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# No Rape Victim, Male or Female, Deserves to Be Blamed

Abigail Rine

Last year, a small American town began to cannibalize its own after a group of high school student athletes sexually assaulted an incapacitated classmate. In the aftermath, rather than rallying around the young victim, townspeople rushed to downplay the attack and defend the perpetrators instead.

If this sounds familiar, you might think I'm talking about Steubenville, Ohio--but I'm actually talking about Norwood, Colorado.

In February 2012, three high school wrestlers from the tiny town of Norwood ambushed a 13-year-old boy on a school bus, restrained him with duct tape, and anally raped him with a pencil. The victim's father, who was also the high school principal, notified the superintendent and school board immediately, but aside from a one-day suspension, there were no repercussions for the perpetrators (two of whom were sons of the head wrestling coach, who also happened to be president of the school board). Despite Colorado's mandatory reporting laws, the police were not notified until the principal reported the incident himself after a month of inaction on the part of town and school officials.

In the wake of the boys' arrests on charges ranging from kidnapping to sexual assault, the seventh-grade victim was blamed and bullied by his peers at school and on social media. Rather than cracking down on this harassment, some parents encouraged it, including the mother of an accused boy who made and distributed t-shirts that proclaimed alliance with the teenaged attackers.

Many Norwood citizens ostracized the victim and called for his father's resignation, incensed that the principal had reported what, to them, was a benign schoolboy prank. The assailants, all charged as juveniles, pled guilty to misdemeanors and received varying sentences of probation, community service, and cash restitution. The victim and his family were arguably punished more severely. After months of harassment, they were ultimately driven out of Norwood altogether and relocated to another community.

While Steubenville has been in the media spotlight since last December, the Norwood assault only recently received minimal national coverage, despite striking parallels between the two cases. There is much they share in common, such as the violence and permissiveness of sports culture, but their most disturbing common denominator is the secondary victimization of the raped teens in the form of rampant, town-wide victim-blaming.

Steubenville, in fact, has become a metonym for victim-blaming, serving for many feminist writers as a case-in-point argument for the existence of rape culture. Jill Filipovic, writing for *The Guardian*, uses Steubenville to lay out the orthodox feminist narrative that victim-blaming is rooted in misogyny. The Steubenville victim was shamed, scrutinized, demonized, and blamed because, Filipovic asserts, we live in a "woman-hating world."

While I'm not going to dispute the pervasiveness of misogyny in most cultures, this standard narrative doesn't fully account for what happened in Norwood, where there was a similar epidemic of victim-blaming, but no female victim. In fact, research on sexual violence indicates that, overall, male victims of rape elicit comparable or even more blame for their attacks than female victims. A number of recent studies reveal a more complex story about rape culture than is often told, a story that roots victim-blaming attitudes not in misogyny (or misandry) per se, but in perceived violations of traditional gender roles.

Thanks to the spotlight of feminist activism, a vast amount of literature on female rape has accumulated over the past four decades, whereas the study of male rape has been comparatively neglected. (Some social scientists estimate that research and resources for male victims lags behind by a good 20 years.) These analyses, as well as activist endeavors like SlutWalks, have focused on highlighting and debunking myths about female rape that contribute to victim-blaming. Such myths were highly visible in reactions to the Steubenville case, where the victim's use of alcohol and sexual history were used to fault her for the rape.

Distinct but corresponding myths about men likewise fuel victim-blaming, as burgeoning research on male rape demonstrates. A 2009 study in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* surveys a number of these false beliefs, including the perception that males, as the physically powerful sexual instigators, can't be raped, or are not as traumatized if they are assaulted. Echoes of these myths are evident even in some headlines about the Colorado case, which use the more benign language of "hazing," rather than "rape" or "sexual assault," downplaying the attack as an extreme display of teenaged masculinity rather than a crime of sexual violence.

These rape myths spring from deeply entrenched gender norms about permissible and idealized behavior for men and women, and rape victims of both sexes are blamed when they openly transgress the social expectations of their gender. A woman who goes out alone at night, for example, is prone to blame, as is a woman who is slut-shamed for having had prior sexual partners. A man who fails to physically overcome his attacker is likewise seen as contributing to his own victimization; he must have secretly wanted it. The young male victim in the Norwood case was particularly targeted for speaking out about his assault, which transgressed the expectation that a boy should just "man up," remaining stoic and invulnerable in the face of violence.

The majority of studies indicate that men are more prone to blaming victims of sexual assault than women, which superficially appears to support the "woman-hating" explanation--except for the fact that they ultimately blame male victims more. In fact, the groups most susceptible to blame for being raped are gay men raped by men and straight men raped by women. This is consistent with the gender role expectation hypothesis, as victims in those scenarios fall prey to the pervasive ideal of the hyper-sexed, insatiable male who invites and enjoys any sexual encounter.

Although men generally judge rape victims more harshly than women, the most recent research indicates that beliefs about gender roles are more predictive of a victim-blaming mentality than the gender of the research participant. In other words, men blame at higher rates not because they are more susceptible to misogyny or misandry, but because they are more likely to endorse traditional views of masculinity and femininity. This holds true for victim-blaming that stems from "hostile sexism," which refers to the denigration of a rape victim who violates gender expectations. Both men and women, however, are equally inclined toward "benevolent sexism," or reserving one's sympathy for those who fulfill gender ideals.

A study published just this year in the *Journal of Sexual Aggression* lends further support to the gender transgression hypothesis. Unlike previous experimental studies of samples from the United Kingdom and United States, this study analyzed a Swedish population. In this instance, victim-blaming attitudes were found to be scarce, as participants of both sexes overwhelmingly blamed the rapist for the attack, and, in a divergence from other studies, male participants did not victim-blame more than their female counterparts. Sweden, one of the highest-ranked countries in the world in terms of gender equality, appears to have significantly lower rates of victim blaming. Although further research is needed, these findings tentatively suggest that the most effective way to combat victim blaming is to move away from polarized gender ideals and cultivate an egalitarian society.

Both Norwood and Steubenville provide unsettling examples of rape culture, but it's a problem that only one of these attacks has received widespread attention. If we want to get at the underlying cause of victim-blaming attitudes, we can't afford to focus only on female victims or misogyny, lest we risk misdiagnosing the root problem. This is not simply a woman-hating world; it's a world that polices the boundaries of gender to the detriment of all.