

Bizarre Realities of Being a Man Who Was Raped by a Woman

Pointing out that society has a rape problem should be about the least controversial thing you can do, in any setting. It's impossible to say how many rapes occur (because so many go unreported), but there is universal agreement that too many women are being victimized and that the system often fails them. But we fail victims in another way, too: by automatically assuming, as we just did there, that all of the victims are women.

Most of us realize in theory that men can be raped by women as well, but it's just not seen as that big of a problem. Unless the victim is a child, female-on-male rape is considered so absurd that the only time we really see it is when it's being portrayed as a carousel of slapstick wackiness in mainstream comedies. You see a beautiful actress force herself on a tied-down Vince Vaughn and the only thought is, "Ha, I wish!" After all, don't movies tell us that men want sex, all the time, from absolutely anyone who'll give it to them? He should be thanking her!

Well, we spoke with a victim of female-on-male rape to find out what it's like to be the victim of a crime that most of society refuses to acknowledge is even a thing. Spoiler Alert: It's awful.

A few years ago, I was at a house party, and I'd had what could politely be described as a bit too much to drink. My girlfriend tried to convince me to leave with her, but I assured her I was having fun and would be fine, and she somehow understood me even though I almost certainly sounded like I was speaking Dothraki at that point. It soon became clear to me that "fine" was a planet I had left hours ago, so I found a couch to crash on.

From here on out, every part of this story would be absolutely typical of a sexual assault ... if the genders were reversed. In fact, if I were female, many of you would literally be saying, "Are you crazy? This is how people get raped!" as you read this next part.

A resident of the house, being a good hostess, generously offered to stash me away in the relative privacy of her bedroom. Sometime later, another woman who was at the party came into the room, got into bed with me, and started trying to convince me to have sex with her. My memory of all this is very hazy, but I know that I repeatedly said, "No thanks, I have a girlfriend, surely you understand."

That's where my coherent memory of the incident ends, but suffice it to say, she absolutely did not understand at all -- she took advantage of me while I was barely conscious and could no longer say no, which is more or less the exact definition of rape.

If the genders were reversed.

But for me, whenever I tell someone I was raped by a woman, they act like I just told them I was bitten by a leprechaun. They can't even fathom how such a thing would be possible. By far the most common response is a brief pause, followed by, "What do you mean?" One of the most hurtful responses was from a close male friend, who dismissed me by saying, "I'm sure she didn't hold you down."

And that, right there, seems to be the psychological hurdle no one can get over. It's based on the idea that sex is something men do to women. Men give out sex, women receive it, and that's just how sex works. So if sex occurred, it must mean I was the one who made it happen. That either knowingly or deep down, I must have wanted it to happen.

That I was "asking for it."

Yeah, sound familiar?

First, there are the people who look you anywhere but in the eye as they nervously whisper, "But how did you get an erection?" The implication being that my penis couldn't possibly have been rigid enough for intercourse unless I was enjoying it. If you own a penis or have seen one in action, you know that the things have a mind of their own -- as long as everything works down there, literally anything can set it off. An erection is not a dowsing rod of intention, it's a bundle of nerves that can be manipulated by anyone who halfway knows what they're doing.

"All right," they say, "then why didn't you just shove her off?"

First, think about how horrific that question sounds when asked of a female victim, since most people will accept that a 120 pound woman isn't able to overpower a rampaging rape monster two and a half times her size. But even people who would never ask a female victim that assume I could easily have fought off some girl. You know, if I'd really wanted to.

There are actually several reasons why I didn't physically defend myself. First, how about the fact that I don't want to inflict violence on anyone, regardless of who they are or what they're doing? You know, like most of you -- all of us have been put into situations that maybe could have been solved by physical force, yet most of us haven't been in a fistfight since grade school.

I'm a pacifist, but really so are most of us in polite society -- it's crazy to ever ask a crime victim, "But why didn't you just overpower your attacker?" Hell, Sugar Ray Leonard was sexually assaulted as a young man, when he was already an Olympic contender on his way to becoming a prizefighter. Don't you think he would have stopped that if he could have? It's not the same thing as fighting off a mugger -- all of your physical strength becomes useless, because your attacker makes you feel powerless. All of society's messages about what's happening are wrong.

And then there's just the fact that I'm not a big guy. The average man is stronger than the average woman, but there's definitely some overlap in those statistics. And while maybe I could have physically stopped her if I was at full strength, I was blackout drunk at the time -- I couldn't have wrestled a hamster to the ground, let alone a grown adult.

But even all of that is just avoiding the obvious: imagine I had fought back. Now imagine me trying to explain that to a courtroom after the fact: "Yes, she's bruised, your honor, and yes, I'm the one who beat her up, and yes, I am injury-free, but I swear I thought she was going to force me to have sex with her." That's a surefire way to win a game of "Let's Go to Prison" in a single move.

So, yes, I've suffered my share of victim-blaming. Just like a woman in my situation, my entire sexual history was called into question, and just like a woman, my sexual history is irrelevant -- I could've banged every girl in the county, it doesn't mean I can't ever say no. My relationship with my girlfriend fell apart pretty soon afterward, partially because, for a long time, she didn't really believe I'd been raped either, treating it as if I'd cheated on her. I'd also completely lost interest in sex (which is a very common response in rape victims).

The parallels are there at every turn, but that one simple change -- switching the genders -- suddenly makes my story impossible to swallow. Yet ...

It is more Common Than You Think

It's easy to see why people think of female-on-male rape as thoroughly bizarre -- historically, the data has shown that men don't get raped, period. As recently as 2003, men accounted for only 10 percent of sexual-assault victims, and it's so widely assumed that all of the attackers were other men (think: prison) that most studies on the subject don't even include that data. However, more recent studies have produced some revealing numbers -- a 2012 survey of 40,000 households found that a staggering 38 percent of sexual-assault victims were male. Nearly half of those men reported that their attacker was a woman.

So what's going on here? Well, for starters, if you ask a man who's been coerced, intimidated, or physically forced into sex with a woman whether or not he's been raped, he's pretty likely to say no (it took researchers years to even think to ask men this question, by the way). But they eventually figured out that if you rephrase the question and ask whether or not he has been "made to penetrate" another person, they're more likely to respond in the affirmative.

That's because the word "rape," in their minds, represents something totally different from what they experienced. It's a masked man in a dark alley holding a knife to some terrified woman's throat, or it's the violent shower sequence in *American History X*. Of course, the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults don't look like that at all, which is the same reason why a disturbing number of people still don't believe that date rape is a thing. Which is to say, the same problem plagues female and male victims alike: in real life, rape just doesn't look like it does in the movies.

But if you look at those survey results, you realize that you probably know a guy who this has happened to. Yet I bet almost none of you have heard a man admit it -- I know I haven't. That's probably because ...

Society Treats It as a Joke

My situation is so foreign to most people that even the Department of Justice -- you know, the people whose job it is to determine the legal ramifications of a misplaced comma -- isn't even willing to unambiguously call it rape. The recently revised DOJ definition of rape reads:

The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.

But, like, whose vagina or anus? Is it a requirement that the victim be penetrated, or just that penetration occurs? What is this, Jeopardy! The Marquis de Sade Edition? Nobody really has a good answer, which is why female rapists are often charged with the lesser crime of molestation. But believe it or not, that new definition is actually an improvement -- the law used to state specifically and without ambiguity that rape can happen only to women, regardless of what was penetrating whom.

Then there's the matter of the rather more permanent consequences of sex, known in certain circles as "children." I worried constantly for nine months that my attacker might have become pregnant, because obviously that would've made the most awful thing even more unimaginably horrible -- in some states, rape victims can be forced to pay child support, to say nothing of the trauma of having to raise a child with your rapist.

And really, is it any surprise that the law doesn't take it seriously? It's not like the culture does either. There's a laundry list of movies and TV shows that use the details of my sexual assault as a gag. On *How I Met Your Mother*, Ted gets so drunk he can't remember anything the next morning, and the strange woman he wakes up with freely admits to taking advantage of him. The incident is set to a laugh track, but swap the genders in the scene and the problem should become immediately apparent. Nonetheless, "The Pineapple Incident" becomes a running joke for the rest of the series, because female-on-male rape is hilarious.

How about the scene in *Forrest Gump* where Jenny molests the clearly uncomfortable, mentally challenged Forrest by forcibly placing his hand on her breast until he involuntarily ejaculates? It's played as a joke, but swap the genders and it becomes the stuff of nightmares. There's this scene from *Old School*, which is basically "The Pineapple Incident" with a teenage girl (meaning if Luke Wilson even attempted to report the incident, he'd be met with a spectacular statutory rape charge of his own).

It all comes back to that old assumption that men always want to have sex, so it's automatically farcical any time they don't. I think this is why a lot of men don't realize this has happened to them, and a lot of women might not realize they've assaulted someone. It didn't even occur to me that I had been raped until more than a week after it happened.

You Instantly Become a Political Football

In a perfect world with perfect Internet comment sections, the following would not need to be said:

Articles written about the plight of female rape victims in no way detract from my own experience. Those victims deserve a voice and to have awareness raised about their situation. Likewise, this article shouldn't detract from what female rape victims go through. This is not a contest.

It is, in reality, entirely possible to feel sorry for more than one group at once. Pointing out that women suffer in one way is not the same as insisting men don't. Empathy is not a zero-sum game in which we're all competing for a limited resource. As a society, progress means becoming more empathetic to everyone, and if your knee-jerk response to a victim's heartfelt testimony is, "But what about MY group's suffering?" you're doing it wrong.

For instance, in a group discussion about a book called *Tampa* about a female sexual predator who escapes justice, I commented, "It's a shame that men get no legal protection." The whole room fell silent, and after a moment, an incredibly smart woman whom I highly respect told me, "Yeah, but women have it worse, so don't play that card." That was crushing. To have someone you trust and admire completely invalidate your experience in a single stroke of ignorance is horrible, and it's born from the same attitude that treats female-on-male rape like a joke.

And, right about here is where waves of men's rights types are waiting to come storming in to the rescue. It's a powerful lure -- you feel betrayed by people you thought were your friends, so maybe you stay up all night mindlessly scrolling through Reddit and stumble upon one of the endless men's groups haunting that website. Suddenly, you've found a place where people are sharing their stories about being attacked by women, and no one's making fun of them. There's nothing but support as you let it all out, raging about a culture that thinks it's funny when women shove dildos into helpless, pleading men, and confessing that you can't even cry about what happened to you because it's been hammered into your head all your life that grown men aren't allowed to cry. They'll nod, they'll sympathize -- and then they'll say, "Can you believe women think they're the ones who are oppressed?"

It's the same dumb mistake, made in the other direction -- the idea that we can be sympathetic only to one group or the other. Never both. That if we want empathy, we have to take it away from someone else.

Well, I'm a male rape victim who has no problem acknowledging that men have dominated every position of power in the history of modern society -- who do you imagine is responsible for creating a culture that ridicules men who cry, get overpowered by women, or otherwise assume a role normally inhabited by women? The Department of Justice isn't run by feminists -- who do you think created the law that, until just recently, insisted that female-on-male rape was literally impossible? All of this ignorance, every single bit of it, stems from the same culture that thinks the harshest way to insult a man is to call him a woman.

But here are the facts: men are rape victims in huge numbers around the world. Studies of male political prisoners held in concentration camps by their governments find startlingly high levels of sexual assault: 21 percent in Sri Lanka, 76 percent in El Salvador, and 80 percent in Sarajevo.

However, it's all but impossible to get any of them to admit it openly, because men are supposed to be sexually dominant, and being forced to submit puts you in the role of a woman. If you live in a society where the patriarchy is such a given no one even thinks to name it, being a "womanly man" is shameful. When we stop perpetuating antiquated gender roles, male victims will be taken more seriously. But let's be perfectly honest -- those gender roles were created by men.

So for me -- or anyone else -- to decide that my story is proof that men are the "real" victims of the modern world and that women/feminists are thus the enemy, is nuts. All victims are real. All victims should feel like they're able to speak up without being dismissed or ridiculed.

If a movement -- regardless of what it represents -- ever feels like it's losing ground by showing empathy, then something has gone seriously awry. And if you ever feel a knee-jerk urge to dismiss the story of a victim because it doesn't fit with what you believe about the world, stop and ask yourself if maybe what you believe about the world happens to be wrong.