

## Myths & realities: sexual assault & our society's misconceptions

**MYTH: Sexual assault happens because sex-starved men can't control themselves.**

REALITY: Sexual assault is a devastating weapon used to dominate another person. For the offender, it's all about achieving a feeling of power and control, not about lust or uncontrollable sexual desires.

Sexual assault is a brutal crime of violence, yet it's usually committed by ordinary people leading outwardly respectable lives. In fact, 80% of reported sexual assault cases involve an offender who is known by the victim: an acquaintance, co-worker, friend or relative (Statistics Canada, 2003).

**MYTH: Sexual assault usually occurs in a dark, isolated location.**

REALITY: More than half of all sexual assaults take place in the victim's own home, or within 1.6 kilometres of it. Another 20% of sexual assaults happen in the home of a friend, neighbour or relative.

**MYTH: Only young, attractive women are sexually assaulted.**

REALITY: Nobody is immune to sexual assault. Women and men, children and seniors, the disabled - people who have been sexually assaulted or sexually abused are found in every Alberta city and hamlet, in every cultural and demographic segment of our society.

The vast majority of sexual assault victims are women: nearly four in 10 Canadian women have experienced sexual assault since the age of 16. Indigenous women and women with disabilities are at even higher risk.

The most extensive study of child sexual abuse in Canada found that 53% of women and 31% of men encountered some form of sexual abuse as children. In fact, it's very likely that each of us knows someone who has experienced sexual assault or abuse during their lifetime.

**MYTH: Women can provoke sexual assault by their behavior or the way they're dressed. That makes them at least partly responsible when it happens.**

REALITY: Nobody ever deserves to become a victim of violent crime, which is exactly what sexual assault is. Sexual assault is NEVER the fault of the person it happens to, not under any circumstances.

Offenders will often claim that a woman's dress or behavior "made" them act out to rationalize their crime. It doesn't matter where the victim was, what they were wearing (or not wearing), or how they were talking or acting. And it doesn't matter whether they were drinking or using drugs. Offenders choose sexual assault; they are entirely responsible for their choice to hurt another person.

**MYTH: Women say "no" when they really mean "yes."**

REALITY: "No" means NO. End of story. Today's culture conditions us to believe that the line of sexual consent is conveniently blurry. When a woman drinks too much, accepts a ride home with a man or even winds up on his sofa or in his bed, her consent to have sex is often assumed or taken for granted.

The Criminal Code of Canada defines "consent" as a "voluntary agreement" to engage in sexual activity. If a woman says "no" to sex verbally or shows it through her conduct, that consent doesn't exist. If she's asleep, drunk or

passed out, she's incapable of consenting to sex. And even if a woman does initially agree to engage in sexual activity, that consent instantly disappears if she changes her mind AT ANY POINT.

If a woman says "no" and a man doesn't accept it but instead continues to pressure or force her into any sexual activity, he's committing sexual assault. And he can't claim being drunk or high on drugs as his own excuse for believing someone consented to having sex with him.

Healthy sexual relationships include elements of equality and respect. The bottom line: if BOTH people in a sexual encounter haven't knowingly, willingly and clearly agreed to be involved, it's likely that sexual assault has occurred. And that's a crime.

**MYTH: She didn't fight back and there are no bruises. Sexual assault only occurs when there's an actual struggle or physical injury.**

REALITY: Sexual assault is a violent crime whether or not physical resistance or injury occurs. Many sexual assault victims are shocked by what's happening and simply "freeze." Many women are too intimidated or terrified to try defending themselves. They may decide that the overwhelming power or size of the attacker makes it very dangerous to resist.

Eighty per cent of reported sexual assault cases involve an offender who is known to the victim: an acquaintance, co-worker, friend or relative (Statistics Canada, 2003). These offenders may be more likely to use tricks, verbal pressure, threats or "mild" force rather than extreme violence.

**MYTH: Some women can't be sexually assaulted (sex trade workers), or are unlikely targets (lesbians, seniors, women of color, women with disabilities).**

REALITY: No demographic group of women is safe from sexual assault or immune to the emotional and physical trauma caused by sexual assault. Women who have been victimized are found in every Alberta city and hamlet, in every cultural and demographic segment of our society.

Women from "marginalized" communities, including immigrant or refugee women, elderly women, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, lesbians, homeless women, women in prison and women from low-income households can be - and are - sexually assaulted with the same alarming frequency as other women. In some cases the risk is even greater.

- Aboriginal women are highly vulnerable to sexual assault. Rates of reported sexual assault are more than three times higher for Aboriginal women than non-Aboriginal women in the United States (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1999).
- In a review of several studies of Aboriginal women's experiences of abuse in both reserve and non-reserve communities, Hylton (2006) indicated that 24 to 75 % of Aboriginal women reported at least one experience of sexual abuse.
- A Canadian study estimates that 40% of women with disabilities have had some experience with assault, sexual assault, or childhood sexual abuse (Stimpson and Best, 1991). It's estimated that women with disabilities are 1.5 to 10 times more likely to be abused than non-disabled women, depending on whether they live in the community or in institutions (Sobsey, 1988).

- Lesbian women are affected by sexual violence too. A study found that 20% of lesbians had experienced some form of emotional/psychological or physical violence while in a relationship with another woman.
- Women who work in the sex trade have the same right to say “no” to sexual activity as any other woman. No one should ever be compelled or forced to engage in sex against their will.

**MYTH: Sexual assault would decrease if women made a bigger effort to protect themselves.**

REALITY: Sexual abuse and sexual assault have always been regarded as "women's issues" that women are supposed to deal with. Efforts to stop sexual assault have generally been focused on getting girls and women to change the way they conduct their daily lives in order to reduce risk: not walking alone, avoiding isolated areas, watching how they dress - even carrying pepper spray.

But we know that these defensive tactics don't prevent sexual assault. Public safety is not the sole responsibility of women or of the victims of sexual violence. Most men will never commit a sexual crime, yet men are responsible for the huge majority of sexual abuse and sexual assault.

Real, long-term change won't happen until men do their part to challenge the attitudes and behaviors that put down and degrade women. If we keep thinking about the sexual abuses and sexual assaults committed by men as a "women's issue," we're not going to do much about truly preventing that violence.

Every woman has the right to live in a society where male violence against women is not acceptable. Not legally, not morally, not socially. Pepper spray and self-defense classes won't do much to make that happen. For change to occur, non-offending men need to stand up against sexually abusive behaviors and attitudes they see in other men.

**MYTH: Men can't be sexually assaulted.**

REALITY: Sexual assault is not an experience only women endure. Men can be, and are, sexually assaulted every day. It can happen to any guy, regardless of his sexual orientation, size, strength, appearance, occupation, race or culture. It happens at home, at work, in locker rooms and in cars - just about anywhere a perpetrator thinks he can get away with it.

It's not unusual for a male victim to "freeze" out of shock or fear of physical harm. Few, if any, men have ever considered the possibility of such a thing happening and are therefore totally unprepared.

Studies show that 10 to 20% of males (boys, youths and adults) are sexually violated at some time in their lives. And on the rare occasions when a sexual assault against a male gets reported, the victim is often doubted, labeled "gay" or even blamed for what's happened to them. We don't hear about male sexual assault because the men it happens to often choose to suffer its effects alone and in silence.

**MYTH: Men can't be sexually assaulted by women.**

REALITY: Women can and do sexually abuse and assault men, but it's a crime that rarely gets reported by the victim. If you include emotional blackmail as a way of forcing a male to submit to sexual assault, then the number of crimes greatly increases.

Sexual assault of a male by a female does not have to involve penile penetration; a female attacker can use sex toys or other foreign objects on an unwilling male. It's also not uncommon for males to experience involuntary erections during a sexual assault.

**MYTH: Sexual assault between lesbian partners doesn't exist.**

REALITY: Sexual abuse and sexual assault can occur within any relationship. Through physical, psychological or emotional coercion, some lesbian women are forced by their partners to engage in non-consensual sexual acts. A lesbian woman in a committed relationship is not the sexual property of her partner.

**MYTH: Only gay men sexually assault other men.**

REALITY: The vast majority of male offenders who sexually abuse or assault other men identify themselves as heterosexual. Some offenders target males simply because it gives them a greater feeling of dominance, power and control than abusing a woman.

Sexual assault is about violence and anger, not lust or sexual attraction. The vast majority of males who target boys for sexual abuse are not gay.

**MYTH: Kids lie about being sexually abused.**

REALITY: It's commonly believed that children make up stories or lie about sexual abuse, but this is extremely rare. Young children usually don't have the knowledge or language skills to misinterpret adult behavior or to invent such stories. It's much more common for sexually abused children to minimize what's happened to them - or to recant their stories after disclosure - than it is for non-abused children to lie about sexual abuse (Health Canada, 1997).

In fact, the majority of children who are sexually abused don't tell anyone that it has happened to them.

**MYTH: Boys who experience child sexual abuse will grow up to become abusers themselves.**

REALITY: Although premature sexual experiences can cause profound emotional damage to boys, most male survivors don't repeat the abuses that happened to them.

In fact, statistics show that many men who commit sexual abuse or sexual assault actually suffered from something OTHER than child sexual abuse (most likely physical or emotional abuse or witnessing domestic violence) when they were young.