

## Behind Closed Doors

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Out of the few lingering relics of past grievances we carry into modern day, the excusability of sexual assault stands as one of the most pressing issues, affecting 1 in 5 women and 1 in 4 men[1]. Despite centuries-old dismissals of victim concerns, it lingers as a persistent silent crisis, worsening unchecked with intangible solutions in sight. Clearly, this issue urgently demands attention for federal or state intervention to impose stricter regulations. Yet, what enables this injustice to endure despite its widespread recognition? There are 3 clear factors: the lack of seriousness within bodies of authority, as more prioritize self-sufficiency than true justice for victims, federal dismissal due to vague laws and indolence, and lastly, the role of media in cases of sexual assault victims. When it comes to a lack of seriousness, it's evident that the positions in power have intercepted the concept of learned helplessness; instead of using their status as a resource of advocacy for victims and receiving justice, they simply declare ownership. It is impossible to separate yourself from the issue of sexual assault, as it runs currently, many cases brought up must be addressed. Yet, this is where authority prioritization of self-image becomes greater than the victims, as media and sociocultural factors stigmatize the idea of sexual assault to be a dirty thing for the *victim*, not the perpetrator. This leads those handling such cases, whether local authorities or higher-level institutions, to downplay their severity, often prioritizing their public image over justice. Even when they get escalated to federal courts, the outcome is frequently underwhelming, with lenient sentencing or simply outright dismissal. Public response, in turn, is largely shaped by the media, which holds immense power in framing sexual assault appropriately and necessarily. Yet rather than fostering empathy or advocacy, media coverage often sensationalizes the trauma, trivializes the crime, and exploits the victim's pain for a cheap

spectacle, ultimately sabotaging the awareness and accountability the issue so desperately requires. In all, there is one string that ties all these factors together, a depravity which allows these negative wheels to continue to stagnate the progress of sexual assault recognition: the lack of education. Our developmental years cultivate the necessary minds to build our response systems and views, destigmatizing sexual assault and bringing it publicly to educational areas may just be the changing variable we need, with only 34% of students reported receiving formal training about consent during their schooling [2]. The U.S. federal justice system and educational institutions continue to fail student victims of sexual assault by downplaying its severity, dismantling protective policies, and fostering stigma within authority structures that prioritize reputation over accountability. Meanwhile, the media promotes hollow advocacy efforts that obscure the systemic apathy beneath, enabling schools to sidestep meaningful intervention and perpetuate a cycle of performative justice over real reform.

To properly address victims with the proper respect, attention, and destigmatized views, it's detrimental for the authoritative bodies that dominate public and federal perspectives. If the models of our education, whether it be top universities or primary classes, fail to properly educate and advocate for sexual assault awareness, then the unreasonable dismissal of victims will continue to stagnate the possibility of future growth. This not only forces victims into an uncomfortable position to oppose these intimidations, or stay silent. Chessy Prout, a student of St. Paul's public school, filed a lawsuit against her school after failing to properly recognize the events and address their responsibility. Yet, St. Paul's "categorically" denied that the school had a culture of sexual assault in a statement to the Today show[3]. Despite further claims to validate her experience and being enlightened, Prout quickly destages that as she shares her experience of alienation among her peers and how quickly they swept it under the carpet. Sexual assault isn't a

spectacle, but when schools claim to have learned from these cases yet put no effort in improving school culture or awareness within the environment, then it poses the question of just how much they truly care or whether they would rather prioritize school image.

“I tried my best to go back to my school and try to have a normal life again. But if they’re going to treat this topic as a joke, this is not a place I want to be,” she said. “Everybody pretty much knew. None of my old friends who were boys would talk to me...And nobody was talking about the issue in itself, and they weren’t trying to prevent it from happening to anyone else.”

Overshadowing these imperative voices helps perpetuate a society that allows sexual assault cases to run rampant with proper attention, furthering the stigma that these events are meant to be hidden or unaddressed, leading to more victims not reporting cases and promoting victim-blaming. But when the frameworks of education fail to show the severity of these cases, it's only natural that the public learns to as well, dismissing it in the same regard. This isn't a one-time crisis, but a plague spreading across the districts unless one decides to break the cycle and speak up. Additionally, in May 2019, school officials suspended a student who had pleaded guilty to third-degree rape, though he continued to attend classes for a week after entering a guilty plea. He had also attended nearly his entire senior year while his criminal case was pending. His accuser attended the same school[4]. Not only is this behavior wildly inappropriate, but it even highlights the lack of timely procedures and proper methods for schools to execute in response to these cases. Albeit, not all blame can be put on these institutions, as it's the wider umbrella of federal foundations that fail to guide these organizations with resources to handle these situations.

“Their negligence and active disregard for my well-being only deepened my pain and suffering. In the time since, they have repeatedly tried to intimidate and silence me.”

Furthermore, as hinted at previously, federal bodies and policies that regulate these cases play a crucial role in advocating for survivors of sexual assault. Properly addressing these cases with clear guidelines is essential to prevent the disorganization often seen in the early stages. Currently, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity receiving federal funding. However, this does not explicitly compel educational institutions to address these issues with the necessary seriousness. In fact, regulations issued in 202 by Betsy DeVos's Department of Education, released during the COVID-19 pandemic, sparked widespread backlash for weakening protections for survivors while emphasizing procedural fairness for the accused. Critics, such as civil rights advocates and public officials, argued that the new rules risked silencing survivors and discouraging reports, especially during a public health crisis when students were already isolated and vulnerable[5]. Changes like this highlight the systemic disregard in considering victims and their cases in their entirety, no matter how sullied, leading to a detrimental risk of permitting an era of negligence within addressing sexual violence by schools, with little to no consequence. Organizations like the Women's Rights Project, in partnership with the ACLU, actively hold schools accountable through legal cases such as *J.K. v. Arizona Board of Regents*, *Simpson v. University of Colorado*, and *Fitzgerald v. Barnstable School Committee* [6]. We are all products of our subconscious environments, so the longer federal policies neglect building a direct framework on tackling these changes, the higher the rates of sexual assault victims being silenced daily.

The new definition, from a Supreme Court case on Title IX, includes unwelcome conduct that a reasonable person would find “so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive” that it denies a person equal educational access. Some public comments (including one that I submitted, with feminist law-professor colleagues) zeroed in on the narrowness of “severe, pervasive, and

objectively offensive,” and urged the department to replace it with “severe or pervasive,” in keeping with the Supreme Court’s workplace-harassment standard—given that a sexual assault may be severe but not pervasive, and some sexual or sexist remarks may be pervasive but not severe

Additionally, the role of media in cases of sexual assault is deeply paradoxical. While it holds the power to amplify survivors’ voices and push for accountability on the federal plane, it often does the opposite, twisting narratives to serve sensationalism rather than justice. The media's portrayal of sexual assault cases often intensifies the trauma experienced by survivors, shifting the focus from the perpetrator's actions to the victim's character, often under mass public dissection. This misrepresentation can lead to public skepticism and victim-blaming, which could prevent other survivors from coming forward out of fear of being socially judged. Studies have shown that media coverage frequently employs methods that dramatize cases into stories to satisfy an audience instead of spreading a message, which can influence public perception and judicial outcomes, as well as being a big factor in the big silent stigma surrounding sexual assault. Commonly, sensationalist reporting can re-traumatize survivors and contribute to a culture that even normalizes sexual violence, where people don’t pay much attention despite its severity. This doesn’t necessarily mean all media is bad as some have played pivotal roles in amplifying survivors’ voices and promoting societal recognition whether it be by the docu series “Surviving R. Kelly” or “13 Reasons Why”, it doesn’t take a lot to make sexual assault representation real advocacy, just handling it with respect, realism, and empathy. To mitigate harm and promote justice, it's imperative for media outlets to adopt survivor-sensitive reporting practices. This includes avoiding sensationalism or making a spectacle, respecting survivors' privacy, and focusing on the perpetrator's accountability. As a result, the media can shift from

being a source of re-traumatization to a genuine push for change, supporting victims and challenging the societal norms and stigmas that perpetuate sexual violence.

In conclusion, the U.S. federal justice system and educational institutions continue to fail student victims of sexual assault by minimizing the severity of their experiences and stripping away meaningful protections; this produces authority structures that prioritize reputation over responsibility. Simultaneously, the media's hollow gestures of advocacy conceal the deep-rooted institutional apathy, allowing schools to perform compliance rather than push for real reform.

The case of *A.P. v. Fayette County School District* underscores this systemic failure with devastating clarity; a 16-year-old student who reported her assault was not only disbelieved, but punished and expelled, an act of betrayal from the very organization meant to protect her, that reflects the broader reality of how damaging the stigma survivors face truly is[7]. Despite extensive evidence and expert consensus highlighting the psychological harm and flawed legal reasoning behind the district court's decision, A.P.'s fight for justice had to continue through appeal. This case, alongside *Doe v. Gwinnett County Public Schools*, exposes how Title IX's promise is repeatedly undermined by courts and schools alike, who rely on harmful stigmas and bureaucratic indifference to avoid real responsibility. Unless schools stop dismissing survivors and start taking them seriously, the cycle of empty promises will continue.

“What makes it so hard for some men to question their own assumptions and so easy for them to act boldly and brutally when faced with *closed doors*?”

- Rebecca E. Biron[8]

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