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# The Current Rape Discourse and its Consequences

## Introduction

Rape is a subject frequently discussed in feminist literature, and much has been written about it. Legal matters on the subject have changed significantly in the past decades, something that has been applauded by women and men alike. However, the current discourse which is used to describe rape has done little good for women. In the contemporary discourse, the image of a stereotypical rape is one in which the rapist is a complete stranger to the victim and is mainly motivated by sexual urges. A high level of physical violence must be exerted on the victim, and without visible bodily harm a victim must actually have been a willing participant rather than a victim. A second feature of the discourse is the constant portrayal of all women as victims. This counts for women who have not been raped, since they are at all times *potential* victims, and should subordinate their independence to the prevention of possible sexual assault. It also applies to women who have been raped, since their image is that of a woman whose life has been damaged beyond repair. A third characteristic of the rape discourse is that women can and should struggle against an attacker with all their might. This idea disregards the dangers inherent to such a strategy. It also underestimates the psychological effects that an attack has on its victim, limiting her ability to fight effectively. A fourth component of the recent rape discourse is its notion of a post-rape trauma development to be imminent. In this paper I will argue, however, that the trauma women tend to develop following rape is encouraged by the way rape is being represented in everyday speech, and would be less severe if the discourse would change. The memory of rape can and should be overcome, but a change in the discourse is first needed.

In this paper, I will first discuss four myths about rape that have been disproven but are still too often taken to be true. I will also highlight the negative repercussions that the false beliefs in these myths bring with them and provide examples from the recent discourse to illustrate the relevance of these myths in today's society. Second, I will discuss how the contemporary discourse surrounding rape victimizes both women who *have* been raped and women who have *not* been raped. Third, I will pay attention to the emphasis in the rape discourse on the ability and necessity for women to psychically resist to sexual assault, and the negative consequences that come along with it. Fourth, I will discuss the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in rape victims, and argue that the trauma is encouraged by the way rape is being represented in everyday speech, and would be less severe if the discourse would change. Lastly, I will provide a framework for a new discourse to discuss sexual violence, and offer my conclusions.

It should be noted that this thesis focuses on the rape of female adults. Although I will not attempt to specifically define 'adult' by pinpointing an exact age when adulthood starts, it is of importance that the claims I make do not refer to children who are sexually abused. It is my belief that the development of a trauma in a child will work differently than that in an adult, and this should be researched separately. Furthermore, the thesis is on the Western world in its totality and the Western world only. The situation of a woman in, for example, Saudi Arabia is completely different from the image portrayed in this thesis. The power

relations in non-Western countries are very different from the Western ones, and should also be researched separately. I define the Western World to be the English-speaking continents, Europe, and Israel, since these share many cultural similarities. Based on Christian-Judeo religious morals, these societies are built in a patriarchic way. Although three waves of feminism have taken place and greatly improved the status of women in the West, the issue of female sexuality is still a problem. On the one hand, female sexuality is often hidden and made irrelevant, for a decent woman is not supposed to express sexual urges in the public. On the other hand, the female body is often sexualized up to the point that women are often seen as sexual objects rather than independent individuals. These dynamics become clear in examining the discourse surrounding rape in different Western countries. Publicly and officially, rape is seen as a horrible act from which women should be protected. Simultaneously, however, rapists often enjoy more protection from the state and the society than the rape victims themselves, and the issue of rape is frequently used to keep women in a state of oppression. Examples I use in this thesis to show today's relevance to the myths surrounding rape are taken from different countries in the West, namely the Netherlands, Sweden, Israel and the United States.

## **Rape Myths**

There are many myths connected to rape and sexual assault that have been proven false. Unfortunately, many of them are still thought to be factual and are prevailing in the mainstream discourse on rape. One of the disputed fables has been the idea of rape as a sexual phenomenon, instead of a violent display of power (Lees 1996:xii). The prevailing notion before the seventies was that rape was inherent in the male sexuality, and men cannot be expected to control their biological urges after a certain point (*Ibidem*). It has also been said that when a woman experiences an event as rape, it has been a misunderstanding rather than bad intent on part of the man (*Ibidem*). However, on many accounts of rape, the attack has been planned in advance. This renders the argument of acute sexual urges groundless (Gregory and Lees 1999:110). Unfortunately, many in the academic community have not yet embraced the new notion that rape is an act of violence rather than sexual desire (Koss and Harvey 1987:40).

Many feminists have strongly argued in favor of the breakdown of this myth. Lees, for example, claims that rape has no relation to pleasure, but is connected to rage and patriarchal predation (Lees 1996:213). Susan Griffin also refers to rape as a form of violence, perpetrated with the goal to deny women their right to autonomy. She even argues that rape is a form of mass terrorism, since the victims of rape are often randomly chosen (in Buss and Malamuth 1996:121). I take this point even further, by arguing that rape encompasses *all* the components of terrorism. Although definitions of terrorism differ, most agree that a definition should at least cover the following: 'An act or threat of *violence*, which utilizes terror or *fear* in order to cause *psychological effects* and anticipated reactions to achieve *political ends*.' The first component, namely *violence*, has already been discussed. The second part, which alludes to *fear*, can be seen in the fact that women who have been raped tend to lose their faith and trust in others. In extreme cases, rape victims develop PTSD and sometimes remain in a constant state of fear. The third characteristic of terrorism, the *psychological effects* that the perpetrator expects to induce in the targeted

population, is also present in rape. Except for influencing the behavior of the victims themselves, the threat of rape affects the behavior of women in general. The last element of terrorism is the goal of achieving *political ends*. The political goal of rape can be defined as the subjection of women. In the words of Brownmiller, "It is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear (Brownmiller 1975:391)." In addition, research conducted in the United States has proven that not only the rape of women, but also the rape of men has more relation to the urge to dominate and exert ones power over someone, than to sexuality (Gregory and Lees 1999:113).

The belief in this myth inevitably carries negative consequences with it. Most notably, it offers men a justification to rape. The myth has, after all, been used to explain the supposed uncontrollability of the male sexuality, which denies the rapist any liability (Lees 1996:213). Zsuzsanna Adler seconds this by arguing that this myth endorses the false idea that women subjected to rape enjoy it as much as their perpetrators do (in Lees 1996:256). To counter this, it is necessary to change the general perception of rape. Brownmiller argues that our patriarchal society consciously endorses and implants those beliefs which provide men with "the ideology and psychological encouragement to commit their acts of aggression without awareness, for the most part, that they have committed a punishable crime, let alone a moral wrong (Brownmiller 1975:391)."

That this myth is still present in everyday speech can be seen in the case of Former Israeli president Moshe Katsav. Katsav, the highest-ranking official in Israel to ever have been sentenced to a prison sentence, was convicted in December 2010 of raping a former employee while serving as the president of Israel, and sexually harassing two other women and committing indecent acts while serving as tourism minister. He has also been found guilty on charges of obstruction of justice (The Associated Press 2011 pars:6-7). The testimony of A., one of the complainants in the Katsav case, illustrates the power imbalance that was always present in her relations with her boss and former Israeli president: "Always that imbalance between us... Some things are said without words. And you depend on him, your livelihood depends on him, he gets to decide whether or not you will work there (Edelman 2011:par. 11)." The experience for at least one of Katsav's victims is thus primarily about power, not sex. Other witnesses have also described how Katsav treats his female employees as subordinates, and "treating the female workforce as a pool out of which he chose sexual objects (Edelman 2010:pars. 1+4)." In this case, therefore, the perpetrator also used his superior power to subject his victims, rather than sexual persuasion. Still, outsiders look back at the events as normal sexual intercourse: "He didn't rape anyone. Everything was consensual (Haim Yona, qtd. in Yagna 2010a:par. 2)." The lack of a connection between rape and sex is thus not evident in the Israeli discourse on rape.

Another example concerns Mark Berck, a political blogger from the Netherlands. When the Dutch politician Ivo Opstelten argued in early 2010 that rapists should always be imprisoned (AD 2010), Berck argues against this in his blog. He prefers rapists to undergo psychiatric help rather than a prison sentence, since, according to him, the perpetrator has a distorted view on normal sexual relations (Berck 2010:pars. 2-3). Berck is thus also

amongst those who still confuse the power relations inherent in rape with sexual intercourse.

However, there is one disclaimer to the notion of rape as violence rather than sex, namely, that it is important to differentiate between the way the *target* of rape experiences the event and the way the *perpetrator* experiences the same act. The *motivation* of the attack may be sexual while the *consequences* may be predominantly violent (Buss and Malamuth 1996:120). Moreover, different victims also hold different views on the subject. Raped women who feel victimized by the experience are more prone to consider it to have been an act of violence, while women who did not blame the perpetrator as much are more inclined to relate to the occurrence as a sexual one (*Ibidem*:122). Moreover, men can rape for different reasons. In some cases they may be more sexually motivated than in others (Lees 1996:213). For example, Diana Russell argues that husbands who rape their wives do not do so purely to subordinate their wives, but are mostly sexually motivated (Buss and Malamuth 1996:129).

A second characteristic of rape that has been proven wrong is the idea of the rapist as a stranger to the victim, who attacks his prey in a dark alley (Koss and Harvey 1991:30). Relatedly, the rapist is often depicted as a black man (Lees 1996:xii). Often, a rapist will be portrayed as “a hideous creature with fangs at full moon, not even human (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:176).” This image, however, is a false one, since in most instances of rape the victim and perpetrator are not strangers to each other (Lees 1996:xii; Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:198). To illustrate, a 1990 study on rape in Ohio, United States, conducted by Koss, Koss and Woodruff showed that in thirty-nine percent of the rapes researched in this study, the perpetrator was the husband, partner, or a relative of the victim. Only in seventeen percent of the cases were the perpetrator and victim complete strangers to each other (Koss and Harvey 1991:15). Another study, this one conducted in the United Kingdom, concluded with similar findings, showing that most rapes take place between people who were familiar (Lees 1996:11). Especially in occasions of ‘completed rape,’ as opposed to other cases of sexual violence such as sexual intimidation, rape is a more common phenomenon among people who are close to one another, than among people with little or no relation to each other (Koss and Harvey 1991:33). In fact, when a woman and man have had sexual relations in the past, this increases the chances of rape. One explanation for this can be the man’s belief that he has the right to sexual relations with a specific woman since he has already had so in the past. In this case, the intention of the male may not necessarily be to inflict pain upon someone, but he may be genuinely guided by the belief that he is within his rights (*Ibidem*:330-4).

The representation of rapists as strangers and anomalies has negative repercussions for women. First, because rapists are believed to always be strangers, women who have been raped by an acquaintance will often not be believed (Lees 1996:xii). When the victim and perpetrator know each other well, and especially if they have had sexual relations in the past, the defense lawyer will use this information to discredit the complainant during a trial (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:176). This also happens outside of the court room. Rape victims are often thought to be falsely accusing an innocent man when the perpetrator does not resemble the stereotypical idea of what a rapist is supposed to look like. Second,

women are taught to be extremely careful around strangers and to take sufficient precautions to never walk the streets at night alone. Since the notion that a rapist is a stranger who attacks his victim on the streets is proven wrong, these precautions are not only responsible for making women more dependent on men, they are also ineffective to prevent rape from occurring. In fact, women are taught to rely on *those* men, who, statistically speaking, more often turn out to be rapists than the men they are supposed to be protected from. Third, the experience of rape by an acquaintance, should it occur, will be more traumatizing if the woman has always been under the impression that she may be raped by a stranger but never by someone that she knows (Lees 1996:17). She will also be more likely to blame herself for what happened if the perpetrator was familiar, and especially if she had sexual relations with him before the attack.

A case in point is the conclusion of a study by Dr. Avigail Moor of Tel-Hai Academic College in Israel. According to the findings, sixty-one percent of Israeli men and forty-one percent of Israeli women do not accept forced sex on an acquaintance to be rape. Ninety percent of both men and women said, however, that forced sex on a stranger did constitute rape. Moreover, only 7.3 percent of men and 8.5 percent of women consider forcing sex on a spouse to be rape (Weiler-Polak). Consequentially, the form of rape that is most prevalent in society, namely rape by an acquaintance, will often not be recognized as being rape by the court, the perpetrator, or even the victim.

More proof that this myth is, unfortunately, still believed today can be found in reactions to the rape accusations against Dutch soccer player Robin van Persie. In June 2005, Persie was arrested on charges of rape (Nu.nl 2005). The reactions this triggered on online forums illustrate the deep belief in the rape myth that a rapist is always a scary, ugly creature. Consequentially, when an attractive, young, famous male is accused of rape, the charges must be false. Roughly translated from Dutch, comments included "Van Persie can get any bitch, why in the name of God would he rape a bitch (Sjakie01, qtd. in Rob 2005)," "Why would a famous person commit such a serious offense, when he can get a woman on every finger (Ogrish, qtd. in Rob 2005)," "He can get enough women that would be willing to do it with him right away, so why would he rape someone? (Renske, qtd. in Pseiko 2005)," and "Why would he sleep with a WHORE... if he can get enough pretty girls... (TC™, qtd. in Pseiko 2005)." According to the general discourse, a famous and good looking man can thus not be a rapist. This plays into the myth that rape is connected to sex rather than power, and also shows that the 'stranger out of the bush'-myth is still present in the Dutch discourse on rape.

A third disproven myth is a compilation of notions that all insinuate that 'rape' as such does not really exist. For example, "no really means yes," "nice girls do not get raped," "women love to be swept off their feet and taken by force," and "it is impossible to rape an unwilling woman (Koss and Harvey 1991:30; Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:175)." These all imply that what women call 'rape' is merely a healthy form of sexual relations. As a consequence, women who have been raped will themselves be blamed for what happened, and rapists will often not be held responsible for their actions either in the courtroom or in society.

One example of a rape charge in which the defendant is not believed in her accusations or the blame is cast on herself rather than the perpetrator is the case against Wikileaks-founder Julian Assange. Many believe that the rape charges against the Australian-born by two Swedish women are false, and most likely politically motivated (Diaz 2010:par. 15; Pendlebury 2010:par. 6). One of the complainants is being discredited because she was not opposed to Assange's flirtatious behavior at first. Because she was pleased with meeting Assange, some believe there has not been a rape, but merely "a one-night stand, [after which] one participant came to regret what had happened (*Ibidem*:par. 42)." This proves pessimism in the recent discourse on the occurrence of rape.

In 1997, accusations of gang rape against Dutch soccer player Patrick Kluivert triggered a similar response. Kluivert played into the myth that an unwilling woman cannot be raped. In his biography *Kluivert*, he talks about the oral sex the complainant claims she was forced to perform on all four of her attackers. He argues that if she really did not like it, she could have 'simply started biting,' so she could have mimed at least one of her attackers for life (in PrivePunt 2006:par. 8). This, of course, disregards the implicit threat hanging over the victim, the fear which she is acting upon, and the helplessness of one woman versus four attackers. The Dutch discourse on rape thus still allows for this myth to continue to exist.

A fourth invalidated myth is the level of psychological violence used in an average rape (Koss and Harvey 1991:30). Although violence and the threat of violence is a determining factor in rape, psychological injuries may not always occur as a result of the attack. It is important to note here that there are different kinds and definitions of force (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:167). For example, when a man forces a woman to perform certain acts by threatening her verbally, physical violence as such does not need to occur, while it is still a form of sexual violence. Unfortunately, this is not always acknowledged. As a consequence, a rape victim who has not sustained physical injuries will not easily be believed when coming forth with her story. Moreover, in this situation it is more likely for the raped woman herself to be blamed for what happened, since she supposedly did not resist as much as she ought to have done. I will discuss the subject of actively resisting rape in more depth later on in this thesis.

The assumption that rape naturally involves strong physical force can be seen, for example, in the difficulties the complainants had in making their case against Katsav. A. describes the inexplicit threat that her boss held over her, as well as the repercussions that would likely be involved with her resisting her boss' advances. Although physical violence did not play a big part of the initial harassment phase, A. describes "an environment of humiliation, unwarranted sexual advances and fear (Edelman 2011 par:1)." Among other demeaning acts, Katsav rubbed against his subordinate, touching her leg and behind, making her feel unpleasant, uncomfortable and embarrassed the whole time. Although Katsav never explicitly told her he would hurt or fire her if she would not cooperate, A. always felt this would be the inevitable outcome of her resistance, because of the imbalanced relationship between them. She further recounts the difficulty in hanging up the telephone, even though he was making inappropriate remarks, telling her to undress for him. Only in a later stage of the harassment, when A. struggled, in vain, to get away from her rapist, did physical violence play a bigger role in the affair (*Ibidem* par:7-9,11,12,18). The emotional violence

exerted by Katsav on his employee at the time is thus evident. At the same time, a lack of tangible evidence of violence done to A. keeps outsiders from believing her, rather accusing her of lying. One example is, Ilana Belhasan, a resident of Katsav's hometown Kiryat Malakhi, who claims that "[Katsav] probably made a mistake, but the girls who were with him... set him up (qtd. in Yagna 2010b:par. 3)." When a rape victim is not physically hurt in a visible way, it is thus near impossible to convince people in the Israeli discourse of their story.

Another example is seen in the case against the *Pijnacker Noord-Groep*. This is the name given to a rape gang from the Dutch town of Pijnacker. From 2005-2009 they have been involved in the gang rape of an unknown number of girls. The police however, note the differing levels of violence exerted in each case. While some girls were tied and beaten, others were 'only' intoxicated with alcohol and drugs (*De Telegraaf* 2010:par. 4). All the girls testify they have been raped by several men against their will, they can be heard saying 'no' on videos that were made by the rape group and later confiscated by the police (Barends 2009:par. 6). Still, partly due to a lack of physical injuries, the court did not find the men guilty of rape (West 2010:par. 1). Evidently, when a raped woman does not have the physical injuries to show it, she will not easily be believed in the Dutch rape discourse. Furthermore, this also reinforces the myth that rape is more closely related to sex than to violence.

### **Women as Victims**

The rape discourse causes women to be victimized in two ways. First, *all* women are treated as potential rape victims. Sometimes their inability to defend themselves without help from a male is stressed, while other times it is emphasized that women can and *should* be able to fight back to avoid rape from happening. In the first scenario the victimization is obvious because it forces women to always be dependent on men. Although the second scenario might seem to be a more satisfying and empowering message, this approach also causes its own unwanted consequences, which I will address later on. The second way in which the current rape discourse victimizes women is that it labels women who have been raped *victims* over and over again.

When much emphasis is put on the horrors and destructiveness of rape, women are effectively taught to live in fear, to see all male strangers as potential rapists and themselves and other women as potential victims. One result of this is the damaging effect on a woman's self-respect (Buss and Malamuth 1996:166). Moreover, a constant fear of rape leads to "behavioral restrictions that limit women's participation in social life (*Ibidem*:173)." Brownmiller outlines four main assumptions implicated by these restrictions. First, a woman will most likely not be able to defend herself or another woman. Second, male presence is always necessary to provide security for a woman, even though it is men who deny her that security in the first place. Third, a woman cannot act freely and independently without knowingly putting herself at risk of being sexually assaulted. Fourth, a woman should give up her freedom of choice, individuality, and independence (Brownmiller 1975:399). In effect, when a woman disobeys these cultural rules, responsibility for whatever happens to her will be attributed to herself (*Ibidem*:398).



When a raped woman presses charges against her rapist, it is indeed often stressed by the defense lawyer that “since the victim went to the place willingly, she knew what would happen (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:174).” Furthermore, this generates the feeling for women that they are completely helpless in the event of an attempted rape (Koss and Harvey 1991:257). As a result, even without ever being raped, women are already being victimized by the well-meant advice that exists in the current rape discourse.

Many caretakers of raped women are adding to the victim-discourse. Professor of Psychiatry Mary P. Koss and clinical and community psychologist Mary R. Harvey, for example, are systematically referring to raped women as victims. In their book *The Rape Victim: Clinical and Community Interventions*, a work which gives advice on how to deal with rape victims, they give their explanation for this. According to them,

The word “victim” is appropriate for the person who is raped because it means “one who is acted upon and usually adversely affected by a force or agent, one who is subjected to oppression, hardship, or mistreatment, or one who is tricked or duped (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary 1985).” The word victim, however, also can denote “one that is injured, destroyed, or sacrificed (Koss and Harvey 1991:ix).”

On rape itself, they have this to say: “Experiencing sexual violence transforms people into victims and changes their lives forever. Once victimized, one can never again feel quite as invulnerable. Rape represents the most serious of all major crimes against the person, short of homicide (*Ibidem*:1).” Defining rape as something that is capable of destroying one’s life, and thus defining a raped woman as someone whose life has been shattered, automatically indoctrinates women who have been raped with the idea that their lives have lost meaning. It also instills a greater fear in women who have not been raped, which in turn causes them to be more willing to give up their independence. After all, if rape is indeed the second worst crime that a person could be subjected to, then one’s freedom of movement and independence may seem like a small sacrifice to avoid this from happening.

Koss and Harvey themselves also admit that the victim-label can have unwanted consequences. Since traditionally, raped women are seen as “damaged goods that have lost their value (Taylor et al, *qtd.* in Koss and Harvey 1991:17),” many women prefer not to come forward after being raped: “When a woman acknowledged her status as a victim, some degree of devaluation and stigmatization inevitably is incurred. As a result of these influences, there is considerable motivation to avoid identification with the role of a ‘rape victim’ (Koss and Harvey 1991:17).” Koss and Harvey, however, do not offer a solution which would de-stigmatize rape, for example by stressing that the raped woman is still the same person as she was before, and only the rapist should be blamed. Instead, they merely express their sorrow over the fact that not more women are willing to take on the humiliating label of *victim*.

Except for the counter productivity of such a definition of rape, it is also highly controversial and subject to discussion. Germaine Greer, for example, poses that a woman who has been raped “may be outraged and humiliated but cannot be damaged in any essential way by the simple fact of the presence of an unwelcome penis in the vagina (*qtd.*

in Lees 1996:257).” The devastating and life-changing effects of rape are thus questionable. Also, not everyone accepts Koss and Harvey’s excessive use of the word *victim*. For instance, Sue Lees in her book *Carnal Knowledge: Rape on Trial* comments, “I shall also use ‘survivor’ to avoid the perils of permanently labeling a woman as a victim and to imply that, though a woman is changed by such an experience, she is not powerless to rebuild her life (Lees 1996:1).” Although still not perfect, *survivor* is a favorable option to *victim*. Even people who have lived through the Holocaust are named *survivors* rather than *victims*. The constant use of the word *victim* for a woman who has been raped thus implies that a single sexual assault does greater damage to a woman than being subjected to the Holocaust. Assigning rape and rapists with this power is only damaging to women. Using the term *survivor* thus eludes the victimization implicated by the term *victim*. However, in my opinion it is still not a flawless term, because it attributes too much importance to rape, turning a woman who has undergone rape almost into a heroine, who has accomplished something special. In this thesis, I will therefore not use the term *survivor*, and only use the term *victim* when talking directly about the rape. Just as a person involved in a car accident may be referred to as a victim of a car accident, so can a woman who has been raped be referred to as a victim of her rapist. However, just like that person who was in a car accident will not still be called a victim a year after the occurrence, I will not label women who have been raped in the past victims still.

Research on possible worsening effects of help programs for rape victims has been conducted. One example of a written report on such a research is “Community Services for Rape Survivors: Enhancing Psychological Well-Being or Increasing Trauma?” by Rebecca Campbell and her colleagues. The writers in this article focus on the process of *secondary victimization*, or, *the second rape*, which occurs when a rape victim has been denied help (Campbell et al. 1999:847). Although the line of approach in their article differs from mine—since theirs focuses on the denial of a victim-status, while mine is concerned with the over-emphasizing of one—the fact that unwanted effects of community services are being investigated already shows that knowledge on what the best approach is in dealing with raped women is uncertain at best.

### **Danger/Incapability of Fighting Back**

Another focus of the general discourse surrounding sexual assault involves the ability of women to *fight back*. This can be seen in advice given to women to join self-defense classes to enable them to protect themselves. Holmstrom and Burgess, for example, stress the importance of teaching women how to avoid rape when facing an attacker (1983:xxxii). Although this seems agreeable at first, it also brings negative consequences with it. First, it affects the lives of women who have not been raped, making their lives orbit around the possibility of rape. Rape then gets assigned more value than it is worthy of. Second, it also has negative effects on a woman who *has* been raped. Since she has been taught to defend herself, she will likely blame herself in case she fails to actually protect herself when faced with an attacker. In fact, researchers have found that women who were under the impression that they would be able to defend themselves if necessary are more probable to develop a trauma after rape than women who were unprepared. These former are more prone to blame themselves for what happened, because they believe, like they always had,

that they should have been able to protect themselves (Foa and Rothbaum 1998:78-9). Consequently, the better a woman is trained in self-defense, the higher the risk of a psychological trauma will be if she is unable to defend herself in the event of an attack.

Moreover, the insistence on women to physically resist a sexual attack is furthering the notion that sexual violence and non-sexual violence are two inherently different subjects. After all, the advice for people facing a robbery is generally to cooperate with the robber, and to not resist at all. Also, a person claiming to have been robbed is not expected to provide the police with tangible evidence of the attack (Brownmiller 1975:383). Women who do not suffer significant physical damage after a sexual assault, however, are less likely to be believed when pressing charges. This leaves women in a no-win situation. Either they resist intensively, which will increase the chances of serious injuries, including death, or they do not resist with all their might, in which case they will have a hard time convincing the police and even beloved ones that a rape actually occurred (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:175; Lees 1996:184).

Another consequence of this part of the rape discourse is the fact that it reinforces the idea that women are always capable of resisting rape. It thus confirms the myth that women cannot possibly be raped against their will (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:1975). This results in the preconception that women claiming to have been raped should be able to show visible bodily injuries (Koss and Harvey 1991:30). This, in turn, strengthens the idea that a raped woman should have been able to avoid it. After all, if she did not have the injuries the police are looking for, she surely did not resist aggressively enough. This can increase the chances or severity of a psychological trauma. Apart from a lack of active resistance, sometimes a woman facing rape will also be forced to actively *participate* in certain acts. This results in a feeling of guilt in most rape victims (Gregory and Lees 1999:133; Foa and Rothbaum 1998:119). By expecting women to resist violently and by requiring them to show visible bodily injuries after an attack, the idea will be instilled in women that they *should* be capable of preventing sexual assault from taking place, putting the blame on themselves in case resistance proves futile (Foa and Rothbaum 1998:134). It should be noted that male victims of rape generally do not resist more than female victims, regardless of the level of violence they are subjected to (Gregory and Lees 1999:133). Instead of blaming the lack of physical resistance on a lack of willpower or physical strength, it can thus more accurately be attributed to a natural "*inhibition* against striking out (Brownmiller 1975:403, emphasis mine)."

Alternatively, it seems much more productive to teach women that passive behavior during any kind of assault, including rape, is normal and cannot be blamed on the victim (Foa and Rothbaum 1998:134; Gregory and Lees:133). Also, the emphasis in rape discourse should change from *avoiding* rape as the main priority, to *survival* and the prevention of physical injuries as the main priority. Frederic Storaska, for instance, advises women to first and foremost avoid death and mutilation. To that end, they should refrain from aggravating their attackers (*qtd.* in Koss and Harvey 1991:258-9). Foa and Rothbaum also advise caretakers of rape victims to focus on the fact that they survived the attack as the most important thing. A lack of resistance does not shift the blame from the attacker to the victim (Foa and Rothbaum 1988:114).

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Earlier in this thesis I touched upon the subject of the controversy surrounding the supposed traumatizing effects of a rape experience, and here I will discuss it in more depth. The fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines trauma as “an event that involves perceived or actual threat and elicits an extreme emotional response.” The symptoms include a cutting fear and feelings of helplessness (Foa and Rothbaum 1998:xi). The most frequent type of trauma resulting after rape is PTSD (*Ibidem*:27), and this trauma haunts almost fifty percent of raped women (*Ibidem*:8). Most cases of PTSD are only mild, and will disappear after several days or weeks. However, between ten and fifteen percent of victims of severe traumas, including but not limited to rape, will suffer from an intense case of PTSD, which is characterized by “flashbacks, nightmares and (most importantly), by numbing or dissociative symptoms (*Ibidem*:25-6).” I argue, however, that the development of PTSD or other traumas after rape is not a natural phenomenon, but in fact encouraged by the general discourse.

One of the ways in which the development of trauma is stimulated by the present discourse on rape is the continuous referral to raped women as *victims*, as I have already explained above. A second feature of the rape discourse that increases the chances of trauma development is the idea that women are less worthy once they have been raped (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:1). In part this has to do with the outdated but ever-existing notion that women have to remain pure and chaste. Any sexual activity, even when it takes the form of non-consensual violence imposed on a woman, will stain her standing and reputation. Although nowadays it is common for women to be sexually active before or outside of the marriage, it is still strongly discouraged (*Ibidem*:192). While boys are motivated by their parents to be sexually active, girls are taught to abstain from it (Koss and Harvey 1991:32). Men thus grow up to be aggressive and authoritative, while women become passive and obedient (*Ibidem*:124). Women who have been raped are often seen as “damaged goods that have lost their value (*Ibidem*:17).” A raped woman will be devalued in two ways simultaneously, since they are being stigmatized both by having had ‘sex’ and by being a *victim* (Lees 1996:212). In certain communities, rape can even damage a woman’s reputation to the extent that she will be ostracized and expelled from the community (*Ibidem*:1).

A third cause for the development of traumas after rape is the way authorities deal with rape afterwards. The way rape victims are being treated both immediately after the crime at the police station and hospital and later at court often induces them to feel “depersonalized, lost, and neglected (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:96).” At the police and in the courtroom, a raped woman is often disbelieved and interrogated about her sex life, amongst other things. Frequently, she will feel as if *she* was the one on trial (*Ibidem*:128). The aspects most rape victims complain about are related to the energy, time, and finances they have to invest in the court case. Moreover, because of the long duration of the trials, victims tend to forget specific details of the attack, which weakens their story (*Ibidem*:128). Even if the complainant wins the case, it will often only be perceived as a minor victory (*Ibidem*:254).

## A New Discourse

I have so far made clear the ills in the current discourse on rape in our society. The next step is to create a *new* discourse that could challenge the unwanted consequences resulting from the old one. This new discourse should first of all not fall into the traps of the old rape myths. It should thus emphasize that rape is a form of violence, while at the same time the presence of extreme physical violence should not be overestimated. Also, both the existence of rape as a social phenomenon and the fact that most cases of rape take place between acquaintances should be stressed. Second, the excessive use of the word victim should be eliminated from the discourse, unless the attack took place a very short time ago. Third, the society should stop urging women to learn how to prevent rape from happening to them. Fourth, it should be avoided to refer to the development of a post-rape trauma as inevitable or logical. The needed changes, however, do not stop here.

Another important step in changing the status-quo is to rectify criminal charges assigned to rapists. When interpreting rape as an act of violence that damages a woman physically but not necessarily psychologically, the penalties for sexual offenders should be lowered to be more in accord with the crime. Brownmiller is amongst those who urge that the penalties for sexual assault should match those for *aggravated assault* (1975:379). Germaine Greer even argues that the crime of rape should be eliminated completely (in Buss and Malamuth 1996:257). In addition, the great differences in penalties issued for different types of sexual assault should be erased, although the specific laws differ per country. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the penalties for sexual assault directed against men differ from those against women (Temkin 2002:70). This undermines equality for men and women, and also implies that sexual violence has different psychological effects on male and female victims. This, in turn, indoctrinates women again with the idea that a traumatic disorder is imminent to develop in them after rape. This also relates back to the issue of victimization. A second asymmetry in legal punishments for sexual offenses lies in the differences between the penalties for statutory rape and those for incest. In the United States, the penalty for the former could reach up to a life sentence, while in the latter case the penalty is usually under ten years. This proves that jurisdiction concerning sexual assault is set mainly to safeguard patriarchal interests (Brownmiller 1975:382).

Furthermore, as Caringella reminds us, the *semantics* used in defining rape need to be altered. For one, the word *consent* is problematic, since it insinuates a woman's inherent passiveness. It should therefore be replaced by *agreement*, which stresses the equality of men and women in sexual relations (Caringella 2009:109-10). Similarly, *non-consent* should be replaced by *non-agreement* (*Ibidem*:118). Moreover, the law should state more clearly that agreement in sexual contact is never implied by default, but should be actively and positively made clear by both parties involved (*Ibidem*:118). In defining concepts such as sex, rape, and agreement, it is of grave importance to start addressing the subject of rape through a woman's viewpoint, since it is *women* who actually experience the amount of force or non-agreement leading up to rape (*Ibidem*:165). Moreover, the male perspective that is currently being used to define both sex and rape has time and again been proven insufficient. It is now up to women to decide what is and is not reasonable in terms of force

(*Ibidem*:165), since the male view on sexuality is that of a masculine activity incorporating both sex and violence (Holmstrom and Burgess 1983:xxiii).”

Lastly, the assumption that we can eliminate rape from the society altogether must be abandoned, since it is an infeasible goal. Instead of the excessive focus on *preventing* rape from occurring, we should do more to decrease the chances of trauma development among those women who have actually been raped. Sexual violence will, after all, always have a presence in any society. Rather than teaching young girls how to spend the rest of their lives in fear while trying to prevent atrocities from happening to them, we should teach them that there is, in fact, life after rape. The value of their life, it should be stressed, is of greater importance than their chastity or pureness. Survival is the top priority of any physically violent attack, and rape should not be made into an exception, even if this means to subject oneself to an attacker (NCASA in Koss and Harvey 1991:258). To combat the patriarchal structures that uphold the notion that women are and should be subordinate to men (Brownmiller 1975; Buss and Malamuth 1996:131), girls should be taught independence and social freedom (Koss and Harvey 1991:127).

## **Conclusions**

In this thesis I have pointed out several problematic aspects of the prevalent rape discourse. I started out by listing several existing myths surrounding rape which have been disproven in the past, but are still widely held as truthful, and the consequences they bare. First is the myth that rape is sex, rather than violence. Second is the false believe that rapists are usually strangers to their targets. Third is the assumption that it is impossible to rape an unwilling woman, and that rape consequentially does not really exist. Last is the idea that rape must involve extreme physical violence, disregarding the power of verbal and psychological force and threats.

Second, I illustrated how the current rape discourse contributes to the victimization of all women. First, women who have *not* been raped are seen as potential rape victims, and are therefore subjected to the consequences of rape without rape actually taking place. Second, women who *have* been raped are taught that what has happened to them is a life-altering, traumatizing event from which they will never fully recover. The danger lies mostly in the self-fulfilling prophecy, leading raped women to believe that they *should* be traumatized.

Third, I explained how the idea that women can and should always resist a physical attack with all their might is harmful for women and should be abandoned. It leads women to arrange their lives according to the possibility of a potential rape attack. Moreover, women who are taught that they are capable of protecting themselves are more prone to blame themselves if they are in fact proven wrong, than women who were completely unprepared. Furthermore, by treating sexual and non-sexual assault so differently, the idea of rape as a form of sex is confirmed. In addition, by endorsing the idea that women can always defend themselves against an attacker, the myth that an unwilling woman really cannot be raped is strengthened.

Fourth, I disputed the idea that women who have been raped are inevitably deeply traumatized as a result. When women develop a trauma after being rape, it is not a direct result of the rape itself, but rather of the discourse surrounding it. First, by consistently referring to a woman who has been raped as a victim, the risk of trauma development increases, and the degree of the trauma will be worse. Second, the ever-present notion that a woman who has been raped loses value also adds to the trauma. Third, by questioning her story and acting uninterested, policemen, medical workers, and other authorities will make a rape victim feel less worthy and at least partly to blame, both of which will increase the trauma.

After listing the wrongs in the contemporary discourse surrounding rape, I have given an overview of what a new discourse should look like. When all the above-listed myths and problematic aspects have been removed, there are still several points of importance. For instance, the criminal charges given to rapists should be more fairly distributed. For one, the penalties should be lower to fit the crime better. Second, the different penalties for attacks against male and female victims should be dismissed, alongside the considerable differences in punishment for offenders of statutory rape and incest. A second point is that the semantics of the criminal definition of rape should be altered, so that we will no longer speak of a woman's *consent*, which has passive connotations to it, but rather a woman's *agreement*, which presumes a more willing, active role on her side. Moreover, issues regarding rape should be seen from a female point of view, since it relates to them the most. Third, we should completely relinquish the idea that rape can be fully eliminated. It is of greater importance to teach girls from a young age on to be independent. Also, they should be taught that their life is more important than chastity, and that there is life after rape.

In order to bring about the necessary changes, we need to go through the media, which is the main catalyst for the conservation of the outdated rape discourse. However, there exists a "reciprocal relationship between the construction or production of news and other coverage about a given phenomenon (...) and the consumption of media-generated images and stories about that phenomenon (Caringella 2009:59)." The media is thus not only an influence on its users but can also be influenced by them. This shows the necessity to change the mainstream discourse on sexual assault. A change in the academic formulations can serve as a first step in bringing about change. Thereafter, a change of wording should be instated in the educational sphere, by which the general public will quickly and widely be addressed (*Ibidem*:278). Shifts in the academic and educational discourses can incline the media to follow suit. In the process, we should be careful, however, not to vilify men in general (Buss and Malamuth 1996:310). To assume that an entire sex is conspiring together with the goal of denigrating the entire other sex is incorrect and counterproductive. What is needed is cooperation between the sexes in the field of communication and understanding. After all, the key to reducing sexual crime lies in societal changes, which men and women should try to bring about together.

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