

Stereotypes of Women Raped by their Partners

The questions asked about the victims

What type of woman becomes involved with a partner-rapist? Is there in fact a 'type'?

This question has no definite answer because *any* woman can be sexually assaulted by her husband or boyfriend. If you saw the film *What's Love Got To Do With It*, you will know that talented and intelligent women like Tina Turner experience severe and prolonged domestic violence, including rape. The women you meet in this book, including its authors, illustrate that domestic and sexual violence span all classes, races, economic and educational levels, and have little to do with the personal characteristics of the women who experience them.

A strong negative stigma surrounds women who have been abused in relationships; the stigma that accompanies rape often means that survivors of partner-rape face a sort of double whammy. Saying you were abused by a partner evokes ignorant inferences about your character, but rape, because of its sexual nature, draws additional ones that assume at worst that you must have liked being sexually abused. Negative stereotypes of abused women often contribute to the feelings of shame and inferiority that the perpetrator has also triggered and fostered:

Maybe it's my fault I let him get away with it for too long.
(Siobhan)

I had lived for years as a non-person. I had no emotions that were not dictated by him. I had learned to bury my feelings so deeply that I couldn't recognise them. I had turned them off and couldn't find the on switch. Mentally and intellectually, I was deficient. I couldn't form a complete sentence without weighing every word. I couldn't organise my thoughts; I couldn't hold a conversation with anyone. I felt stupid and began thinking that all those things he had said about me were in fact true. (Kuriah)

Let's do a little exploring and exploding of some myths about women abused in relationships. Perhaps you've been hurt by some of them, and may even believe them to a degree. We hope you'll be less inclined to be hard on yourself after reading the following.

Are women who are raped by partners stupid and crazy?

As survivors and as people who work in the areas of rape and domestic violence, we are frequently asked, 'Why don't these women just leave?'

This question is often asked from genuine concern or honest curiosity. But at other times it is asked in a derisive way: the enquirer might just as well come out and say, 'She must have been stupid or at least a little crazy.' Rather than seeing an abused woman as somebody who was betrayed perhaps repeatedly, people resort to questioning her intelligence:

Although the abuser betrayed you by being abusive rather than loving, you may also feel as if you betrayed yourself – your dignity, your self-esteem, your worth as a person – by staying in a situation in which you were being harmed. 'Am I a masochist?' you may wonder. You may especially ask this question if you have been exposed to psychological theories that contend that you're only victimised if you allow yourself to be. Such theories are unrealistic and inaccurate. They fail to take into account the multitude of ways in which even a bright, financially independent and psychologically well-balanced individual can become entrapped in violence.¹

Focusing on a survivor's personal characteristics absolves perpetrators of the responsibility for the abuse they commit. Unfortunately, there's a tendency for people to side with perpetrators of violence regardless of what they have done. People seem to find it too hard to accept that sometimes other people are shockingly cruel, and in searching for reasons, they need to imagine that victims must somehow be responsible for their fate. Thus, women who have been raped or battered suffer incredible levels of insult and blame from family and friends or wider society, including the criminal justice system – we look further at this in chapters 13 and 14.

In fact, you were not stupid or crazy for staying. You may remain for many reasons; usually in part because of the dynamics of violence in relationships (see chapter 7) and the effects that has had upon you:

But I just thought the next day ... I have to be a better woman.
Why can't I get this right? So anyway, the relationship continued.
(Kelly)

Violence in relationships is indeed centred on control. It is slow and insidious:

Those things all happened slowly and subtly, so I ended up very much under the thumb and just couldn't recognise that I was under the thumb. (Sarah)

Then you think about that. I thought it was just selfishness. I didn't think it was also control and abuse and that you're the second class citizen in the family. It didn't click. Because it was slow. (Tiffany)

It's also about humiliation and degradation:

I've been stabbed. I've been held in a bath with an electric blow heater over me for 10 hours. I've had the handbrake pulled on in the car while I've been driving. I've been punched numerous times. He used to get me into a position in the corner of the wall in the room we lived in and he would just keep hitting me, or pulling my ears and my nose. And, he dragged me around the house by my ear. I'd rather be punched in the face. That's just humiliating; that's how you treat a dog.

But the whole time I just wanted for him to love me more, and for him to not want to do that to me anymore. (Kelly)

Your sense of self erodes:

So you stop fighting it, because you just can't keep up with it. But the controlling continues without a break. You adapt to it. Eventually, what was once strange becomes normal. You eventually stop thinking of yourself as a person. Your feelings are of no consequence. (Melina)

You may become increasingly isolated through secrecy and shame. Your perpetrator tells you that it is your fault he has to beat you. There's no-one to contradict him. As one woman says:

I suppose it was partly because there was no one to validate my reality since I couldn't tell any of my friends what was going on in our house. Consequently, there's always this self-doubt; that maybe it really isn't as bad as it seems. And, there were the periods when he was charming and loving, which contributed to that type of denial.

There was another reason that's hard to explain but it has to do with needing to stay so that he will ultimately realise that I'm OK and a good person. For years he'd been justifying his

drinking, adultery and abuse with a view of me as a nagging bitch. It became incredibly important for me to show him that his reality was not right.

On the outside I looked like I had it all together. I never stopped functioning so you see no one knew. No one had a clue. But, on the inside, each time that I failed to follow up on a threat to leave him, the self-hatred grew. It expanded within like a malignancy until I totally lost a sense of myself.

And, leaving doesn't necessarily terminate the violence. We only have to look at breaches of domestic violence orders, reports of rape and the fact that almost one half of the homicides perpetrated by husbands take place after the woman leaves the violent relationship.

Given the effects and dynamics of violence in the home and lack of informal and formal support, getting out of the relationship can be extraordinarily difficult for any of us:

It was pretty hard when I did leave him. I found it really difficult to do and society particularly unsupportive. It was so hard being on my own, it was so hard putting up with the stigmatism of being a single parent and all the crap that goes with that, the insecurity, the financial strain, his constant stuff with the kids and all the pressures with the children, and I think I couldn't have done that until I got a certain inner strength and a deep, deep, deep, watertight conviction that I couldn't go back. So I think I had to have had a gutful to leave, because it was really hard, particularly with kids. (Kate)

Are women raped by partners masochistic?

The idea that women want to be raped is a very old one. Such false myths have given rise to flippant 'jokes' such as the one that features a woman walking into a police station and saying, 'I'd like to report a rape! I'd like to, but nobody will give me a reason to!' This is another way to blame rape victims, and excuse perpetrators.

Some women may fantasise about rape. This is due in part to living in a culture where rape has been eroticised and even made sexy. Women take on the myriad of messages society gives us about female sexuality being dirty and wrong. Consequently, rape fantasies are often a way for a woman to achieve some sexual release without feeling bad about it.

In the vast majority of cases, the cause of a woman's rape fantasies doesn't lie in her desire to be harmed or victimised,

nor in her supposed masochism. Rather the cause lies in the sexist notion that having sexual desires is bad or degrading to women.²

Rape fantasy can be triggered when a woman who has pushed down memories of prior sexual assault is having sex:

He would laugh at my lack of rhythm and the like. I got through the first years of the marriage with rape fantasies and dissociation, but never told him what I was doing. He knew about the childhood abuse and that didn't seem to matter. He was the healthy one in the relationship. It all centred on what he wanted me to do to him, but there was never the ability to slow down enough to learn how to do it together. It would often trigger things from the past and the only way through it was by dissociation or fantasising about rape. (Jill)

If you have ever fantasised about rape you may feel guilty and ashamed and think that this somehow has played a role in you being sexually assaulted. These words from Diana Russell might be helpful to you:

Having voluntary fantasies of being raped, and wanting to be raped in actuality are two entirely different things. First, people are in complete control of their fantasies, even if the fantasy involves a situation in which they are out of control. A woman is hardly in control when she is raped. If she were in control, the situation would not be imposed and would not be rape. Second, a person is rarely likely to feel fear in a fantasy which she has constructed. But in a real rape or attempted rape situation, unlike the fantasy version, women are usually afraid and often terrified.³

You may feel especially guilty if you enacted mock-rape, bondage and discipline or sadomasochistic fantasies with your partner. Perhaps you believe that such games gave him the message that actually raping you was okay. First, be assured that many couples play such games, and that it doesn't culminate in the subsequent rape of the female partner.

Let's have a look at some more fundamental differences between sex-games and rape.

Games are consensual; rape isn't. Women who are practitioners of BDSM enjoy the same right not to be raped as anybody else. If their partners have raped them, they have been betrayed. The idea that a history of sex games

cancels a right to withdraw consent is wrong. Would acting out spanking fantasies give somebody the right to subsequently beat you up?

Games are about sexual fulfilment; rape isn't. It is about punishment, lack of respect and control.

Are women raped by partners weak?

Some are quick to label the battered woman as weak, passive and dependent, especially if they remained for a time in the relationship. People who take this position often proclaim in loud tones of superiority that *they* would never put up with it.

Survivors say things like, 'If I hadn't been such a coward I'd have left sooner.' Self-berating can happen for years after women end abusive relationships, often in the face of great danger. People who brand survivors of partner violence as weak may not appreciate that a woman 'putting up with it' is not weak but may be trying to survive conditions that threaten her very life, as Jennifer did:

I told him that I was calling the police and that he would have to leave. He became very angry again but I remained calm and insisted. He picked up the computer and said he was taking it with him. I told him that he should go but leave behind anything of value as he owed me a large amount of money and when he had repaid that he could have it. We struggled and I managed to take the computer and hide it. During the struggle, my hand was cut quite badly. Eventually he grabbed me by the shoulders, looked in my eyes, punched me in the stomach twice, causing me to double over. He then brought his knee crashing into my chest twice saying, 'Maybe that will stop you.'

By this time I had lost a child, suffered sprains, bruises, contusions, bites etc., and nausea. I learned never to raise my voice, cry, indicate to him that I felt pain or discomfort, regardless of what was happening to me and never to fight back. He viewed everything as a competition and if I had fought back he would have continued assaulting me until I stopped defending myself. One of us would have died; probably me.

I know that if he had not been sent away I would either still be with him or have suffered some terrible 'accidental' death. He is a truly evil person.

Sometimes, a man may rape his partner because he feels threatened or undermined by a show of strength on her part; the rape is his attempt to

take away her strength, to ‘weaken’ her so he can feel more in control. Accordingly, women are often raped after they have initiated a separation or indicated that they are going to leave:⁴

When I said that I would need to speak to my lawyer, he then sexually assaulted me.

This time he used a weapon – a pair of scissors.

I recognised that what was happening was rape when he threatened me with the scissors, whilst trying to remove my clothing. I suppose it was the weapon that made it obvious. I fought to get away. However he is a lot stronger than me plus I have rheumatoid arthritis that affects my strength. I finally succumbed and waited until he finished. The whole process took a great deal of time. (Samantha)

It is the perpetrator who displays weakness by not choosing other alternatives to violence.

If you re-evaluate some of what you see as weakness, you might begin to see that it was actually strengths that enabled your survival.

Are women raped by partners frigid?

If you saw the film *La Bamba*, you might remember the scene in which Joey, the brother of Ritchie Valens, laments to Ritchie that he has to ‘practically rape’ his wife Rosie in order to get sex from her. ‘Frigid’ wives or women who withhold sex from their partners are often blamed for rapes perpetrated against them.⁵

Here, the perpetrator becomes the victim – a poor, frustrated man who actually has no choice but to take by force what he can’t otherwise get. Remember that he has that insatiable libido too! The blame for the victim is justified by the belief that men can’t be expected to do without sex, and that it is women’s duty to fulfil those needs.

However, none of the 30 women in this book withheld sex from their partners.

Carl had sex with me without my consent a lot of the time. Sometimes I felt like I had to, because I’d said no for too long. I thought if I said no he’d hit me or force me. (Liz)

The frigidity myth is confusing rape with sex. Yet, research reminds us that rape is not usually committed to have sex, but to humiliate and punish.⁶

Dispelling the myths

As we've seen, myths seem determined to blame women one way or another for rape. On the one hand, it is inferred that rape victims are 'sluts' who are raped for being too sexual:

Unfortunately, I created a false correlation between my sexuality and Paul's sexual violence. I imagined that the rapes had occurred because I had been sexual with him in the first place. He often used to say he was doing it to teach me not to be a slut. Shit! In hindsight, how twisted is it to use rape as a form of moral instruction? (Rachel)

On the other hand, we hear that women are raped for not being sexual enough! Yet sexual boundaries are your right to set. Having boundaries is not a crime, but rape is. You can counter the blaming myths and help set those boundaries with affirmations like:

- I have a right to not enjoy sex.
- I have a right to be asexual.
- I have a right to not always be interested in sex.⁷

These myths are false and derived from parts of rape culture, including a lack of understanding of male and female sexualities, the effects of sexual assault, the dynamics and consequences of violence in relationships. Knowledge is power. We hope that you are able to use the information in these last pages to mute the voices that want to blame you for your victimisation.