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ON SLUT SHAMING AND RAPE CULTURE

Scarlett Peterson

“Why rape someone when there’s plenty of hoes throwing it out and giving it up,” says the anonymous post on YikYak, “She doesn’t seem like the type to be raped, she seems like the type to give it up,” says the man sitting across the room from me in class. “It’s a convenient way to justify being a slut, and ultimately regretting the mutual decision you made...,” says another anonymous post. So where do these attitudes develop? When we as a society discuss rape and sex, why do the two have to overlap in insult and shame?

Slut-shaming is common; the idea that a person who owns their sexuality and engages in sex for fun is something to be ashamed of is nothing new. It’s a learned behaviour, but a rampant way of thinking. But how does slut-shaming relate to rape? Let’s think about it. If she’s such a “dirty” person because she’s had sex with so many people, she’s not seen to have the same value that a chaste, “pure” girl would. She’s not something to be cherished, treasured or protected by society. By relating a woman’s value to her sexual purity, we are indirectly showing a specific group of women that not only do we not support them, we don’t protect them, and we don’t believe that they have the same inherent value that their purity-oriented counterparts do. This attitude isn’t just harmful in terms of self-esteem and mental well being; it’s harmful in terms of sexual violence and the likelihood that women who engage in “risky behaviors” will become targets.

Women who engage in “risky behaviors” such as attending parties, drinking recreationally, staying out all night, walking alone on campus, and trusting male friends... Wait, that last behaviour sounds fairly safe, doesn’t it? Shouldn’t all of these behaviors be fairly safe? According to the rates of acquaintance rapes in comparison to stranger rapes, it doesn’t seem to be safe at all. Returning to YikYak, our collegiate pot of gold for asinine comments from anonymous posters, we have another gem; in an instance where a survivor of sexual assault posted asking for advice, a charming commenter responded with “just don’t date tall blonde guys,” in the thread, alluding to the description of one of the perpetrators of sexual assault on campus this semester.

There seems to be a disconnect here; we're not only shaming the women who have sex when they want it, we're not just creating a grey area that leads to a whole new way of looking at these women, we're also telling these women that the assaults and violence that they experience are somehow their fault. This victim-blaming leads many women who experience acts of sexual violence to believe that they did something wrong. There is no instance in which it's acceptable to blame the victim of any crime for what happened to them. When someone is murdered, beaten, or robbed people don't criticise them like they criticize rape victims. There isn't the same generalized flurry of questions ranging from "Did you tease them?" or "What were you wearing?" and "How much did you have to drink?" when someone is stabbed or beaten. We do not question the judgment of murder victims the same way that we judge victims of sexual assault. The added scrutiny does nothing to help the victim, it simply attempts to help excuse the perpetrator.

So here's the real question; why does it matter what she was wearing? Why does it matter if she'd had two beers or ten? So what if she did flirt with the guy sitting next to her on the couch? Do any of those things excuse an act of sexual violence? Does a past full of lovers and promiscuity mean that he doesn't need her consent? Does that make a woman unrapeable?