

Carrying the Burden of Sexual Assault Prevention

As I'm only a few weeks into my college career, it seems like it was just yesterday that I was gleefully forming a list of items to bring with me to college. All of the dorm room essentials, plenty of junk food and snacks, and, of course, a plentiful armory of self-defense weapons to carry on me at all times. Because with the excitement and optimism that college life brings comes the shockingly high chances of being raped or sexually assaulted during my time on campus. It seems that most other young women and I have come to accept that we will simply have to carry a ridiculous amount of brightly colored, glittery defense weapons just to feel only *a little bit safer* for... existing as a young female college student.

Contrary to popular belief, such precautions do not rise from excessive paranoia. In fact, they are extremely justified when statistics are considered. In a 2019 Campus Climate Survey taken at Rice, 17.4% of women experienced forced penetration/sexual touching, whether that force be physical or verbal (for example: coercion, or lack of ability to consent). The fact that so many young women at Rice- nearly one out of every five girls- experienced such a traumatizing ordeal is terrifying. Me, or someone that I'm close to, could easily be that one out of five. How are we supposed to believe that we will ever be safe when it is *statistically likely* that we will experience some type of assault?

The answer to the previous question is a bleak one- we don't feel safe, so we have collectively decided to cling to any means of protection we can find. But the more I see young women carrying pepper sprays, alarms, and kitty-cat stabbers, the more I realize how blatantly unfair it is that potential victims have to carry the burden of preventing sexual assault on campus. Societal expectations that sexual assault is inevitable (and that women just have to deal with it) are rooted in deeply sexist gender stereotypes. This dynamic perpetuates the idea that men cannot keep themselves from assaulting women, and that there is nothing women can do to change this. Thus, we are forced to accept the likelihood of assault. As I'm re-reading the last sentence I just wrote, the utter ridiculousness of the expectations of each gender is hitting me. Men are human beings that can control themselves. And women are human beings that do not deserve to be victims of assault by virtue of their gender.

Unpacking my current understanding of gender power dynamics this way has helped me understand that decreasing the possibility of being assaulted begins with changing our fundamental understanding of gender stereotypes and sexual assault. What might this look like? Ultimately, it starts with having conversations with BOTH boys and girls about consent and sexual assault in an equal way. Currently, there is a huge discrepancy between the way we talk to girls about sexual assault and the way we talk to boys about sexual assault. In a recent survey conducted by Planned Parenthood, parents revealed that they were more likely to discuss topics regarding sexual assault with their daughters, and these conversations centered around how to

reduce the risk of being sexually assaulted and how to say no rather than the topics of asking for and giving consent. Consequently, framing the conversation this way toward girls perpetuates the idea that sexual assault is inevitable, and excluding boys from the conversation leaves them unaware of what a healthy sexual interaction looks like (and more likely to buy into the stereotype that they are allowed to assault women).

In addition, we should focus our conversations on how to ask for and give consent. Discussing consent first conveys a healthier idea of what a proper sexual interaction consists of, and it addresses the root cause of many of the societal problems related to rape culture and gender stereotypes. By considering consent first rather than conveying the idea that you are likely to be assaulted and it is your responsibility to prevent it, the burden of preventing sexual assault doesn't simply fall on girls anymore. Everyone understands their responsibility in *preventing* sexual assault rather than simply dealing with it.

So as college students, what can we do immediately? Understand that consent is a mutual agreement that both parties come to in a clear way- it isn't just the lack of a "no." In any interaction you have, you must have consent established. Also, be okay with being told no. It isn't fun to experience this, but neither is committing an act of violence or being a victim of an act of violence. Nobody owes you any sexual favors. I have hope for our future and our ability to make change on campus. But I have to be cautiously optimistic. These kinds of sweeping changes take time. Until our world changes, I'll hold on tight to my pepper spray with the knowledge that one day, I won't have to.