

Date Rape: Naming, Publicizing, and Fighting a Pandemic

By Ellen Sweet

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Fifty years ago, women could not get credit in their own names, newspapers advertised jobs for men separately from jobs for women, and most people believed that rapes were committed by strangers stalking women down dark streets. The term date rape did not even exist in the public consciousness. But it was starting to exist in some thoughtful researchers' minds.

My focus is on the emergence of date rape in the 1970s and into the 80s, first as a topic of academic research and gradually, through advocacy journalism and student activism, as a real and pressing concern. During the 1970s, I edited a national newsletter called *Women's Agenda* for the Women's Action Alliance, a resource center for women's organizations. During the 80s, I was a staff writer and editor at *Ms. Magazine*. At times, I thought of myself as the "atrocities editor."

From its inception, in 1972, *Ms.* aimed to provide a forum for women's personal voices, including women speaking out on their experiences of rape and abortion. In those early years, *Ms.* published many articles about rape, ranging from confessions of a would-be rapist to a how-to guide for starting a rape crisis center. And because of our national circulation, we were able to publicize widely the ideas and actions of the anti-rape movement.

I remember leaving *Ms.* one night with my one-year-old daughter and walking one block over to 42nd Street in Manhattan to join a Take Back the Night march, back when 42nd St. was lined with porno shops, whose occupants emerged to shout insults at us.

Along with the increasing awareness about rape as violence against women and as a form of social control, which led to some much-needed reforms in state rape laws, came a more nuanced analysis of rape. In September 1982, *Ms.* published an article about a hidden form of rape that preliminary research indicated might be as much as or even more prevalent than stranger rape. That article entitled "Date Rape: A Campus Epidemic?" was, I believe, the first major article in a national magazine. It reported on a study by Mary Koss at Kent State University in Ohio, that asked female students if they had had sexual intercourse against their will through use of or threat of force (the minimum legal definition of rape). Of those who answered yes, only 57 percent went on to identify their experience as rape.

Koss found that one in eight women students had been raped and another one in four were victims of attempted rape. She concluded, “at least ten times more rapes occur among college students than are reflected in official crime statistics.”

The *Ms.* article received scores of responses from readers, and opened a national conversation about responsible sexual behavior. In the years immediately following its publication, numerous other magazines and newspapers started writing about date rape as a serious issue, although they tended to put the term in quotation marks, as if it were still suspect.

After publishing that first article, *Ms.* editors wanted to learn just how prevalent date rape was on college campuses nationally. We teamed up with Mary Koss and applied for a federal grant to do a major study, the first of its kind, from the Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape at the National Institute of Mental Health.

Although it was during the Reagan Administration and although the *Ms.* name was squarely on the proposal from the start (it was called the *Ms. Magazine Campus Project on Sexual Assault*), we got the grant. That isn't to say it was easy. For one thing, we had to pass a site visit from officials in Washington, which meant we had to straighten up our chaotic, raw loft space in the garment district and carve out a tiny private room for the coordination of the project.

The site visit chair insisted that while they might fund our research, they would not support the magazine to fulfill a dissemination plan. Gloria Steinem replied: “So let me get this straight. The government is willing to fund finding a cure for cancer, but they are not willing to tell anyone about it.”

Well, we managed to get a lot of attention for the report anyway. Maybe because of that attention, Reagan recommended de-funding the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, which was eventually phased out in 1987.

I coordinated the three-year study, which surveyed more than 6,000 students on 32 college campuses. I reported on the preliminary findings in the October 1985 issue of *Ms.*, and, based on that, also negotiated a book contract with Harper and Row for an expanded version of the final report. The book was *I Never Called It Rape: the Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape* by Robin Warshaw.

That title is very important. During the course of our research, some of the *Ms.* staff, including me, realized that we had had experiences, which, in hindsight, we recognized as rape or near-rape. We just didn't have a name for what had happened.

For almost ten years after my article appeared, I received requests to include it in textbooks or syllabi for courses in sociology, psychology, health education, philosophy, women's studies, writing, and more. It was proof to me that date rape

had penetrated campus consciousness.

The mainstream media picked up on the report as well. Although they still tended to put it in quotation marks, date or acquaintance rape (used somewhat interchangeably) became the hot topic for many articles during the latter part of the 1980s.

Meanwhile, campus rape-crisis activists were using the solid data provided by studies such as Koss's to push for much-needed reform. And by the way, various studies over the years have reached the strikingly similar conclusion that 1 in 4 or 1 in 5 college women are the victims of rape or attempted rape. (Held up the current cover of *Ms. Magazine*).

Most of the activists' early efforts were focused on the administrations of the schools themselves. In the beginning, schools responded with such measures as improved lighting along campus walkways or buddy systems for girls walking back to their dorms at night. These measures, while useful in themselves, focused on the stereotype of the stranger lurking in the shadows. Administrations were much slower to acknowledge that rapes really were taking place among their own student bodies.

As I found in interviewing college administrators for my article, schools were (and still are) slow to react for reasons including inadequate judicial review systems, fear of bad publicity affecting enrollment, and refusal to admit they had a problem in the first place. As a result, those attacked were triply victimized: by their attackers, by classmates and administrators who didn't believe them, and by local law enforcement.

But many schools did initiate programs that tried to address the problem: Stanford, Duke, U of P, Syracuse, Barnard, Rutgers, Swarthmore, Brown among others. Sadly, even some of the schools I just mentioned have been newsworthy in recent times for continuing problems of date rape.

The federal government also started listening. Then Senator Biden held a series of hearings in the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1991 (which eventually led to passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994). Mary Koss testified in one of those hearings, which focused on date rape at colleges.

It's hard to understand how Biden, that same year, could have handled so shamefully Anita Hill's testimony about sexual harassment in the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on Clarence Thomas.

One of the most controversial of our study's findings was that a majority of women who reported attacks that fit the legal definition of rape did not report the rape to any authorities, possibly because the vast majority of those women did not perceive themselves as raped. This finding led to some nasty attacks in right-wing

periodicals on our research as flawed and politically biased because we ignored women's own perceptions. As early as 1990, *Playboy* drew on those criticisms to run a series of articles challenging the research.

But Katie Roiphe's 1993 book *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* drove the media backlash to a frenzy. In a nutshell, Roiphe dismissed what we call date rape as no more than a woman's excuse for a bad night. Her evidence? "If I was really standing in the middle of an epidemic, a crisis, if 25% of my female friends were really being raped, wouldn't I know about it?" Well, the answer, Ms. Roiphe, is no!

Roiphe provided the male-dominated media with one of their favorite opportunities: a potential catfight. As a result, if the media "discovered" date rape in the 80s, it dismissed it in the 90s.

Fast forward to the present. A number of federal laws and regulations, each improving on earlier ones but none perfect, have helped campus anti-rape activists put pressure on their schools to do better, from Title IX in 1972 to the Clery Act in 1990 to the Campus Sexual Assault Victims Bill of Rights in 1992 to the Higher Education Reauthorization Act in that same year to Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance in from the Department of Education's Office of Civil Right in 2001 to the Dept. of Education's Dear Colleague letter in 2011. Most recently, Congress passed the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act, which went into effect this month. As a result of these laws, the number of students filing complaints has been called unprecedented. I hope some of you in this room can tell us what's happening on your campus, and how you have been able to leverage laws to make change.

Additionally, new ideas about how to negotiate the tricky terrain of he said/she said are gaining some traction. Mary Koss, for example, has worked with other researchers and school officials to promote restorative justice as a tool for institutions to deal with cases of reported rape.

And last month, the *New York Times* cover story in its special Education section was about bystander intervention as a way to prevent attacks. Students are also getting ever more sophisticated in using the existing laws and also social media to form networks for change.

And yet...so much remains to be done. It seems that every week I see a new story in the media about a specific campus rape; or about a school's renewed promise (always after the fact) to make its procedures for investigating and punishing rapes more transparent.

This kind of news led me to write a piece for the Women's Media Center a year ago, entitled "Date Rape Revisited: why are colleges still struggling to deal with the problem?" But I was heartened at the beginning of this year to hear President Obama announce the creation of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. On the same day, his White House Council on Women and Girls

released a report entitled: "Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action." His words, and those of Vice President Biden, were strong and encouraging.

Obama said, "We've got to keep teaching young men in particular to show women the respect they deserve and to recognize sexual violence and be outraged by it, and to do their part to stop it from happening in the first place." From Obama's lips to young men's ears!