



# GENDER BASICS

*Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*

SECOND EDITION

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## VII.1 Men on Rape

Begin

### TIM BENEKE

Tim Beneke explains how the widespread threat of rape affects lives of women. He also mentions some ways in which men try to blame the women they raped for the rape.

Beneke, a writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area, is the author of *Men on Rape*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

#### *Reading Questions*

1. How would your life be different if rape were suddenly to end? Would your answer be different if you were of the other gender?
2. Do you feel your clothes must be zipped, buttons done up, everything tucked in because of threat of rape? Is this a matter that would be different for the other gender?
3. Would you be friendlier to people, strangers in particular, if you were not afraid of being taken advantage of sexually? Once again, is this different for the other gender?
4. Is the heterosexual situation a power game won by a woman if she engages a man's interest but doesn't have sex with him, won by the man if sex does occur?

RAPE MAY BE America's fastest growing violent crime; no one can be certain because it is not clear whether more rapes are being committed or reported. It *is* clear that violence against women is widespread and fundamentally alters the meaning of life for women; that sexual violence is encouraged in a variety of ways in American culture and that women are often blamed for rape.

Consider some statistics:

- In a random sample of 930 women, sociologist Diana Russell found that 44 percent had survived either rape or attempted rape. Rape was defined as sexual intercourse physically forced upon the woman, or coerced by threat of bodily harm, or forced upon the woman when she was helpless (asleep, for example). The survey included rape and attempted rape

in marriage in its calculations. (Personal communication)

- In a September 1980 survey conducted by *Cosmopolitan* magazine to which over 106,000 women anonymously responded, 24 percent had been raped at least once. Of these, 51 percent had been raped by friends, 37 percent by strangers, 18 percent by relatives, and 3 percent by husbands. Ten percent of the women in the survey had been victims of incest. Seventy-five percent of the women had been "bullied into making love." Writer Linda Wolfe, who reported on the survey, wrote in reference to such bullying: "Though such harassment stops short of rape, readers reported that it was nearly as distressing."

- An estimated 2–3 percent of all men who rape outside of marriage go to prison for their crimes.<sup>1</sup>
- The F.B.I. estimates that if current trends continue, one woman in four will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime.<sup>2</sup>
- An estimated 1.8 million women are battered by their spouses each year.<sup>3</sup> In extensive interviews with 430 battered women, clinical psychologist Lenore Walker, author of *The Battered Woman*, found that 59.9 percent had also been raped (defined as above) by their spouses. Given the difficulties many women had in admitting they had been raped, Walker estimates the figure may well be as high as 80 or 85 percent. (Personal communication.) If 59.9 percent of the 1.8 million women battered each year are also raped, then a million women may be raped in marriage each year. And a significant number are raped in marriage without being battered.
- Between one in two and one in ten of all rapes are reported to the police.<sup>4</sup>
- Between 300,000 and 500,000 women are raped each year outside of marriage.<sup>5</sup>

What is often missed when people contemplate statistics on rape is the effect of the *threat* of sexual violence on women. I have asked women repeatedly, “How would your life be different if rape were suddenly to end?” (Men may learn a lot by asking this question of women to whom they are close.) The threat of rape is an assault upon the meaning of the world; it alters the feel of the human condition. Surely any attempt to comprehend the lives of women that fails to take issues of violence against women into account is misguided.

Through talking to women, I learned: *The threat of rape alters the meaning and feel of the night.* Observe how your body feels, how the night feels, when you’re in fear. The constriction in your chest, the vigilance in your eyes, the rubber in your legs. What do the stars look like?

How does the moon present itself? What is the difference between walking late at night in the dangerous part of a city and walking late at night in the country, or safe suburbs? When I try to imagine what the threat of rape must do to the night, I think of the stalked, adrenalated feeling I get walking late at night in parts of certain American cities. Only, I remind myself, it is a fear different from any I have known, a fear of being raped.

It is night half the time. If the threat of rape alters the meaning of the night, it must alter the meaning and pace of the day, one’s relation to the passing and organization of time itself. For some women, the threat of rape at night turns their cars into armored tanks, their solitude into isolation. And what must the space inside a car or an apartment feel like if the space outside is menacing?

I was running late one night with a close woman friend through a path in the woods on the outskirts of a small university town. We had run several miles and were feeling a warm, energized serenity.

“How would you feel if you were alone?” I asked.

“Terrified!” she said instantly.

“Terrified that there might be a man out there?” I asked, pointing to the surrounding moonlit forest, which had suddenly been transformed into a source of terror.

“Yes.”

Another woman said, “I know what I can’t do and I’ve completely internalized what I can’t do. I’ve built a viable life that basically involves never leaving my apartment at night unless I’m directly going some place to meet somebody. It’s unconsciously built into what it occurs to women to do.” When one is raised without freedom, one may not recognize its absence.

*The threat of rape alters the meaning and feel of nature.* Everyone has felt the psychic nurturance of nature. Many women are being deprived of that nurturance, especially in wooded areas near cities. They are deprived either because they cannot experience nature in solitude because of threat, or because, when they do

choose solitude in nature, they must cope with a certain subtle but nettlesome fear.

*Women need more money because of rape and the threat of rape makes it harder for women to earn money.* It's simple: if you don't feel safe walking at night, or riding public transportation, you need a car. And it is less practicable to live in cheaper, less secure, and thus more dangerous neighborhoods if the ordinary threat of violence that men experience, being mugged, say, is compounded by the threat of rape. By limiting mobility at night, the threat of rape limits where and when one is able to work, thus making it more difficult to earn money. An obvious bind: Women need more money because of rape, and have fewer job opportunities because of it.

*The threat of rape makes women more dependent on men (or other women).* One woman said: "If there were no rape I wouldn't have to play games with men for their protection." The threat of rape falsifies, mystifies, and confuses relations between men and women. If there were no rape, women would simply not need men as much, wouldn't need them to go places with at night, to feel safe in their homes, for protection in nature.

*The threat of rape makes solitude less possible for women.* Solitude, drawing strength from being alone, is difficult if being alone means being afraid. To be afraid is to be in need, to experience a lack; the threat of rape creates a lack. Solitude requires relaxation; if you're afraid, you can't relax.

*The threat of rape inhibits a woman's expressiveness.* "If there were no rape," said one woman, "I could dress the way I wanted and walk the way I wanted and not feel self-conscious about the responses of men. I could be friendly to people. I wouldn't have to wish I was ugly. I wouldn't have to make myself small when I got on the bus. I wouldn't have to respond to verbal abuse from men by remaining silent. I could respond in kind."

If a woman's basic expressiveness is inhibited, her sexuality, creativity, and delight in life must surely be diminished.

*The threat of rape inhibits the freedom of the eye.* I know a married couple who live in Manhattan. They are both artists, both acutely sensitive and responsive to the visual world. When they walk separately in the city, he has more freedom to look than she does. She must control her eye movements lest they inadvertently meet the glare of some importunate man. What, who, and how she sees are restricted by the threat of rape.

The following exercise is recommended for men.

Walk down a city street. Pay a lot of attention to your clothing; make sure your pants are zipped, shirt tucked in, buttons done. Look straight ahead. Every time a man walks past you, avert your eyes and make your face expressionless. Most women learn to go through this act each time we leave our houses. It's a way to avoid at least some of the encounters we've all had with strange men who decided we looked available.<sup>6</sup>

To relate aesthetically to the visual world involves a certain playfulness, spirit of spontaneous exploration. The tense vigilance that accompanies fear inhibits that spontaneity. The world is no longer yours to look at when you're afraid.

I am aware that all culture, is, in part, restriction, that there are places in America where hardly anyone is safe (though men are safer than women virtually everywhere), that there are many ways to enjoy life, that some women may not be so restricted, that there exist havens, whether psychic, geographical, economic, or class. but they are *havens*, and as such, defined by threat.

Above all, I trust my experience: No woman could have lived the life I've lived the last few years. If suddenly I were restricted by the threat of rape, I would feel a deep, inexorable depression. And it's not just rape; it's harassment, battery, Peeping Toms, anonymous phone calls, exhibitionism, intrusive stares, fondlings—all contributing to an atmosphere of intimidation in women's lives. And I have only scratched the surface; it would take many carefully crafted short stories to begin to express what I have only hinted at in the last few pages. I have not

even touched upon what it might mean for a woman to be sexually assaulted. Only women can speak to that. Nor have I suggested how the threat of rape affects marriage.

Rape and the threat of rape pervades the lives of women, as reflected in some popular images of our culture.

### “SHE ASKED FOR IT”— BLAMING THE VICTIM<sup>7</sup>

Many things may be happening when a man blames a woman for rape.

First, in all cases where a woman is said to have asked for it, her appearance and behavior are taken as a form of speech. “Actions speak louder than words” is a widely held belief; the woman’s actions—her appearance may be taken as action—are given greater emphasis than her words; an interpretation alien to the woman’s intentions is given to her actions. A logical extension of “she asked for it” is the idea that she wanted what happened to happen; if she wanted it to happen, she *deserved* for it to happen. Therefore, the man is not to be blamed. “She asked for it” can mean either that she was consenting to have sex and was not really raped, or that she was in fact raped but somehow she really deserved it. “If you ask for it, you deserve it,” is a widely held notion. If I ask you to beat me up and you beat me up, I still don’t deserve to be beaten up. So even if the notion that women asked to be raped had some basis in reality, which it doesn’t, on its own terms it makes no sense.

Second, a mentality exists that says: A woman who assumes freedoms normally restricted to a man (like going out alone at night) and is raped is doing the same thing as a woman who goes out in the rain without an umbrella and catches a cold. Both are considered responsible for what happens to them. That men will rape is taken to be a legitimized given, part of nature, like rain or snow. The view reflects a massive abdication of responsibility for rape on the part of men. It is so much easier to think of rape as natural than to ac-

knowledge one’s part in it. So long as rape is regarded as natural, women will be blamed for rape.

A third point. The view that it is natural for men to rape is closely connected to the view of women as commodities. If a woman’s body is regarded as a valued commodity by men, then of course, if you leave a valued commodity where it can be taken, it’s just human nature for men to take it. If you left your stereo out on the sidewalk, you’d be asking for it to get stolen. Someone will just take it. (And how often men speak of rape as “going out and *taking* it.”) If a woman walks the streets at night, she’s leaving a valued commodity, her body, where it can be taken. So long as women are regarded as commodities, they will be blamed for rape.

Which brings us to a fourth point. “She asked for it” is inseparable from a more general “psychology of the dupe.” If I use bad judgment and fail to read the small print in a contract and later get taken advantage of, “screwed” (or “fucked over”) then I deserve what I get; bad judgment makes me liable. Analogously, if a woman trusts a man and goes to his apartment, or accepts a ride hitchhiking, or goes out on a date and is raped, she’s a dupe and deserves what she gets. “He didn’t *really* rape her” goes the mentality—“he merely took advantage of her.” And in America it’s okay for people to take advantage of each other, even expected and praised. In fact, you’re considered dumb and foolish if you don’t take advantage of other people’s bad judgment. And so, again, by treating them as dupes, rape will be blamed on women.

Fifth, if a woman who is raped is judged attractive by men, and particularly if she dresses to look attractive, then the mentality exists that she attacked him with her weapon so, of course, he counter-attacked with his. The preview to a popular movie states: “She was the victim of her own provocative beauty.” Provocation: “There is a line which, if crossed, will *set me off* and I will lose control and no longer be responsible for my behavior. If you punch me in the nose then, of course, I will not be responsible for what happens: You will have provoked a fight. If

you dress, talk, move, or act a certain way, you will have provoked me to rape. If your appearance *stuns* me, *strikes* me, *ravishes* me, *knocks me out*, etc., then I will not be held responsible for what happens; you will have asked for it.” The notion that sexual feeling makes one helpless is part of a cultural abdication of responsibility for sexuality. So long as a woman’s appearance is viewed as a weapon and sexual feeling is believed to make one helpless, women will be blamed for rape.

Sixth, I have suggested that men sometimes become obsessed with images of women, that images become a substitute for sexual feeling, that sexual feeling becomes externalized and out of control and is given an undifferentiated identity in the appearance of women’s bodies. It is a process of projection in which one blurs one’s own desire with her imagined, projected desire. If a woman’s attractiveness is taken to signify one’s own lust and a woman’s lust, then when an “attractive” woman is raped, some men may think she wanted sex. Since they perceive their own lust in part projected onto the woman, they disbelieve women who’ve been raped. So long as men project their own sexual desires onto women, they will blame women for rape.

And seventh, what are we to make of the contention that women in dating situations say “no” initially to sexual overtures from men as a kind of pose, only to give in later, thus revealing their true intentions? And that men are thus confused and incredulous when women are raped because in their sexual experience women can’t be believed? I doubt that this has much to do with men’s perceptions of rape. I don’t know to what extent women actually “say no and mean yes”; certainly it is a common theme in male folklore. I have spoken to a couple of women who went through periods when they wanted to be sexual but were afraid to be, and often rebuffed initial sexual advances only to give in later. One point is clear: The ambivalence women may feel about having sex is closely tied to the inability of men to fully accept them as sexual beings. Women have been traditionally punished for being

openly and freely sexual; men are praised for it. And if many men think of sex as achievement of possession of a valued commodity, or aggressive degradation, then women have every reason to feel and act ambivalent.

These themes are illustrated in an interview I conducted with a 23-year-old man who grew up in Pittsburgh and works as a file clerk in the financial district of San Francisco. Here’s what he said:

“Where I work it’s probably no different from any other major city in the U.S. The women dress up in high heels, and they wear a lot of makeup, and they just look really *hot* and really sexy, and how can somebody who has a healthy sex drive not feel lust for them when you see them? I feel lust for them, but I don’t think I could find it in me to overpower someone and rape them. But I definitely get the feeling that I’d like to rape a girl. I don’t know if the actual act of rape would be satisfying, but the *feeling* is satisfying.

“These women look so good, and they kiss ass of the men in the three-piece suits who are *big* in the corporation, and most of them relate to me like “Who are *you*? Who are *you* to even *look* at?” They’re snobby and they condescend to me, and I resent it. It would take me a lot longer to get to first base than it would somebody with a three-piece suit who had money. And to me a lot of the men they go out with are superficial assholes who have no real feelings or substance, and are just trying to get ahead and make a lot of money. Another thing that makes me resent these women is thinking, “How could she want to hang out with somebody like that? What does that make her?”

“I’m a file clerk, which makes me feel like a nebbish, a nurd, like I’m not making it, I’m a failure. But I don’t really believe I’m a failure because I know it’s just a phase, and I’m just doing it for the money, just to make it through this phase. I catch myself feeling like a failure, but I realize that’s ridiculous.”

*What exactly do you go through when you see these sexy, unavailable women?*

“Let’s say I see a woman and she looks really pretty and really clean and sexy, and she’s giving

off very feminine, sexy vibes. I think, 'Wow, I would love to make love to her,' but I know she's not really interested. It's a tease. A lot of times a woman knows that she's looking really good and she'll use that and flaunt it, and it makes me feel like she's laughing at me and I feel *degraded*.

"I also feel dehumanized, because when I'm being teased I just turn off, I cease to be human. Because if I go with my human emotions I'm going to want to put my arms around her and kiss her, and to do that would be unacceptable. I don't like the feeling that I'm supposed to stand there and take it, and to be able to hug her or kiss her; so I just turn off my emotions. It's a feeling of humiliation, because the woman has forced me to turn off my feelings and react in a way that I really don't want to.

"If I were actually desperate enough to rape somebody, it would be from wanting the person, but it would be a very spiteful thing, just being able to say, 'I have power over you and I can do anything I want with you,' because really I feel that *they* have power over *me* just by their presence. Just the fact that they can come up to me and just melt me and make me feel like a dummy makes me want revenge. They have power over me so I want power over them. . . .

"Society says that you have to have a lot of sex with a lot of different women to be a real man. Well, what happens if you don't? Then what are you? Are you half a man? Are you still a boy? It's ridiculous. You see a whiskey ad with a guy and two women on his arm. The implication is that real men don't have any trouble getting women."

*How does it make you feel toward women to see all these sexy women in media and advertising using their looks to try to get you to buy something?*

"It makes me hate them. As a man you're taught that men are more powerful than women, and that men always have the upper hand, and that it's a man's society; but then you see all these women and it makes you think 'Jesus Christ, if we have all the power how come all the beautiful women are telling us what to buy?' And

to be honest, it just makes me hate beautiful women because they're using their power over me. I realize they're being used themselves, and they're doing it for money. In *Playboy* you see all these beautiful women who look so sexy and they'll be giving you all these looks like they want to have sex so bad; but then in reality you know that except for a few nymphomaniacs, they're doing it for the money; so I hate them for being used and using their bodies in that way.

"In this society, if you ever sit down and realize how manipulated you really are it makes you pissed off—it makes you want to take control. And you've been manipulated by women, and they're a very easy target because they're out walking along the streets, so you can just grab one and say, 'Listen, you're going to do what I want you to do,' and it's an act of revenge against the way you've been manipulated.

"I know a girl who was walking down the street by her house, when this guy jumped her and beat her up and raped her, and she was black and blue and had to go to the hospital. That's beyond me. I can't understand how somebody could do that. If I were going to rape a girl, I wouldn't hurt her. I might *restrain* her, but I wouldn't *hurt* her. . . .

"The whole dating game between men and women also makes me feel degraded. I hate being put in the position of having to initiate a relationship. I've been taught that if you've not been aggressive with a woman, then you've blown it. She's not going to jump on *you*, so *you've* got to jump on *her*. I've heard all kinds of stories where the woman says, 'No! No! No!' and they end up making great love. I get confused as hell if a woman pushes me away. Does it mean she's trying to be a nice girl and wants to put up a good appearance, or does it mean she doesn't want anything to do with you? You don't know. Probably a lot of men think that women don't feel like real women unless a man tries to force himself on her, unless she brings out the 'real man,' so to speak, and probably too much of it goes on. It goes on in my head that you're complimenting a woman by actually staring at

her or by trying to get into her pants. Lately, I'm realizing that when I stare at women lustfully, they often feel more threatened than flattered."

## NOTES

1. Such estimates recur in the rape literature. See *Sexual Assault* by Nancy Gager and Cathleen Schurr, Grosset & Dunlap, 1976, or *The Price of Coercive Sexuality* by Clark and Lewis, The Women's Press, 1977.

2. *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1980.

3. See *Behind Closed Doors* by Murray J. Strauss and Richard Gelles, Doubleday, 1979.

4. See Gager and Schurr (above) or virtually any book on the subject.

5. Again, see Gager and Schurr, or Carol V. Horos, *Rape*, Banbury Books, 1981.

6. From "Willamette Bridge" in *Body Politics* by Nancy Henley, Prentice-Hall, 1977, p. 144.

7. I would like to thank George Lakoff for this insight.

## *Further Questions*

1. Do you still think actions speak louder than words, so that a woman can ask to be raped through the way she behaves, no matter what she says?
2. Is going out alone at night, for a woman, defying danger, as you would be going out into the rain without an umbrella?
3. Is walking on a sidewalk at night like leaving your stereo on the sidewalk, asking for it to be taken?
4. Does an overly trustful woman deserve what she gets, sexually?
5. Is a woman's dressing to look attractive a weapon she uses on the man's sexuality, so that he is blameless if he mounts a sexual counterattack?
6. If you, a woman, say "no" to sex, but later say "yes," does that prove that you meant "yes" all along?