

Stop Victim Blaming: We Carry Our Own Shame

Trauma is paralyzing and shame keeps survivors embedded in their traumas. Whether sexual assault or domestic violence, survivors do not need others to victim blame them, especially when they weren't present nor do they know the facts. The reality is crime victims already feel an inner layer of shame derived from their upbringing be it cultural, religious, due to a lack of belief and/or support from family, or because of societal norms and what they teach us about response.

Let's understand cultural upbringing.

Culture is defined as "the ways of life for an entire society including arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, and art" (<https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/PH/CulturalAwareness/CulturalAwareness2.html>).

One of the many examples of victim blaming is to state, "The victim's parents should have taught her to look out for things like that" (<https://elawtalk.com/what-are-some-examples-of-victim-blaming/>). This perception, like all the other examples of victim blaming, place undue blame on a trauma survivor. Rural areas, for example, are still resistant to prevention and education programs about sexual assault and dating violence being taught in their schools. Additionally, rural communities believe rape won't happen in their towns; they believe it is an urban issue and that it is typically committed by a stranger.

My story is a case study of rural the community. My community was so small there were only 47 students in my graduating class. Though we had a senior class requirement titled *Preparation for Life* which taught us essential life skills such as banking, taxes, etc., we had no sexual education class. So, there was no teaching about dating violence or sexual assault prevention. Additionally, my parents were so old-school they did not talk to us about sex and dating. More to the point, my father's life advice consisted of telling me and my brothers, "You can do anything you want, but understand we do not know the word divorce in this family. If you ever got divorced, you would be disowned." Furthermore, I had to ask my older brother where our mother kept the sanitary products when I got my first menses.

Let's understand religion.

Whatever one's religion, there are often strict rules, especially for females. Growing up a Catholic, that is all I can speak to. This is not an assault on the Catholic Church; my faith has always been and continues to be very important to me. As a matter of fact, had it not been for my strong faith, I would not have survived the trauma of my sexual assault and relationship with a narcissist. My faith is the only constant that kept me from feeling alone and was a lifeline for me to fight for my survival and healing. However, my religious upbringing was deeply embedded in my family rituals.

My family lived with my paternal grandmother; we went to church with her every Sunday. Once I became a teenager close to graduating high school, the last year of her life, she took it upon herself on a daily basis to reiterate to me that, "Good girls do not have premarital sex." This is ironic because (1) I was such a nerd that boys were not paying me any attention and (2) I was

so afraid of my own shadow that the furthest thing from my mind was paying attention to boys. I didn't even start dating until my sophomore year in college.

However, this is important to understand the relationship between religious upbringing and the inner layer of shame a victim may feel on his/her/their own. When I became a survivor of sexual assault, I struggled with an extreme feeling of shame because I felt I had let my family down by breaking to coveted rule of being non-virginal on my wedding night. It took me years to come to terms with this.

Let's understand shame due to a lack of family belief/support.

If you know someone who is a survivor of sexual assault or dating violence, it is important to be there, listen, and do not yell at them, judge them, or blame them. Rather, hold what they are telling you sacred and important then respond with care. Beyond this, you can best provide support by (1) staying calm, (2) believing them, (3) being caring and supportive, (4) helping them create a safety plan, and (5) facing the problem with them and getting help. Several other ways in which you can help yourself or a friend/relative are to:

<i>Be patient:</i>	Dealing with either situation is a process; it takes time.
<i>Be there:</i>	Offer to go with them if they decide to get medical attention.
<i>Empowerment :</i>	Do not pressure yourself or them to take steps until they are ready.
<i>Encouragement:</i>	They can report what happened to law enforcement, and can contact a sexual assault or domestic violence hotline for support.

As I experienced, one should never force the survivor to individually tell each family member what they survived. Afterall, surviving a traumatic event like sexual assault/rape is not to be compared with an accomplishment that one celebrates by sharing. Also understand, a survivor's story is theirs to work through; it is not for anyone else to disperse information about what happened to them.

Let's understand shame because of societal norms and what we are taught about response.

I experienced my assault in the early 1990s. What I recall learning from the media at that time was, "If you are ever in a situation where you are in the throws of a sexual assault, it is best to comply as to save your life. If you fight, your assailant may kill you." As we all know, this speaks to stranger rape. However, as we also know date rape is a significantly more prominent occurrence. Now, I did fight, but obviously my assailant was stronger than I, therefore, I lost the fight. I said, "No" multiple times; he refused to hear me. This in no way makes what happened to me my fault; my assailant was responsible.

We also need to look at the societal norm of saying, "No" as it relates to the many situations when one is unable to actively speak the word, but through actions or inability to act, is unable to consent. As has been the case for decades, there is such an epidemic of victims of sexual assault being drugged without their knowledge. So much so that a brilliant individual created drink condoms for bars. Check out @4media.marketing on Instagram for details. For obvious reasons, this reality should automatically negate victim blaming. When an individual has been drugged, they are unable to consent. They may even be so physically impaired by the effects of

the drug that they are unable to physically fight off their assailant. Again, being temporarily paralyzed, or even freezing are not signs of consent.

Additionally, we need to understand a body's automatic response which in no way implies consent or makes the victim culpable in the crime against them. In 2011, Martin Lalumiere, a professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Psychology, found "genital reactions during an assault are physical, reflexive responses - which are actually the body's way of minimizing injury, such as tearing and pain" (<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a9620593/sexual-assault-rape-lubrication-reaction-research/>). This in no way indicates pleasure and indicating such to a survivor of sexual assault further perpetuates the shame and guilt they are innately feeling.

RESOURCES:

- A. <https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/PH/CulturalAwareness/CulturalAwareness2.html>
- B. <https://elawtalk.com/what-are-some-examples-of-victim-blaming/>
- C. <https://evawintl.org/wp-content/uploads/Rural-Info-Packet-v2-FINAL-UPLOAD-12.28.10.pdf>
- D. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/violence-and-abuse>
- E. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a9620593/sexual-assault-rape-lubrication-reaction-research/>