

Librarians Against Rape Culture!

Raising Consciousness to Uproot Sexual Violence

Consciousness transforms brutal facts and painful realities into new knowledge that exposes power and ignites action.

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Today in the United States over 6000 women will be raped. Do you have an hour lunchbreak? 200 women will be raped while you are eating your lunch. If you are getting the recommended eight hours of sleep, while you sleep tonight 1600 women will be raped. According to the latest National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, nearly 2% of women reported being raped in the last twelve months, with rape defined as “completed or attempted forced penetration or alcohol- or drug-facilitated penetration” (Breiding et al. 4). 157 million women are currently living in the U.S., as reported by the most recent Census (Howden & Meyer 2). Nearly 2% of 157 million is 2,500,000: the number of women raped every year in this country, that we can claim to know about. Given that many women who are raped never report the violence against them to law enforcement, indeed never give public voice of any kind to what has been done to them, it is probable that 2,500,000 is in fact an underestimation of the total number of women raped annually. These numbers speak to the prevalence of rape alone, which by its definition involves penetration or attempted penetration, of the mouth with a penis, of the vagina or anus with a penis, with fingers, a fist, or an object (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1). The reality is that there is more to sexual violence than penetration. If we expand our view to capture other forms of sexual assault – such as undesired fondling

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or groping, undesired exposure to sexual exhibitionism (i.e., “flashing”), and coerced exposure to pornographic media – we are confronted by the following: 43.9% of women will be sexually assaulted during their lifetimes (Breiding et al. 4). The estimated 12-month prevalence of non-penetrative assault is 5.5%, indicating that during your lunchbreak today, nearly 900 women – at least – will be sexually assaulted. In the United States today, sexual violence against women constitutes a public health crisis of epidemic proportions.

As librarians, we have an ethical, professional imperative as well as a tremendous opportunity to confront the systemic injustices that afflict our society, and to galvanize social change. The epidemic of sexual violence against women in the United States is one such injustice, and a grave one, which has not yet been given significant attention in the field of library and information science. This is unfortunate, as I propose that librarians have at our ready disposal the means to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing feminist movement to end sexual violence. In this paper I will review the cultural grounding of endemic sexual violence against women as a social phenomenon and follow with a discussion of approaches librarians might take to make our libraries part of the solution so sorely needed to make ours a truly free society, for all its members – women included.

Certainly the sheer scale of sexual violence against women in this country is staggering: 900 women assaulted in an hour, 6000 women raped daily. What no statistics can sufficiently express, however, is the burden of suffering imposed upon those women who are raped, who are assaulted. Along with natural disasters, combat, and life-threatening accidents, sexual violation is considered a traumatic event, associated with serious and potentially lifelong physical, psychological, emotional, and social consequences for victims. Anxiety, fear, a sense of guilt and shame are common in the aftermath of an assault, as are depression, nightmares, insomnia, substance abuse, and a general deterioration in personal health and well-being (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral 3; Eby, Campbell, Sullivan & Davidson 569; Chrisler & Ferguson 239; Jina & Thomas 16-19). For women who have endured sexual violence, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is not merely a possible consequence but a probable one. A review of the psychological impacts of sexual violence determined that, in the majority of studies, between 33-45% of women with a lifetime history of sexual assault were reported to develop PTSD (Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral 3). PTSD has also been found to be more common among survivors of sexual violence than among any other group of trauma survivors, including soldiers returning from combat (Olantunjo et al. 1093; Kessler et al. 1052-1053). This burden of trauma has financial implications for sexually assaulted women, who have been found to incur significant healthcare expenses and income losses as a result of their victimization (Chrisler & Ferguson 239). Since women are more likely than men to live in poverty, and women of color and women in

low-income households are disproportionately exposed to sexual violence, the expenses and losses in income associated with rape trauma have the effect of furthering women's socio-economic, thus political, marginalization (Hess & Román 1; Planty et al. 3; Breiding et al. 5).

It is without doubt an injustice that millions of women each year endure sexual assault, lasting trauma, and marginalization. What must also be recognized is that it is not inevitable. It is not an inexorable fact of life that millions of women should be subject to sexual violence. Rape is not a force of nature. It is a social phenomenon, with social causes and social consequences.

During the women's liberation movement that developed through the 1970s and '80s, feminists rallied to raise public consciousness of sexual violence, fighting for legal reform and social change, and developing much-needed outreach services, such as rape crisis centers, to provide support for victims of violence, who before had been all too often left without assistance or recourse of any kind (Bevacqua, 2000). Of equal importance was the new understanding of rape proposed by feminist writers and thinkers of this era. Their crucial insight was that rape and sexual assault are not "natural" – not biologically determined – nor ineliminable – not an immovable feature of the human condition – but instead linked to the patriarchal organization of western society. By this understanding, sexual violence as social phenomenon is a manifestation of male cultural and political dominance. It is a fact that women make up the majority of the raped, and men the vast majority of the perpetrators (Breiding et al. 1). Indeed, an estimated 99% of female rape victims are raped by males, and when men are raped, in roughly 80% of cases they too are raped by males (Breiding et al. 5). Feminist activists and writers like Susan Griffin (1971), Susan Brownmiller (1975), Andrea Dworkin (1976; 1983; 1987), and others have argued that men's sexual violence is directly related to the political situation of patriarchy, as a symptom of human sexuality molded within the context of male-dominated society, and as an instrument of women's ongoing oppression.

In her cross-cultural study of rape in tribal societies, Peggy Reeves Sanday offered compelling evidence in support of the feminist assertion that rape, like all sexual behavior, is determined by sociopolitical and sociocultural context rather than by biology. She observed consistent differences between the cultures she studied with a low incidence of rape compared to those cultures with a high incidence. "Rape prone" cultures were characterized by the social stratification of men and women into discrete classes, by male dominance and an objectifying view of women as men's property, and high levels of other forms of interpersonal violence (Sanday 63). Sexual interaction was conceived as essentially and inherently hostile, a contest between men and women which the man must win to prove his manhood, while constructions of masculinity – what it means to be a man – were inseparably entwined with aggression and

conquest. One example of a “rape prone” culture Sanday cites is the Gusii people of southwestern Kenya, among whom a high rape rate (as estimated in the mid-1950s) was complemented by a cultural tradition among Gusii males to use sexual force on their wedding nights with the aim of inducing their new wives to cry, the women’s pain serving as testimony to the men’s virility (60). Conversely, “rape free” cultures were marked by greater equity between the sexes, respect for women as individuals, minimal interpersonal violence, and a reverence for the natural world. In these cultures, the concept of masculinity was not constructed around the image of the warrior. An example of a “rape free” society that Sanday describes is the Mbuti people of the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Mbuti culture, the relationship between the sexes was defined by mutual respect and balance of power, with minimal sex role division and an almost complete absence of interpersonal violence (65). Based on Sanday’s findings, a social etiology for sexual violence can be inferred: the acceptance and even valorization of violence in all its manifestations – and eroticized male violence in particular – fused to a foundational ideology of male supremacy.

In the United States, popular media such as television programs, movies, and novels are saturated by imagery and narratives glorifying violence. Men’s violence is of particular popularity in mainstream media, the manly-man warrior with chiseled muscles and a righteous contempt for all things “soft” being the preeminent heroic figure of our cultural imaginary. Relations between men and women are conceptualized in terms of an antagonistic “battle of the sexes.” The current congress is over 80% male (Manning, J.E. 7), and men hold CEO positions in roughly 96% at S&P 500 companies (Catalyst). During the 2014 trial of Owen Labrie, a young man accused of raping a fifteen-year-old female classmate at the prestigious New Hampshire boarding school he attended, witnesses testified that male students at the school used the strikingly macabre term “slaying” as slang for sexual intercourse (Manning, A.). Together these facts reveal that in the United States men’s violence is not merely tolerated but celebrated; that masculinity is bound to aggression as intransigently as sexuality is to violence; and that, in spite of the gains made by the feminist movement, there remains severe political and economic inequality between men and women. Hence, the U.S. meets Sanday’s criteria for classification as a “rape prone” society, one characterized by a high prevalence of sexual violence against women. It is therefore unsurprising that the 2010 European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control International Statistics on Crime and Criminal Justice report identifies the United States as having among the highest reported rape rates in the world (Harrendorf, S., Heiskanen, M. & Malby, S. eds. 25). Indeed, the U.S. was determined to have the tenth highest rape rate among all countries that participated in the survey, with approximately 30 reported rapes per 100,000 individuals. In this report, the country with the highest reported

rate was South Africa, while others on the “top ten” list included Australia (#2), Canada (#4), Suriname (#6), Sweden (#7), and New Zealand (#9). The survey found that Asian countries tended to have the lowest reported rape rates.

While in the context of a “rape prone” society sexual violence against women emerges as if inevitable, its emergence – and persistence – is the product of social, cultural and political factors that promote sexual inequality, male violence, and the eroticization of aggression. Fortunately, social, cultural, and political conditions can be altered: because they have been imposed by humans over the course of history, it is within our power as human beings to deconstruct them. We need resign ourselves neither to patriarchal domination, nor the rape epidemic that is its consequence and its enforcement. Rather, we must begin working to incite the social transformation that will bring it to an end.

As librarians, particularly (but by no means exclusively) those of us who work in public library settings, we are well-situated to act as agents of change in the communities we serve. Libraries are among the most trusted of all community institutions, giving us reason to anticipate that, were we to take a visible stance in opposition to rape culture, we could have a real impact on the public perception of men’s sexual violence against women, effecting increased recognition of such violence as a serious social problem in urgent need of remedy (Horrigan; Willingham 9). As librarians we thus find ourselves in an ideal position to claim a leading role in galvanizing large-scale community-level resistance to rape culture. Since we are presented with an opportunity to capitalize on the public’s faith in libraries to catalyze a shift in consciousness that could advance the movement to end men’s sexual violence against women, it is our imperative to embrace it, for our sisters and our daughters, ourselves, for all women not only in our communities but around the globe. Sexual violence is a fixture of the oppression of women everywhere.

We must act. But what can we do?

Inspired by Lynn Westbrook’s terrific work on the role of libraries in providing outreach to women abused by husbands and boyfriends in situations of intimate partner violence (see: Westbrook, 2009; Westbrook & Gonzalez, 2011; Westbrook, 2012; Houston & Westbrook, 2013; Westbrook, 2015), for my Master’s paper as a student in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I chose to study how libraries might extend similar support to victims of rape and sexual assault. While many women are sexually assaulted by abusive boyfriends and husbands, sexual violence also occurs outside the context of intimate relationships, and in either case carries with it consequences and concerns distinct from those associated with physical or psychological violence. However, there is a significant gap in the library and information science literature regarding how libraries might serve those who have been sexually victimized. Indeed, a review of the literature unearthed only one paper specifically addressing libraries and sexual violence

(Wilmoth, 2008). As an initial effort to attend to the gap, I sought to identify the unique information needs of sexually assaulted women, for which purpose I interviewed victim advocates at a rape crisis center nearby the University. My ultimate goal was to develop recommendations for library-based programs and services that would fulfill these needs.

Yet it is not enough simply to assist women after they have been assaulted. As Andrea Dworkin wrote, “To think about helping a rape victim is one thing; to think about ending rape is another” (“Remember, Resist, Do Not Comply” 172). If we do not strive for the eradication of rape, there will be a never-ending stream of victims, and we will be struggling to assist woman after woman, one after another, forever. For a wound continuously re-opened, to apply fresh bandages by the hour is meager antidote; the only solution is the radical one: to uncover whatever is making the cut and disarm it. Anything less and the wound will never heal. Unwilling to settle for a Band-Aid, I sought to outline strategies for providing library-based support to sexually victimized women that would simultaneously work towards unmaking rape culture, by increasing public awareness of the problem of sexual violence, its causes and consequences as a social phenomenon, and our shared obligation – and power – to expunge it.

One approach to library response that accomplishes the dual goals of assisting victims and confronting rape culture is to publicly evince awareness of, and opposition to, men’s sexual violence through the institution of library services designed to support those women (and those fewer men) who have been assaulted. Westbrook writes that librarians can become what she calls “guerilla activists” by providing information assistance to victims of intimate partner violence (“Private Crises/Public Responses” 8). Specifically, she highlights the need for librarians to intervene in and thus improve the information provision processes of public response organizations, as in the field of criminal justice, which are critical to victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) but which do not consistently extend effective assistance to these individuals, making it difficult for women to successfully escape abusive relationships. Westbrook invokes the term “guerilla” to emphasize how librarians who work to renovate information pathways and enhancing available information resources in order to assist vulnerable and systematically underserved individuals challenge the institutionalized power structures that reproduce social inequality.

To similar ends, we can serve as “guerilla advocates” for victims of sexual violence, applying our expertise to aid them in navigating the convoluted post-assault processes of obtaining medical attention, undergoing forensic examination for evidence collection, filing reports with law enforcement, and moving forward with court proceedings should they choose to pursue legal action against their attackers. Clear and comprehensible information regarding these processes is not readily accessible to many women, and as I learned in conversation with victim advocates, questions regarding reporting, medical

care, and the legal process comprise the FAQ's of sexual assault victims. As information professionals, we can create the materials that these women need, such as easy-to-read guidance on reporting an assault, or fact sheets about the Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE) procedure. We can make the information they need readily available in our libraries, and be prepared to provide such information at the reference desk. We can educate library staff about sexual violence, so that our staff can better assist assaulted women without acting upon injurious misconceptions about what it means to be a victim of sexual violence. Librarians who have lived through sexual violence themselves may consider sharing their stories, as a means to open lines of communication with other victims who may feel more comfortable reaching out to someone they know has survived a similar traumatic experience.

Moving beyond library walls and into the community, we can pursue relationships with other local agencies and organizations concerned with assisting victims and countering rape culture. Collaboration is essential to the maximization of resources, through fostering creative problem solving and generating increased visibility around a particular problem. In order to confront and effectively combat the problem of rape culture, it is necessary that librarians be proactive in reaching out to nearby rape crisis centers, which provide services to victims as well as public education on the subject of sexual violence. There are many ways that libraries can demonstrate solidarity with these organizations: publicizing the services that these centers offer, promoting the fundraising events and volunteering opportunities crucial to these centers' survival, offering our spaces for their events and programs, collaborating in the creation of informative materials (e.g. pamphlets, fact sheets). In addition to working with rape crisis centers, we can enter into further partnerships with members of the local Sexual Assault Response Team (SART), such as law enforcement, forensic units at local hospitals, and concerned individuals in the district attorney's office. Such partnerships would be invaluable in establishing the library as an official information resource for victims and a community institution active in sexual violence prevention. By taking the initiative and getting involved in these simple but powerful ways, librarians have the potential to emend the infrastructure of public sexual violence response while reinforcing the necessity of holistic, community-wide approaches to deconstructing rape culture.

To complement assistive services and collaborations, I encourage librarians to take full advantage of the library's role as a community hub to raise consciousness around the issue of sexual violence against women through topical programming and conspicuous resistance. Too often rape and sexual assault are obscured by silence: the victim is silenced by a patriarchal culture that wrongly imposes blame on victimized women rather than their male victimizers; silence permeates a society that has deemed sexual violence an

“inappropriate” subject for public conversation. Answering with silence rather than strident reproach, society enable patterns of sexual violence and sexual inequality to perpetuate. Hence, we who want to disrupt these patterns must elevate our voices. If our opposition to rape culture is to instigate social change in our communities, our stance must be visible and unmistakable, our commitment to ending sexual violence broadcast in no uncertain terms to the public we serve. Achieving visibility need not be a difficult undertaking. In our lobbies and at our help desks we should make available materials about the scope of sexual violence against women in the United States, resources available to victims within our communities, and guidance on supporting friends, family and community members who have been sexually assaulted. Posters about sexual violence, readily obtainable from national organizations such as the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), might be posted in oft-used areas of the library (e.g. entryways and restrooms). We can organize events and programs in April, Sexual Assault Awareness Month, or year-round: speak-outs that give victims a platform for sharing their accounts of violence and survival; exhibitions of victims’/survivors’ art and writings; public classes on sexual violence prevention; forums on such facets of rape culture as sexism, male entitlement, and the glorification of violence; healthy sexuality and media literacy workshops for young adults. If there are events elsewhere in our communities that relate to sexual violence prevention, such as lectures or Take Back the Night marches, these should be publicized in our newsletters and on our websites.

In addition to supplementing existing library offerings with new services and programs addressing sexual violence, it is equally necessary that we be self-critical and consider library policies already in place. Careful attention must be paid to the various ways that we, in our libraries, could be unintentionally, unconsciously fortifying the social, cultural and political conditions that foment men’s sexual violence against women. One area of librarianship where critical reflection is of particular salience is collection development. How do the materials that we bring into the library reaffirm or, conversely, subvert the ideological foundations of rape culture, e.g. male dominance, misogyny, or the objectification of women? What messages are the materials we purchase sending to our patrons, about women, about men, about sexuality, about violence? As an example, many libraries subscribe to women’s fashion and men’s “lifestyle” magazines that encourage women to conceptualize themselves as sexualized objects, defined by their attractiveness, and men to view women as sexualized objects placed on earth for men’s enjoyment. Thus these magazines endorse two primary principles of rape culture: the depersonalization of women into sexual objects, and male entitlement to female bodies for sexual use. An additional example would be novels written for boys and men which promote conceptions of masculinity as physically aggressive and dominating. Are we

obligated to host these materials in our libraries, merely because they exist, and because the current cultural ethos ensures a demand for them? If we are committed to deconstructing our contemporary rape culture, we must be purposeful in our collection development decisions instead of quietly acceding to the status quo and purchasing materials that endorse patriarchal and male supremacist values. A related concern is the viewing of Internet pornography in the library. Pornographic media is saturated with misogyny, sexual hostility and sexual violence; to say that pornography objectifies women for men's purposes transcends understatement. What are the implications when we grant men license to publicly view materials that degrade women in our library spaces? This is a question that must never be excluded from the conversation regarding library policies on pornography. Libraries can be spaces where rape culture is actively resisted, where a vision of a world without male violence against women is drafted, or they can be spaces where the injustices of the status quo are reproduced, to the detriment of the oppressed, to the benefit of the privileged. Social change requires conscious choice.

The recommendations outlined above represent some of the many different options available to librarians who seek to join the struggle to end sexual violence against women. They are not intended to encompass the whole of approaches librarians might take, but instead to serve as an introduction to how we might begin to confront a problem that has as yet received scarce attention from our profession. The epidemic of sexual violence in the United States is an emergency situation; it demands an emergency response. I want you to understand that the only thing you can do that would be truly disastrous would be to do nothing, to accept that in our society one out of five women will be a victim of sexual violence before she dies, and one of every three men admits he would force a woman into sexual acts if he was assured he could get away with it (Breiding et al 4; Edwards, Bradshaw & Hinz 190); to concede to the depreciation of human sexuality by patriarchal imperatives into an interaction defined by hostility and aggression, a political weapon against women. If we do not strive to transform culture, the conditions that have rendered it a war zone for women will only worsen. Left unchallenged, the rape culture of male power and female victimization will become ever more firmly rooted. As librarians, we have a role to play in uprooting it. Using our professional skills and resources, notably the public's regard for the library as a trusted institution, we can raise consciousness and ignite grassroots community responses to the problem of sexual violence. Through services for victimized women, collaboration with community agencies striving against sexual violence, targeted programming, thoughtful collection development and policy-making, and continuous conversation, we can join forces with our communities to push back against rape culture. Together, committed to a shared vision of transformation, we can overturn rape culture and embark on the creation of another reality, one in

which women can move through their lives free from men's sexual terrorism, from rape, assault, patriarchal oppression – a society in which women can be free.

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