

Wall Street Journal

Friday, April 14, 2006 12:01 a.m. EDT

Ladies, You Should Know Better – How Feminism Wages War on Common Sense

By Naomi Schaefer Riley

Word came out this week that Darryl Littlejohn, the New York bouncer charged in the Feb. 25 rape and murder of graduate student Imette St. Guillen, has been linked by a DNA match to an October sexual assault on another woman. This latest revelation will no doubt (and rightly) lead to more angry cries about the failure of Mr. Littlejohn's parole officer to keep track of his violent charge and about the negligence of bar owners who do not check the backgrounds of their employees. But it should also serve to remind women, yet again, that it would be a good idea to use a little more common sense.

A police investigation has confirmed that on the night of her murder, Ms. St. Guillen was last seen in a bar, alone and drinking at 3 a.m. on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It does not diminish Mr. Littlejohn's guilt or the tragedy of Ms. St. Guillen's death to note what more than a few of us have been thinking – that a 24-year-old woman should know better. Yet there are forces in our culture (writing letters to this newspaper even now) that find this suggestion offensive.

If you have attended college any time in the past 20 years, you will have heard that if a woman is forced against her will to have sex, it is “not her fault” and that women always have the right to “control their own bodies.” Nothing could be truer. But the administrators who utter these sentiments and the feminists who inspire them rarely note which situations are conducive to keeping that control and which threaten it. They rarely discuss what to do to reduce the likelihood of a rape. Short of re-educating men, that is.

But just as sociopaths exist on the Lower East Side, they exist on college campuses. One or two might even be playing lacrosse for Duke University. The past few weeks have brought much hand-wringing about the alleged rape of a stripper at a team party in Durham, N.C. Understandably so: An email from one team member, just after the party, suggested that he was aroused by the idea of skinning a woman and killing her. Though the investigation is still under way, commentators have already blamed the event on everything from racism (the stripper was black, the accused players white) to the lack of moral instruction in colleges today.

Which explanation is most credible? Perhaps it doesn't matter. Whatever the problem is, it won't be fixed this year or possibly ever, even with best sorts of attitude adjustment. Perhaps the law of

averages says that, with 14 million men in U.S. colleges today, a few of them will be rapists. What to do? For starters: Be wary of drunken house parties.

Now, readers may well assume that this advice is obvious and that no Duke coed would ever do what the stripper, by her own account, did: Upon finding 40 men at the party instead of the four for whom she agreed to “dance,” she stayed and performed anyway. When the partygoers began shouting what she described as racial epithets and violent threats, she left but returned after an apology from a team member. A stripper with street smarts is apparently a Hollywood myth.

But smart women at top schools are engaging in behavior that is equally moronic. In another recent incident, a cadet at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., apparently got so drunk on two liters of wine and a couple of glasses of beer that she didn’t know that she had had sex with a Naval Academy midshipman until he told a friend of hers the next day to get her the morning-after pill.

In a survey conducted two years ago by the Harvard School of Public Health, one in every 20 women reported having been raped in college during the previous seven months. Rape statistics are notoriously unreliable, but the kicker rings true: “Nearly three-quarters of those rapes happened when the victims were so intoxicated they were unable to consent or refuse.” And those are just the ones who admitted it.

The odd thing is that feminism may be partly to blame. Time magazine reporter Barrett Seaman explains that many of the college women he interviewed for his book “Binge” (2005) “saw drinking as a gender equity issue; they have as much right as the next guy to belly up to the bar.” Leaving biology aside – most women’s bodies can’t take as much alcohol as men’s – the fact of the matter is that men simply are not, to use the phrase of another generation, “taken advantage of” in the way women are.

Radical feminists used to warn that men are evil and dangerous. Andrea Dworkin made a career of it. But that message did not seem reconcilable with another core feminist notion – that women should be liberated from social constraints, especially those that require them to behave differently from men. So the first message was dropped and the second took over.

The radical-feminist message was of course wrongheaded – most men are harmless, even those who play lacrosse – but it could be useful as a worst-case scenario for young women today. There is an alternative, but to paraphrase Miss Manners: People who need to be told to use their common sense probably didn’t have much to begin with.

Ms. Riley is The Wall Street Journal’s deputy Taste page editor and the author of “God on the Quad.”

Copyright © 2006 Dow Jones & Company, Inc.