

SCSU Women's Center Statement on Victim-blaming and Accountability for Patriarchal Violence



WOMEN'S CENTER
ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY

Feminist analysis of patriarchal violence¹ recognizes violence as a functional tool of oppression (e.g., a dominant group forces submission of a subordinate group, particularly through an illusion of consent or when non-obvious coercive routes are exhausted).

Sexual violence, and all forms of gender and power-based abuse, are forms of *political and social oppression* that are not the result of an individual survivor's choices, ontology, identity, vulnerability, character, or reputation.

SCSU Women's Center uses, and is not opposed to, risk-reduction² as a general concept, idea, or strategy. The Women's Center does employ some risk and harm-reduction strategies (e.g., education on egalitarian/ethical relationships and sexual consent and communication). However, many common risk-reduction strategies perpetuate oppressive belief systems rooted in sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, white supremacy, neoliberalism, etc. Many common risk-reduction tactics and "safety tips" directed at systematically subordinated groups are only marginally applicable in more rare, stranger-perpetrated sexual assault cases.

These methodologies often perpetuate inaccurate, sensationalized, and narrow stereotypes of sexual violence that do not capture the broad scope of the issue. Most sexual violence is committed by a person the victim knows and trusts (dates, partners, spouses, friends, co-workers, classmates), as well as authority figures, people of high status, and "helping" professionals the public often trusts (clergy, police and criminal/legal professionals, mental health professionals, educational professionals, coaches, supervisors, medical providers, politicians, military, celebrities, etc.).

The Women's Center is committed to working within our community to change the institutions, systems, and broader culture and politics that normalize violence. We want to invest in ending the harm, not change or constrain the liberty, movement, and behavior of survivors/the people

¹ "Patriarchal Violence (PV) is an interconnected system of institutions, practices, policies, beliefs, and behaviors that harm, undervalues, and terrorize girls, women, femme, intersex, gender non-conforming, LGBTQ, and other gender-oppressed people in our communities. PV is a widespread, normalized epidemic based on the domination, control, and colonizing of bodies, genders, and sexualities, happening in every community globally. PV is a global power structure and manifests on the systemic, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized level. It is rooted in interlocking systems of oppression." – [Black Feminist Future](#)

² Examples of common sexual assault risk-reduction (primarily with strangers) strategies: carrying pepper spray or weapons, "buddy systems," not drinking, pouring your own drinks, not leaving drinks unattended, not going anywhere alone, not wearing clothing perceived by men as "sexy", self-defense classes, carrying your keys in your hand, not wearing headphones/talking on a cell phone, avoiding elevators and stairs, avoiding poorly-lit areas, remaining alert/vigilant, etc. Though these tactics or behavior changes can create a feeling of safety, they ultimately will not *prevent* sexual violence.

harmed by those systems. We aim to focus our efforts on *primary prevention*—this means uprooting systems of oppression, stopping violence before it starts, preventing perpetration, and building long-term solutions that address the fundamental causes of violence. In order to eradicate violence, violence must be confronted at every scale (interpersonal, familial/household, community, institutional, systemic, state, and global) and not remain isolated to only the interpersonal.

Our vision is not only to abolish patriarchal violence and rape culture, but to make patriarchal violence unimaginable. This also means we work to shift power in a concrete and material way, end dehumanization and sexual entitlement, and resist the belief systems that view human beings as objects to be possessed, commodified, and controlled (the ideological foundations that precede violence).

At the Women’s Center, we do not believe behavior-change on behalf of individuals will ultimately stop or prevent violence, because abuse and violence are always a choice by the person/group who *cause* the harm, not the responsibility of the person/people victimized by it.

There is no guaranteed way to “protect” oneself against relationship violence, stalking, sexual harassment, exploitation, and/or trafficking. While there are no perfect victims, a person can do everything considered “right/cautious,” take every “safety precaution,” or implement every “risk-reduction” strategy, and still be violated and abused.

A victim/survivor’s choices or character are irrelevant to an abuser’s choice to abuse (e.g., dress, drinking, flirting, who they hang out with, sexual decisions, “risky/dangerous situations/environments,” how they respond/resist sexism and violence, reporting decisions, or levels of personal vulnerability, assertiveness, self-esteem, and/or confidence). Vulnerability is not inherent to an individual but is intentionally created by systems of oppression and dominant groups to subordinate, marginalize, and target particular groups.

Violence/abuse perpetrated against a person is never, regardless of the context, the fault or responsibility of the person victimized. Perpetrators are motivated to perpetrate for many reasons independent of the person they abuse. In addition, promoting individual changes to a potential victim’s behavior does not mean the abuser won’t abuse; it may mean the abuser abuses regardless, and/or they may choose to target a different person to abuse. Either way, the abuser usually continues abusing as they are socially rewarded and not held accountable. Generally, those with the most power and privilege are the least likely to be accountable.

While our center works to educate and raise consciousness on ethical relationships and sexuality, education alone is not enough to protect someone from abuse, because they do not hold systemic power and are not in control of the abuse. For example, educating people of color on racism (what racism is, how to identify it, etc.) will not stop systemic racism. Educating disabled folks on ableism or queer folks on homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism will not end these systems of oppression. Likewise, a victim/survivor’s knowledge and ability to

identify abuse does not mean the victim, on their own, can prevent it or has the power to stop it.

Victim-blaming messages directed at subordinated groups are used to distract the public from challenging the oppressive behavior of dominant groups. Cis women, femmes, people who experience/d feminine socialization, and other marginalized groups often internalize and have been lectured their whole lives to modify their behavior, dress, etc. to appease or de-escalate cis men and other dominant groups.

The Women's Center is committed to not perpetuating these messages. This statement was written for accountability purposes and to share our Center's analysis of violence as an informational and educational tool. If you see our Center share any type of messaging through social media, presentations, awareness campaigns, advocacy, support services, etc. that conflicts with the analysis above in this statement, please contact us immediately. Your feedback and accountability is critical to us.

“Reducing or eliminating rape in our culture isn’t an individual task. Asking women to each, individually, fight off or take responsibility for managing the entirety of the male population is both unjust and impossible. Rape exists at the levels it does in our society because of rape culture. We know this. We have good research about how perpetrators operate in the world, and how much their operation relies on several overlapping levels of social camouflage. Rapists don’t rape because individual survivors aren’t vigilant enough about protecting their valuable bodily autonomy; they rape because we live in a culture that promotes it and they can get away with it.

We need to tackle rape and sexual assault as a social problem, one that requires community organizing and policy change to stop. When we look at social problems as individual problems, we completely miss the root cause of the issue and end up pressuring people to alter their lives and reduce their abilities to live fully and freely for no benefit” ([Rini, 2010](#)).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rebecca Kotz' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rebecca Kotz

Interim Director, Women's Center

7/19/2022