

## **RAPE: What Cornell Forces Us to Confront**

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There are moments when a news story does more than horrify us. It warns us.

A former Cornell student has filed a civil lawsuit alleging that she was drugged and gang raped by seven fraternity members in 2024. The allegations are now receiving national attention, and the criminal investigation has reportedly been reopened, with the matter expected to be presented to a grand jury. Cornell has said that its own Title IX process resulted in expulsions and suspensions and that the fraternity chapter remains barred from campus. These are serious allegations that must proceed through the appropriate legal processes, and those processes matter.

But there is another conversation we need to have. Because even if we removed Cornell's name from this story, removed the fraternity letters, removed the Ivy League backdrop and removed every identifying detail, we would still be left with a question that should make every parent, educator, institution and community deeply uncomfortable: **What are we teaching our boys about women? And perhaps more importantly, what are we allowing them to teach one another?**

### **We need to stop talking only to girls**

For decades, our prevention messages have overwhelmingly been directed toward girls and women. Watch your drink. Don't walk alone. Text when you get home. Stay with your friends. Don't get too drunk. Don't leave your drink unattended. Don't go upstairs. Don't trust strangers. Women have been handed an exhausting lifetime curriculum in how not to be raped.

Perhaps it is time we become equally relentless about teaching people not to rape.

That means teaching consent long before young people arrive on a university campus. It means teaching boys that a woman's intoxication is not an opportunity ... her clothing is not consent ... her flirting is not consent ... her previous sexual history is not consent ... and going to a bedroom is not blanket consent. Consent to one sexual act is not consent to another. Silence is not consent. Fear is not consent. Freezing is not consent. A woman does not owe anyone access to her body because someone bought her dinner, poured her a drink, invited her to a party or believes he has somehow "earned" sex.

It is astonishing that we still need to say these things. But apparently, we do.

### **Rape myths should have become socially extinct by now**

I have zero tolerance left for rape myths. None.

What was she wearing? How much had she been drinking? Why did she go there? Why didn't she leave? Why didn't she fight? Why didn't she report immediately? Why did she continue speaking to him afterward?

These questions have followed survivors for generations, often turning the behaviour of the person reporting sexual violence into the primary object of scrutiny. Evidence must, of course, be examined fairly in any criminal or civil proceeding. But our social response to sexual violence cannot continue to rest upon an expectation that a traumatized person must have behaved perfectly before, during and after an assault in order to be worthy of being heard.

The question we should have learned to ask by now is painfully simple: **Who made the decision to violate another human being?**

Sexual violence prevention cannot continue to revolve primarily around teaching potential victims to become better risk managers. We need to become much more interested in preventing perpetration.

### **And now I want to speak to men**

Not just men who commit sexual violence. All men.

Some of the most important conversations about misogyny will never happen in front of women. They happen in locker rooms, group chats, fraternity houses, bars, workplaces, golf courses, hockey dressing rooms, online gaming communities, bachelor parties, cars and private conversations between friends. They happen in the moment when somebody makes the degrading comment and everyone laughs. When someone shares the photograph. When somebody describes a woman as a conquest. When someone says something sexually aggressive and another man knows it is wrong but decides it would be awkward to challenge him.

That silence matters.

You do not have to commit an act of sexual violence to participate in a culture that makes sexual violence easier to normalize, excuse or conceal. Sometimes all a harmful culture needs from decent people is their silence.

So, men: **Call other men out.** Not tomorrow. Not when a woman is watching. Not when there is social credit attached to doing it. **Do it when you see it.**

Say, "That's not funny."

Say, "Don't talk about her like that."

Say, "She's too intoxicated. Leave her alone."

Say, "What you're doing isn't okay."

And when you see someone vulnerable, intervene safely. Get another person involved. Create a distraction. Find her friends. Get security. Call for help. Refuse to become the person who saw what was happening, recognized that something was wrong and decided that it wasn't his problem.

Men who respect women cannot simply distinguish themselves from men who don't.

**They need to challenge them.**

### **Parents, we have work to do too**

We need to raise sons differently. And I don't mean raising boys to be afraid of women, sex or relationships. Quite the opposite.

Raise boys who understand tenderness, boundaries and empathy. Raise boys who can hear "no" without experiencing it as humiliation. Raise boys who don't confuse masculinity with dominance. Raise boys who understand that sex is not something a man gets from a woman, but an intimate experience shared between human beings who both want to be there. Raise boys who know that strength includes restraint, courage, compassion and accountability.

And please, teach them love.

Not possession disguised as love. Not jealousy disguised as love. Not control disguised as protection. Teach them the kind of love that recognizes another person's humanity as equal to their own.

Then teach them something else: their friends' behaviour is their business. If their friend humiliates a woman, it is their business. If their teammate is pressuring someone for sex, it is their business. If someone shares an intimate photograph without consent, it is their business. If a woman is too impaired to consent and someone is leading her away, it is absolutely their business.

We have spent far too much time teaching children to "mind their own business" when sometimes courage requires precisely the opposite.

### **Institutions don't get to be neutral either**

Universities, schools, workplaces, sports organizations, fraternities and community institutions are not merely buildings in which culture happens. They create culture. What leaders tolerate becomes culture. What institutions minimize becomes culture. What peers laugh at becomes culture. What nobody challenges becomes culture. And what carries meaningful consequences also becomes culture.

A sexual violence policy sitting quietly on a website is not prevention. A mandatory online training module everyone clicks through is not culture change. A poster about consent hanging in a hallway is not accountability. Policies matter, education matters and training matters, but only when they change what people actually do.

Culture is what happens at two o'clock in the morning when nobody in authority is watching. Culture is what happens when someone says something degrading in a group chat. Culture is whether the person reading it joins in, ignores it or says: **Stop.**

### **Stop asking women to carry the entire burden**

Women cannot prevent men's violence by becoming sufficiently vigilant.

We can teach safety planning. We can teach awareness. We can teach people to watch their drinks, travel together and trust their instincts. Those strategies may reduce vulnerability in particular circumstances, and there is value in giving people tools that may help keep them safer.

But none of those strategies eliminates the person willing to exploit vulnerability.

There is an enormous moral difference between reducing someone's risk of victimization and preventing someone from choosing to victimize. We have confused those two conversations for far too long, and when we confuse them, responsibility quietly slides back onto the potential victim.

Don't drink too much. Don't go upstairs. Don't walk home alone. Don't trust him. Don't be alone.

Maybe we need to spend far more time saying: Don't exploit an intoxicated person. Don't pressure someone. Don't ignore hesitation. Don't touch someone who cannot consent. Don't participate. Don't watch. Don't laugh. Don't cover for your friend. Don't remain silent.

And when someone tells you they have experienced sexual violence, do not begin your response by investigating whether they behaved perfectly.

**Trauma does not require perfection to deserve compassion.**

**RAPE is still happening – A Warning**

Cornell did not invent misogyny. Fraternities did not invent sexual violence. Universities did not invent rape myths. And sexual violence certainly does not belong exclusively to elite American (or Canadian) campuses.

That is precisely why this moment matters.

There is not a warning about one fraternity house. It is warning us about the conversations we still tolerate, the excuses we still entertain, the behaviour we still dismiss as "boys being boys," the women we still interrogate before we interrogate the culture surrounding them, and the men who know better but remain silent because speaking up might make the room uncomfortable.

Good.

**Make the room uncomfortable.**

Misogyny should be uncomfortable. Rape jokes should be uncomfortable. Sexual entitlement should be uncomfortable. Victim blaming should be uncomfortable. Watching a vulnerable person being exploited should be unbearable. And calling it out should become so ordinary that silence becomes the socially unacceptable choice.

**We do not need another generation of women who are better trained at avoiding sexual violence.** We need a generation of human beings who are less willing to perpetrate it, excuse it, normalize it, conceal it or stand quietly beside it.

That requires parents. It requires schools and universities. It requires justice systems and community institutions. It requires women to continue speaking. And yes, it requires men ... especially men who would never dream of committing sexual violence themselves, but whose voices may carry enormous power in the rooms where women are not present.

Because equality will never be achieved simply by teaching women how to survive dangerous rooms.

**We need to change what is permitted inside the room.**

Rape / Sexual assault is still happening.

The question is whether we are finally prepared to listen.