level of intervention at this point will vary significantly based on the community’s level of acceptance for such behavior.

Society has a stronger response when it comes to more explicit acts of sexual violence. Peeping in windows, exposure, and soliciting sex constitute some of the “minor criminal”

violations that communities have implemented to underscore their lack of tolerance for such behaviors. The proliferation of such “minor criminal” violations point us back to a societal belief that women exist for the sexual gratification of men. In essence, society’s objectification of women grants the perpetrators of such acts unspoken permission to invade a woman’s privacy by watching her through the windows of her home, “flashing” her for pleasure, and attempting to manipulate her into sex through prostitution. At the same time, these actions are taken more seriously by society because they are viewed as threatening to the community, and police and court interventions are utilized. However, although the general tolerance level for such behavior is lower, reporting, arresting, and convicting perpetrators of these crimes can be a struggle.

After the “minor criminal” acts mentioned above, the continuum of sexual violence moves on to include more physical violations such as molestation, coerced sex, and statutory rape. These violations include non-consensual contact, including the removal or attempted removal of clothing covering intimate body parts, date rape or forced sex, and taking advantage of younger/teenaged women. Such acts often occur in the context of on-going relationships between acquaintances, dating relationships, and in marriage. Our society supports the unspoken notion that a woman becomes the property of a man in a relationship, and all too often, this idea of women as property can translate into older men staking a claim to younger and younger women (girls). Society’s implicit message that a woman’s worth rests solely on her seeming sexual attractiveness and ability to procreate can be seen in the value that our society places on youth and the media’s tendency to portray young girls as sexual women. This gives unspoken approval for these acts thus making it difficult for perpetrators to fully understand the harm that they have caused.

Common discussions of sexual assault typically focus on the most extreme acts of sexual violence. Severe aggression, kidnapping, and brutal assault coupled with sexual penetration are what most people envision as the dynamics of sexual violence. Some might believe that the continuum of sexual violence starts with rape then moves up from there to include hitting, restraining, and use of weapons. As this continuum demonstrates this is actually toward the most extreme end of sexual assaults.

The most extreme end of sexual violence involves both sexual and physical violence. This includes women who are beaten and raped over an extended period or throughout a relationship, women who are forced into prostitution, and those who are raped and murdered. This type of violence is what grabs our attention, and this is what we try to protect our communities from, when actually this is the end result of our social attitude toward women. (When we treat women as objects we divest them of their humanity. Objects can be used, misused, and even destroyed without consequence; human beings on the other hand, have basic human rights that must be respected.)

There are many issues to be aware of when dealing with sexual violence. Society’s myth that women must fear the stranger in the alley when it comes to rape and sexual assault should be reexamined in light of the fact that women know the perpetrator in 82% of rape and sexual assault cases (BJS Special Report, number NCJ-154348). Many battered women report being sexually assaulted in their relationship with the batterer. In addition,

women have experienced sexual abuse by spiritual leaders and traditional healers when seeking ways deal with the trauma of sexual violence. No matter where in the continuum a woman experiences sexual violence, the experience is traumatic and harmful.

Many communities have people and programs available to deal with these issues and there is a growing effort to cover the full extent of the problem. To create lasting change we must address our social attitudes and beliefs in order to effectively address violence against women.

- Jeremy Nevilles-Sorell, Mending the Sacred Hoop. Based on a presentation by Bonnie Clairmont at a MSH-TA sponsored sexual assault training March 4-6, 2001 in Minneapolis, MN.