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ENTITLEMENT AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Carlynn Sharpe

Contrary to the widely held belief that rape is usually committed by strangers, according to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), one in four rapes takes place between intimate partners. The other misconception that can inhibit proper discussions of sexual assault is that rape cannot take place between two people who are in a relationship, who are married, or who have had consensual sexual intercourse before. This common misconception is revealing of a larger problem: entitlement.

Entitlement to sex or to someone else's body is a harmful mentality that plays a role in a vast number of rapes and sexual assaults. Date rapes, partner rapes, acquaintance rapes, and rapes involving alcohol and drugs like "ruff" are all examples of sexual assaults caused by feeling entitled to someone else's body. In the case of date rapes, perpetrators may feel entitled to sex because they took their victim out on a date, paid for dinner, drove them home, etc. In the case of partner rapes or rapes perpetrated by past partners, perpetrators may feel entitled to their victim's body, because they had consensual intercourse in the past. Perpetrators disregard the fact that consent is necessary each time, because they feel they have partial ownership of their partner's body. Many acquaintances who commit rape feel entitled to the victim's body due to feeling "led on", feeling like they "earned it" through favors or friendship, feeling their victim's sexual history invalidates the victim's refusal to have sex, or because they feel there is no reason for their rejection. For sexual assaults that take place at parties or clubs or that involve alcohol or drugs, the perpetrator may feel entitled to a victim's body because of what they are wearing or how much they drank. The perpetrator also may feel entitled because of what they perceive the moral conduct of the victim to be, or if the perpetrator feels like the victim led them on.

For several of these cases, entitlement often overlaps with victim blaming. Victim blaming is when the victim of rape or sexual assault is blamed for their attack. Victim blaming is rarely blatant, but often appears when questions arise, such as "What were they wearing?", or "But why did they drink?", or "Were they flirting?" These questions

insinuate that the perpetrator was entitled to the victim's body due to choices made by the victim prior to the attack. Victim blaming reveals that our society feels that perpetrators are entitled to another person's body if that person does not fit society's definition of victimhood, such as if the victim is the spouse or partner of the perpetrator, if the victim is perceived as promiscuous, if the victim and the perpetrator have had consensual sex in the past, if the victim was dressed provocatively, if the victim was drunk or using drugs, or if we feel that the victim led the perpetrator to believe sex was going to take place.

Entitlement to a person's body and victim blaming are never legitimate in the case of rape or sexual assault. These are dangerous and problematic mentalities that prevent our society from having healthy discussions about consent and sexual misconduct. Furthermore, entitlement and victim blaming inhibit us from creating comprehensive ways of preventing sexual assault. In order to address the problem of sexual assault, we must first understand consent and dismantle the belief that anyone is ever entitled to sex.