

# ***BAD MEN, GOOD MEN, BYSTANDERS:***

## ***Who Is the Rapist?***

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In an influential article, Carine Mondorossian (2002, 753) lamented that a “lopsided focus” on victims in public discussions of rape tended to support a belief that victims of sexual assault suffered from a “self-defeating personality disorder.” This lopsided focus also left questions related to perpetrators—and by extension, actions aimed at preventing future assaults—out of focus. Resisting a ubiquitous blame-the-victim ideology, the feminist antirape movement since the 1960s has struggled to shine light on perpetrators, and starting in the mid-1970s leaders in the movement encouraged and mentored small numbers of men to work with boys and young men to prevent future assaults against women (Greenberg and Messner 2014). In the past decade—especially with growing awareness that sexual assault is endemic in the military, organized sports, schools, and universities—institutional efforts to prevent violence against women have blossomed (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015).

For the past half-century, the question of “who is the rapist?” has continued to be fraught, contested, and ultimately consequential for how we think about and create strategies to stop rape. In this commentary, and with broad brushstrokes, I will outline a shifting genealogy of perspectives on rape and antirape activism, with a focus on how these shifts both constrained and enabled men’s participation in antirape work. I will suggest that a pre-feminist view of rape as deviant acts committed by a few

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bad men was radically upended by a 1960s and 1970s feminist paradigmatic shift that viewed rape not as deviance but as a normal manifestation of patriarchal masculinity. The successful 1980s and 1990s institutionalization and professionalization of antirape work in state- and foundation-funded nonprofits and campus offices was accompanied by two profound shifts: the medicalization of the definitions of sexual assault and the marketization of anti-sexual violence efforts. These developments, I will argue, had powerful implications for how the rapist was defined and how prevention work with boys and men was shaped. The 1990s and 2000s emergence of a “good man/bystander” approach to rape prevention broadened the field for men’s participation, while simultaneously thinning the field’s political connections to feminist visions of social transformation. I will suggest that recently an emergent on-the-ground social justice strategy holds potential to reinvigorate antirape activism with feminist visions of social transformation.

In a pre-feminist 1950s and early 1960s, violence against women was barely even on the map as a social problem. Spousal rape was largely invisible, and when it did become visible it was viewed largely as an individual, private matter, or worse, as a joke. Stranger rape was sometimes seen as an issue before the 1970s, but it was mostly viewed through the lens of individual pathology, with the rapist imagined to be a crazed deviant who attacks a lone woman from the bushes on a dark night. Frequently in the United States, this collective fear of the lone rapist was projected on to Black men. The “myth of the Black rapist,” as Angela Davis (1981) called it, stretched back to the post-Civil War reconstruction era, where it performed two functions. First, the myth justified lynching and other racist terror that impeded the ability of Black males to participate as full citizens in public life. Second, casting lynching as a “defense of white womanhood” deflected critical scrutiny away from acts of domination and violence perpetrated by white males. For more than a century, the myth of the Black rapist linked race and gender in ways that obscured and therefore supported the continuation of vast social inequalities. As late as the 1960s, it was widely assumed that good men, normal men, especially white middle-class men, would not rape a woman.

By the start of the 1970s, a reawakened feminist movement asserted a radical paradigm shift in views of sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and related forms of public and domestic terror inflicted against women. Women in small consciousness-raising groups shared with each other their own stories of violence in families and relationships and started to understand that sexual and domestic violence, rather than

being a shameful individual experience with an unusually deviant father, husband, or boss, was a shared experience, a pattern woven into unequal power relations between women and men. Institutions such as police, courts, and workplaces were, at best, slow to respond to these feminist claims. So feminists took matters into their own hands, pouring tremendous amounts of time and energy—initially through informally organized groups and networks with little or no financial resources—into working with survivors of sexual assault. Volunteer-staffed rape crisis hotlines and drop-in counseling centers, women's self-defense workshops, and shelters for women and children who had been the targets of sexual assault or domestic violence emerged in scores of communities and on college campuses (Hollander 2014; Martin 2007).

The feminist naming of violence against women as a social issue was nothing short of a radical paradigm shift. Foundational to this shift was the assertion that men who rape or hit women are not isolated individuals, deviating from some normal form of masculinity. Rather, feminists reframed men's violence against women as *over-conformity* with a culturally honored definition of masculinity that rewarded the successful use of violence to achieve domination over others (Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1971). The emergent feminist paradigm implied that successfully ending violence against women would involve not simply removing a few bad apples from an otherwise fine basket of fruit. Rather, working to stop violence against women meant overturning the entire basket: challenging the institutional inequalities between women and men, raising boys differently, and transforming in more peaceful and egalitarian directions the normative definition of manhood. Stopping men's violence against women, in other words, was now seen as part of a larger effort at revolutionizing gender relations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, this radical analysis formed the basis of the incipient antirape organizing done by pro-feminist men, whose strategies were premised on the feminist assumption that ending violence against women required fundamental changes in power relations in society, including men's rejection of culturally honored forms of violent and dominating masculinity (Stoltenberg 1989). However, as my colleagues and I learned in our interviews with members of the cohort that pioneered men's antirape work, their radical feminist approaches were too often experienced by boys and men as guilt-imposing, antimale monologues that shut off conversation, rather than as openings for dialogue to engage and ask men to change themselves and their communities (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015). The perception that their work was less than

effective was even sharper when mostly white middle-class antirape activists attempted to educate boys and young men in poor, working-class schools and communities of color. In response to these perceived shortcomings, as the 1980s stretched into the 1990s, activists began to develop pragmatic antirape pedagogies intended to appeal to—rather than turn off—boys and men.

During this same time, two key transformations shifted the ground under feminist antirape work in general, and men's antirape work in particular. First, a wall of conservative antifeminist backlash broadsided the women's movement (Faludi 1981), just as the movement fractured internally from corrosive debates about race and class, and about pornography and sex work (Bronstein 2011; Echols [1984] 2002; Roth 2004). Second, simultaneously and perhaps less visibly, feminists were succeeding in building institutions like rape crisis centers, campus-based women's centers, and women's and gender studies programs (Martin 2007). Feminist activists also wrested concessions from the state, culminating in the United States with the 1994 passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). This helped to institutionalize modest funding for community antiviolence institutions, although, at least initially, more VAWA funds were devoted to anti-domestic violence work than to antirape work (Corrigan 2013). A trickle of VAWA funds were directed to violence prevention efforts through states, counties, schools, and community organizations, thus helping to create and sustain opportunities for a growing number of men to engage in both volunteer and paid violence prevention work with boys and young men. As the antirape field became more institutionalized, the work itself became more professionalized, especially in growing subfields of social work and clinical psychology.

The institutionalization and professionalization of antirape work is clearly a historic accomplishment of a generation of feminist struggle. By the mid-1980s, with a mass feminist movement less visible in the streets (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005) but now built into organizations and institutions, feminism was "everywhere and nowhere" (Reger 2012), creating both problems and opportunities. One major paradox of feminist professionalization (Markowitz and Tice 2002) stems from rape crisis and other feminist antiviolence work being absorbed within a medicalized field that largely recast violence against women as a public health issue, rather than as a manifestation of men's collective power over women. A professionally medicalized approach to stopping violence against women also was soon marketized, as antirape organizations were required continually to seek new foundation and state funding for their work (Greenberg 2015).

Such efforts routinely include providing empirical evidence that funded programs are effective. While it may be simple to show how funds are used to shelter X number of women and their children in a domestic violence shelter, or to provide legal support and counseling for X number of rape survivors, when it comes to organizational efforts to prevent future acts of sexual assault, reliable data is difficult to come by. As a result, in a medicalized and marketized institutional context, professionals who work with boys and men to prevent violence face a major quandary over how to demonstrate that their work is changing men's attitudes and actions in ways that reduce the numbers of future sexual assaults.

Together, these emergent processes—the development of pedagogies now more pragmatically aimed at engaging boys and men in antirape work; the fragmentation and decline of feminism as a mass movement in the streets; the institutionalization and professionalization of feminist antiviolence work; and the medicalization and marketization of antiviolence work—contributed to a fundamental shift in men's involvements in stopping rape and other forms of violence against women. Most obviously, these developments created a foundation for an expansion of the number of men doing volunteer and paid violence prevention work. And with the growth in numbers came a broadening racial and sexual diversity among the men doing antiviolence work. Most important for my purposes here, these changes helped to usher in a profound shift in how we think about who rapes, and how to prevent rape.

Since the early 2000s, the hegemonic sexual violence prevention approach aims to appeal to and engage boys and men, meshes with the institutional requirements of a marketized field to measure outcomes, and echoes the ascendant medicalized language of prevention. Here, “violence against women” is recast as “gender-based violence,” opening space for thinking about the connections between violence against women with violence against gay, lesbian, queer and transgender people, sexual assaults of boys and men, as well as gender-based bullying in schools (Meyer 2012). While antiviolence professionals view this expansion of the antiviolence field as important, many of them are concerned that the language and pedagogy of this new paradigm risks eclipsing a feminist language of collective social transformation, and de-centering *women*, who are still the major victims of gender-based violence, and are still also the major source of activist response to it. One indicator of this change over the past 10 years is the scores of longstanding antirape and anti-domestic violence organizations that have changed their names; in most cases the “rebranding” included removing “women” from the organizational name and replacing

negative terms like “rape” with positive language that pointed to healthy lifestyles and peaceful futures (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015, 95-96).

This medicalized/marketized shift has also been consequential in terms of how antiviolence workers answer the question, “who is the rapist?” No longer is the rapist theorized as an over-conformist with dominant conceptions of masculinity. Instead, he is recast as someone who is poorly socialized about healthy relationships founded on respectful communication about consent. The logic of this paradigm is codified on the ground in what my colleagues and I called the “good man/bystander approach” to violence prevention (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015, 121-23). The pedagogy of the “good man” side of this approach hails young men to use their masculine strength to act ethically, including respecting their sexual partners as full sexual subjects; meanwhile, the “bystander” side of this approach challenges men to step up to prevent other men’s acts of violence (for instance, acting when seeing the potential for a gang rape at a fraternity party). The originators of the bystander approach viewed it as a strategic intervention that pulls away from the conventional perpetrator–victim focus on individuals, instead recasting men’s attentions to confronting the everyday dynamics of a rape culture in male groups and organizations (Katz, Heisterkamp, and Fleming 2011).

Many feminists likely see this good man/bystander approach as a smart strategy for engaging men—especially in male groups—to make positive changes that may result in preventing some future sexual assaults of women. However, the current appropriation of this approach within medicalized (and psychologized) helping professions carries the risk of further eclipsing feminist visions of social transformation. Now absorbed (and diluted?) within a larger public health agenda, the good man/bystander approach to violence prevention tends to reindividualize and largely depoliticize the understanding of the causes, and thus the interventions to stop gender-based violence. Recent antiviolence curricula—for instance, the popularly deployed “My Strength Is Not for Hurting” curriculum used in many high schools (McGann 2009; Murphy 2009)—departs from the feminist strategy of viewing core definitions of masculinity as causing violence against women. The My Strength curriculum strategically sidesteps the off-putting guilt of previous curricula—so often experienced as “antimale”—by instead appealing to a sense of masculine honor. In effect, today’s antiviolence pedagogy *deploys* dominant forms of masculinity, rather than arguing for masculinity’s eradication or radical transformation. Put another way, while late 1970s and early 1980s

antiviolence/antirape activists such as John Stoltenberg (1989) argued that stopping violence against women must entail “refusing to be a man,” today’s pedagogies implore their charges to step up and *be a good man*.

The appeal of today’s good man/bystander approach to rape prevention is clear. First, the approach is consistent with current professionalized, medicalized and marketized configurations of organized prevention and measurement. Second, the approach is also in sync with institutional efforts at reputational damage control that stretch across and through the military, men’s sports, colleges, as well as the numerous nonprofits that drive antiviolence work, and the state and foundations that fund such efforts. And third, the good man/bystander approach has greater appeal to the boys and young men who are its targets, drawing them in with positive pitches to masculine responsibility and honor, instead of with guilt. The entreaty is to the presumably good young men who have absorbed equality values but are still silently complicit with the rape culture dynamics of male groups. This approach has had the hopeful effect of broadening the field of antiviolence work, drawing growing numbers of young men into the work. But, what else, exactly, is it doing?

The good man/bystander approach has its limits and dangers. First, in violence prevention workshops, a foundational but often unspoken assumption is that everyone in the room is a “good man,” while the violent men, the rapists, are imagined to be someone else, somewhere *out there*. This approach risks reinscribing a pre-feminist “individual deviant” view of the rapist, with the added danger—especially in privileged contexts like white fraternities—of inadvertently reviving racist and classist projections on to “other” men as the main perpetrators of sexual violence. Second, despite the intention of the bystander approach to focus on group dynamics, within the context of a public health paradigm the approach can easily devolve into an individual focus on “making healthy choices,” diverting attention away from a critical analysis of institutionalized power relations. And this occurs right at a time when we see heightened awareness of how normal group dynamics (including celebrations of violence) in fraternities, sports teams, and the military can generate sexual violence. Though the effectiveness of the first wave of men’s antirape activist pedagogy was likely limited by its off-putting guilt loading, what they got right was that “overconformity with masculinity” is not just an individual problem or an unhealthy lifestyle choice. It also is a group process that too often overrides the inclinations of otherwise “good” individual men, whose desperate need to feel accepted (or at least safe) within a male group keeps them silent and thus complicit in the sexual assaults of women by their brothers.



Individualizing the concept of the rapist thus risks further stripping collective politics from antirape work. Masculinity becomes the savior of women, rather than something we see as a root cause of violence and inequality, and thus in need of transformation. In short, the current professionalized approach risks “Losing the ‘gender’ in gender-based violence” (Reed et al. 2010). Today’s violence preventionists develop strategies within a social space that is *broadening*, with expanding numbers of state- and foundation-funded programs, and professional occupations and curricula. But such strategies are also simultaneously *thinning*, as gender-based violence is understood and confronted increasingly as a discrete health-oriented problem, rather than as a link and part of a larger system of social inequalities.

Fortunately, this is not the entire story. In doing the research for *Some Men* (2015), my colleagues and I met activists and professionals who are fully aware of the limitations, strains, and contradictions imposed upon them by a professionalized, medicalized, and marketized antiviolence field. We were continually impressed with their commitment to ending violence against women and with their strategic savvy in navigating this field. And we witnessed the hopeful bubblings of an emergent social justice paradigm of antiviolence work, fueled by three factors: veteran feminist professionals mentoring younger people as they enter the field; incipient transnational links between antiviolence activists and organizations; and the growing racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity of antiviolence workers that generates what we call an “organic intersectionality” within the antiviolence field (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015).

In this social justice paradigm—today emerging as a counterhegemonic force within the marketized public health field—the question of “who is the rapist?” is answered as “any man,” and the potential of a bystander approach to confront group dynamics is tapped. But, importantly, these on-the-ground antiviolence strategies are not abstracted away from social contexts. To the contrary, antirape efforts are theorized and coordinated in light of the *connections* between gender-based violence and structured injustice. For instance, many of the young men of color we interviewed saw their efforts to stop rape and domestic violence against women as threads in a larger fabric of resistance against interpersonal and institutional violence, including police violence against people of color, institutionalized poverty, mass incarceration, and men’s violence against boys and each other in families and in the street. These sorts of political and structural connections are crucial at this historical juncture, as a way of countering the individualizing and retrogressive tendencies built into the



hegemony of professionalized, medicalized, and marketized approaches to gender-based violence. The extent to which activists and professionals can make these sorts of connections in their work will determine the extent to which future violence prevention efforts will contribute to progressive changes, rather than simply containing the problem of violence in ways that help to stabilize the antiviolence social problems industry as part of an apparatus of institutional hierarchical control.

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