

# 10 ways to counter **RAPE CULTURE** in the church

*"Rape happens everywhere, and it happens all the time and to females of all ages. Rape is inescapable for women. The act, the attempt, the threat - the three dynamics of a rape culture - touch 100 percent of us."*

– Andrea Dworkin

## Foundations

- ❖ Patriarchy (a system of male rule, dominance, and control) is a consequence of sin and aftereffect of The Fall- not God's original intention for relationships and society (Gen 3:16).
- ❖ Part of Jesus' self-defined mission statement (Luke 4:18) was to liberate the oppressed! The Gospel, in its cultural context, was a radical revelation that challenged the oppressors and religious legalists' obsession with power and used this power to sustain inequalities based on sex, race, and class (Galatians 3:28).

### 1. Practice egalitarian theology and principles

Biblical egalitarianism is the belief that the totality of scripture promotes the fundamental equality of the sexes. Egalitarians believe that leadership in the home, church, and world is based on call, gifting, character, and guidance from the Holy Spirit that is not sex-selective. Egalitarianism fosters accountability, shared power, freedom, co-leadership, and partnership between women and men. In contrast, complementarian/patriarchal views support male-only leadership/authority, sex roles, rigid stereotypes, and sustains the foundational atmosphere of sex-based hierarchy where abuse thrives.

- a. Build women up in spiritual leadership: full inclusion and authority in decision-making, teaching, pastoring, elder roles, and ministry within the church.
- b. Study women of The Bible. The Bible is full of female leaders- apostles, disciples, judges, prophets, ministers, and deacons! Do you know the female apostle Junia? Prophet and warrior judge Deborah? Deacon Phoebe, trusted coworker of Paul? Mary of Bethany, a student of Jesus who defied traditional domestic sex roles (and Jesus praised her for it!)?
- c. Evaluate the state of representation in church leadership - it matters! If your church is made up of 60% women, women should comprise at least half of these leadership positions. In addition to sex, are people of diverse races, ages, relationship status, abilities, and socioeconomic classes represented and included in church decision-making?
- d. Encourage biblical equality within marriage: mutual (not one-sided or sex-based) submission (Eph 5:21), co-leadership and co-service.
- e. Follow, financially support, and read egalitarian and feminist theologians. Become a member of Christians for Biblical Equality International (visit [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org))
- f. Lead egalitarian Bible & book studies (*See my website for book recommendations!*)

### 2. Understand and act against harmful sex-based socialization/gender

Sex (male/female) is a biological reality created by *God*, gender (masculinity/femininity) is a social construction created by *man*. Gender creates a hierarchy of male dominance and female subordination and builds the foundation for abuse. Jesus demonstrated what it means to be fully human and rebelled against sex roles, cultural customs, and rejected most of what our culture defines as "masculinity" (e.g., aggression, dominance, emotionless, tough, violence, control, power, wealth, etc.)

- a. Resist the social pressures to behave certain ways because of your sex. Choose to live in freedom to be all God has called us to be. Our human experience, strengths, personalities, attributes, and gifts cannot fit into one socially-constructed gender box. Gender expectations constrain and limit our unique gifts we as individuals offer the world, while shaming those who don't conform/fit into these boxes.
- b. Be conscious and critical of stereotypes, gender messages, and sex-based roles/expectations that are communicated in your families, church, and community.
- c. End the glorification of "masculine" traits/behavior. End the devaluation of women. Women and girls are too often the punchline in a sermon or used to insult (e.g., "man up/be a man," "stop acting like a girl," "stop being a sissy," "you're so whipped," "real men...")

### 3. Interrupt attitudes and intervene against sexist behaviors

- a. Refuse to laugh or remain silent when others make sexist remarks, comments, stereotypes, rape jokes, prostitution or porn jokes, or perpetuate myths about rape/the sex industry
- b. Confront abusive attitudes, behaviors, doctrine, or practices in the church
- c. Do not hold double standards for men and women in the church (e.g., oftentimes men's sexual sin is considered a "mistake/struggle" that others empathize with, while women's sexual sin deems them unworthy, dirty, and destroys their relationships and reputation in the church.
- d. Refuse to support or engage in sexually exploitative businesses (pornography, strip/exotic dance clubs, prostitution) or stay at hotels that offer pay-per-view pornography
- e. Be aware of covert or benevolent sexism (e.g., placing women on pedestals, acting as if women are fragile, more special, need to be rescued, must have their "innocence" or "purity" protected by men, are better at something or morally superior to men)

#### 4. Educate yourself and hold yourself accountable

- a. Take an honest personal assessment: *How much am I willing to risk? How much am I willing to give up?* Oppressive systems rely on mass complicity, neutrality, and/or silence. Following Jesus and working towards a just and equal society both may require enormous sacrifice, personal and public cost.
- b. Reflect on how you personally treat women. Have you been said or done sexist things? Remained silent when others have? Have you been emotionally, psychologically, financially, verbally, sexually, spiritually, or physically abusive and controlling? Have women told you that you are "moody" or have "anger" or "control" issues? This is a sign you should seek professional help through a batterer's intervention program.
- c. Recognize *anyone* is capable of abuse or exploitation. Abusers/exploiters are your family members, neighbors, co-workers, friends, public officials, celebrities, professionals, and clergy. Abusers may appear respectful, moral, charming, or well-liked. Abusers often do not abuse their victims in public and are the people you may least suspect.
- d. Recognize the complexities of abusive attitudes and that abusers reap many benefits and privileges from their power positions and control over others. These advantages are what provide little incentive for abusers to change. Abuse and violence are functional tools used to ultimately force submission.
- e. Ask women how sexism and the constant threat of violence/rape has affected them and those they love. Listen and don't cut them off or tone police when women get angry. Women are justified in their anger about the violence, sexism, and abuse men have perpetrated against them. Validate their experiences, avoid defensiveness, and ask how you can be a safer person to them.
- f. Be a role model and set an example of accountability by owning up to your own mistakes, sins, temptations, failures, and sexist attitudes/behaviors.
- a. Learn from egalitarian theologians, victim/survivors, feminists, and advocates of women's liberation. Read their writing and work to understand their analysis. (*See my website for book recommendations!*)

#### 5. Educate congregations on healthy relationships

Healthy relationships are relationships where both people share power equally. Both partners communicate assertively and constructively. Differences in opinions and ways of doing things are respected and not shamed. Both feel safe. There are no double standards. Both are held equally accountable.

- a. Invite a guest expert to speak about spousal/dating abuse and coercive control from the pulpit
- b. Educate church on signs of abuse (including verbal, emotional, mental/psychological, economic, sexual, physical, financial, and spiritual)
- c. Mentor and assist youth (and adults!) in building media literacy skills. It is impossible (and unhelpful) to shelter youth from the toxic images and messages that bombard them. Instead, we can help youth critique destructive influences. This will help youth not passively listen or internalize these messages but instead ask questions. (e.g., What message is being sent? How accurate is this message when weighing reality/truth? What are the consequences of this message being normalized? etc.)

#### 6. Educate congregations on healthy sexuality

Sex is created by God and is *very good* in the context of a committed relationship where both people feel loved, safe, valued, respected, and treated as equal, whole human beings. Messages about sexuality should not communicate that sex is taboo, dirty, evil, something to fear, or identity-defining.

- a. Make healthy relationships/sexuality an ongoing conversation in the family and in the church (not a one-time “talk” solely focused on biology, reproduction, puberty, pregnancy, and STDs).
- b. Speak about the powers of sexuality- the uplifting, gratifying, spiritual, and connecting power. Sex can be an incredible source of intimacy, mutual pleasure, safety, passion, and joy! Sex also can be very destructive in the context of sexual violence, abuse, and objectification. Speak up about both.
- c. Work on any discomfort levels about speaking openly about sex in the congregation, marriage, or youth groups. Don't be afraid to say the words out loud and always use the correct terminology- vagina, penis, clitoris, orgasm, sex! Your relaxed, comfortable, vulnerable demeanor will help others respond in the same.
- d. Recognize that sexuality is an expression and *part* of us, but not an identity. Our identity is in Christ alone- as children of God. Resist the urge to imitate the world by making our sexuality define who we are and/or what we are worth.
- e. Use caution when speaking on “modesty.” Modesty topics often victim-blame, shame, and don't acknowledge the enormous pressure girls/women face to look sexually appealing as a measure of their worth. Girls/women's bodies are not dangerous and do not cause men to sin. Jesus didn't tell women to put on more clothes, he took objectification seriously- even to the point of telling men to gouge their eyes out (Matt. 5:28-29)!
- f. Never communicate a message that marriage/a relationship is a license to unlimited access to your spouse/partner's body. No one is ever entitled to sex. Never manipulate, guilt, pressure, or punish your partner. Do not make your partner feel bad for asserting their boundaries or not wanting to have sex.
- g. Preach/practice enthusiastic consent. Have sex only when you both truly want to!

## 7. Support victims/survivors of abuse, violence, and exploitation

1/3 of girls and 1/6 boys have been sexually abused before age 18. 1/3 of women are sexually assaulted and 1/3 of women have been battered by a partner in their adult life. We all know survivors, but many do not disclose in fear of retaliation, blame, or disbelief. How we respond to disclosures is crucial in creating a safe environment.

- a. Listen and believe people when they disclose they have been a victim of abuse. Do not get mad at them for not telling you or not coming forward sooner. Validate their feelings. It is normal for survivors to be angry, numb, depressed, sad, calm, isolate, or even make light of it/crack a joke. People cope and respond emotionally to trauma in diverse ways.
- b. When someone discloses abuse, control your emotional reaction as much as possible (so that you don't shift the focus on the survivor having to take care of/deescalating *you* instead of you supporting the survivor)
- c. Do not pressure survivors to heal, forgive, or move on/”get over it.” This may *obstruct* their healing. Recognize healing is often a long, sometimes up-and-down journey and every survivor's journey is different.
- d. Let victims know you support them no matter what. Ask them how you can support them and what that would look like!
- e. Give the victim opportunities to make their own choices and take back their power. Don't imitate the abuser by telling the victim what to do, pressuring them, assuming you know better than them on what to do/what they need, or attempting to take control of the situation.
- f. Recognize abuse or sexual assault is always the fault of the abuser alone- never the victim
- g. Avoid asking “why” questions and do not blame the victim (e.g., *Why did you wear that/walk alone/drink/flirt/dress that way? What did you do to make him so mad? You must've provoked him. What did you expect?*)
- h. Do not ask survivors for details of what happened. Do not scrutinize a victim's experience or response. Whatever they did to survive that situation was the right thing to do. Do not pick apart what you would have done differently.
- i. Ensure the safety of the victim is the primary concern- not maintaining the relationship with the abuser. Do not shame others for leaving/divorcing OR returning to an abuser. People do not return to abusers because they like being abused. Many abusers do not allow victims to leave and the abuse often continues even after the victim is physically separated from the abuser. Leaving an abuser can be more dangerous than staying.

## 8. Confront pornography use in the church

Pornography is one of the most powerful forms of rape culture and misogyny. Pornography eroticizes the sexual inequality, pain, and subordination of women and ties it to a user's arousal. Pornography is a grooming tool for both sexual perpetration and victimization.

*"The civil impact of pornography on women is staggering. It keeps us socially silent, it keeps us socially compliant, it keeps us afraid in neighborhoods; and it creates a vast hopelessness for women, a vast despair. One lives inside a nightmare of sexual abuse that is both actual and potential, and you have the great joy of knowing that your nightmare is someone else's freedom and someone else's fun."*

– Andrea Dworkin

- a. Porn promotes men's violence and sexual exploitation
  - i. Pornography itself is videotaped sexual assault/trafficking
  - ii. Mainstream porn eroticizes violence (close to 9 out of 10 of the most popular pornographic films contain physical violence) and degradation.
  - iii. Victims exploited in the porn industry are coerced or forced into the industry. Most are in the sex trade for survival reasons and often reenacting trauma (65-95% were sexually abused as children).
  - iv. Sex buyers seek to imitate porn acts with a real person that doesn't have the ability to say "no"- this increases the demand for prostitution/sex trafficking.
  - v. Men who view porn are more likely to believe women want to be raped, like pain, show less empathy towards others, victim-blame, and show an increased interest in sexual coercion/assault
- b. Porn is habit-forming
  - i. In the U.S., 1 in 3 men ages 18-30 believe they are "addicted" to porn ([www.yourbrainonporn.com](http://www.yourbrainonporn.com))
  - ii. As a person continues pornography use, they become desensitized and build up a tolerance- progressively seeking out more hard-core, degrading, deviant, and violent porn
- c. Porn destroys marriage, family, and sex
  - i. Marital, relationship, and sexual satisfaction decreases over time after porn use- eventually users no longer desire sex with their spouse and can only be aroused by porn
  - ii. 56% of divorces cite at least one person's pornography obsession as a major factor in their divorce
  - iii. Porn is a grooming tool for both victimization and perpetration of sexual violence and abuse
- d. Porn is a personal, political, and social sin.
  - i. Evaluate attitudes and systems that breed porn use (e.g., male sexual entitlement, sexism, female objectification, normalization of violence and women-hating) that are just as rampant inside the church as outside the church.
  - ii. Do not naturalize exploitative behavior (e.g., "men are wired this way" or "all guys struggle with porn"). This untrue, sets the bar low for men, excuses continued use, and normalizes a destructive action that *can* be stopped.

## 9. Foster an atmosphere of accountability

- a. Speak up when others are being spiritually abusive: twisting, distorting, bullying and manipulating others by using theology, doctrine, or scripture (e.g., using verses on "submission" to justify abuse and sexism) to gain power and control
- b. Recognize men's violence against women is a men's issue. Men commit most acts of violence, so it is up to men to prevent/stop it, under the leadership of women.
- c. Hold abusers both criminally accountable in the community and spiritually accountable in your church
- d. Install internet filtering and accountability software in your home, mobile devices, and work places
- e. Start a sexism and/or porn accountability group with peers
- f. Hold pastors accountable if they use jokes about women or sexism to get a laugh at the pulpit

## 10. Organize

- a. Volunteer and donate to local centers working with survivors (sexual assault programs, trafficking programs, domestic violence programs, violence prevention programs, men against sexism groups etc.)
- b. Start or join a church network/coalition to address men's violence
- c. Take political action- protest and push to change unjust laws or practices, write letters, call, vote, and lobby with public officials to support policies that promote justice for women and freedom from men's violence and exploitation.
- d. Resist and fight against all systems of oppression: sexism, racism, classism, ableism, etc. Systemic inequality creates barriers and constraints where trafficking, sexual, and domestic violence thrive.