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MEDIA RESPONSE

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Media Responsibility

People's attitudes toward sexual assault and its victims and survivors are largely driven by the way the crime is reported by mainstream media. **Many news articles that report a rape focus on the actions of the victim or include irrelevant details that lead the reader to infer that a rape did not actually occur.** For example, the *New York Post* article "'2 Cops in Sex Rap- Busted After Traffic Stop; B'klyn Cops Arrested on Sex Rap'" (November 21, 2005) describes the alleged rape of a woman by two on-duty police officers who stopped her in the middle of the night for not wearing a seat belt. The reporters quote several "accounts" of what happened, including a version told by an unknown source (neither the victim nor the alleged perpetrator, potentially a friend or acquaintance of the alleged perpetrator) in which the woman *invited* the cops back to her apartment and had consensual sex with one of the officers. The article makes a point of noting that the woman "refused medical attention," as if this indicates that no rape occurred. The biased article *concludes* by stating that one of the officers was "married with a child," as if having a family exonerates him.

News articles such as these help shape societal attitudes toward sexual assault, where the victim is blamed and doubts are raised as to whether an assault even occurred. Is it any wonder that the majority of rape victims are hesitant to report a rape to the police when the general public's initial reaction is to blame them for the rape or to doubt the occurrence of the rape? Perhaps more victims would report a sexual assault if they were ensured that people would believe them and they did not have to defend their own actions and behavior. **Our goal is to change attitudes about sexual assault, starting with the media, so that in the future nobody blames the victim for being raped, but instead places the blame where it belongs: on the rapist.** For more information on reporting a sexual assault to the police, [click here](#).

EXAMPLES OF MEDIA MISREPRESENTATION OF RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

- 1) an insinuation that the victim is lying, often made by the defense attorney or the perpetrator, that is not countered by the victim or an advocate for the victim.
- 2) the use of sexual or romantic, rather than violent or criminal, language to describe the crime. Words such as "sex," "affair," or "seduction" are often used to describe the crime, particularly if the victim is a woman or a child. The language used to describe male-on-male rape is often more reflective of the violence that it is.
- 3) victim blaming, based on the victim's profession, personal life, social status, behaviors, etc.
- 4) biased discussion of the victim's history, but not the perpetrator's.
- 5) description of the details of the crime in a pseudo-pornographic or titillating manner.
- 6) media outlets that provide greater coverage to cases in which the accuser's credibility is questionable, which both discourages other victims from coming forward and hurts the accused if they are in fact innocent.
- 7) lack of perspective from the victim's side, for example by a lack of interviews with victim's advocates; similarly in most cases the victim is not interviewed by the press (often by choice or to protect the victim's privacy).

- 8) reporters who publish the defense attorney's quotations without putting them into perspective by providing context about rape/sexual assault;
- 9) in cases with homosexual or racial overtones, a focus on the issues of homosexuality and race instead of the rape or gender issues.
- 10) the location in the newspaper of an article on rape that affects public perception of the case; for example, including an article about rape in the sports section plays up the heroic attributes of the athletes being accused.
- 11) when the accused is a member of the military, the use of a tone of shock and anomaly, sometimes resulting in the accused being portrayed as patriots and neighborhood boys rather than criminals.
- 12) newspapers that tend to highlight and publish instances in which someone has been wrongly convicted and imprisoned for rape. In those cases they neglect to address whether the accuser was lying about being raped or if the wrong person was captured by police. As a result, these articles imply innocent men are very likely to be accused of rape and women often lie about rape.

EXAMPLES OF MEDIA UNDERREPRESENTATION

- 1) a lack of coverage of cases involving acquaintance rape. Newspapers tend to focus on rapes perpetrated by a stranger with a weapon; rapes perpetrated by famous athletes, entertainers, etc.; or rapes involving children.
- 2) little media coverage of the work done by rape crisis advocates (greater coverage of their work could help the public better understand the issues and perhaps encourage victims to disclose).
- 3) little coverage of the number of rapes publicly reported on college campuses and similar institutions.
- 4) little coverage of updates on the technology involved with using and detecting date rape drugs.
- 5) little coverage of how rape is used as a weapon of war.
- 6) little coverage of rape in prison, contextualized with victim advocacy.
- 7) little coverage of rape experienced by women of color, and how violence against women and racism coexist

Samples of Problematic Headlines

"Woman in Five-Day Sex-Slave Nightmare," July 17, 2007; New York Post

-This headline sensationalizes the crime.

"Fla. Teens Accused of Gang Rape Attack," July 7, 2007; Newsday

-This headline makes it seem that the crime is the accusation of gang rape, rather than the gang rape itself.

"Jury Convicts Ex-Principal of Having Sex with Student," March 30, 2007; New York Times

-This headline implies that an adult can have ?sex? with a child, when in reality this situation is clearly rape.

"Bronx 'Sex' Teach Faces Music: Major Rap In Minor 'Rape'," March 7, 2007; New York Post

-This headline both sensationalizes the crime and implies that an adult can have ?sex? with a child, which is clearly rape.

"?'Forgetful' rape suspect," February 10, 2007; New York Post

-This headline discredits the victim, and decontextualizes the trauma of rape which may include loss of memory.

"Victim recounts graphic details at rape trial," January 30, 2007; Newsday
-This headline promises titillating details, sensationalizing the crime.

"Home Invader Rapists," January 20, 2007; New York Post
-This headline aims to shock and scare, decontextualizing rape as something that occurs primarily among strangers.

For more information on media justice in reporting on sexual violence, visit **The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma**.

Examples of Appropriate Media Representation

- 1.) including both the victim's and perpetrator's voice
- 2.) the victim is treated with respect, and the implication is that a crime did in fact occur
- 3.) the severity of the crime is acknowledged
- 4.) attention is given to the emotional/psychological long term effects of the crime in addition to any physical consequences
- 5.) attention is given to the broader issue of sexual assault and the difficulty in prosecuting the crime
- 6.) follows all **ethical guidelines** indicated by the Associated Press