

# A Gentlemen's Guide To Rape Culture

By Zaron Burnett (<https://medium.com/human-parts/a-gentlemens-guide-to-rape-culture-7fc86c50dc4c#.upk313axf>)

**If you are a man**, you are part of rape culture. I know ... that sounds rough. You're not a rapist, necessarily. But you do perpetuate the attitudes and behaviors commonly referred to as rape culture.

You may be thinking, "Now, hold up, Zaron! You don't know me, homey! I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you say I'm some sorta fan of rape. That's not me, man!"

I totally know how you feel. That was pretty much exactly my response when someone told me I was a part of rape culture. It sounds horrible. But just imagine moving through the world, always afraid you could be raped. That's even worse! Rape culture sucks for everyone involved. But don't get hung up on the terminology. Don't concentrate on the words that offend you and ignore what they're pointing to—the words "rape culture" aren't the problem. **The reality** they describe is **the problem**.

**Men are the **primary agents** and **sustainers** of rape culture.**

Rape isn't exclusively committed by men. **Women aren't the only victims**—men rape men, women rape men—but what makes rape a men's problem, our problem, is the fact that **men commit 99% of reported rapes**.

How are *you* part of rape culture? Well, I hate to say it, but it's because you're a man.

When I cross a parking lot at night and see a woman ahead of me, I do whatever I feel is appropriate to make her aware of me so that a) I don't startle her b) she has time to make herself feel safe/comfortable and c) if it's possible, I can approach in a way that's clearly friendly, in order to let her know I'm not a threat. I do this because I'm a man.

Basically, I acknowledge every woman I meet on the street, or in an elevator, or in a stairway, or wherever, in a way that indicates she's safe. I want her to feel just as comfortable as if I weren't there. I accept that any woman I encounter in public doesn't know me, and thus, all she sees is a man—one who is suddenly near her. I have to keep in mind her sense of space and that my presence might make her feel vulnerable. That's the key factor—vulnerability.

I don't know about you, but I don't spend much of my life feeling vulnerable. I've come to learn that women spend most of their social lives with ever-present, unavoidable feelings of vulnerability. Stop and think about that. Imagine always feeling like you could be at risk, like you were living with glass skin.

As modern men we must seek out danger. We choose adventures and extreme sports in order to feel like we're in jeopardy. We make games of our vulnerability. That's how differently men see the world from women. (Obviously, stated with full acknowledgment that there's a vibrant community of extreme athletes that are women, who regularly risk their safety as well. However, women don't need to engage in adrenalin sports to feel at-risk.)

Now, I stand about a finger of tequila under six feet. I work out and would say I'm in decent shape, which means when I'm out alone at night, I rarely ever fear for my safety. Many men know exactly what I mean. Most women have no idea what that feels like—to go wherever you want in the world, at any time of day or night, and feel you won't have a problem. In fact, many women have the exact opposite experience.

A woman must consider where she is going, what time of day it is, what time she will arrive at her destination and what time she will leave her destination, what day of the week it is, if she will be left alone at any point ...

the considerations go on and on because they are far more numerous than you or I can imagine. Honestly, I can't conceive of having to think that much about what I need to do to protect myself at any given moment in my life. I relish the freedom of getting up and going, day or night, rain or shine, Westside or downtown. As men we can enjoy this particular extreme luxury of movement and freedom of choice. In order to understand rape culture, remember this is a freedom that at least half the population doesn't enjoy.

That's why I go out of my way to use clear body language and act in a way that helps minimize a woman's fear and any related feelings. I recommend you do the same. It's seriously, like, the least any man can do in public to make women feel more comfortable in the world we share. Just be considerate of her and her space.

You may think it's unfair that we have to counteract and adjust ourselves for the ill behavior of other men. You know what? You're right. It is unfair. Is that the fault of women? Or is it the fault of the men who act abysmally and make the rest of us look bad? If issues of fairness bother you, get mad at the men who make you and your actions appear questionable.

Because when it comes to assessing a man, whatever one man is capable of, a woman must presume *you* are capable of. Unfortunately, that means all men must be judged by our worst example. If you think that sort of stereotyping is bullshit, how do you treat a snake you come across in the wild?

...You treat it like a snake, right? Well, that's not stereotyping, that's acknowledging an animal for what it's capable of doing and the harm it can inflict. Simple rules of the jungle, man. Since you are a man, women must treat you as such.

The completely reasonable and understandable fear of men is your responsibility. You didn't create it. But you also didn't build the freeways either. Some of the things you inherit from society are cool and some of them are rape culture.

Since no woman can accurately judge you or your intentions on sight, you are assumed to be like all other men. [73% of the time a woman knows her rapist.](#) Now, if she can't trust and accurately assess the intentions of men she

knows, how can you expect her to ever feel that she can accurately assess you, a complete stranger? Rape prevention is not just about women teaching women how not to get raped—it's about men not committing rape.

Rape prevention is about the fact that a man must understand that saying “no” doesn't mean “yes,” that when a woman is too drunk/drugged to respond that doesn't mean “yes,” that being in a relationship doesn't mean “yes.” Rather than focus on how women can avoid rape, or how rape culture makes an innocent man feel suspect, our focus should be: how do we, as men, stop rapes from occurring, and how do we dismantle the structures that dismiss it and change the attitudes that tolerate it?

**Since you are a part of it, you ought to know what rape culture is.**

According to [Marshall University's Women's Center website](#):

*Rape Culture is an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. Rape culture is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety.*

When a woman first told me I was part of rape culture, I wanted to disagree for obvious reasons. Like many of you I wanted to say, “Whoa, that ain't me.” Instead, I listened. Later, I approached a writer I respect. I asked her to write an article with me, wherein she'd explain rape culture to me and to male readers. She stopped returning my emails.

At first, I was annoyed. Then as it became clear she wasn't going to respond at all, I actually got mad. Luckily, I've learned one shouldn't immediately respond when they feel flashes of anger. Thunder is impressive but it's the rain that nourishes life. So I let that storm pass and thought about it. I took a walk. They seem to jangle my best thoughts loose.

Blocks from my house, in front of a car wash it dawned on me. If rape culture is so important to me I needed to find out for my self what it is. No woman owes me her time just because I want to know about something she

inherently understands. No woman should feel she has to explain rape culture to me just because I want to know what it is. No woman owes me shit. I saw how my desire for a woman to satisfy me ran deep. Even my curiosity, a trait that always made me proud, was marred with the same sort of male-centric presumption that fuels rape culture. I *expected* to be satisfied. That attitude is the problem. I started reading and kept reading until I understood rape culture and my part in it.

**Here's a bullet-point list of [examples of rape culture](#).**

- Blaming the victim (“She asked for it!”)
- Trivializing sexual assault (“Boys will be boys!”)
- Sexually explicit jokes
- Tolerance of sexual harassment
- Inflating false rape report statistics
- Publicly scrutinizing a victim’s dress, mental state, motives, and history
- Gratuitous gendered violence in movies and television
- Defining “manhood” as dominant and sexually aggressive
- Defining “womanhood” as submissive and sexually passive
- Pressure on men to “score”
- Pressure on women to not appear “cold”
- Assuming only promiscuous women get raped
- Assuming that men don’t get raped or that only “weak” men get raped

- Refusing to take rape accusations seriously
- Teaching women to avoid getting raped instead of teaching men not to rape

You'll quickly find that rape culture plays a central role in all the social dynamics of our time. It's at the heart of all our personal interactions. It's part of all our social, societal and environmental struggles. Rape culture is not just about sex. It is the product of a generalized attitude of male supremacy. Sexual violence is one expression of that attitude. Again, don't let the terminology spook you. Don't get hung up on the term "male supremacy." The term isn't the problem. The problem is that rape culture hurts everyone involved. Antiquated patriarchal notions of society make it difficult for men to come forward as rape victims just as much as they foster a desire for a man to be seen as powerful and sexually aggressive. Men shouldn't feel threatened or attacked when women point out rape culture—they're telling us about our common enemy. We ought to listen.

### **Now that you know what it is, what can you do about [rape culture](#)?**

- Avoid using language that objectifies or degrades women
- Speak out if you hear someone else making an offensive joke or trivializing rape
- If a friend says she has been raped, take her seriously and be supportive
- Think critically about the media's messages about women, men, relationships, and violence
- Be respectful of others' physical space even in casual situations
- Always communicate with sexual partners and do not assume consent
- Define your own manhood or womanhood. Do not let stereotypes shape your actions.

## **What else can you do about rape culture when you experience it IRL?**

### **1. Men can confront men.**

No one is suggesting violence. In fact, that's what we're looking to avoid. But sometimes, a man needs to confront another man or a group of men in a situation. When I'm out in public and I see a man hassling a woman, I stop for a moment. I make sure the woman sees me. I want her to know I'm fully aware of what's happening. I wait for a moment for a clear indication from her of whether she needs help. Sometimes, the couple will continue right on fighting like I'm just a hickory tree. Other times, the woman will make it clear she'd like backup and I approach the situation. I've never had to get violent. Usually, my presence alone makes the guy leave if he's a stranger, or explain himself if they're familiar. It changes the dynamic. That's why I always stop when I see a woman getting hassled in public. For any reason. I make sure any woman, in what could become a violent situation, one I may or may not be correctly assessing, feels that she has the opportunity to signal to me if she needs assistance. I'm a big brother to a sister so that response is practically instinctual.

But, I don't limit this to women. I've also done this for two men who were clearly in a lovers' spat. Whenever you see a situation spiraling out of control, and especially if someone is crying for help or being attacked, you should confront the situation. You don't need to "break it up." But engage, get involved, take down pertinent information, alert authorities, call the police. Do something.

### **2. Men can correct men.**

If you hear a guy say some jacked-up slurs in front of you and there's no one from that particular community around to be offended, you can still say something. This is also true when you hear misogynistic language. Speak up. Tell your friend or co-worker that rape jokes are bullshit and you won't tolerate them.

Trust me you won't lose your "man card." If you're older than nineteen and you're still worried about your man card, you don't understand what

respectable masculinity is about, anyway. It's not about cultish approval from others—it's about being "your own man" and doing the right thing. You might be surprised by how many other men will respect you for doing what they wanted to but didn't. I've heard it plenty. I'm not some social justice cop, but I have and will argue with whole roomfuls of men. Later on, some dudes will approach me and say how much they respected what I did. I always tell them it gets easier to speak up every time you do it. I promise you that's true.

No one is suggesting you go around policing everybody. I don't make it my business to make sure everyone live by my yardstick. No one needs you telling them what you think about every little thing they say and whether it meets your criteria for social awareness. But when some dude says some foul shit, and you know it—we all hear those jokes—you can let the dude know his rape joke or his "she's a whore" analogy didn't play.

### **3. Men can make other men STFU.**

Let's say, you're in a group of men, and one of your friends starts hollering at a girl—tell him to knock it the fuck off. You won't be a punk for speaking up for the woman. As long as you don't try to score points with her for "defending her," you won't be white-knighting it either. You're just doing the right thing. No one needs some sexist clown hollering at her because the dude popped a mental woody. Cat-calling is one of the worst advertisements for male sexuality there is. Those assholes make us all look like complete tools. You get that, right? We need to cut that shit out.

Working construction is when I learned to speak up to a group of men. You have to do it. Mostly, you do it because you want to respect yourself. Otherwise, you're another pathetic man that allows a guy to mistreat a woman in your presence. When a guy cat-calls a woman and you don't say something, he just treated her like a cheaply degraded sex object for his satisfaction and he turned you into the punk-ass that's willing to allow him to mistreat a woman in your presence ... while you say nothing.

What would your grandfather think if he saw you in that moment? Would he be proud of you? Are you proud of yourself? Male pride is good for something—use it to be your better self. Don't be that silent punk that goes



along with the crowd to get along with the crowd. Speak up when someone cat-calls a woman in front of you. Tell them to shut the fuck up. As a man, you have power. Use it. Men respect conviction.

#### **4. It's our job to have standards for ourselves, and thus, for all men.**

You may think, "Zaron, man, lighten up, brother. Cat-calling is not that big a deal. Aren't we making a mountain out of a molehill? Some women like it." You may be right. Maybe some women do like it. That doesn't matter. I like to speed. My cousin likes to smoke pot in public. Neither of us gets to do what we like. That's just how it goes sometimes when you're a member of a society. If you find that woman who likes to be cat-called, go for it, just do it behind closed doors. When you're in public, respect the physical and mental space of others.

Don't limit yourself to being a man. Be a mensch. Be a human being.

When something like [#YesAllWomen](#) occurs in our cultural conversation and women the world over are out there sharing their experiences, their trauma, their stories and their personal views, as men, we don't need to enter that conversation. In that moment, all we need to do is listen, and reflect, and let their words change our perspective. Our job is to ask ourselves how we can do better.