

STEMMING THE TIDE:
COUNTERING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE
Helen Moffett (March 2003)

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Dr. Moffett examines how sexual violence is described in public discourse and through the media, the messages that are inherent in this narrative, and how advocates and activists can reclaim the narrative to more accurately describe sexual violence. Although her focus is South Africa, the points she raises have implications for beyond the borders of her country.

She begins her exploration with a statement indicating that “the way we think shapes the way we speak, which in turn shapes the way we act” (p.#1). By examining how sexual violence is talked about in public and in the media, we can influence how sexual violence, the victim/survivors, and perpetrators are responded to and held responsible.

Ms. Moffett suggests several myths and distortions about sexual violence that flow from denial about sexual violence.

The first myth/distortion is that the “rapists himself is erased from the equation, with rape becomes not so much a crime, as an act of fate” (p. #2). This can be seen by the common statements used to describe sexual violence – “a woman was raped,” “women are raped,” one in three women are raped in their lifetime”... In all of these kinds of statements, rape isn’t something that is done, it becomes something that happens. “the underlying message is that we [women] are somehow responsible for the bad things that happen to our bodies, and that even if we are extremely careful, bad things could still happen to us” (p. #2).

The following examples are offered:

- A woman was raped this weekend [passive voice, subject has fallen away]
- A woman was raped by a man this weekend. [passive voice]
- A man raped a woman this weekend. [active voice]

Notice the difference in how we “read” these three statements and where we place the responsibility for the rape.

A second myth that flows from the denial about sexual violence has to do with how men who rape are described. When faced with actual situations in which the actor cannot be ignored, public discourse resorts to describing rapists as a monster, or some form of psychopath that is “out there” – i.e. not like the rest of us. In most cases, these descriptions are tainted with the worst of racist and classist stereotypes. This process effectively pushes men who rape to the outer edges of society, thus ensuring that they aren’t recognized as one of us.

“This [“monster narrative”] has enormously problematic consequences for society. If we only accept a certain picture of a rapists, then we are greatly constrained as to which rape scenarios

we can establish as valid” (p. #5). The message becomes, “normal men don’t rape” -- a statement that advocates and activists no is patently false, misleading and ultimately dangerous.

A third myth, relate to the monster narrative described above, is those that depict rape scenarios that reinforce an “otherness” or “us vs. them.” These are seen most patently in the situation of rape as a weapon of war or genocide. It is much more common to describe these kinds of rapes, and to delve into them in ore detail, than it is to describe what is the much more common forms of sexual violence that that occur within communities and among people who know each other. This narrative describing sexual violence further reinforces the myth that sexual violence, when it does “really happen” is something that is perpetrated outside of the realm of normal everyday life.

The narratives, then, reinforce the following myths:

- There is no rapist, rape is something bad that happens to women;
- If there is a rapist, he is a monster, a stranger, a brute or a hardened criminal – not like us;
- Rape, when it “really happens” occurs in war or genocidal situations – far away from here.

Which implies that:

- Rape is a woman’s problem – it has nothing to do with men
- Women aren’t raped by someone “respectable” or that they know or like
- Rape can’t and doesn’t happen in “nice”, safe or secure communities.

Other myths that are round in the way that the media and the public describe sexual violence include:

- The rapist may be aberrant, but rape itself is a biologically normal act which is only made criminal by the victim’s lack of consent
When rape is described as if it is some kind of sexual pressure that got out of control, undermines the ways that rape is about power and control.
- The female body is “rapable” suggesting that rape is not necessarily violent
The vagina is often described and seen as an empty “penis-sized” space – suggesting that it is incomplete without a penis to fill this space. This depiction reinforces the myth that women want sex but aren’t able to ask for it thus fueling the belief in false-reporting.

Some practical steps that can be taken to counter these narratives:

- Used the active voice when discussing sexual violence
- Work to put the rapist back in the picture (“he raped me” as opposed to “I was raped”)
- Openly discuss the need for female sexual arousal as an essential physiological component of sexual intercourse with men. There is no open space waiting for a penis.
- Enforce the reporting of rape in all situations, not those that reinforce stereotypes narratives – especially those that fuel sectarian or racial hatred.
- Develop rape education strategies that are primarily directed at perpetrators or potential perpetrators rather than survivors and potential victims

- Rape should not be framed as a “women’s problem.” It is men who rape, not women.
- Men should be actively engaged in rape prevention strategies
- Educators and practitioners consider using rhetorical inversion “shock” tactics (such as some which are described in the paper) when appropriate
- Update and legal definitions when needed.