

Shaping our Cultural Norms, Speaking Out Against Rape Culture

-Marla Sohl, Prison Advocacy Coordinator

The Nebraska Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence (Nebraska Coalition) is a fierce and unapologetic voice for survivors of sexual and domestic violence in Nebraska, the nation and the world. Tolerance of misogyny, sexism, objectification of women, sexual harassment and assault in our country continues to occur at troubling rates across economic, education, racial, gender, and religious boundaries. The mission of the Nebraska Coalition is to enhance safety and justice by changing the beliefs that perpetuate domestic and sexual violence.

Language is an important piece of our culture. Language shapes our norms; a standard of behavior that is generally accepted as normal or acceptable. It colors, shapes and informs our beliefs and perceptions which influence our behaviors. When we dismiss messages that reflect sexism, female objectification, or descriptions of sexually harassing or assaultive behavior, we are essentially establishing this type of rhetoric as our norm. And while the majority of individuals who hear and dismiss these messages will never commit acts of violence against others, those who will, tend interpret these messages accordingly. Research has revealed that people who commit sexual violence overestimate the extent to which their behavior is viewed as acceptable by 200 to 300%.ⁱ Rape jokes, objectification and the like just reinforce this misperception.

Unfortunately, that's not the only way a norm of sexually abusive acceptance affects our culture. These messages serve to silence victims. These messages trivialize the trauma that hundreds of thousands of girls, boys, women, and men have endured. However, we have the power to correct those misperceptions with what we know to be true. Most people do not view sexual violence as acceptable or funny.

Sexual violence is an epidemic affecting our nation and world. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old.ⁱⁱ One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives.ⁱⁱⁱ These numbers represent more than a distraction, it's an epidemic. In fact, annually, rape costs the U.S. more than any other crime (\$127 billion), followed by assault (\$93 billion), murder (\$71 billion), and drunk driving (\$61 billion).^{iv}

We need to speak up when we are confronted with this type of attitude and messages that dismiss sexual assault, because silence will only imply support. What we say and what we do *not* say matters. So what can you do? Speak out anytime you hear, see or experience jokes, commentary, or behaviors that reinforce rape culture. (We have provided some examples below from the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence that can be used on social media.) Actively promote respectful and consensual interactions for all people. Recognize that ending sexual assault and other forms of violence is on all of us. Please, join with the Nebraska Coalition to speak out in support of survivors and against rape culture.

Social Media Examples from National Alliance to End Sexual Violence:

Every allegation of sexual assault must be taken seriously. Survivors must be believed & supported. No matter what. #SupportSurvivors

Many survivors have been deeply hurt by how they've been treated by the criminal justice system. That's never ok. #NotOkay #SupportSurvivors

Often, family members make excuses 4 offenders & don't support victims leaving them 2 suffer alone. Never ok. #NotOkay #SupportSurvivors

Sexual harassment is sexual violence & women still have an uphill battle to be believed and supported. #NotOkay #NotOk #SupportSurvivors

ⁱ Neighbors, C, Walker, D, Mbilinyi, L, O'Rourke, A, Edleson, JL, Zegree, J & Roffman, RA. (in-press). Normative misperceptions of abuse among perpetrators of intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women*.

ⁱⁱ Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I. A., & Smith, C. (1990). Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics and risk factors. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 14, 19-28. doi:10.1016/0145-2134(90)90077-7

ⁱⁱⁱ Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., ... Stevens, M. R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 summary report. Retrieved from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf

^{iv} Krebs, C. P., Lindquist, C., Warner, T., Fisher, B., & Martin, S. (2007). The campus sexual assault (CSA) study: Final report. Retrieved from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf>