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~ Preventing Sexual Assault ~ A Quest in Need of a Compass

When it comes to sexual violence, or any violence against women, an ounce of prevention would be worth far more than the proverbial pound of gold. Once these assaults occur, there's really no way to undo all the damage that's been done. We desperately need effective prevention to stop this violence before it occurs. Women's freedom and lives depend on it. But despite decades of school and community programs aimed at preventing sexual assault, finding that ounce of prevention that truly works, has proven a quest without a compass in very stormy waters.

At least today there is growing recognition that the once standard prevention fare of plying young women and kids with a litany of things they should and shouldn't do not only doesn't work, it's a strategy that actually reinforces rape dynamics by shifting responsibility away from perpetrators. As often as not, it backfires on the very victims it presumes to help.

In 2004, the U.S. Dept. of Justice (DOJ) reported on their two year review of 59 different sexual assault prevention programs which had been subject to one degree or another of evaluation. The DOJ report, titled *An Evidence Based Review of Sexual Assault Prevention Intervention Programs*, began by noting the general lack of rigor of the evaluations they reviewed. At best, the summary states, "...evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programs is weak, and sometimes contradictory."

According to the report, most of the program evaluations

they reviewed made moderate claims of positive results. But the positive results claimed generally consisted of participant's increased knowledge of facts about sexual assault or improvement in attitudes, neither of which can remotely be said to translate into a reduction of sexual assault. In its conclusion, the report underlined the critical need for long term, rigorously designed studies that would measure actual effects on rates of sexual assaults; costly studies which, to date, have not been done.

Since the 2004 DOJ study, however, the search for 'evidence-based' sexual assault prevention programs has heated up considerably. There's been lively experimentation with interesting new programs. But the longed for rigorous scientific proof that this or that program actually works to reduce assaults is just not there. And the term 'evidence based' in front of each new program is being thrown about as loosely as ever.

Nonetheless, the timeless legend of the apple falling from the tree onto Isaac Newton's head reminds us that important clues can come as much from keen observation of the world around us as from tightly controlled studies.

In this issue of *Justicia* we look at some current trends in sexual assault prevention, take a few clues from the living landscape, and find some glaring gaps as well as some promising paths to pursue.



Preventing Sexual Assault

From San Francisco Progressives, It's the Rooster's Crowing that Makes the Sun Come Up

On October 24, 2009, in an empty courtyard in Richmond, CA, a 15-year-old girl was beaten and raped for over two hours by at least 7 perpetrators while as many as two dozen others variously cheered, joined in, photographed, and gathered others to the scene for the fun. On October 29, San Francisco public radio KQED broadcast a one hour forum on the causes and prevention of these crimes.

Despite a progressive host, expert guests, and liberal bay area callers, the all-too-predictable rape prevention litany filled the hour. What's needed are less drugs and alcohol, more civility among youth, more supervision, less violent video games, better court yard lighting, less gangs, less poverty, better intervention in bystander psychology, less racism...

Done! Another brutal rape successfully buried under a barrage of obfuscation. There was zero discussion of sexism, oppression of women, or male violence. The word misogyny did surface for a second, received no comment, and was vanished without further ado. This despite the fact that all 30 plus participants in the crime were male; the same as is true in over 98% of all rapes.

The tenor of the broadcast is no surprise. Over the last 15 years, rape prevention discussions have been steadfastly stripped of gendered analysis and women's rights framework. From school programs to talk shows, they've been tamed by relentless accusations of 'male bashing' and a knot of bogus studies 'proving' women are as violent as men. Even many rape crisis centers have succumbed to the gender neutral stance.

And it's no accident. Illegitimate powers thrive best by constantly diverting attention from the roots of their illegitimacy. Rape is both an enforcement and reinforcement of male domination. No other offense so starkly asserts the split between male supremacy on the one side and female subordination on the other. Patriarchal power is protected by blurring that line. Preventing rape requires exposing it.

What's especially disturbing is the extent to which even the most progressive voices of our society have drunk the cool aid. It's the rooster's crowing, they've come to agree, that makes the sun come up

in the morning, the sky is green, and more civility, better lighting, and less alcohol are the potion for preventing rape.

From Haiti, Clarity in Crisis

Days after the Haiti quake ended the lives of 250,000 people, the world braced tensely as the lives of another two million Haitians hung on the brink of death by dehydration and hunger. A frightening country-wide outbreak of violence was strangling relief efforts at every turn. Supply trucks were being attacked and overwhelmed. Food was being stolen from people's hands and sold on black markets. Violent brawls swept through the food lines.

The violence had to be stopped! There was no room for myth, taboos, tradition, games, obfuscation, or smoke and mirrors. The UN's World Food Program made a bold dictate. Women and children only in the food lines! No men allowed!

From one day to the next a national epidemic of violence was stopped. Problem solved! Prevention par excellence! It would be near impossible to design a more definitive study, nor obtain more conclusive results.

Just as illuminating for this discussion is that for a very brief moment, the world response was amazingly sane. There was no rabid outcry of 'male bashing', nor accusations of 'feminazi schemes'. Nor was anyone waving about those ridiculous studies proving that women are just as violent as men. Because, truly, anyone who inhabits planet earth is fully aware that when it comes to violence, from rape to militarism, the core of the problem resides in male behavior.

Most of the world is not on the brink of dying tomorrow. But we are on the brink nonetheless. The violence has to be stopped. And there isn't time for the games. Critical questions need to be answered. What is it about the way we raise boys? Where are the intervention points in male behavior? What will motivate the changes? And many more.

But until we stop pretending the problem isn't gendered we'll never even get to the questions.

From Men on the Horizon, Advances and Ambiguities

One of the most hopeful developments in recent years has been a new corps of men's groups dedicated to engaging men in ending sexual assault. Their explorations, to the good, are raising a whole new set of questions.



In a research paper published this year in the journal, *Sexualities*, sociologist Tatiana Masters analyses the approach of six of these national men's groups and points to some of the dilemmas.

Some of the men's groups appeal to traditional male identified characteristics such as strength, manhood, protectiveness, and heroism, as in the "My Strength is Not for Hurting" campaign. But, Masters asks, doesn't this then only fortify the rigid sex role divide of 'men are strong and women weak' that is a well known factor in fostering rape?

She contrasts this with other of the men's groups that have taken the opposite tack of attempting to soften role distinctions by encouraging men to open up to the feminine in themselves by embracing compassion and nurturing. Here Masters asks the equally compelling question of whether this approach can appeal to enough men to matter.

On another facet of strategy, she finds the groups vary in the extent to which they hold all men to account for rape. Some groups do what the author calls 'othering', i.e., the 'rapists are bad men, we are good men' approach as illustrated in the "Real Men Don't Rape" campaign. In contrast, other groups ask all men to inspect the way their own behaviors are part of a continuum of rape culture. How much the message can be massaged and still be effective is open to question. But, at least, it's a beginning.

From the Front Lines, The Bystander Model, One Step Forward, Many Left to Go

At the forefront of evolving strategies is what's known as the bystander model. It's an unfortunate naming, really, because it conjures the image of teaching people to intervene in an actual rape, which isn't the core idea at all. The premise of the bystander model is teaching individuals and communities how to intervene in the culture of rape, with the ultimate goal of changing the community norms that support rape.

(For one example of this model, and related resources, see *Sexual Violence and the Spectrum of Prevention* at http://www.nsvrc.org/_cms/fileUpload/spectrum.pdf)

An encouraging step forward is that the bystander model abandons the approach of telling women what they should do to prevent rape, an approach most now agree does more harm than good. And it recognizes a certain futility in telling rapists not to rape. Instead the bystander model speaks to both males and females as agents of cultural change. The message is positive. And it recognizes the need for everyone in all community positions to change. Strategically, the bystander model parallels

the successful modern public health 'ecological model' of disease prevention.

And therein lies its defect. Rape is much more deeply rooted than a cultural phenomena, and more intentionally and maliciously driven than a socially neutral disease. The model neglects the intense concentration of patriarchal power in male dominated institutions that protects rape as an effective instrument for maintaining the social, political, economic, and sexual subordination of women. These entrenched concentrations of male power can easily overwhelm whatever cultural shift may be gained, as the following example shows.

From the Vatican, Accusations of "Petty Gossip"

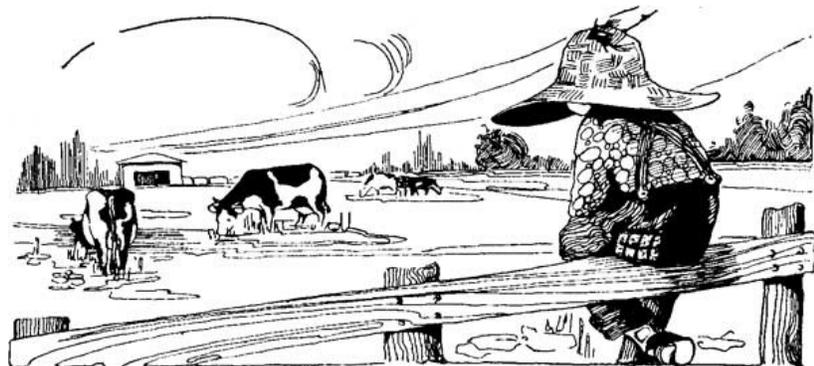
Take any male dominated institution - law enforcement, sports, the military, corporations, the boy scouts, the media, - each in their own terrain have easily pushed back cultural and even legislative attempts to end sexual assault. We take the Catholic Church because details are so fresh.

According to the bystander model, the problem of child sex abuse in the church should be solved. Public norms have long ago turned against the church's covering for pedophile priests. And church policies and state reporting laws are established.

But despite decades of victims coming forward, their stories are still being met by accusations of "petty gossip" from the Vatican. And in the U.S., in just the past few weeks, the church has lobbied intensely, and successfully, in at least three states to defeat legislation that would have allowed the victims to seek justice in civil courts.

Here in Sonoma County Bishop Walsh was brought in ten years ago to fix the local priest sex abuse problem. A month ago, Walsh rejected the recommendation of his own advisory committee to remove a priest, despite the committee's two year investigation into the case.

And two years ago when Walsh ignited public outrage by delaying reporting a known molester priest, allowing the priest time to flee, we see how other patriarchal institutions galvanized to protect Walsh. The district attorney declined to prosecute Walsh's clear criminal violation. And 13 male business leaders signed a joint missive in the Press



Democrat calling for compassion - not for the victims, but compassion for Bishop Walsh!

A mere shift in public norms can no more overturn that kind of power than it can end the financial theft of America by the mega-banks. Any serious effort at rape prevention has to expose the patriarchal power locked deep in the history and structures of society's most cherished institutions. And then teach how to dismantle and re-envision it.

From the Future, The Lure of a More Powerful Vision

On first take, It seems a battle royal to anchor rape prevention in a gendered women's rights framework, and to push communities to dig deeper to uproot the powerful structures that sustain it. But on second thought, it may be that it's precisely because rape is being presented as little more than an offensive cultural phenomena that communities see little reason to mobilize and marshall the needed forces to end it.



But if communities are given to understand sexual violence as a controlling instrument for holding all the world's women in fear and submission, and as a primary supporting pillar of menacing patriarchal powers, then eliminating rape

becomes nothing less than a mission to change the world, a luminary vision worth fighting for. There just isn't time for anything less!

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