

# PREVENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Interdisciplinary  
Approaches to  
Overcoming a  
Rape Culture

EDITED BY

Nicola Henry  
Anastasia Powell



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## Interdisciplinary Approaches to Overcoming a Rape Culture

Edited by

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Summary: "Globally, rates of sexual violence remain unacceptably high, with disproportionate effects on women and girls. While most scholars and practitioners uniformly concur about the scope of the problem, there is currently little agreement about how to prevent sexual violence before it occurs. Drawing on diverse disciplines such as criminology, education, health promotion, law, psychology, social work, socio-legal studies, sociology and women's studies, this book provides the first interdisciplinary collection on the primary prevention of sexual violence. The volume addresses the key causes or determinants of sexual violence, including cultural attitudes, values, beliefs and norms, as well as systemic gender-based inequalities that create the conditions underlying much violence against women. Including contributions from internationally renowned experts in the field, the volume critically investigates the theoretical underpinnings of prevention work, describing and analysing the limits and possibilities of primary prevention strategies 'on the ground'. The chapters collectively examine the role that structural violence and gender inequality play in fostering a 'culture' of sexual violence, and reflect on the relationship between macro and micro levels for understanding both sexual violence perpetration and prevention. This book will be a key resource for scholars, practitioners and policymakers involved in the fields of sexual violence prevention, education, law, family violence, and child sexual abuse. Including contributions from Victoria L. Banyard (University of New Hampshire, USA), Alison Cares (Assumption College, USA), Moira Carmody (University of Western Sydney, Australia), Gillian Fletcher (La Trobe University, Australia), Wendy Larcombe (University of Melbourne, Australia), Claire Maxwell (University of London, UK), Mary M. Moynihan (University of New Hampshire, USA), Bob Pease (Deakin University, Australia) and Antonia Quadara (Australian Institute of Family Studies, Australia)." — Provided by publisher.

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This book is dedicated to our respective 'boy children', Frederick and Alexander, and to our (perhaps unrealistic) hope that they will grow up in a world where violence and inequality are not allowed to flourish.

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# 1

## Framing Sexual Violence Prevention

### What Does It Mean to Challenge a Rape Culture?

*Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry*

#### Introduction

The startling findings across various country and multi-country studies on sexual violence unequivocally point to what the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013, p.2) describes as a ‘pervasive [...] global public health problem of epidemic proportions’. In the first study of aggregated global and regional prevalence estimates for intimate partner and non-intimate partner sexual violence, the WHO (2013) found that overall 35 per cent of women worldwide reported having experienced either physical or sexual violence by a partner, or sexual violence by a friend, family member, acquaintance or stranger. Police data consistently show that while men report experiencing more physical, non-sexual violence than women, women continue to represent the majority of victims of sexual violence, while perpetrators are overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, male. Young women continue to be at highest risk of experiencing sexual violence, and most likely at the hands of a known man, such as a boyfriend, friend or acquaintance, rather than at the hands of a stranger (for prevalence studies, see, for example, ABS, 2006; 2013; Basile et al., 2007; Black et al., 2011; Fulu et al., 2013; Heenan & Murray, 2006; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004; Office for National Statistics (UK), 2013).

The statistics only tell half a story, yet they can be utilised to paint a gloomy picture of the widespread, persistent and systemic problem of sexual violence – and more generally, gender-based violence or violence against women. While scholars and practitioners routinely agree about the scope of the problem, there is much disagreement about how to prevent and ultimately eradicate all forms of sexual violence.<sup>1</sup> The public health model, advocated by governments, organisations and institutions globally, tends to describe sexual violence as an ‘epidemic’. Accordingly, sexual violence is treated as a disease that can be eradicated before it occurs, or before it ‘spreads’ further into the community. This

approach enables the identification of adverse social, economic and psychological ‘public health’ impacts on victims, while squarely positioning violence against women as prevalent and serious – but preventable. While it is important to be optimistic about eradicating all forms of violence against women (as many public health models are – see discussion below), a disease-centred model runs the risk of individualising both the causes and impacts of violence, and as such it may fail to address the structural and cultural ‘scaffolding’ of men’s violence against women (Gavey, 2005).

Rather than focusing on individual risk factors for either sexual violence perpetration or victimisation, many feminist scholars conversely argue that the focus instead should be on the social structures that underpin the perpetration of sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> Feminist scholars, practitioners and activists pejoratively refer to a ‘rape culture’ as the social, cultural and structural discourses and practices in which sexual violence is tolerated, accepted, eroticised, minimised and trivialised (Buchwald et al., 1993; 2005; Gavey, 2005). In a rape culture, violence against women is eroticised in literary, cinematic and media representations; victims are routinely disbelieved or blamed for their own victimisation; and perpetrators are rarely held accountable or their behaviours are seen as excusable or understandable (see Burt, 1980; MacKinnon, 1987; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). These manifestly sexist attitudes and beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists do not exist in isolation but rather are part of a broader manifestation of gender inequality, prevalent in the language, laws and institutions that are supposed to criminalise, challenge and prevent sexual violence but instead perpetuate, support, condone or reflect these values (see Smart, 1989; Temkin, 2002). Resistance to changing or challenging this rape culture can also be found in the erroneous but deeply embedded belief that rape is an inevitable and natural fact of life (Marcus, 1992).<sup>3</sup>

Whether drawing on prevalence statistics and public health impacts, or on critiques of gender-based inequalities, what feminist and public health models of sexual violence have in common is the desire to prevent and eradicate sexual violence. Indeed, owing to the dynamic development of these diverse models, over the past decade the field of sexual violence prevention has undergone an enormous shift both pragmatically and theoretically. Emerging out of the women’s movement and grass-roots efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to secure support services for victim-survivors of rape, early efforts tended to focus on what *women* can do to avoid rape, such as how to avoid risk in public spaces and how to defend oneself against a potential predator (see Bart & O’Brien, 1984; Levine-MacCombie & Koss, 1986). Following the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, governments too began directing greater policy attention to the prevention of sexual violence. In the United States, for example, the 1994 *Violence Against Women Act* committed federal funding for prevention of sexual



and intimate partner violence, among other policy measures, including victim support services. Since 2000, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has received additional federal funding to develop a programme of research into public health models to prevent sexual violence (Degue et al., 2012; CDC, 2004).<sup>4</sup> In the same period, the WHO published several key research reports on sexual and intimate partner violence and advocated a public health approach to preventing violence against women ‘before it occurs’ (WHO, 2002; 2007; 2010; 2013). The last five years have seen a burgeoning of state and federal government policy and programmes directed at the *primary prevention* of sexual violence in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia.

Drawing significantly on the public health approach, as well as interdisciplinary perspectives across education, criminology, gender studies, law, psychology, social work and sociology, ‘primary prevention’ refers to strategies that seek to prevent sexual violence *before it occurs*. Prevention efforts are commonly directed towards addressing the key underlying causes of sexual violence, including cultural attitudes, values, beliefs and norms about masculinity, sexuality, gender and violence. These efforts include interventions that focus on building the knowledge and/or skills of individuals in order to change their behaviour, such as social marketing campaigns, community theatre and/or public art projects, as well as education programmes in high schools and university campuses. Yet primary prevention also incorporates strategies that are directed towards changing organisational, community, institutional and societal cultures and structures to address underlying causes of violence, such as gender inequality, sexism, discrimination and socio-economic deprivation.

The rapid rise of primary prevention approaches to sexual violence represents a substantial shift from strategies directed at women to strategies directed at changing the socio-cultural and socio-structural causes of sexual violence. The implications of this shift for how we address sexual violence through policy, law, education and our broader community are yet to be fully realised. Indeed, to date, the field of sexual violence prevention remains significantly under-theorised. This book is the first to draw together a unique collection of internationally renowned scholars writing about the issue of primary prevention of sexual violence. The chapters in the collection are informed by analytical frameworks and strategies across key fields, including criminology, education, health promotion, law, psychology, social work, socio-legal studies, sociology and women’s studies. The book provides a much-needed theoretical and empirical investigation of primary prevention, which is lacking in the existing sexual violence literature.

This chapter provides a brief background and conceptual framework for exploring the promises and the perils of the emerging field of primary prevention of sexual violence. The chapter will introduce several key themes to

be further developed across the book, including the role that structural violence and inequality play in fostering a 'culture' of sexual violence; the relationship between the macro- and micro-levels for understanding both sexual violence perpetration and prevention; the role of bystanders and community initiatives; the normalisation of sexual violence in certain cross-cultural contexts; and the benefits of multi-disciplinary approaches to addressing and preventing sexual violence to effect substantive cultural change. The first part of the chapter critically examines three conceptual frameworks for the primary prevention of sexual violence, before then addressing some of the key tensions and challenges inherent in current theoretical and practical approaches to primary prevention. The final section provides an overview of each contributing chapter to this collection.

### **How to prevent sexual violence? Conceptual frameworks and accompanying strategies**

The conceptual frameworks with which we seek to understand sexual violence have important implications for what we do in practice. Indeed, different prevention frameworks draw on different understandings of the problem of sexual violence and are open to divergent limitations or critiques. For example, some feminist engagements with sexual violence prevention have been critiqued for focusing too strongly on gender, while marginalising other factors such as ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic status, or for focusing on what women can do to 'protect themselves' from men's violence. Classic crime prevention frameworks have likewise long been criticised for focusing on protecting the 'targets' of crime (often conceived of in terms of property rather than people) and less commonly focusing on attempts to change the behaviour of offenders themselves. Public health models, meanwhile, tend to be more inclusive in their focus on a broad range of causal factors, but in doing so they risk marginalising strategies that address systemic gender inequalities or the human rights basis for action to prevent violence (Daykin & Naidoo, 1995).

The following sections will briefly outline each of these three key frameworks and their contribution to sexual violence prevention. Ultimately, we suggest that primary prevention of sexual violence means challenging the socio-cultural and socio-structural basis of rape, and it is this broad approach to primary prevention that underpins each of the chapters in this book.

### **Sexual violence as a socio-cultural and socio-structural problem**

Feminist theory and action over the last 40 years have persistently challenged the silence surrounding sexual violence, and the idea that it is a matter exclusively for the private realm. A range of strategies have been deployed to bring sexual violence firmly into public discourse and debate, and ultimately to

eradicate this form of violence. Law and policy reform, crisis support services, community programmes, school curricula, awareness-raising resources (such as posters, pamphlets, stickers, billboards and films), mainstream media interviews and articles, public shaming of alleged and convicted rapists, street marches such as 'Reclaim the Night' and 'Slut Walk', and online campaigns through blogs, petitions and social media have all contributed to an alternative discourse on sexual violence and a challenge to a 'culture' of rape. While feminist approaches to prevention are many and varied (as are feminist thinking and activism), feminist-informed frameworks remain central to sexual violence prevention. At their core, these frameworks share the central tenet that gender inequality and gender relations underpin sexual violence (Evans et al., 2009).

As Carmody (2009, p.3) writes, early feminist approaches to rape prevention problematically tended to 'deny the diversity of women's experience of sexual violence, and left unchallenged an assumption that sexual violence was inevitable. In other words, early approaches universalised women as "victims" and men as "perpetrators".' Susan Brownmiller's highly influential 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, for example, positioned rape both as an expression of men's political dominance over women and as a biological inevitability:

Man's structural capacity to rape and women's corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself [...] We cannot work around the fact that in terms of human anatomy the possibility of forcible intercourse incontrovertibly exists. This single factor may have been sufficient to have caused the creation of a male ideology of rape. When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it.

(Brownmiller, 1975, pp.13–14)

This 'inevitability of rape' was (and still is in many examples) expressed in public campaigns and programmes that focus on what women can do to prevent being attacked: improving knowledge of what constitutes sexual assault; providing legal education around rights and recognising and avoiding risk; and in some instances, proposing strategies for women to resist and/or survive rape (see, for example, Delacoste, 1981; Rozee, 2011).

Influenced by the post-modern turn within gender studies more broadly, by the 1990s, feminist ideas about gender and violence shifted substantially to recognising the socially and culturally variable practices of femininities and masculinities (see Carmody, 2009). This brought greater attention to both the diversity of women's experiences of sexual violence and the intersectionality of marginalisation based on race, class, sexuality and disability. It also enabled a challenge to societal constructions of normative gender roles and the

notion that rape is an inevitable, or natural, manifestation of gender difference. In other words, challenging the fundamental roots of a 'rape culture' has become a key approach within feminist rape prevention.

While the everyday expressions of rape culture in mainstream media, advertising and popular culture (including more recently in online communities and via social media) cannot be ignored, one identified problem for feminist prevention strategies is that the construction of women's vulnerability to victimisation can have the effect of positioning women as 'inherently rapeable'. Feminist scholar Sharon Marcus (1992, p.170), for example, has challenged the view of rape as an inevitable 'fact', structured in the physiological differences between men and women, and instead calls for a challenge to the 'narratives, complexes and institutions' that make rape a dominant 'cultural script'. Norms inscribing passive, non-combative models of femininity against a physically aggressive masculinity set women up to live with both the fear and practice of rape. Controversially, among the strategies of rape prevention that Marcus (1992, p.170) suggests is for women to 'resist self-defeating notions of polite feminine speech as well as develop physical self-defense tactics'.

To be clear, Marcus's approach is not to imply that individual women are responsible for 'rape avoidance', as is common in some risk frameworks of rape prevention, but rather she acknowledges that disrupting our collective, cultural narratives of women's 'natural' passivity and vulnerability to rape is just as important as disrupting those of men's 'natural' sexual aggression (Marcus, 1992; see also Henderson, 2007). When one considers broader contexts of gender inequality, in which a presumed physical and psychological passivity underlies women's under-participation in sport comparable to men (in turn negatively affecting their health and well-being), and women's lower assertiveness in the workplace (which is linked to women's lower rates of promotion and positions of leadership), the deconstruction of normative assumptions about passive femininity should not be dismissed too readily, since discourses are powerful and can have the effect of reinscribing these patterns of dominance and subjugation which perpetuates the oppression rather than fundamentally challenges it (Brown, 1995). However, as Mardorossian (2002, p.755) argues, 'making women's behavior and identity the site of rape prevention only mirrors the dominant culture's proclivity to see rape as women's problem, both in the sense of a problem women should solve and one that they caused'.

In response to the limitations of prevention programmes and initiatives that focus on dismantling women's vulnerability to sexual violence, more recently, feminist approaches have turned towards engaging men and promoting alternative cultures and practices of masculinity as key to the prevention of sexual violence. The important role that masculinity and male peer cultures play in violence against women is further expanded in Schwartz and DeKeseredy's

highly cited theory of 'male peer support' – a feminist-informed application of 'routine activity theory' (RAT) to the specific issue of men's sexual violence against women. Based on research conducted in Canadian college campuses, male peer support focuses on the community and peer norms condoning violence against women that can contribute to both increasing offender motivations for using violence and a perception of the absence of guardianship against violence (DeKeseredy, 1990; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). In their own surveys of campus sexual assault, Schwartz and DeKeseredy have repeatedly found that rates of violence are higher on those campuses where there is male peer norm support for the use of coercion in sexual relationships (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2001). The theory of male peer support then highlights the need for sexual violence prevention to focus on challenging the norms at the meso-level – in peer groups, organisations and communities – such that these cultures may become spaces where peers routinely challenge other men's adherence to attitudes and norms condoning sexual violence, rather than reinforcing them.

This approach to rape prevention, based on engaging men to challenge their own socio-cultural norms and practices as well as those within their immediate peer groups and communities, has grown in influence in recent years. The work of Katz (1994), Katz and colleagues (2011) and Foubert and colleagues (2011), for example, draws in men as 'bystanders' in a culture that ultimately condones male dominance and sexual violence and calls on men to become allies in sexual violence prevention by challenging norms of violence, sexism and male dominance in their everyday lives. As Capraro (1994, p.22) asserts:

[R]ape prevention work begins with men and with men's questioning of prevailing assumptions about masculinity and their rethinking what it means to be a man [...] the perpetration of rape is traceable to a highly problematic masculinity, constituted by sexism, violence and homophobia.

While shifting the focus to engaging men and problematising hegemonic masculinity is fundamental to the deconstruction of cultural beliefs and attitudes around normative femininity, masculinity and sexuality, it is important to view prevention not simply as the responsibility of individual men but more importantly as a shared, community or societal responsibility. Thus to expand on Mardorossian's (2002) conclusion, feminist approaches to rape prevention must be situated not in focussing on 'women' as 'victims' and 'men' as 'perpetrators' but rather in an understanding of the gender relations and wider social systems of patriarchy, capitalism and exploitation. This entails a focus not simply on men as potential perpetrators but also on men *and women* as bystanders and supporters of a rape culture.

### **Criminology, 'crime prevention' and rape**

Criminological models such as 'routine activity theory' (or RAT) 'crime pattern theory' and 'rational choice theory' (or RCT) have substantially influenced crime prevention frameworks more generally. For example, at its core, RAT suggests that for the opportunity of crime to occur there must be (1) a motivated offender, (2) a potential target or victim, and (3) the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Cohen, 1980). Crime pattern theory meanwhile provides an account of the localised opportunities for offending behaviour, which are often concentrated around particular times and locations (such as home burglaries when residents are out at work for the day, or shoplifting during the busiest of business hours or sexual assaults around licensed premises at night). Finally, RCT 'seeks to understand how the offender makes crime choices, driven by a particular motive within a specific setting, which offers the opportunities to satisfy that motive' (Felson & Clarke, 1998, p.7).

While such 'crime opportunity' models explicitly include the offender in their account of crime (indeed, such models often suggest to take the offender's perspective when designing crime prevention strategies), in practice much crime prevention programming has tended to focus foremost on the target/victim and guardianship issues ('environmental' crime prevention) rather than focusing on 'social' crime prevention, that is, the strategies seeking to change the motivations of offenders (see Sutton et al., 2014). This contradiction in the theory and practice of crime prevention is arguably most evident in sexual violence prevention programmes. Though mainstream criminology has largely neglected the prevention of sexual violence, the impact of victim-focused 'opportunity reduction' can nonetheless be seen in much rape prevention programming. For example, in their review of sexual violence prevention approaches, feminist criminologists Moira Carmody and Kerry Carrington (2000) found that many strategies focus almost exclusively on educating women to improve their knowledge of 'risky' situations and to avoid 'risky' behaviours. The persistence of this type of approach is further evident internationally in several meta-analyses which continue to recommend targeting women for education on risk behaviours as a key approach to sexual violence prevention (Söchting et al., 2004; Yeater & O'Donohue, 1999).

Such 'risk management' or 'rape avoidance' approaches to sexual violence prevention are highly problematic for several reasons. First, risk management represents an inaccurate model of sexual violence victimisation, as even women who follow the safety guidelines may still become victims (see Carmody, 2006; Lawson & Olle, 2006; Neame, 2003). Indeed, the list of behaviours women are instructed to avoid are often so encompassing that 'we could remind women that taking their vaginas out [...] with them is "risky"' (Lawson & Olle, 2006, p.50). Moreover, sexual assaults are rarely committed by strangers in public

spaces preying on 'risky' or 'unprotected' women but rather by known men at residential locations, often the victim's or perpetrator's home (Keel, 2005; Neame, 2003).

Another issue with the victim-focused risk management approach to sexual violence prevention is that it conveniently makes the perpetrators of sexual violence and coercion invisible, at the same time 'denying women a right to be safe' (Lawson & Olle, 2006, p.50). Finally, prevention models that emphasise women's risk management tend to lend themselves to strategies that teach young women 'refusal skills' and how to say 'no' clearly and assertively. While it may remain important to encourage and empower women to assertively refuse unwanted sex, it is arguably counter-productive to position rape as primarily a problem of women's 'miscommunication' (see Kitzinger & Frith, 1999) rather than a problem of perpetrators' indifference to consent. Indeed, such models of sexual violence prevention remain contentious for feminists and victim advocates, largely due to the vast number of strategies that have focused on modifying women's behaviour so as not to 'precipitate' sexual assault (Neame, 2003). In other words, the focus is on the 'target' and 'guardianship' aspects of the crime while ignoring or minimising the responsibility of perpetrators and the cultural and social conditions that produced the offending in the first place.

### **Public health frameworks for preventing gender-based violence**

Public health frameworks for violence prevention are underpinned by an understanding of the individual, relationship, community and societal factors contributing to violence (the ecological model), and the classification of prevention approaches across three categories or levels of intervention – primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention deals with population-wide factors that contribute to violence before it occurs. It can include strategies to address the underlying causes of gender-based violence, such as gender inequality, as well as strategies focused on changing individual behaviour, knowledge and skills. Primary prevention can target a whole population (for example, through media/social marketing campaigns, education through schools, universities and community organisations, or by addressing structural factors such as policies and institutional practices) or be developed to engage particular groups that are at a higher risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence in the future (VicHealth, 2007). Secondary prevention, also known as early intervention, targets individuals or population subgroups who show early signs of engaging in violent behaviour, or becoming a victim of violence, or who may be at particular risk of developing violent behaviours (VicHealth, 2007). Tertiary prevention focuses on intervening after violence has occurred to reduce its effects and prevent reoccurrence, such as therapeutic and criminal justice responses.

While a public health framework provides a useful model for identifying the level and scope of prevention strategies, according to some researchers, 'it says