



Violence Against Women: Shattering Myths

By Danielle Prince

Let me offer up some statements about domestic and sexual violence.

- It happens, but not to a lot of women.
- This only happens to certain individuals from certain backgrounds.
- These things happen somewhere else, but not in your community, family or religious group.
- It happens because of what you wear, say, or do.
- Victims sometimes incite violence.
- Rape cannot occur in marriage.
- It's easy to leave a violent relationship.

These statements are provocative, maybe even confrontational. Most of us would never agree to these statements, but isn't there a kernel of truth in at least some of them?

No. Research tells us a different story. These statements are threads woven into a complex tapestry of social and cultural assumptions that play a primary role in furthering gender-based violence. In order to address the causes of domestic and sexual violence, we must shatter misogynistic myths – down to the very core – held by both genders that uphold victim-blaming and deflect true accountability. We must stop seeing these as individual, incident-based occurrences and frame them within the societal constructs that condone the continuation and perpetration of such violence.

Let's first address who is affected. Domestic and sexual violence are universal, global and claim 1 in 3 women as victims. According to the UN, the most common form of violence against women around the world is physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. Stunningly, women ages 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than they are from car accidents, cancer, malaria and war, according to World Bank data. These numbers reveal that we all know someone who is a survivor.

Domestic and sexual violence frequently co-occur, and neither discriminates. Women in all countries, cultures, religions, classes, education levels, ages or incomes are at risk. There are factors that place individuals at higher risk of becoming victims such as witnessing domestic violence in the home of origin, living in poverty, adhering to strict traditional gender roles, and being in a previously violent relationship. But these risk factors do not automatically equate victimization. Nor is there automatic immunity because of any affiliation with certain groups. The Valentine's Day murder of law student and model Reeva Steenkamp by her boyfriend, celebrity Olympian Oscar Pistorius, was one of 2013's highest-profile domestic violence cases and is a tragic example that anyone is at risk of becoming ensnared in such a relationship.

Another common myth is that the woman does something, says something, or wears something that merits abuse or assault. This myth – rooted in gender oppression – is so deep that women around the world often believe in it themselves. In order to survive in patriarchal societies, women accept and carry the conviction that sometimes other women “deserve it”, believing that there are certain circumstances under which violence or rape is justified. Recently in the United States, the Steubenville (Ohio) rape case garnered a lot of attention. Top media outlets empathetically characterized the perpetrators, two high school football jocks self-ascribed to a “rape crew”, as suffering because their promising football careers were obliterated. Almost secondary were their actions: raping a 16 year old girl, while largely unconscious, over a six-hour period, video-taping it and posting it on YouTube and Twitter. Galvanized by this incident, Americans have been loud about blaming this young girl for her behavior that evening: she was drunk, she was a liar. Therefore, if we follow this misogynistic logic, she provoked this vicious, violent, attack and is then partly, if not entirely, to blame not only for what happened to her, but for “ruining” these two young men’s futures. In March 2013, when the guilty verdict was handed down convicting the two young men, a couple of *girls* fiercely attacked the rape victim via social media by threatening homicide and bodily harm.

Reporting a rape is often risky for victims. They are vulnerable to ostracism by family and friends, they will probably be blamed to some degree for playing some part in causing it, they may not be believed, the police or medical responders may further victimize the person, or even worse, they may be taken advantage of by professionals who are purportedly there to protect them.

Once in a relationship, however, rape is often denied as something that happens because of the common belief that a man is permitted to have sex with his wife whenever he wants because marriage equates consent. The underpinning of rape within marriage, unacknowledged as such, lies within ubiquitous patriarchal and often religious attitudes of entitlement and ownership. In many countries around the world women’s and girls’ lives are still traded like goods. The dowry system, or any interaction - where the woman is married off in exchange for money, livestock, jewelry, other commodities, or even used to pay off debts or resolve disputes - exemplifies that women are still being treated as property in as much as, or even more so, than being treated as human beings.

Rape is then impossible, so goes the argument, if the rapist is the husband and the woman his property. Rape is rarely, if ever, reported within marriage and even less frequently convicted. As with most laws on violence against women, laws against rape are usually ignored, perpetrators enjoy impunity, and women shoulder the experience, the blame and the re-victimization by others. Even in countries that have done away with the dowry system, women’s and girls’ bodies are objectified in such a way as to condone men’s ownership of them. Examples of this are the rampant explosion of pornography over the last three decades in the West, and male-dominated political regulation on reproductive rights such as the 2012 all-male panel speaking on women’s reproductive rights in the United States.

Lastly, the notion that it is easy for women to leave abusive relationships is false. Women stay in domestically and sexually violent relationships all the time, and for good reason. Lethality skyrockets by 70% around the time of leaving, making the time of leaving the *most dangerous time*. Herein echoes the sense of ownership – the woman cannot leave because she ‘belongs’ to the man and any attempts to do so increase her risk of being seriously harmed, or even killed. There are innumerable reasons why women stay: out of fear, having no place else to go, from familial and societal pressure to maintain the relationship, because of the children, because of economic dependence, poverty, immigration status, hope that their partner will change, not having the right to divorce their husband, and having limited or no access to resources. We, as a global society, need to understand this so that we can shift the responsibility from the survivor to the perpetrator. We need to stop asking *Why doesn't she leave?* and start asking *Why is he doing this and why aren't we – as a society - holding him accountable?*

By recognizing these common assumptions are actually misogynistic myths, we are better equipped to dismantle them and recognize the truth of violence in intimate partner relationships: it is about power and control, entitlement, ownership and patriarchy. Studies show that women who are safe, healthy and economically independent invest more in their children, families, and communities thereby benefiting everyone, including GDP. We must learn to speak truth to power and confront these myths when they present themselves. It is our responsibility, as caring, capable human beings, to end violence against women and girls. Shattering these myths is a first step.

About the author: After living a total of 8 years outside of the United States and receiving her M.A. in International Development Studies with a focus on Sub-Saharan African women's migration experiences in a human rights framework, Danielle relocated to her home town of Seattle, USA. She is passionate about women's issues both locally and globally, working full-time for a domestic violence victim organization and in her free time, writing and volunteering for international projects dedicated to gender equality. Danielle has volunteered in South Sudan, Cambodia, Ghana, India, Germany and New York in different roles with the same purpose: to work toward her global sisters' empowerment, equality and right to be heard.

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