

What Is Sexual Violence?

People usually talk about sexual violence as defined by the law: attempted rape, forcible rape etc. That leaves out numerous other forms of sexual violence that virtually all women experience. Here we talk about sexual violence as defined *by women*. Though, sexual violence happens to men and children, the majority of victims of sexual violence are women. To undo violence against men and children, the first step is to undo violence against women. That's why we talk about sexual violence against women from a woman's perspective.

All types of sexual violence are crimes against individuals and society no matter how the criminal justice system defines or responds to it. Sexual violence is unnatural and a crime against the woman, her family and the entire community. Before colonization, before reservations, in Indian Country sexual violence was extremely rare, there were no excuses, no victim-blaming. Consequences were immediate and severe - usually death.

All forms of sexual violence are types of rape - violent acts where sex is the weapon. Using sex as a weapon is very effective and violent because sexual acts harm us spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. These acts are always about taking power and control away, causing humiliation and proving dominance.

Sexual violence begins with a thought. All sexual violence against women is caused by and begins with the thought that women are basically spiritless sex objects that are inferior to men. Without that thought or belief, there would be no violence against women. We know this because in traditional native culture women are considered sacred, possessing powerful spirits and the ability to give and nurture life. To harm a woman was to harm yourself and everyone else. Rape and battering were therefore nearly unheard of.

American society in general aims sexual violence at all women through sexualized images of women in advertisements, song lyrics and other media. Pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry based on sexual violence. Prostitution and sex trafficking/slavery are sexual violence businesses that impact the safety and integrity of all women. One in four women in America and 1 in 3 Native women will be raped in their lifetime (by the legal definition of rape). This harsh reality forces women on some level to be constantly fearful and aware of the possibility they can be raped. That is an act of violence against all women. Proof is that women routinely change their behaviors and create life ways in order to prevent rape from happening to them. Going out or even to the bathroom in groups, not going out alone, especially at night, parking in well-lit places, listening for footsteps, checking the back seat of the car before you get in... Hotels do not say your room number out loud, and instead write it down; employers and stores have special lighting and cameras in parking areas and isolated places. We raise our daughters differently than our sons, restricting where and when they go out, in attempts to prevent them from being raped. Sexual violence against women is a societal and cultural matter. It is an issue of human and civil rights.

Individual women experience sexual violence everyday without any physical contact. Men staring at sexual parts of her body and unwanted sexual comments and gestures. Telephones, texting, cyberstalking and e-mail have become common methods of sexual violence. Sex acts demanded or else

get fired or not promoted. Legally, these behaviors are usually defined as "sexual harassment," but lack of physical contact does not necessarily mean less trauma.

The violence escalates the closer men get: "flashing" or exhibitionism - expose their genitals to unsuspecting women; "peeping," or violating personal space and privacy - hiding while watching women dress/undress, go to the bathroom, bathe etc. The violence continues to escalate with touching. Fondling and molestation include unwanted, sexualized touching that are degrading and humiliating. These actions include brushing or rubbing up and pressing against someone without their consent, pinching someone's buttocks or grabbing sexual parts of the body.

Prostitution is forcing a woman to perform sex acts for money or in trade. Generally, this "business" is controlled by men and relies on society's acceptance of women as sex objects. And, as with all forms of rape, society's acceptance of men's entitlement to sex.

Incest is the rape of children by their own relatives. These acts require people to see children as property and sex objects.

Rape is defined legally as forced sexual intercourse, and/or using force to commit oral, anal or vaginal sex. Rape occurs by gangs, with use of objects and even animals. It is not uncommon, though rarely talked about that some batterers have been known to bring other men home to rape their wives, again proving that they have total control over her.

Most rapes are committed by someone the woman knows. Teachers, relatives, clergy, school friend, therapists and even so-called traditional spiritual leaders have sexually violated women (and children) using their relationship as part of their trap in order to rape. This creates a sense of betrayal that is logical, but extremely painful. If one of those people rapes you, who do you trust to tell? Who do you ever trust again?

All of these types of sexual violence are forms of rape. The trauma they inflict can last a lifetime, if safety, support and resources for healing aren't provided. Women do not tell or seek help often because they feel shame and responsibility for what happened to them. This thinking is a result of unnatural beliefs and attitudes about sexual violence taught by society. Woman/victim-blaming is a type of rape in itself. Some women don't blame themselves, but won't tell, because going through the criminal justice system means making themselves vulnerable again and re-living the rape repeatedly, often with no consequences for the rapist. They know they may be shunned or re-assaulted. Some women know all this and still testify as their way of reclaiming their power and control over their lives. They believe that even if there is no conviction, they have "outed" a rapist. In doing so they protect other women from the rapist.

Telling is a woman's choice. Many women do not tell for weeks, months or many years - even decades. It can take that long to get strong enough and find enough safety and support to talk about the rape. The more people talk about rape openly as a violent crime, state repeatedly and loudly that rape is never the victim's fault, accept no excuses for it, provide support for those who have been raped and hold the offender accountable with severe consequences, the more sense it makes for women to come forward and heal. Rape can be stopped. In Native communities, especially there is

hope for peaceful, non-violent communities, because traditionally women are honored as sacred and men are their protectors, not their rapists. Respect for all people is the foundation of the culture.

"Even in thought, women are to be respected...men can be transformed..."

- From the teachings of White Buffalo Calf Woman as told by Tillie Black Bear - Sicangu

Product of the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault