

## Talking with Youth about Sexual Violence

Darlane Santa Cruz  
Community & Prevention Educator  
Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault  
May 2007

*“Sexual violence is a sickness that continues to permeate within our culture.”*

*~~Quote by a young person at Tucson Youth Take Back the Night -2007*

At our second annual youth Take Back the Night, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, head of the Women Studies Department at the University of Arizona, spoke about the *huipil* (a type of clothing) that she wore. It was a gift given to her from the Zapotec women in Oaxaca, Mexico. In the past and even in some communities today in Mexico, women wore their *huipils* with their breasts uncovered. For the indigenous people that were accustomed to having their women dress this way, they never looked at women with malice nor did they use the uncovered breast as a reason to sexualize them. Both men and women acknowledged they were sexual beings and at the same time respected each gender's place in the cosmos.

In those times, women were respected for their ability to create life. It was not until the colonization and exploitation of indigenous people by the European settlers that views towards women began to change.

We know today from watching the Discovery channel or leafing through a National Geographic that many indigenous women across the world continue to carry themselves in a “revealing” (for lack of a better word) manner and some may see this as “uncultured or primitive.” If we want to apply this to U.S. society, take a look at the arguments around breast feeding in public; so many men and women are outraged and see it as inappropriate behavior for women to breastfeed in public as they see women who do this as “exposing” themselves. In indigenous communities around the world, women's breasts have been for feeding their offspring and not necessarily for sexual gratification.

Today, women and girls are bombarded with messages of femininity in the media that shows women in revealing clothing making women and girls want to dress like the girls in the magazines. The underlying purpose is to receive attention, especially male attention and to sell products because as we all know, sex sells.

However, the expectations of women are like a double-edged sword – expected to be beautiful and model-like, but we also use the way they dress to justify them being abused, experiencing sexual violence and/or sexualized by men. Not only that, but we as women live with the harsh reality that at any point we may become victims of sexual violence regardless of how we dress.

Women and girls are raised with the *inevitability* that at some point, they will get “cat called”, sexually harassed, abused, or raped. Sexual violence is a standard part of life.

As a sexual violence prevention educator, I am at middle and high schools daily, talking to youth and making them aware that they are more likely to be abused or raped by someone that they know rather than a complete stranger. Yet, I still cannot help clenching my keys and cell phone in one hand and my pocket knife in the other as I walk to my car after class at the U of A.

It overwhelms me to think that a few hundred years ago, my ancestors did not live with the fear that I do now.

I was at a high school earlier this semester, and I was taken aback when one of the students, a European American young man, was disturbed by my raising questions about gender norms and patriarchy. He spoke up to the 60+ students that were in the class asking, why was I even trying to change things (society) if that's just how things are. I told him that perhaps we could not change society as a whole but that each of us can do something to change the way we interact with the people around us. I wrote the famous Mahatma Ghandi quote on the board, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Later that week, when discussing the film "Tough Guise" by Jackson Katz, he again spoke up saying the film was sexist since it made men and more specifically "white men" look bad. I found that ironic, since Jackson Katz, himself is a European American man who critiques the power that (wealthy) white heterosexual men have in our society.

The biggest challenge for me this year has been incorporating alternative culturally relevant approaches when talking to youth about sexual violence. In tying together the issues relevant to not only their current lives but to their history, I draw in examples of Pre-Columbian practices that demonstrate that patriarchy, and more specifically men's violence against women, was not a norm. When talking about gender norms and the strict expectation we have of boys and girls I address it as a learned behavior. Men and women are born with both male and female energies that express themselves in various ways.

Some women may excel as athletes, have muscular builds, like to work on cars, and some may realize that they have a sexual preference towards other women. On the other hand, some men may prefer to do the cooking at home, show great love and care for their children, take good care of their facial skin, and although seen as "manly" have a sexual preference towards other men.

Regardless of the issues we are addressing, as a sexual violence prevention educator, it helps to expand students awareness that norms are learned behaviors that have nothing to do with human nature. Men and women are not born with the desire to inflict pain on others, rather it's a behavior that is learned, and then normalized by the dominant society. Here I leave *food for thought* as we work towards breaking down norms, beliefs and ideas that perpetuate sexual violence.

*Hasta que la violencia termine ~~~ Until the violence stops...*

Darlane Santa Cruz