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Drinking and Rape: Let's Wise Up About It

By Jaclyn Friedman, WeNews Commentator

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's Enews.



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(WOMENSENEWS) – In 1992, while I was an undergraduate, I was raped by a fellow student while we were both drunk. He was not a date. I didn't even like him when we were sober. But we were at a party together, a party at which I tried too hard to "keep up" with my friends in the alcohol department and wound up far more drunk than I wanted to be. So I went back to my room. And he followed me. And then he raped me.

Looking back, I can imagine a number of social or institutional interventions which might have helped prevent this attack from happening. But none of them includes the approach that so many articles on this subject take, which is to "raise awareness" among young women that getting drunk in public puts them at greater risk of exploitation and sexual assault.

Why is this an impotent approach? For all the same reasons abstinence-only education does nothing to stop the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (and may even contribute to it).

Very few people of any age or gender go out and drink enough to get drunk thinking it's a responsible thing to do. However true it may be that it's safer not to get drunk (approximately 70 percent of rapes among college students involve alcohol or drug use), it's not like young women don't already hear about the risks from parents, college administrations, the nightly news, or any of the 25 "CSI" or "Law and Order" clones on TV.

In fact, for many young people of all genders, drinking is a form of rebellion, appealing exactly because of all the warnings that come along with it.

Three Positive Steps

So what would have worked? No one can say for sure, but here are three things that would have given me a fighting chance:

1. Hold boys and men responsible.

Let's look a little more closely at that correlation between rape and alcohol. That's not a correlation between female drinking and rape. It's a correlation between all drinking and rape. In fact, studies have shown that it's more likely that a male rapist has been drinking than that his female victim has. So if we want to raise awareness about the links between drinking and rape, we should start by getting the word out to men that alcohol is likely to impair their ability to respond appropriately if a sexual partner says "no." When was the last time you read that article in any kind of publication?

The silence around men's drinking is, of course, part of a much larger "boys will be boys" culture, one which played a large part in my assault. The party I attended was for a men's sports team; the coaches provided the alcohol. Try to imagine them doing that for a women's sports team.

This is the very culture that supports acquaintance rape to begin with, the very culture feminists have been working to dismantle for decades. Holding boys and men accountable is no quick fix. But when we discuss drinking and rape and neglect to shine the light on men's drinking, we play into the same victim-blaming that makes it so easy for men to rape women in the first place.

Similarly, we should be teaching men that the best way to avoid becoming a rapist is to seek positive consent, as opposed to just leaving it up to a woman to say "no."

Meanwhile, there are some things we should be doing to keep ourselves safe in the short term, including:

2. Promote a more sophisticated, pleasure-affirming message.

This means going beyond advocating "abstinence."

Yes, tell young women that when it comes to preventing sexual violence, not drinking is safer than drinking.

But stop there and you're setting up a false and impossible choice between sobriety and rape. Drinking can be a lot of fun, both chemically and socially, and most of us will choose immediate pleasure over the abstract risk of violence or death, at least some of the time. Plus, the more adults warn against something, the more appealing it is as an act of rebellion.

Give All the Information

Instead, let's try the safer sex education approach: Treat young women as people who can make informed decisions by giving them all the information. A message that might sound something like this:

- (a) The safest thing to do is not to drink at all.
- (b) If you decide to drink, it's safer to do it in moderation and-or in the company of a friend you trust to look out for you. (Not just someone you know. Nearly 80 percent of rape victims know their attackers.)
- (c) For the times you may choose to get properly sauced, or your friend turns out to be not as reliable as you'd hoped, and for times you may be sober and need to know anyhow, learn how to defend yourself against sexual coercion and assault.

Which brings us to:

3. Teach widespread, effective self-defense skills to women and girls.

I never even tried to shove that guy off of me, something that I now know I could have easily done, even drunk, even if he was bigger than me, which honestly, he wasn't. But it never occurred to me there was anything I could do physically to protect myself. Why? Not because I was drunk. Because literally no one my whole life had told me that my body could work in my own defense (and many, many messages had told me to the contrary).

Women Can Use Their Own Bodies

And yet it's true; women and girls can keep themselves safe using our very own bodies. No pepper spray. No whistles. Even women who don't work out, or are "overweight" or are physically impaired.

It both is and isn't mystifying why more women don't know this.

The parts of our culture that rely on violence against women as a tool to keep everyone "in their place" work hard to keep us from knowing.

But women often play a role in this unknowing, whether out of discomfort with the process involved in learning, fear that it may work for others but not us, and other complex reasons. (For more on this phenomenon, read Anastasia Higginbotham's excellent article "Kicking and Shrugging – Why do we resist self-defense?" in *Bitch* magazine.)

Regardless of this resistance, we must all learn how to defend ourselves and insist that our schools and other public institutions teach all girls and women the same skills and not just for our own safety. Because the most practical way to reduce the risk of rape for all women is to create a culture in which the rapist has to worry that he'll get hurt.

Jaclyn Friedman is a writer, performer and activist living in Boston, where she works as program director for the Center for New Words, producers of the annual Women, Action and the Media (WAM!) Conference. She sometimes enjoys drinking in public and isn't going to stop anytime soon. You can visit her online at <http://www.jaclynfriedman.com/>.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

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