

Sexual Violence: An Introduction

As a support person, it is important to understand what sexual violence is, how our culture enables it, and the impact it can have on a victim/survivor and those around them.

Exploring these issues can help you better understand and address the needs of victims/survivors.

You may already know a little or a lot of this information, or it may be new to you.

Don't worry about absorbing all of this information at once. Sexual violence is a difficult topic and it is

important to listen to your own needs. Looking after your wellbeing is an essential part of supporting someone.

You can help someone cope and heal from sexual violence, however you are not responsible for making everything better. Making this world a better place for victims/survivors, and ending sexual violence, is a collective effort.

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is a broad term that describes behaviours and actions that are sexual in nature and unwanted, coerced, and committed without consent.

It may also be known as sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse, exploitation, incest, date rape, and human trafficking.

Sexual violence also includes sexual harassment, indecent exposure, forced sexual acts between children, stalking, showing or distributing sexual images without consent, and other forms of cyberviolence/cybermisogyny.

Sexual violence can be a single incident or ongoing. It can be perpetrated by one person or multiple people. Several people can be violated by the same person or people at the same time.

Sexual violence is about exerting power and control over a person or groups of people.

Power and control

Sexual violence is violence. Period. It is about entitlement, dominance, power, control, and humiliation. Sexual violence is a result of power imbalances that stem from gender inequality and systemic oppression.

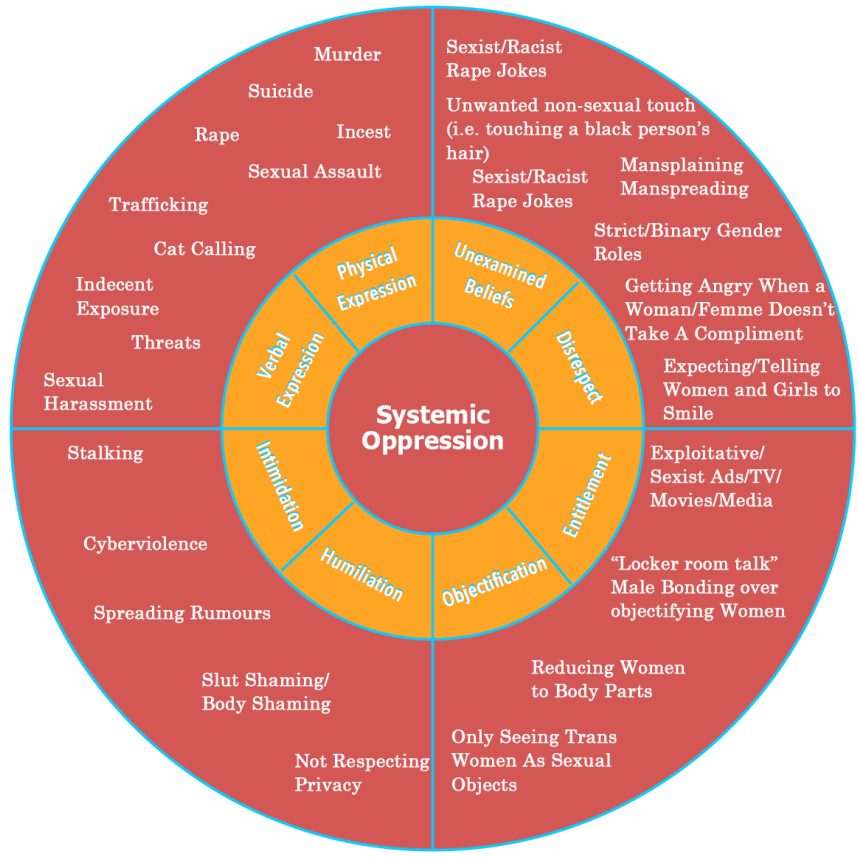
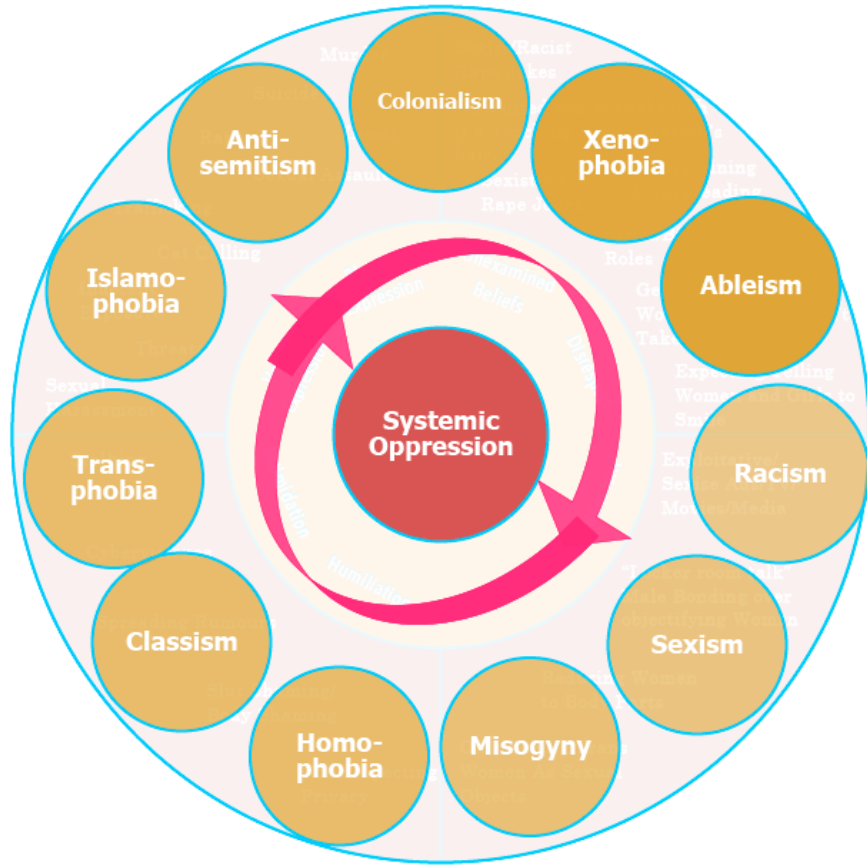
Using sexual violence to control a people	Sexual violence has been, and continues to be, used as a tool of colonization, slavery, and war.
Financial control	People who perpetrate sexual violence target vulnerability. Living in poverty or not having stable housing can leave someone vulnerable. A victim/survivor might depend on the person perpetrating the sexual violence for financial security, whether the person is their boss, their partner, or a client.

Financial control	If someone is relying on another for a place to stay or a drive home, they may not have the freedom to say no or the ability to fend off that person's sexual advances.
Relationships	Rape culture perpetuates the idea that being in a relationship means that you are entitled to sex. No one owes anyone sex regardless of the type of relationship they have or how many times they have previously had sex. It may be difficult for someone to report if the person who violated them is/was their partner.
Gender norms	Gender norms dictate that men should aggressively pursue women. These same norms say that women should be polite, passive, and always ready for sexual activity. Gender norms enforce the idea that men are entitled to women's bodies, labour, and time.
Threat of violence	Many women fear that rejection could result in a violent reaction. There are unfortunately many current examples of men attacking or killing women who refuse their advances. Sex workers can also face violence (sexual and otherwise) if they say no to a client or a certain sex act.
Minimizing, denying, and blaming	Sometimes sexual violence gets reframed as "non-consensual sex". This minimizes both the violence and the impact it has on victims/survivors. If there is no consent, it's sexual violence. Victims/survivors are also often blamed for what happened to them.
Coercion	Coercion is when someone tries to change a "no", "maybe" or "I don't know" into a "yes". Coercion can also involve threats and/or bribery.
Limiting the power of marginalized people	Systemic oppression limits the autonomy "(i.e. control) that marginalized people have over their lives, wellbeing, bodies, and health (sexual and otherwise). This lack of autonomy contributes to the power imbalances that foster sexual violence.

Systemic oppression

While sexual violence is perpetrated by individuals against other individuals, it also exists on a societal level. It is a result of power imbalances that stem from gender inequality and other forms of oppression. It is the result of, and compounded by, misogyny, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, colonialism, xenophobia, classism, and more.

Systemic oppression is a series of barriers that disadvantage particular groups (based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, age, immigration status etc.) enforced through systems such as laws, institutions, and social norms.



Who is subjected to sexual violence?

"If you are a person who is alive ... in the world, you know a survivor of sexual assault. The extent to which women, men, and transgender people (who don't fit neatly into a male/female gender binary) are sexually assaulted is unknown because of the elements of cultural silence, disbelief, and fear of more violence that surrounds rape."

Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault, UBUNTU* and Men Against Rape Culture (MARC)

People of all genders can be subjected to sexual violence. However, sexual violence is more commonly experienced by:

- Women and girls
- Transgender, gender non-conforming, non-binary and Two-Spirit people

* UBUNTU is a U.S. based movement "led by women of color and survivors of sexual assault, dedicated to creating a world without sexual violence".

Children as a whole (including boys), racialized and Indigenous women, women with disabilities, low-income women, women experiencing housing insecurity/homelessness, sex workers, and women with addictions experience higher rates.

Sexual violence can happen to people of any age, including seniors.

It is important to remember that the person you are supporting is not defined by the sexual violence. They are a whole and multi-faceted person who has strengths, a life beyond what happened to them, people who care about them (and that they care about), interests and passions, and a future full of possibilities. With the proper supports it is entirely possible to learn how to cope with the effects of, and start the process of healing from, sexual violence.

How does sexual violence impact victims/survivors?

Sexual violence impacts victims/survivors in many ways. Each person's feelings and experiences are unique and valid.

A victim/survivor may feel a range of emotions including shock, anger, sadness, powerlessness, confusion, guilt or shame.

They may have already come to terms with, processed, or significantly healed from sexual violence and may appear as being at peace with, matter of fact about, or detached from, what happened.

They may experience medical issues, such as physical injuries, pregnancy, or Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Sexual violence can have an impact on a person's body image or self esteem. They may also experience difficulty with social interactions or an aversion to physical touch or intimacy.

A victim/survivor may experience trauma responses such as numbness, extended periods of anxiety or depression, mood swings, flashbacks, nightmares, difficulty sleeping, hypervigilance, and decreased sexual desire.

Due to how the brain files traumatic memories, it is common for people to have difficulty remembering the details of a traumatic experience.

People cope with sexual violence in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, withdrawal from the things or people that they love, risky sexual behaviour, increased alcohol or drug use, and self-harming behaviour. They may have suicidal thoughts or make attempts to end their life.

A victim/survivor may experience none, some, or all of these, or something entirely different.

These feelings and experiences may be different or heightened for survivors of intergenerational trauma.

Victim Blaming

Unfortunately, victims/survivors are often held wholly or partially responsible for the sexual violence. This is called victim blaming. Victim blaming is more common for victims/survivors of sexual violence than it is for those of other crimes.

Victim blaming can come from friends, family, the justice system, the media, and society in general. Victims/survivors may also blame themselves due to internalized victim blaming.

Who perpetrates sexual violence?

People who perpetrate sexual violence can be any gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. The only common characteristic is that the vast majority are men.

According to Statistics Canada 94% of people who perpetrate sexual violence (of the instances that were reported) are men regardless of the victim's/survivor's gender. 99% of sexual assaults against women were perpetrated by men.

Sexual violence, however, is vastly underreported and there are a variety of factors that discourage some people from reporting. This includes people of all genders who have been violated by women.

The victim/survivor usually knows the person who violated them. This relationship could be one of trust or power. Friends, partners, spouses, dates, classmates, teachers, relatives, or anyone else can perpetrate sexual violence. In most cases, they are not strangers lurking in the bushes.

Cyberviolence & Cybermisogyny

Sexual violence exists and thrives online, just as it does off. When sexual violence is perpetrated on the Internet, on social media, using a smartphone or other electronic device, via text message or email, it can be called cyberviolence, cyberbullying or cybermisogyny.

“The term ‘cyber misogyny’ encapsulates the diverse forms of gendered hatred, harassment, and abusive behaviour directed towards women and girls online. It offers a more nuanced way of describing behaviours often lumped into the catch-all term ‘cyberbullying’ in mainstream discourse, a term which tends to erase the sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and otherwise discriminatory nature of the behaviour and ignores the context of power and marginalization in which it occurs.”

West Coast LEAF, #CyberMisogyny report

<http://www.westcoastleaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014-REPORT-CyberMisogyny.pdf>

Cybermisogyny also includes online stalking and hate speech, rape and death threats (often aimed at outspoken women, trans femmes, feminists, and people of colour.)

Unfortunately, there have been several local high profile instances of cyber sexual violence in recent years.

In 2013 Rehtaeh Parsons, a 17-year-old Dartmouth woman, died by suicide. In 2011 Rehtaeh told her parents that she had been sexually assaulted at a party and that a photo of it had been shared electronically amongst her peers. For over a year, Rehtaeh was continuously harassed, slut-shamed, blamed, and bullied online.

A year later, the public learned of a Facebook group made up of 13 male Dalhousie University Dentistry Students, in which members made misogynist, homophobic, and sexually violent posts, including about their female classmates.

Both garnered international attention and outrage. Rehtaeh's story was one of the catalysts for Nova Scotia's Sexual Violence Strategy and also led her parents Glen and Leah to create both the annual walk to "Rae's Awareness about Sexualized Violence" and the Rehtaeh Parsons Society.

Cyberviolence, cyberbullying, or cybermisogyny can manifest in a number of ways including:

- Unsolicited/unwanted sexts. A sext, or sexual text message, can include pictures of nude (or partially nude) bodies or body parts.

- "Revenge porn" — The non-consensual sharing of sexual images with the intent of getting revenge, usually following a rejection or break-up. 90% of victims/survivors of revenge porn are women.
- Non consensually sharing sexual images of another person. This includes forwarding, or showing others, a sexual picture that was meant to be private.

It is illegal to share "intimate images of a person" without their consent, regardless of age.

Sexual violence law in Canada

Sexual assault is a criminal offence.

Exploring Sexual Consent goes into more detail about how Canadian law defines sexual consent and the age of consent.

Choices Following Sexual Violence provides information about what a victim/survivor may expect if they go through the criminal justice process.

The intersections of sexual violence

If someone is a member of more than one marginalized group, they can experience intersecting oppressions. The term "intersectionality" was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how different systems of power interact to oppress people with multiple marginalized identities, specifically Black women.

A victims'/survivors' position within society — their identity, background or situation — can impact how they experience sexual violence.

Sexual violence has been (and continues to be) used as a tool of dominance and control and is deeply connected to colonization, slavery and war.

For example, enslaved Black women were considered property and raped by white male slave owners. Slave owners justified this violence by promoting the idea that Black women were always ready for sex and therefore could not be violated.

This idea persists and is one example of the racism and sexism that contributes to high rates of sexual violence against Black women.

Indigenous people in Canada — especially women, girls and Two-Spirit people — face high rates of sexual violence. Colonialism, cultural genocide, intergenerational trauma, and racism, are some of the root causes that contribute to this reality.

"The experiences of sexual violence are often reciprocal: women living in poverty are often at increased risk of victimization; victimization can then increase risk of unemployment and reduced income. African American women are disproportionately impacted, often living within complex intersections of violence, poverty, and mental and physical health struggles."

Key findings from the Sexual Violence Victimization and Associations with Health in a Community Sample of African American Women, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center

“The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canada as victims of violence must be understood in the context of a colonial strategy that sought to dehumanize Aboriginal women.”

*Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC),
What Their Stories Tell Us*

Sexist and racist ideas about Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people send the harmful message that people won’t notice or react quickly, or at all, if they are subject to violence or go missing.

These attitudes contribute to the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada. Thousands of Indigenous women and girls have gone missing or been murdered in this country since 1980. (Pre 1980s numbers are lesser known).

Police have recorded 1,800 missing or murdered women and girls. Estimates by families, Indigenous groups, and the federal government are much higher.

Families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and groups have worked relentlessly to tell the stories of their loved ones and draw attention to this crisis. In 2016, responding to the mounting pressure, the federal government launched the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Indigenous women and girls and Two-Spirit people deserve to be respected, valued, loved and celebrated.

Download the **Indigenous Perspectives** handout for a more in depth discussion of these issues, supports and ceremonies that may be helpful to an Indigenous victim/survivor of sexual violence, and examples of community led initiatives.

The intersections of disclosing and accessing support

A victim’s/survivor’s identity, background or situation can also impact their ability to access support, as well as how other people will interpret and respond to a disclosure. It can also influence if they report sexual assault or cyberviolence to authorities.

For example, people with disabilities are often dehumanized, denied agency, or viewed as not being sexual or desirable. Because sexual violence is often (falsely) equated with desire, people with disabilities may not be believed when they disclose. If a person with a disability is assaulted by a care provider, they may fear that reporting the violence will mean losing an essential support.

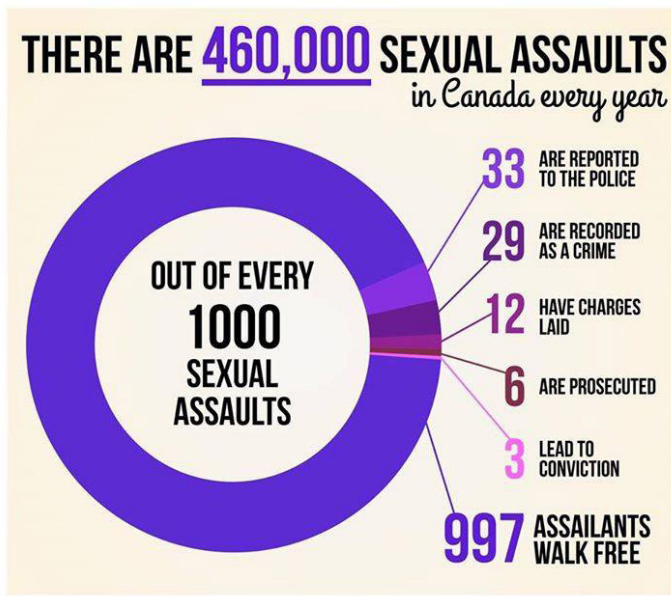
Women of colour cite high rates of racism when accessing health care, which may lead to an African Nova Scotian or otherwise racialized woman not wanting to access health care following sexual violence. If a support service demonstrates a lack of cultural competency it may discourage an Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, or otherwise racialized person from accessing that service.

Transgender people often encounter transphobia, are misgendered, or called by their birth names when accessing support services. A transgender woman may not feel welcome at an agency that typically doesn’t serve transgender women.

When these realities intersect - for example for a racialized transgender woman - they create added barriers.

See the **Choices Following Sexual Violence** handout for a fuller discussion of the barriers people from marginalized communities may face when accessing health care.

Why do so few people report sexual violence?



Source: Johnson, "Limits of a Criminal Justice Response: Trends in Police and Court Processing of Sexual Assault," in Sheehy, *Sexual Assault in Canada: Law, Legal Practice and Women's Activism*, 2012.



Sexual assault is a criminal offence that happens frequently but is vastly underreported.

Every person has different reasons for disclosing, reporting, or not.

The word "disclose" describes when a person tells someone about having been subjected to sexual violence. "Report" describes when someone makes an official report to an authority.

A victim/survivor may disclose to friends, partners, family members, or teachers and may report to campus authorities and police (to name a few).

Whether or not someone reports, it is essential that they receive non-judgmental support and have room to make their own informed decision.

If a person under the age of 16 discloses to you, you are legally required to alert the local child protection agency, even if this information was told to you in confidence.

This is also the case for anyone under the age of 19 who was violated by a parent or guardian.

There are many reasons people do not report sexual violence:

- They are worried they will not be believed.
- It can be re-traumatizing to tell your story to authority figures such as police officers and lawyers. It can be distressing to be questioned again and again about what happened, especially if the person seems unaffected or doubtful.
- Distress, fear, and trauma can impair memory. Gaps in memory can make reporting sexual violence challenging, even if it occurred recently.
- It can be difficult to establish physical evidence of sexual violence. The victim/survivor is often the only witness, which can be intimidating.
- Victims/survivors often feel like they are the ones on trial.
- It is rare for a sexual assault charge to result in a conviction and a victim/survivor may feel that it is pointless and will only cause further emotional distress.
- Systemic discrimination within the criminal justice system and a history of police violence makes members of many marginalized communities – such as Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA2S+ communities – hesitant to report to police.
- Im/migrant people may be wary to report due to language barriers, cultural differences, and fear of the impact it could have on their residency status.
- The victim/survivor often knows the person who sexually violated them. If the person is part of their family (or friend of the family), family members may pressure them not to report. The victim/survivor may worry about the impact that reporting the sexual violence will have on their family.
- The person who perpetrated the violence may be an authority figure who has power over their life.
- They may fear retaliation or further harm.

- They may be afraid that others won't believe that the person who perpetrated the sexual violence is "capable of such a thing". This can especially be the case when the person is a respected community member or public figure.
- They may fear being ostracized by family, friends, or community.
- Some people do not see what has happened to them as sexual violence. They may question whether their experience was 'real' sexual violence.
- A victim/survivor may see the violence as normal, especially if it has been passed down through generations or has been ongoing in someone's romantic/sexual relationship.
- Many blame themselves for the violence.
- The sexual violence may have occurred long ago or in childhood. They may have been afraid or unable to talk about the violence, or they may have repressed their memories.
- They may not have faith that reporting to police, a criminal trial or incarceration will lead to rehabilitation or healing. For example, some cultures come from a tradition of community based or restorative justice.

There are many other reasons why people decide not to report sexual violence. These reasons may stem from past experiences, current concerns, or cultural or systemic barriers.

Those who decide to report also have reasons for doing so:

- Some feel empowered by reporting.
- They want to stop the person who perpetrated the sexual violence from sexually violating anyone else.
- They feel it is an important part of the healing process.
- They believe it will help other victims/survivors.
- They are seeking justice, accountability, or punishment.

What are rape myths, and how do they contribute to the underreporting of sexual violence?

Rape myths are common misconceptions about sexual violence. They are misleading, harmful, and still very present in our collective thinking.

Many victims/survivors do not feel comfortable reporting sexual violence or getting support due to rape myths. These myths impact how survivors are treated (and if they are believed) by police, the media, the justice system, and even by friends, family, and community. Rape myths contribute to why some victims/survivors doubt or blame themselves.

MYTH: Many victims/survivors lie about what happened.

FACT: False claims of sexual violence are extremely rare.

When people accuse victims/survivors of lying they often point to changes or perceived gaps or inconsistencies in the victim's/survivor's story. Gaps in memory are common after someone has been sexually violated or otherwise traumatized. This is because the brain files memories differently when people are under threat. Changes in a story may occur as new details are remembered. This is normal.

MYTH: Women want to be pursued and dominated.

FACT: Women have a diverse range of needs and wants when it comes to relationships and sexual activity.

Sexual consent means asking what someone wants and needs, and doesn't want or need, listening carefully, caring about and respecting that answer. It means paying attention to how the other person(s) is/are doing throughout, and asking if you are unsure. It is also about working to address the power imbalances present in each sexual encounter and creating space for a no, verbal or otherwise.

Download the **Exploring Sexual Consent** *handout* for more information.

MYTH: Sometimes people are "asking for it."

FACT: No one asks or deserves to be sexually violated.

Regardless of what someone is wearing, if they are drinking or using drugs, if they are flirting, or if they were sexting, no one asks to be sexually violated. Going to a party, walking through a park, going upstairs or home with somebody, etc., also does not mean a victim/survivor is to blame.

Additionally, if someone enjoys having sex (whether a lot or a little, with one person or many different people), it does not mean they are "asking" to be violated.

MYTH: When someone enters into a romantic and/or sexual relationship they consent to all sexual activity.

FACT: No one owes anyone sex regardless of their relationship. Consent must be obtained each time and for every sexual act. Unfortunately, up until 1983 a husband could not be charged with raping his wife, contributing to this myth.

MYTH: If sexual violence occurred, there would be evidence of a struggle.

FACT: Many people do not physically struggle when they are being sexually violated.

Not physically struggling can either be an automatic survival response or a conscious strategy.

Under threat, the brain's and body's response is to fight, flight, or freeze - these are all automatic responses and we usually do not get to choose.

Many victims/survivors do not fight back due to fear, shock, numbness, or dissociation.

*To learn more about trauma responses, download the **Responding to a Disclosure** *handout*.*

Additionally, some people fear that struggling will cause the person perpetrating the violence to become more violent. Many are scared of sustaining severe physical injuries, or even of being killed.

Many people don't realize that what happened is sexual violence until later. Naming what happened as sexual violence can take time, if it happens at all.

Also, some instances of sexual violence occur when the person is intoxicated, unconscious or asleep.

MYTH: Some people cannot be sexually violated.

FACT: Some people believe that sex workers, for example, cannot be sexually violated.

Sex workers are people who have the right to set boundaries and engage in consensual sexual activity, just like anyone else.

Ongoing consent is mandatory, regardless of the acceptance of payment for sex.

Some people believe that men cannot be subjected to sexual violence, and if they are then they are not "real men." This is untrue and stems from ideas about gender that shame men for expressing emotion or talking about sexual violence.

MYTH: Men have sexual desires and urges that they can't control.

FACT: This myth falsely equates sex and sexual violence. People who perpetrate sexual violence do so to exert power over or harm the other person.

This myth enforces the idea that "boys will be boys," and that male violence is natural and normal.

The assumption that men have no control over their urges is untrue and insulting to men.

MYTH: It wasn't sexual violence if the victim/survivor was aroused or orgasmed.

FACT: Arousal and orgasm are both involuntary bodily reactions and do not mean that someone consented

to or enjoyed what was done to them. People who perpetrate sexual violence often use this to convince the victim/survivor that it wasn't sexual violence and to keep quiet.

MYTH: Rape jokes are harmless.

FACT: Rape jokes trivialize sexual violence.

For example, prison rape jokes, which are unfortunately very common, make light of an extremely serious issue.

Sexual violence is prevalent in men's and women's prisons and is perpetrated by prison officials and incarcerated people. Indigenous and African Nova Scotian people, particularly youth, are overrepresented in prisons, and as such are at increased risk of sexual violence.

According to Just Detention International those most at risk include: non-violent, first-time offenders; youth; LGBTQIA2S+ people; people living with a mental illness or disability; and sex workers.

Transgender people forced to serve their sentence in a prison that matches the sex they were assigned at birth, such as a transgender woman in a men's facility, are especially at risk.

People who are sexually assaulted while incarcerated do not have access to many of the resources available in the community such as sexual assault centres, telephone support lines, and even supportive friends and family. This makes the healing process especially difficult.

What is rape culture?

Rape culture is a term that describes an environment where rape is pervasive, normalized, and accepted as inevitable.

Rape culture does not necessarily mean that society or individual people promote sexual violence in an outward, active manner. Rather rape culture is largely perpetuated via unexamined (and false) beliefs about sexual violence.

Some examples of rape culture include rape myths, victim blaming, language that trivializes rape (such as "I just got raped by that exam"), rape jokes, sexual objectification in ads, images that glamourize sexual violence, song lyrics that send confusing and harmful messages about consent, and more.

Rape culture teaches people not to get raped. We should be teaching people not to rape.

Rape culture is a product of misogyny and other intersecting forms of systemic oppression.

How does rape culture impact survivors of sexual violence?

Rape culture normalizes sexual violence and as a result, the victim/survivor may not understand what happened to them as sexual violence. They may think they are overreacting and refrain from talking

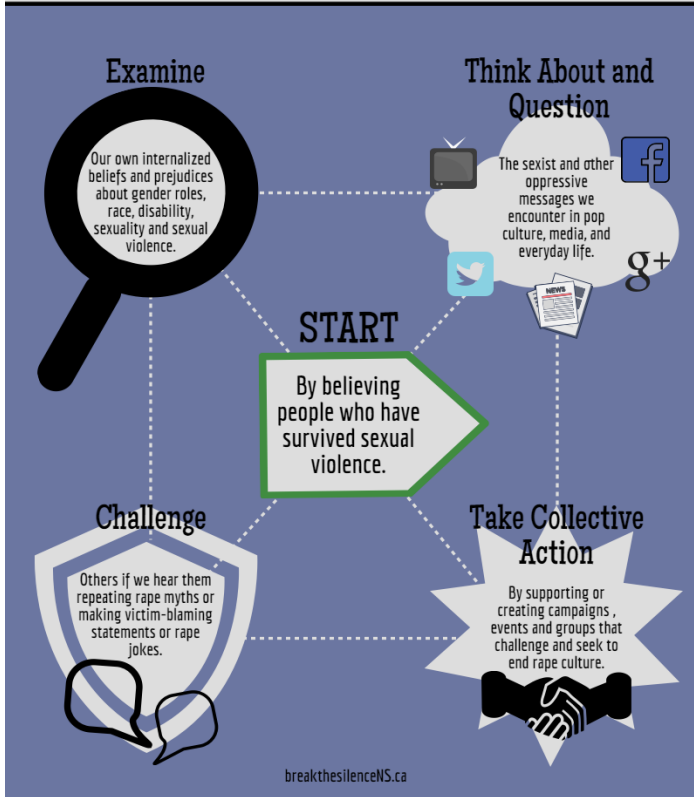
with someone, seeking support or reporting the violence. Even if they do recognize what happened to be sexual violence, rape culture can cause them to blame themselves, feel guilty or ashamed, and feel afraid that they will not be believed, including by professionals and authorities.

For example, rape culture tells a young woman at a bar that if she flirts with someone she owes them sex. It tells her that if she invites them back to her apartment and is assaulted, then she brought it on herself and shouldn't complain.

These ideas play into the "good victim", "bad victim" narrative. This false dichotomy positions the "good victim" as a woman who, for example, didn't know the person who perpetrated the violence, was dressed modestly, was not drinking or doing drugs, was a virgin or had few past sexual partners, reported the assault to police directly after it happened, and remembered all of the details. This is an unrealistically high and unfair bar, one that is always moving.

The hypersexualization and dehumanization of racialized, Indigenous, queer/bisexual women, transgender women, and transgender people, also means that a "good victim" is usually thought of as being both white, heterosexual, and cisgender.

How Can We Challenge Rape Culture?



In reality, there is no such thing as a good or bad victim. No one asks or deserves to be violated.

Rape culture makes it challenging for victims/survivors to heal from their experiences. It creates a toxic culture where they encounter rape myths and victim blaming attitudes on a regular basis. It creates an environment where sexual violence and trauma is trivialized.

These instances can be stressful and re-traumatizing.

How can we challenge rape culture?

We can start by believing people who have survived sexual violence.

We can also examine our own internalized beliefs and prejudices about gender roles, race, disability, sexuality, and sexual violence.

We can think about, and question, the sexist and other oppressive messages we encounter in pop culture, media, and everyday life.

We can challenge others if we hear them repeating rape myths or making victim blaming statements or rape jokes.

We can take collective action by supporting or creating campaigns, events and groups that challenge and seek to end rape culture.

Acknowledgments

This handout was created as part of Nova Scotia's Sexual Violence Strategy. It is one of the many components of the training course, *Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Nova Scotia Resource*.

A Provincial Committee made up of community members from across Nova Scotia dedicated nearly two years of time, energy and expertise to develop this important resource. It would not exist without their unwavering dedication and passion.

For more information contact:

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breakthesilencens.ca/training

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