

# Systemic Sexual Abuse in Christian Congregations

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Trigger warning: This is a carefully researched and well written paper on one of the most egregious shortcomings of the church today – its failure to address, and sometime complicity in, physical and emotional violence against women. The author offers a frank analysis of the rise of “rape culture” in which such violence has become the norm, briefly examines the failures of the church to address these issues, and focuses attention on the opportunity for “victim ministry” focused on critical consciousness, ethical education, and social conversion. The paper demonstrates a commitment not just to faith and learning, but to application in the life of local congregations.

Every 107 seconds, another American becomes a victim of sexual assault, with an average of 293,066 victims of rape and assault every year, according to the U.S. Department of Justice’s National Crime Victimization Survey. One out of every six American women have been victims of rape or attempted rape. In 2003, nine out of every ten rape victims were women. However daunting, these sociological statistics are not inclusive for they do not take into account the cases that are not reported to the police, either out of shame or compulsive fear, for 32 out of 100 go unaccounted (RAINN).

The book *Transforming A Rape Culture* by Emile Buchwald states that “A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm...It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent” (Buchwald vii). Sexual violence is widespread in our culture and sadly religious communities are not immune to cases of aggression against women. In the Christian church, instances of rape and addiction to pornography often go unseen and necessitate a change in how Christians

approach violence against women to effectively strive for healing and social justice for victims.

This paper will seek to answer the questions, “How do social interpretations of gender roles and exposure to explicit material feed into instances of sexual violence against women? What is the nature of rape culture in the environment of the Christian church?” For the sake of this analysis, sexual assault, as defined by the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), refers to “rape, attempted rape, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, fondling or unwanted sexual touching.” The widespread cultural leaning towards legitimized aggression is centered around a disparity of gender roles, both in secular and Christian circles, and portrayals of women in erotic material, especially that which is abusive in nature.

## GENDER INEQUALITY IN SECULAR CULTURE

A University of Florida school administrator was once asked to give a response to the high numbers of gang rape occurring at colleges. His response

about the pressure to commit gang rape was, “The men almost cannot say no, because if they do their masculinity will be in question” (Miedzian 153). Male sexuality is often associated with power, aggression and uncontrollable desire in a way that eroticizes violence. One of the central concepts surrounding the discussion on sexual assault against women is the idea that rape serves as a function of a male dominated society. Conceptualized gender roles often encourage sexual exploitation, especially when it is socially normative to associate masculinity with strength, dominance, belligerence and sexual prowess.

Despite the different waves of feminism, there is still gross inequity regarding gender representation. Such sexual discrimination come from underlying assumptions that shape societal views of gender and value. According to Pamela White, professor of Pastoral Theology and author of *The Cry of Tamar*, there are several stereotypes of women which are relevant to the issue of abuse in that they illuminate the psychological justifications employed by perpetrators. 1) Women are wild and need to be subdued. This stereotype is commonly driven through media portrayals of women in advertisements, such as the nude model Nastassia Kinski draped with a python snake, associating her with danger. There is a common trope of identifying women with animalistic nature, which only compels the desire for men to conquer the untamed side of woman. 2) Women are volatile. One of the most potent ways to legitimize abuse is to invalidate the narrative of the women by branding them as emotionally unstable. This concept of the irrational can be traced to historic roots with the word *hysteria* which was the Greek term for the word womb, *hýsteron*. Plato wrote that hysteria was a condition only for women, in which her womb would disrupt her body and cause emotional havoc. Therefore the warning against hysteria was historically directed at women as an exaggeration of assumed female attributes, such as being too emotive. In response to this proposed relationship between female physiology and emotional conditions, a common cultural reaction was to mutilate their bodies to remove sexual organs. This practice was recorded until 1946 (White 70). This correlation between the sexuality of women and derangement trivializes their real stories of abuse

under the pretense that they either exaggerate or emotionalize.

## STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN CHURCH HISTORY

The issue of gender disparities is not restricted to broader culture and does have a stronghold in church tradition, which is a significant component in assessing the crime of sexual assault in Christian communities. Church history reverberates with gender conventions that have often hindered progression towards social justice. St. Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, said in a statement that illustrates the contemporary view of his day, “Every woman ought to be overcome with shame at the thought that she is a woman” (Gilmore 87). Scripture also easily became an avenue for supporting gender stratification as church leaders dealt with difficult passages such as 1 Timothy 11, which states, “Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (NIV). Such passages led to a gender divide based on presumed moral and spiritual superiority, lived out through blatant patriarchy. Therefore, the stereotype of the ‘perfect’ Christian woman became someone who was meek, submissive and who stayed at home rearing children while her husband was her ontological authority. Carol Adams’ article “The Church and Sexual Violence” in *Transforming A Rape Culture*, shows that the early history of misogyny continues today in the form of using Scripture to argue “women as sinful, women as the cause of sin, and subjugation to men as the punishment for women’s sinful behavior. This positioning of women provides several legitimations for rapist behavior” (69). When men assert moral and social control over women, Scripture can become twisted for support, especially in justifying rape between a married or engaged couple.

This continual theme of viewing women as less worthy is what leads to the condition of objectification and allows men in contemporary Christian culture to view a woman as an “it” to be owned and used for pleasure. Such contrived cultural and church-oriented assumptions serve to shape an individual’s understanding of sexual ethics and

the way that gender, and aggression, is normalized. The problem heightens when misconceptions on gender roles lead into legitimizing violence. In the *Issues in Criminology* report “Victimology and Rape”, sociological researchers Dr. Kurt Weis and Sandra Borges state, “Rooted in a social structure which is characterized by male domination, the socialization processes of the male and female act to mold women into victims and provide the procedure for legitimizing them in this role” (81). Through the gender gradation, men are conditioned to adopt a social and ethical authority, while “women are brought up to think of themselves as sexual objects, subject to being acted-upon by men” (Weis 84). One of the most tangible ways these inequitable roles exist is through the visual portrayal of female sexuality in pornography. The camouflaged rape culture within the church is strongly driven by exposure to explicit material, which warrants hostility and sexual expression.

### EXPOSURE TO PORNOGRAPHY

There is often a misconstrued idea of what pornography really entails. The issue is not with the showing of flesh or the portrayal of erotic scenes. Instead, its very nature is that of exploitation, taking something sacred, the intimacy of faithful sexuality, and giving it a price tag to be consumed. It is this dehumanization that restricts the narrative of the women involved from being human to being objects. Baron and Straus’ comprehensive sociological approach to rape culture in America, written in conjuncture with the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire, focuses on pornography as an irrefutable component of legitimized aggression in cultural contexts. They write that pornography “reflects and promotes male dominance in society”, “sexually objectifies women” and “depicts physical assaults against women that serve as behavioral models” (96). Just as those who hear foul language begin to repeat it, pornography viewers are often unknowingly influenced over time and can easily become imitators of the sexual domination.

While some of the following evidence is reflective of the general populace in American society, the

principles hold true about the relationship between graphic portrayals of women and reactions of violence. A public health survey with the U.S. National Library of Medicine found that “...exposure to sexually violent material correlated significantly with the belief that ‘rapists are normal’...and a consensus of ‘everybody does it’ and ‘this is the way that men act’...” (Cramer 269). This concept of normalization is what allows perpetrators of sexual violence to justify their actions. In a 1988 study of 220 undergraduate men, 27% of the men said they would use force to gain sexual access to a woman. Furthermore, 81% of these men admitted to using nonviolent pornography, with roughly 40% using violent materials. The study found that the “Likelihood of rape and sexual force were directly associated with the use of sexually violent pornography and an attitude of acceptability regarding interpersonal violence against women” (Cramer 269). Not only does pornography lead to a desensitization, but it can also perpetuate violence, especially if the material being absorbed is aggressive in nature. One of the dangers in this is that a vast majority of explicit material is “rape porn” in which the woman resists and does not consent, but is still shown to experience arousal sex with enjoyment. This media stereotype, furthered by songs such as “Timber”, with lines like “Says she won’t, but I bet she will”, are centered around the correlation between pornography and abuse and the assumption of sexual pleasure for the victim. Therefore, those who partake in viewing violent pornography easily become desensitized and the lines between consensual sex and rape become blurred.

For example, the porn magazine *Penthouse* was caught up in scandal at the end of 1984 when their December issue showed nine different pictures of Asian women tied up with rope. Two of them were shown as dead and the others hung limply from trees. Psychotherapist Melissa Farley led a protest against *Penthouse*, arguing that “these murderous images... exude dominance and subordination” (Farley). Two months later, a young girl was kidnapped, raped and killed in a similar fashion, which lead sociologist Diana Russell, among others to “believe that *Penthouse* magazine owner Bob Guccione is in part responsible for her horrifying death” (Russell 104).

The portrayal of violence as accepted art had a direct correlation to enacted assault, in this case on a minor who lost her life.

While the above example is extreme, the relationship between observing aggression, especially in a legitimate medium, and acting upon sadistic fantasies that belittle women is critical. The widespread moral degeneration also illuminates the fact that this problem does not begin on an individual level—it is systemic and deeply institutional. Most perpetrators began as victims of the high sexualization of a corrupted culture.

But do these findings apply to Christian contexts? Statistics show that the same temptations to view pornographic material exists. A 1996 study found that over 50% of attendees at Promise Keepers, a Christian event for men, admitted to viewing pornography that same week (White 75). Furthermore, a 2014 national study of Christian men aged 18-32 found that 77% acknowledged looking at explicit material at least monthly, 36% daily and 32% recognized it as an addiction (Hesch). Evangelical Christians are not immune to the temptation of viewing erotica. Not only does pornography solidify the implicit gender stereotypes, that women are to be viewed, enjoyed and used, but its existence in the church is significant in the discussion on sexual abuse in Christian communities.

### **OPPOSING ARGUMENTS**

Though this subject is underdeveloped and easily overlooked in the world of higher academia, the discussion is relevant and more common than many might presuppose. There have been few social studies specifically on rape and abuse statistics in Christian communities, but numbers from mainstream research still apply in illustrating cultural normalization and the correlation between erotica and substantiated hostility. The initial “It doesn’t exist” counteraction is actually a product of this rape culture in which we are immune to sexualized portrayals of women which inevitably lend towards aggression, as shown through the sociological evidence linking graphic content to actions of violence. Misguided gender roles are still present in contemporary church settings today, especially depending on patriarchal tradition and

congregation. Christian men are also not impervious to pornography, much of which is violent in nature.

An important insight is that a Christian community is a subculture—it is not outside of culture. Churches are still influenced by sexualized media, music, gender perceptions, violence and social reactions to victimization. The most dangerous reaction we can have is to ignore the cries of the injured and assert that such crimes are impossible and do not exist in the supposed safe haven of a congregation. In doing so, I believe that we only perpetuate the problem.

### **CHANGES TO VICTIM MINISTRY**

It is clear that the church is not inherently protected from instances of sexual violence. The real question is how Christian communities choose to respond. The first step in reconciling the sweeping problem of systemic abuse and misconceived standards for gender inequalities is formerly acknowledging their existence. Pastor and victim counselor Karen McClintock writes in her manual *Preventing Sexual Abuse in Congregations*, “Individuals living with the pain of abuse are sitting among us in worship, at Bible studies, and in other activities. The ‘shhhh’ method has kept these victims and witnesses of their abuse silent...Those who are wounded by abuse are doubly wounded by silence” (3). We are quiet on the topic of abuse from the pulpit and in small groups, living with disillusionment and disbelief that aggression could ever exist in our Evangelical communities.

However, this silencing only leads to victim shaming—instead of viewing an abused woman as the sufferer of a heinous crime, she is now deemed impure. When we silence the cries of the injured, we dehumanize them and hinder the journey towards healing and social justice. A significant part of reforming victim ministry is to distance pastoral counseling from the Blame and Shame method of discussing abuse. What often happens is that the response of outside parties is focused on what the victim did wrong, insinuating that they are in some way responsible. Such victim blaming is often manifested in questions around topics such as what they were wearing, whether or not they were drunk,

or if they had flirted and encouraged the ensuing attack. One researcher found that people who “do not identify with the victim may receive a sense of security by distancing themselves from victims with their belief that the victim deserved it” (Hayes 207). If our response to violence is to misdirect responsibility, then we fall under the same fallacy as saying that someone deserved to be murdered because they chose to walk down a dark alley—while it may have been prevented, the victim is never morally responsible and the crime is never justified.

Instead, our approach should be three-fold. I propose that the most effective way for Christian communities to further the discussion on sexual abuse in their congregations is to support *critical consciousness*, *ethical education* and *social conversion*. The first step, *critical consciousness*, means allowing for perception and open exposure to the real state of social surroundings. This includes creating a healthy view on gender roles and the moral equality between men and women. Church leaders should proactively provide venues for developing the conversation on sexual ethics for prevention and psychological healing for both the victims and repentant perpetrators. While accountability is a significant part of working towards justice, guilt is not a healthy mode of experiencing reconciliation for either party. Through the *ethical education*, church leaders and goers should assume a communal duty of conversing on the subject of sexual and relational ethics. While most churches succeed in teaching sexuality as a holy aspect of marriage, few address its misuse other than warning teenagers of its sanctity. We can reclaim the conversation so that the church can be providing the moral education more than secular media. This leads to *social conversion* and congregational transformation. Churches can contribute to the preventive and reactive sides of abuse ministry by eliminating the taboo and modeling transparency through small groups, counseling, personal mentorship, small groups and any other valuable means of establishing dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

Sexual violence is deeply ingrained in mainstream culture, and though it may be easy to

turn a blind eye to the truth, religious communities are also impacted by aggression against women. In the Christian church, instances of rape and addiction to pornography often go unseen and necessitate a change in how Christians approach violence against women we work towards continued healing and reform for victim ministry. Implicit gender roles, propelled through patriarchy, social inequities and media serve to detract from the narratives of the abused and subconsciously normalize violence. Exposure to sexually explicit material, especially that which is aggressive such as “rape porn”, eroticize badgered women and often lead perpetrators to imitate what they have seen. Such addictions to pornography are just as powerful within church circles, illustrating a key component of the systemic abuse of women that still exists in Christianity. If we begin by recognizing the gravity of this issue and make steps to avoid the Blame and Shame approach to victim ministry, we can make great strides in the pursuit of reconciliation and social justice.

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