

What are the myths and facts about sexual assault?

There are a number of commonly held myths about sexual assault. Unfortunately these are prevalent in all areas of society, from the victims/survivors themselves through to the police and the judiciary. It is important to explode these myths and set out the real facts.

Myth

Women "ask for it".

Fact

No woman ever wants or asks to be sexually assaulted. The idea that women deserve to be raped because they dress or behave "provocatively" shifts responsibility away from the offender and onto the victim. It reinforces the idea that "good" women aren't raped and that "bad" women are. Every woman has the right to dress and behave as she chooses without having to fear sexual assault.

Myth

Women are raped by strangers lurking in dark streets.

Fact

The vast majority of sexual assault victims know the offender. The Crime Safety Survey (ABS, 1998) found that more than 80% of victims knew the offender in the most recent incident. In addition, over half (58%) of all incidents reported to the Crime Safety Survey took place in the home.

Myth

Sexual assault is an unusual occurrence and rape is rare.

Fact

Sexual assault is all too common. Sexual harassment such as leering, touching, pinching and suggestive remarks is an everyday occurrence for many women. At the other end of the scale some researchers have estimated that 38% of girls and 9% of boys will be sexually assaulted in some way by the time they are eighteen (Finkelhor, 1979; Russell, 1983; Goldman, 1986) and that one out of ten women will be raped during their lifetime (Offir, 1975; Haines, 1985).

Myth

Only young stereotypically "attractive" women are raped.

Fact

Women under the age of 24 are of the highest risk of sexual victimisation. (Recorded Crime 2001) However in the Women's Safety Survey (Coumarelos & Allen 1998) one percent of the women over 40 surveyed reported sexual assault.

Myth

Women make up stories about rape.

Fact

Statistics suggest that "false" reporting of rape is minimal at only around 2% of reported assaults (Williams and Gardener, 1989). In fact rape is notoriously one of the most underreported of crimes. In 1996, The Women's Safety Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated that only one in ten sexual assaults is ever reported to the police. According to the 1999 Victorian Crime Victimization Survey victims of sexual violence are the least likely to report when compared with victims of other person related crime such as robbery and non-sexual assaults. This is hardly surprising given the level of disbelief which women often face when they do report to police and the treatment they sometimes receive in our courts.

Myth

Rapists are sex-crazed "madmen".

Fact

The overwhelming majority of rapists are ordinary men from the complete range of socio-economic classes, occupations and nationalities. They do not suffer from any psychological disturbance and are not the victims of "uncontrollable" sexual urges. All men can control their sexual urges if they wish to and no sexual urge ever gives a man the right to rape a woman or child. Most rapes are, in fact, premeditated and well-planned. They are not spontaneous, uncontrollable sexual acts.

Myth

Women enjoy being raped.

Fact

No-one ever enjoys sexual assault. In some cases a person may respond sexually during the assault, but this is purely a reflex physiological response, it does not indicate that the abuse was welcome. In fact, for many survivors, any pleasurable sensations may be more upsetting than painful ones. Rape is about power not sex and, as such, is an expression of hostility and aggression intended to humiliate and degrade the victim. Sexual assault always involves coercion, manipulation, and/or threatened or actual injury, mutilation or death. In the short term victims can suffer terror, shock, illness and physical injury. In the long term it can mean loss of self-esteem, ongoing psychological problems, breakdown of relationships and economic hardship.