

PORTRAYALS AND PREVENTION CAMPAIGNS: SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA

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FEBRUARY 2020

Sexual violence in the media: Portrayals and prevention

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Special thanks to all peer reviewers of this publication

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An introduction to the role of media

The mass media now includes television, radio, internet and printed communications and is intended to reach the majority of the general public. Every day, an individual now spends more time engaging with mass media outlets through technology than sleeping. Ofcom (2014) reported that people in Britain spend an average of 8 hours and 40 minutes per day accessing media in comparison to only sleeping for an average of 8 hours and 20 minutes per day. With individuals relying heavily on media for information about social and political issues, pop culture, product information and general news, it is easy to see the power that these outlets have when it comes to presenting messages about sexual violence (Shaw et al., 2009). Even studies from the early eighties and nineties found that large proportions of children's prime time television dramas contained sexual imagery, kissing, flirting and discussion of sex and intimacy (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2011).

Despite feminist groups fighting the objectification and sexualisation of women and girls in the mass media for decades (Long, 2012) media outlets can be selective when it comes to the portrayal of women and girls. Further, media portrayals of sexual assault and rape have been shown to increase victim blaming and influence the way women, the general public, the police, the criminal justice system and in some cases, the way juries have perceived a female victim (Shaw et al., 2009; Eaton, 2019). In a review examining depictions of young women in a range of media, (APA, 2007) findings showed that women and girls are frequently depicted in sexualized and objectified manners. The same report argued that this was causing girls as young as seven years old to view themselves through the 'male gaze' and judging themselves based on their own sex appeal (APA, 2007).

This report will discuss the ways in which mass media and pornography influence the way we all perceive sexual violence – and the ways we seek to prevent sexual violence by encouraging women and girls to protect themselves.

As suggested by Sandra Walklate, preventing sexual violence requires a good understanding of the causes of sexual violence against (predominantly) women and girls. However, as this report will demonstrate, the harmful messages being communicated by different forms of media may be playing a role in misguided and poor prevention strategies taken by local authorities, government and police.

Dominant messages: The sexualisation, pornification and objectification of women and girls

The media communicates influential messages about the gender role stereotypes of women, girls, men and boys. Whether it is the consistent depiction of women in the kitchen, boys playing construction games whilst girls apply make-up to a plastic doll head and men doing DIY in their garage – the media has considerable power to influence gender role norms. Sexualisation and objectification of women and girls in the media is commonplace. The media play a key role in communicating information, cultural norms, attitudes and approaches not only to sexual violence as a topic, but also to the prevention of sexual violence. Therefore, it is relevant to consider the way the media portray women, sex and sexual violence.

Sexualisation of women and girls is defined as occurring when the value of the person is derived from their sex appeal, excluding their other characteristics; when a person is defined by their physical attractiveness and when a person is sexually objectified (APA Task Force, 2007).

Objectification is defined as perceiving and treating a person as a sexual object (Loughnan, 2013). Sexualisation and objectification in mainstream media has been shown to affect the perceptions of the general public. Sexualised and objectified women and girls are dehumanised, dementalised and therefore perceived as less worthy of moral concern. Consequently, when women and girls are

sexualised and objectified either directly or indirectly, they are more likely to be blamed for rape and sexual assault and less likely to be perceived as suffering from the experience of being subjected to sexual violence (Loughnan et al., 2013).

Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2011) report that sexual imagery or sex-related talk occurred 8-10 times per hour and 1 in 4 conversations between lead characters were about sex on prime-time television shows in the nineties. Less than two decades later, Eyal and Finnerty (2009) found that 16% of all sexual intercourse depicted on TV involved teenagers or young adults.

Attractive female characters were found to be more likely to be victims of sexual crimes in television shows than male characters. The authors found that whilst HBO included the most shows with sexual intercourse, few differences across channels were observed in the presentation of sexual intercourse (Eyal and Finnerty, 2009). Television shows and advertisements were largely presenting sex and relationships in the same way: women and girls are frequent victims of sexual assault, whereas men are rarely victims of sexual assaults or rapes; sex is framed as positive and casual, but negative depictions of sex are presented as having very serious and long lasting consequences for the female victims (Eyal and Finnerty, 2009).

In recent television, internationally popular 'Game of Thrones' was scrutinised for the staggering number of rapes of women and girls in the episodes across all series, with 50 rapes in the TV series and over 200 rapes in the original book series. When questioned about this by The New York Times in 2014, author George R.R. Martin argued that sexual violence was a common part of history and war – and that he was reflecting an everyday occurrence. However, critics called the significant amount of sexual violence against women and girls gratuitous, unacceptable and disgusting (The New York Times, 2014).

However, this is not the only globally viewed production that has been criticised for the sexualisation and sensationalism of the rape and abuse of women. Other films include *Gone Girl* (2014) and *Red Sparrow* (2018), which were criticised for sensationalising the rape of women and for perpetuating

the rape myth that women lie about rape and domestic violence for revenge or attention. In May 2019, newspapers reported that audiences had walked out of screenings of *The Nightingale* (2019) due to the inclusion of three violent rape scenes of the female character within 20 minutes. Reviews described the film as 'vacuum-packed with a non-stop supply of rapes, deaths and beatings' (The Independent, 2019).

Mass media play a large role in depicting and reframing issues of gender role stereotypes, sexualisation and objectification of women (APA, 2007; Eaton, 2019). Authors have also argued that the media depiction of gender roles of women and girls often intersect with the depiction of race, which causes further problems for women of colour who are not only subject to the misogyny of sexualisation and objectification, but also the racism related to their ethnicity or cultures.

Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) found that the sexual exploitation of African American women and girls in slavery has led to media stereotypes of Black women as sexual aggressors and sexual savages (Thomas et al., 2004). They also reported that Asian women and girls were generally portrayed in the media as sexually submissive, childlike, and exotic (Root, 1995). Finally, women and girls of all ethnicities and cultures that belonged to lower social classes were portrayed as gross, overly sexed, untamed, crude, and deserving of sexual exploitation and aggression (Pharr, 1988; Smith, 2008). Whilst this may result in seemingly benign popular adverts containing, for example, African women dressed like carnal, sexual animals in a jungle or chained naked in a metal cage, the reality is that women of colour are depicted as non-human animals, savages or submissive slaves.

Film Director and Photographer, Jean Paul Goude is behind many famous images of Black women. His book called 'Jungle Fever' (1982) and much of his most influential work depicts Black women as sexual savages, usually naked in cages, in jungles and animalistic poses. In the book, he speaks candidly about Black women he dated and married, comparing their body parts and characters to animals and savages.

In 2009, famous Black actress and model Amber Rose was depicted as an animal in a cage for a photoshoot for Complex Magazine. Naomi Campbell and Grace Jones are among other famous Black women who have been repeatedly depicted as savages or animals in fashion and advertisement. The media reinforces the powerful historic white, misogynistic power over 'exotic' women and girls of colour who are hyper-sexualised objects of sex to be used or tamed by the dominant class: white, privileged men.

Long (2012) argues that all these media representations of women and girls reduce women to an object for sex, holes to be filled or a body to be used. This has direct links to the victim blaming of women and girls who have been subjected to rape or sexual assault because it reinforces the notion that they are insatiable sex objects for men and boys to conquer and use. This systemic desensitisation of the sexual purpose of women means that rape is often seen as an act of sex, not as an act of violence. It perpetuates rape myths such as 'women who are forced to have sex, enjoy it really' (Payne, Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1999) which features as an item in the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale.

Sexualisation and objectification is important when considering prevention of sexual violence because this positioning of women as objects has been shown to reduce concern for women who are subjected to sexual offences. If the concern is reduced, the prevention strategies may be misguided or even blame women and girls for being subjected to sexual violence.

This was demonstrated by Loughnan et al. (2013), who found that participants presented with a case study of an objectified, sexualised woman who had been raped were less likely to feel moral concern for her and she was more likely to be held responsible than women who were not objectified or over-sexualised. Not only this, but the hyper-sexualisation of groups of women can be absorbed and accepted by the women themselves (Loughnan et al., 2013), meaning that they can buy into the popular misrepresentation of their own gender roles and self-worth; thereby increasing self-blame (Eaton, 2019).

Arguably, one of the most devastating effects of buying into the representation by the mass media of women as sexual objects is that women can learn that their self-worth lies within sex and remaining constantly sexually available to men and boys (Garcia, 1999; APA, 2007b). This can lead to women and girls judging and blaming themselves using common rape myths for why they were raped - or not even realise that their sexual encounter was non-consensual, forced or exploitative (Ullman, 2011; Eaton, 2019). Indeed, Fairchild and Rudman (2008) have shown that young women who were subjected to sexual harassment and objectification in the street by unknown men had a variety of coping mechanisms but those young women who responded to sexual harassment passively or by blaming themselves were much more likely to self-objectify.

The effect of pornography and porn culture

Pornography is now one of the most consumed forms of media in the world. Each year, Pornhub.com releases statistics on usage and trends. They reported that:

- In 2017, Pornhub.com received 28.5 billion visits. That's 78.1 million per day.
- In 2017, people watched 92 billion porn videos on Pornhub.com
- In 2017, 4.6 billion hours of porn were watched on Pornhub.com

This immense consumption of pornography is not confined to adults. A report by online security company BitDefender showed that children under 10 years old accounted for 22% of porn consumption by under 18s and that out of all people using porn, 1 in 10 visitors to porn websites every day are under 10 years old (BitDefender, 2016). Porn culture or 'pornification' is defined as 'the prevalence or normalisation of sexual themes and explicit sexual imagery in popular or mainstream culture'. Examples of this can be seen in advertisements, music videos, drama, fashion and even fast food.

As pornography and porn culture is often based upon both sexualisation and objectification of women, there is evidence to show links between all three and victim blaming. Pornography is linked to victim blaming because it provides validation of the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women and girls (Katyachild et al., 1985) and the trivialisation, minimisation and glorification of rape and sexual assault (Layden, 2010).

Pornography and porn culture in the media convey compelling messages about what sex is, how it should be performed, how a woman or girl should respond to sex or sexual advances and what men and boys should expect and want from sex. In a study conducted by NSPCC in 2013, young people of 15 years old were found to be imitating or requesting sex acts that they had seen in porn. Indeed, many pornographic materials watched by adults and children exploited the 'rape loophole'. The 'rape loophole' was a method in which film makers were legally allowed to depict rape and sexual assault in their films up until 2013 when Rape Crisis England and Wales put pressure on the government to make it illegal.

In a study carried out by Rape Crisis (2013) as part of their campaign, it was found that of the top ten Google search results for the search term 'free porn', half of the websites hosted free 'rape pornography'. Their study also found that on the top 50 UK porn websites, 78% advertise content simulating rape of girls under 18 years old under keywords such as 'schoolgirl rape' and 'young teen rape'. Further to this, Pornhub.com reported that one of their most common search terms in 2017 was 'stepdaughter porn' and 'stepsister porn'. This not only sent messages to established and potential perpetrators that incest, child abuse, rape and forced sex is acceptable, exciting and enjoyed by women but also sent strong messages to women and girls, who may feel obliged or pressured to perform a sexual act that they have seen in pornography.

This is especially concerning when added to the research findings from Corne et al. (1992) who found that women and girls who were exposed to pornography from an early age were more likely to accept common rape myths and even experience sexual fantasies where they were raped.

Researchers argued that this was due to the way that exposure to porn had socialised these women and girls to believe that sexual aggression and sexual submission was a part of a romantic or intimate event/relationship. Further still, Layden (2010) found that young women who watched pornography depicting rape and sexual violence would recommend a prison sentence half the length of young women who had not watched the material. It is arguable that exposure to porn of any kind that repeatedly presents women and girls as subordinate, insatiable and 'enjoying' forced sex acts will desensitise and distort a person's perception of healthy consensual sex.

In a study conducted in Japan in 1994, Ohbuchi and colleagues found that young men who watched porn depicting rape and forced sexual acts where the actresses are directed to show pleasure are significantly more likely to believe that high percentages of rape cases are invented by women and girls in society. The same study also reported that the young men who had watched this type of pornography were significantly more likely to believe that women and girls enjoy being raped. More recently in Britain, reports of rapes of girls being perpetrated by boys on school grounds is increasing, with recent statistics showing 5500 rapes of girls happened in their schools in 2016. Bates (2018) reported that when interviewed, schoolboys had said that they thought it was normal for girls to cry during sex and foreplay, which Bates attributed to the prevalence of porn now containing women and girls crying in pain (Long, 2012).

To explore these comments, a keyword search was conducted on the 30th August 2018 of Pornhub.com.

Keywords searched included 'crying', 'hurt' and 'pain', to explore how accessible free porn videos were that contained women who were in clear physical pain and might normalise sex with women who are crying in pain. The results from the brief keyword search resulted in 1129 videos of women 'crying' in pain during sex acts, 983 videos of women being described as 'hurt' during sex acts and 2364 videos of women described as 'in pain' and 'in extreme pain' during sex acts. All words featured in the titles of the videos. It is important to note that this was a brief search of only one

free porn website conducted at one moment in time, but that there was clearly a very large collection of videos depicting women who were crying from physical pain during sex, therefore sexualising and normalising painful and abusive sex.

This effect was found years before the internet made porn so readily available. In a piece of research with male undergraduates, Garcia (1984) found that the more sexually violent and coercive materials consumed by the participants, the more likely they were to believe that women and girls are responsible for their own rape, that rapists should not be severely punished and that women and girls should not resist non-consensual sex. However, this study was based on male undergraduates accessing hard copy pornography such as books, magazines and occasionally, video tapes in the eighties. The participants reported that around 50-60% of the pornography they had seen showed physical violence towards the woman. With the expansion of the internet, social media and mobile technology, the modern figure of violence in pornography is now reported to be around 90-97% (Long, 2012; Dines, 2011).

A meta-analysis was conducted by Paolucci et al. (2000) to explore the impact that watching pornography has on committing sexual violence and accepting rape myths that blame women for their rape and sexual assaults. The meta-analysis of 46 studies between 1962-1995 with over 12,000 participants showed that there was a 22% increase in men committing sexual violence and a 31% increase in the acceptance of rape myths by men (Paolucci et al., 2000) and that rape myth acceptance has been repeatedly positively correlated to all forms of porn (violent or non-violent) due to the degradation and dehumanisation of women contained within the materials (Van Maren, 2014; Long, 2012; Dines, 2011).

These issues could be central to prevention strategies. For example, if women and girls are consistently framed as sexual objects in widely consumed media and pornographic materials, then abuse, sexual assaults, rapes and harassment may be perceived as 'the norm' for the way women and girls will be treated in society, in their relationships and in sexual intercourse.

Victim blaming, rape myths and misogyny

If sexual violence against women is presented as the norm, prevention strategies may focus on what women could have done differently to protect themselves from inevitable sexual violence, rather than stopping perpetrators of sexual violence (Eaton, 2019). Clearly, sexualisation of women and girls may play a role in which prevention strategy is developed and adopted. If women and girls are sexualised and objectified as a social norm, rather than telling perpetrators not to rape, we may issue advice to women about covering their bodies and ensuring that they do not lead men on.

Franuik and Shain (2011) argued that this perspective was demonstrated in Australia in 2006 when an influential Muslim Cleric spoke in a public address. Sheik Hilali was quoted as saying:

"If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside ... without cover, and the cats come to eat it ... whose fault is it, the cats' or the uncovered meat's? The uncovered meat is the problem. If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred."

Whilst it would be easy to suggest that this is an isolated religious or culturally specific view, this concept of preventing sexual violence by women covering their bodies exists in all religions and many cultures around the world (Franuik and Shain, 2011; Eaton, 2019). This is related to a broader theme in the prevention of sexual violence, in which women and girls are expected to make changes to their appearance, behaviour or character to prevent sexual violence.

Eaton (2019) conducted interviews with women who had been blamed for not preventing rapes and sexual assaults against them and found that women were being encouraged, advised or forced to change something about themselves as a 'preventative' measure. Among the things women had changed about themselves to prevent sexual violence, women had cut their hair off, wore baggier clothes, hid their body shape, quit their jobs, moved areas, stopped walking home from work, stopped dancing and singing, stopped hugging friends and family and stopped drinking alcohol or

socialising in bars and clubs. One of the key findings from this study was a theme that suggested that women who were blamed for sexual violence were given 'prevention' and 'protection' advice that involved changing herself, despite most women understanding that it would not really protect them from an abusive partner or rapist.

Whilst rape myths and victim blaming from the 1960s through to the 1990s often cited the clothing of the woman and her modesty (Burt, 1980; Brownmiller, 1970; Eaton, 2019); other rape myths communicated by the mass media have focussed on extreme, rare and unusual sexual violence against women – which has played a role in the prevention advice being given to women and girls.

The mass media tend to report on the rarest cases of rape and sexual violence (stranger rapes, sudden abductions, imprisonments). Whilst this makes sense from a 'news' perspective (to sensationalise rape as the 'stranger waiting in the dark alley', to gather more clicks and shares or to attract more readers to the website), it can reinforce stereotypes about rape and sexual assault and can increase the misconception that most rapes and sexual assaults happen to women and girls when they are walking home alone and are violently attacked by a stranger (Brownmiller, 1975; Ward, 1995; Payne et al., 1999; Eaton, 2019). Over half of media reports of rape describe a rape that has occurred in a deserted public place and committed by a stranger (Maier, 2008), despite this being one of the rarest forms of sexual violence (Sleath and Woodhams, 2012; Eaton, 2019).

Victim blaming is also prevalent in the media and directly affects attitudes towards sexual violence. For example, results from a content analysis of television dramas found that 42% of storylines depicted a female "wanting" to be raped, 38% depicted a female victim lying about rape, and 46% featured females "asking" to be raped (APA, 2007). In an experimental study examining whether newspaper headlines influence readers, Franuik et al. (2008b) exposed participants to an article with either a rape myth-endorsing or non-rape myth endorsing headline. Results showed that participants exposed to the rape myth endorsing headline were less likely to believe that the

perpetrator was guilty of rape and more likely to hold rape-supportive attitudes about women and girls.

An international report that reviewed studies and law enforcement estimates reported that approximately 2–8% of reported sexual assaults are believed to be false (Lonsway et al. 2007).

However, the general perception of false rape allegations is much higher. In 1980, Burt found that half of men and women from a community sample believed that women lie about being raped and almost thirty years later, Kahlor and Morrison (2007) found that participants believed that an average of 19% of sexual assault and rape accusations were false.

As so many people watch television (such as soap operas, dramas and documentaries) on a daily or weekly basis, it is important to explore how the stories of the rape and sexual assault of women and girls are told in fiction, too. Culkanz (2000) outlined the most common messages on prime time TV as being that women and girls often lie about rape, that rapists are always a stranger, that women are responsible for their attack due to how they behaved or what they wore, that rapists are mentally ill or psychologically abnormal, that women and girls who are raped must prove their prior sexual purity to be taken seriously and that black men are more likely to rape women than white men. TV shows increasingly focus on policing and law; therefore, it is important to examine how this potentially contributes to victim blaming in prevention campaigns and responses to sexual violence.

Whilst it could be argued that this extra media exposure to sexual violence could increase awareness of the general viewing population, the success of this would depend on the nature and the style in which the drama productions represented rape and sexual assault. For example, when hit TV show 'Glee' ran a storyline about sexual abuse of a boy, RAINN (2014) reported that their online chat service usage increased by 60% and calls to their National Sexual Assault Hotline increased by 80%. Not only this, but because the storyline was based on a male experiencing sexual abuse, RAINN (2014) also reported a large increase in men and boys calling for support about their own sexual abuse.

However, if storylines are stereotypical and contain victim blaming responses from authority figures in crime and law contexts, this could have a detrimental impact on the public and professional attitude towards women subjected to sexual violence. Examples of such shows are the multiple CSI series', Law and Order: Special Victims Unit and Criminal Minds, all of which contained examples of victim blaming and rape stereotypes. This was explored by Magestro (2015) who suggested that over one quarter of all aired episodes of Law and Order: SVU and CSI are based on the rape of women.

Magestro provides the examples of victim-blaming language use in NCIS such as a police officer saying '*she got herself raped and killed*' (Magestro, 2015, p.8) and the repeated use of the word 'relationship' instead of the word 'abuse' or 'rape'. Also discussed are the general storylines and possible effects on the viewer. All ten of the rape storylines featuring in the first ten seasons of NCIS (100% of episodes) were found to blame the woman or girl for her rape (Magestro, 2015). Further examples include a storyline in which a woman is seen as undeserving of empathy and justice because she had an online dating profile whilst her husband was away serving in the military and another involving a girl being raped which concluded with suggesting she had made up the accusation. Magestro (2015) also found several jokes and threats of rape including a police officer mocking a man about being raped 'like prom queen on prom night' in prison (Magestro, 2015, p.13).

Crime and law dramas are not the only shows to discuss or depict rape and sexual assault. Even British national chat shows, such as ITV This Morning, have found themselves at the centre of justified criticism due to the way their presenters and journalists have discussed rape to an audience which averages 1 million people per day in the UK. In 2011, Eamonn Holmes interviewed a young woman who explained how she used techniques from TV shows such as NCIS to ensure her DNA was left in the car of her rapist and then concluded the interview by commenting to the 18-year-old woman who was abducted near her own home '*Well, I hope you take taxis now*'. In 2015, daytime television chat show 'Loose Women' ran an interactive poll with their viewers asking 'Can women ever be to blame for their rape?' and whilst only 12% of the viewers that day responded 'yes' the

presenter said, *'If I am walking around in my underwear and I'm drunk, and I get raped, who else's fault could that be?'*

Television, film, advertisements and pornography have been shown to have considerable impact on the perception of sexual violence and of women subjected to such violence. But as technology has advanced, media is more than just television and film – and the messages about sexual violence have spread to gaming. Violent and sexist video games, such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA) that had sold over 220 million copies in February 2016 (IGN, 2016) have been shown to reduce empathy for female victims of sexual violence (Gabbiadini et al. 2016).

Gabbiadini et al (2016) argue that male characters tend to be hyper-masculine and aggressive and all the female characters in the game are prostitutes, pole dancers and victims of the male characters; females in this game are therefore sex objects. For example, players of GTA can have sex with a prostitute but then make the decision in game play to kill her after the sex and steal their money back (Gabbiadini et al., 2016). The researchers concluded that playing video games in first-person that endorsed violent, abusive and sexist behaviours towards women increased the masculine beliefs of adolescent male players and therefore reduced the empathy towards victims of sexual violence and increased their levels of desensitisation towards violence against women.

In a more extreme example, a popular immersive computer game called 'Rapelay' was released in 2006 which was available worldwide through Amazon.com and Microsoft. The game was a first-person story-mode from the perspective of a man who stalks and rapes a mother and her two child daughters. Whilst tracking them down, the person playing the game can sexually assault, rape, gang rape or kill other women. The gameplay includes incredibly graphic scenes and even has 'forced fellatio' option and an 'internal ejaculation' counter. It took three years for government officials to launch campaigns against the game and its creators in Japan. Despite clearly encouraging and glorifying the rape and sexual assault of women and girls, the large scale action to ban the game was met with confusion from the creators, fans of the game and even academics who argued that there

are thousands of games that depict worse crimes than rape, including murder and war crimes. The game is no longer available to purchase from the creators and Amazon agreed to delete any listings of new or used versions of the game in 2009.

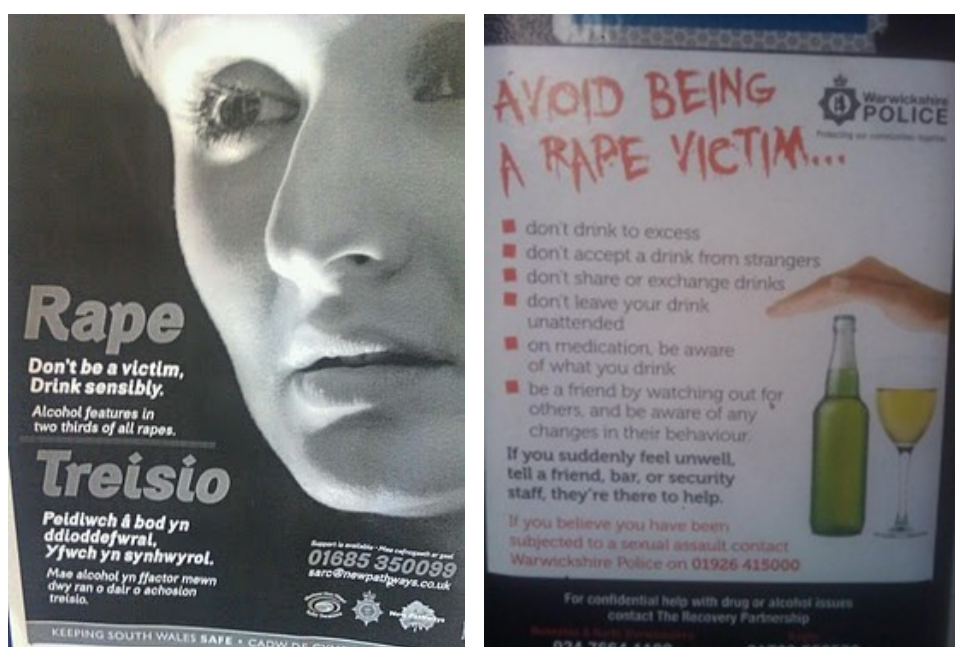
It appears that mass media in all its forms, is the vehicle in which sexual violence is embedded as normal, sexualised, trivial, exciting and fun – and women and girls are framed as sexual objects to be used and abused. However, there may also be a problem with the media being used to raise awareness about sexual violence.

An interesting criticism by Kitzinger (1999) considers wider media influences such as posters, adverts, articles, case studies and even sexual violence support organisations and campaigns that are often forced to use the most extreme examples of rape and sexual assault to push governments, authorities and public to take the issue seriously or to campaign for change. This results in frequent representations of rape and sexual assault that include severe physical injuries, stranger rapes, unfamiliar places, night-time scenarios and ‘vulnerable’ girls and women. The distorted ‘real rape’ scenario is therefore upheld and reinforced not only for general public and for those working in the criminal justice system, but for women and girls who have been subjected sexual assault or rape and may be questioning whether what happened to them was really a sexual offence (Campbell, 2009; Eaton, 2019).

This frequent misrepresentation of sexual violence as occurring outside, in dark unfamiliar places, perpetrated by violent strangers has been recognised in the forensic psychology literature for decades, with Williams (1984) naming it ‘The Classic Rape’. This is central to discussions of prevention, as the classic rape stereotype teamed with the previously discussed victim blaming, sexualisation and objectification of women and girls has arguably led to some questionable prevention strategies in the UK.

Examples of sexual violence prevention posters used in the UK

This section will examine and analyse sexual violence prevention campaign posters used in the last 8 years by authorities in the UK. As discussed in the previous section, a combination of social narratives about sexual violence, the sexualisation and objectification of women and girls, the consistent victim blaming of women and girls as the cause and solution of sexual violence and a tendency to suggest that women and girls should change something about themselves to prevent sexual violence is likely to have played a role in the development and publication of sexual violence prevention campaigns such as those featured here.



(Left) South Wales Police rape prevention campaign poster (2011) and (right) Warwickshire Police rape prevention campaign (2013)

The two rape prevention posters above have clear slogans that encourage women not to 'be a victim'. South Wales Police advise women 'Don't be a victim' and Warwickshire Police advise women 'Avoid being a rape victim'.

As prevention campaigns, these posters are aimed at victims as if the women can prevent sexual violence by following some simple safety rules. The prevention message here, is that women are

instrumental in preventing sexual violence by not drinking alcohol and remaining more vigilant.

However, this of course does not prevent sexual violence, as preventing sexual violence would mean that campaigns should be aimed at the cause of sexual violence: sex offenders.

Interestingly, both posters contain vague, metaphorical language about 'being a victim', which erases the role and actions of the sex offender by omitting them completely. Language such as this positions the woman as the cause and solution to sexual violence – which she can avoid if she modifies her own behaviours and choices.



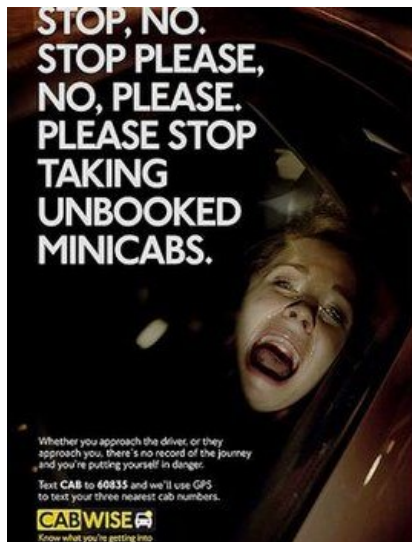
North Yorkshire Police child sexual exploitation prevention media campaign (2018)

In 2018, North Yorkshire Police launched a new child sexual exploitation campaign aimed at children which positioned sexual violence as a poor choice. The poster featured above was one of a collection of posters which asked children 'Which choice will you make?' about whether they will 'choose' to be exploited, raped and trafficked or whether they will choose to have nicer outcomes free from abuse. This prevention campaign is particularly problematic as it is aimed at child victims of serious sexual crimes and repositions their abuse as a free choice.



(Left) Sussex Police sexual assault prevention campaign poster (2015) and (right) NHS England rape prevention campaign poster (2014)

Rape and sexual assault prevention campaigns often focus on the behaviour of women who drink alcohol or go out to bars and clubs with their friends. The posters above from the police and the NHS were displayed in town centres and women's toilets in bars, clubs and venues where they would be consuming alcohol. They are both problematic due to positioning the prevention of sexual violence as being the responsibility of women to either stop drinking, stop socialising or protect their friends from sex offenders. Further, it is wholly unfair to blame friends of women subjected to sexual violence for not preventing rapes or sexual assaults committed by adults who chose to attack another person. Neither poster challenges the offender or potential offender to not commit offences or to think differently about women and girls.



Transport for London rape prevention campaign (2009)

This final example which was displayed around London transport links (train stations, tube stations and taxi ranks) sends a clear message to women to stop taking unbooked taxis as they may be raped. The language on the poster containing the protests of a woman being raped is problematic alone, without the additional image of the screaming, crying woman. The prevention message here is behavioural, again. Women should stop using unbooked taxis and in the smaller text, the poster tells women that 'you're putting yourself in danger'. As with the other prevention campaigns, there is no focus on the concern that unbooked taxi drivers were committing acts of rape and sexual assault – but the focus remains on women to prevent sexual violence by not putting themselves in danger.

This collection of posters is only a small proportion of the historic and current sexual violence prevention campaigns that have been published and promoted in the UK in recent years. They convey a strong message to women and girls that preventing sexual violence is their own responsibility and can be achieved by changing their lifestyles, choices and behaviours. Prevention campaigns such as the ones presented here do not mention who commits the sexual violence and do not target potential offenders and abusers. Instead, they focus on women and girls as inevitable victims of sexual violence who must protect themselves from 'rape' and 'assault' (as the humans, the offenders, are never named in the prevention campaigns).

Recommendations for improving sexual violence prevention

This final section will suggest changes that could be made to improve prevention campaigns and media portrayal of sexual violence committed against women and girls.

- Journalists, news presenters, talk show hosts and media editors could engage in training and further education to improve the language they use to describe sexual violence, victims and offenders
- More responsibility could be placed on production companies and TV channels to ensure that they do not encourage misogyny and blaming of women and girls subjected to sexual violence
- Wider education on the harms of pornography should be implemented for both adults and children, including information about the ways sexual acts in porn do not reflect sexual acts in real life and the way sex is staged for film
- Prevention campaigns by authorities could be aimed at offenders, potential offenders and bystanders – rather than being aimed at women and girls to change their behaviours and appearance
- Prevention campaigns should seek to prevent sexual violence from being perpetrated at all and should not seek to encourage individual women to protect themselves from inevitable sexual violence
- Prevention campaigns should not position sexual violence, exploitation and abuse as ‘poor choices’ of women or children
- Prevention campaigns should be developed and piloted in conjunction with a group of diverse victims of sexual violence and experts in the field to ensure that messages are thoroughly researched and tested before use
- Women and girls should not be encouraged to change something about themselves to prevent sexual violence

- Prevention campaigns should name the problem and name the perpetrators of the problem clearly, rather than using metaphorical language about 'being a victim' which omits the choices and actions of the offender(s)

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