

# I. History of Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Efforts

## Origins

Sexual assault prevention is a relatively new field of practice and study, emerging out of the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. In the early Consciousness Raising groups of the feminist movement, women started speaking about their experiences, everything from housework to domestic violence to workplace inequities to sexual assault. The first rape crisis centers were founded as a result of the efforts of these early feminist activists. The Boulder County Rape Crisis Team was the 4<sup>th</sup> such center to open in the country in 1972.

Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, published in 1975, drew widespread attention to the issue of rape. In it, she systematically examined the historical and cultural contexts in which rape and violence against women exist. "Before Brownmiller and other feminist critics ... published work on the subject, rape was discussed, if at all, in terms of aberrant and criminal behavior." [Benson, 1992] The ten years following publication of this book witnessed large increases in public awareness of sexual violence.

In response to public concern, laws began to change. Slowly, some state laws were changed to recognize marital rape, and "rape shield laws" were introduced. (Rape shield laws are laws that bar defense attorneys from introducing evidence about the victim's prior sexual history.) Congress passed the Rape Control Act in 1975.

## Key Concepts About Sexual Violence

Many of the issues raised by feminist critics were later confirmed by research. Two key concepts emerged: (1) Rape and the fear of rape have an impact on every woman's life, and that fear influences choice and restricts freedom; and (2) rapists are not necessarily pathological, but may be extending and exaggerating culturally supported gender role stereotypes. These critics also discussed the prevalence of myths about rape, which distort the facts and inappropriately move the focus of attention from the crime and the assailant to the victim and her behavior.

## Expansion of the Movement

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States experienced a tremendous increase in survivors of sexual violence publicly speaking out, sharing their stories of victimization. This resulted in increased activism around the issues of sexual violence, and the development of services for survivors. These efforts increased public awareness, reduced the trauma to survivors, and raised the demand for programs designed to prevent sexual violence.

## 1980s

The current level of public awareness about acquaintance rape stems largely from the **Ms. Magazine** Project on Campus Sexual Assault in 1984. The project, led by Mary Koss, a renowned researcher, consisted of a self-report questionnaire distributed to a large

number of college students across the United States. The results transformed our understanding of the scope of sexual assault in our society. Koss' work revealed that rape was a common experience, and one that did not match the stereotype of the ugly stranger jumping out of the bushes at night. Robin Warshaw managed to translate the results of the study into compelling stories of real people whose lives were profoundly affected by non-stranger sexual assault. In her 1988 book, *I Never Called It Rape*. The term, "acquaintance rape," became a popularly understood phrase, and the focus of prevention and treatment shifted in response.

People who worked in the field began to understand the root causes of sexual assault, developed and refined programs, and lobbied for support and funding of prevention efforts. Researchers attempted to further document rates of sexual violence, to define prevention, and to conceptualize theories that explained why such problems occurred. From this work emerged what has become an on-going debate about the root causes of the problem and the best way to prevent it.

### **Debates**

Theorists from the prevention field, such as George Albee and William Lofquist, argued that social problems of the time were the result of both structural problems of society and individual defects. They provided theoretical frameworks for the creation, focus and implementation of prevention programs. Nonetheless, much of their work has been limited to prevention efforts focused on youth problem behaviors and chemical dependency, and has not been applied to the field of sexual violence.

### **Activist Advocates**

Activists and rape crisis centers took on the responsibility to prevent sexual violence. Rape crisis centers were founded on the belief that sexual violence occurs as a result of societal attitudes and the distribution of power in our culture. Preventing sexual violence, from this perspective, necessitates changing the power dynamics and the underlying attitudes of society. Their initial prevention strategies focused on raising public awareness, with the goal being to inspire the public to take seriously the goal of ending sexual violence.

### **Empowerment**

As survivors spoke out and public awareness grew, an urgent desire emerged to protect those who were perceived to be most vulnerable to victimization-- women and children. A wide variety of self-defense programs were offered to help women learn to recognize danger and how to respond to a potential assault. These programs ranged from those that developed defensive skills, such as adaptations of traditional martial arts, to controversial re-enactments of potential assaultive situations, as well as self-empowerment programs that often combined education, consciousness-raising, and skill building. While sometimes characterized as prevention programs, these efforts are more correctly understood as rape avoidance strategies.

## **Sexual Assault as a Children's Issue**

The 1980s saw a virtual explosion of efforts to prevent child abuse and child sexual abuse. In response to widespread media coverage of the issue, including some horrific cases of alleged child sexual abuse, numerous programs emerged. Curricula were developed and implemented, children's books were printed, educational videos were made, and pamphlets were distributed to children. These programs were not built on rigorous systematic testing, but rather, sprang out of an urgent desire to respond to these alarming reports.

## **New Legislation**

The '80s were also marked by the passage of legislation aimed at preventing sexual violence through legal deterrence. Across the country, laws were enacted to increase penalties for criminals, and the definition of "rape" was expanded.

## **Institutional Response**

The 1980s saw federal dollars allocated to the prevention of sexual violence. The federal prevention block grants had special set-aside funding for the prevention of sexual violence. During this time, legislators began early work on what is now known as the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), eventually enacted in 1994 as part of the federal Crime Bill.

While government gradually increased funding for the treatment of sexual violence, it was difficult to garner support for prevention from the legislative arenas. Some policy makers viewed sexual assault as a crime and justice problem, while others viewed it as a public health problem. The question was raised whether sexual violence can be most effectively addressed by efforts directed at those who may commit the crime or directed towards the survivors and their communities. This debate continues to be reflected in current legislative language and intent for funding.

## **Institutional Response**

The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by a tremendous increase in the number of survivors seeking services. Survivors of all types of sexual violence came forward, including incest, sexual harassment, date/acquaintance rape, and many other forms of sexual violence. Assisting survivors was an immediate need and became a priority for groups such as the rape crisis centers. As well, public sentiment supported addressing their immediate need. While this may have satisfied the public desire to "do something" about sexual violence, it did nothing to further the goal of preventing it in the first place.

The number of survivors in need of advocacy and assistance overwhelmed many rape crisis centers. While the organizations were committed to social change and ending sexual violence, they had limited resources (including funding). Consequently, organizations focused on meeting the needs of survivors. In addition, many funders were

resistant to funding sexual assault prevention efforts for reasons that included a lack of understanding of the process of social change and a desire for immediate results.

### **The 1990s: Prevention and Accountability**

Prevention programming, especially that which was directed toward children, arose out of the public's desire to do something to protect the most vulnerable. Practitioners rushed to respond and had little or no opportunity to come together to share information, resources, and develop an understanding of what constitutes "best practice."

The 1990s began an era of accountability. Funders, policy makers and the general public started calling for programs and service organizations to be accountable and clearly demonstrate the impact of their work. In the field, practitioners learned much about the efforts they have implemented and some are now taking a critical look at how they do the work. Researchers began to move beyond documenting that sexual violence occurs and understanding who is vulnerable, to looking at what may be effective in the prevention of sexual violence. Programs, projects and curricula are now being evaluated and studied across the country. Practitioners and researchers are cooperating to design appropriate evaluation tools for the prevention field and are beginning to apply those to existing projects.

### **Backlash**

In Susan Faludi's 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, she describes how the messages and the accomplishments of the feminist movement have been manipulated and used against women, in an effort to promote an argument that the feminist movement has been detrimental to the well being of women. During the 1990s the sexual violence movement experienced a similar backlash.

This backlash has arguably most affected the treatment of adult survivors of childhood incest. During the 1980s and 1990s adult survivors of childhood incest became much more vocal and, in some cases, successfully sued perpetrators. In response, groups such as the False Memory Society arose and challenged survivor's stories and their ability to accurately remember abuse which may (or may not) have occurred twenty or more years ago. The False Memory Society challenged therapists who work with adult survivors of incest, accusing them of leading their clients to believe they were victims of events that had not, in fact, occurred. FMS challenged the credibility of therapists who work with this population, and the methods they use in uncovering memories.

The backlash affected the sexual violence prevention field in two primary areas; first, by questioning the validity and impact of programs; secondly, by asserting that the occurrence rates of sexual violence had previously been overstated, and thereby questioning the real need for prevention efforts. As challenging as it was and is for the prevention field to respond to the backlash, in many ways it helped to advance the field. The era of accountability helped practitioners more closely examine what they do and encouraged researchers to further study the field.

**Back to Roots**

Currently, the attention of researchers and practitioners alike is focused more intensely on primary prevention, especially discerning what is effective sexual assault prevention education. Much recent effort has centered on programming for youth and towards reaching the population of potentially sexually aggressive men. A growing consensus is developing among researchers and practitioners that the causes of the problem are found, at least in part, in our sociocultural roots. Addressing these attitudes and beliefs is seen as the key to prevention.

## **References**

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