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I Was Taught to Yell Fire

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“I Was Taught to Yell, “Fire!”

Marina Gutierrez

From a very young age my mother always told me to yell, “Fire,” if I was ever in a situation where I needed help from a potential attacker, but I never understood why I couldn’t just yell, “Help.” Her reasoning was that many people will run towards a fire to help put it out or save potential victims, but when someone yells for help others will shy away because they don’t want to get involved. I would just nod and promise to yell fire not really understanding the underlying meaning she had just explained to me.

It wasn’t until I was nineteen years old that I would truly understand the rape culture in this country when I stopped at a gas station at one in the morning and was approached by a man. He started off with the usual compliment of how beautiful I was, but quickly tried to coax me into his car so we could go see a “movie” together. I told him to go away, to back off, to leave me alone. I told him, “No,” and yet he wouldn’t get into his car and go on his way, not without trying to grab my hand to get me to go with him. I put away my pump and got into my car to lock the doors and make for my getaway, but the part that bothers me to this day? There was another guy pumping gas opposite of me that could see and hear every little part of the altercation and not once stepped in to help or veer the conversation elsewhere.

Luckily, I made it out without a scratch while others are not so lucky. So, I took it upon myself to interview a few ladies and bring their stories to light and to transform their words into images to expose the rape culture we endure day to day. My words are not polite and my images are not rated PG because I’m tired of pleasantries, they aren’t getting us anywhere.

KARA

Kara has been sexually assaulted a number of times starting from the young age of seven where the assault came from a close relative's boyfriend, but we are going to focus on two other occurrences. One being when out partying late she awoke to find herself being penetrated by her boyfriend of the time, but without her knowledge and definitely without her consent. So often we dismiss a woman's "cry" of rape because it was committed by her partner or by a person she was on a date with as if to say they are entitled to her body because they have some sort of prehistoric claim to her. No! That's still rape. Why does alcohol excuse a man's actions, but condemn a woman's? You cannot possibly tell me you have never heard a guy say, "It's not rape if you like it," yes it is and your "rape jokes" are not funny.

Fast forward to a year ago when she was twenty-one and working as an exotic dancer at a local strip club. She was already taking precautions by wearing two pairs of underwear when making her rounds and she was always big on asking clients for their consent before she did anything. But that didn't stop one gentleman from sticking his fingers inside her vagina when she opened her underwear for him to slide in his money (and only his money). She told her manager, but nothing was done. Her sister also worked at said club and was dancing for the same guy and his group of friends a little later on when one of the girls in his group decided to start filming which is against club rules. Kara, already upset about the altercation that just occurred with her and the man, defended her sister by trying to get the girl to delete the video and when the girl refused, Kara took it and smashed it. Resulting in her being fired. But being fired was the last thing on her mind because she had to go to the hospital to get a rape kit done and file a police report on the man that decided it was okay to stick his fingers inside her. The problem though was even with video surveillance, there wasn't enough evidence to prosecute the man and Kara's

female investigator told her that the courts would just say he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing and that her character would be attacked because of her occupation as a dancer. Not only that, but the people who were supposed to have her back, including family members and her boyfriend of the time, hit her with the, "Well, what did you think was going to happen?" bullshit.

Kara never followed up with her report because she knew nothing would happen. She started getting counseling from the YWCA, but it didn't help her so she turned to drinking and stopped shortly after being hospitalized for alcohol poisoning. "I don't think anything can really help," she told me, "When you get assaulted by someone you the lose control, it's taken from you."

LYNN*

Lynn was a Catholic seventeen year old virgin saving herself for marriage when she was raped. She was at an outside party when a friend's brother took her behind the garage. They started kissing, but it quickly turned for the worse when he knocked her to the ground and put his hand over her mouth and on her neck. The music was so loud that no one knew what was going on just a few feet away. Lynn went home right after she was raped and got into the shower with her clothes on then threw them away afterwards. She told her step-mother asking what she should do and her step-mother told her to not to go to the police because then everyone would know about it and there wouldn't be a way for it to be proven so nothing would even be done. Instead, she got counseling from the YWCA, but she never really told anyone because she was too embarrassed and the pain was too real, "It just gives you shivers [when] you remember."

When I asked why she never told even her best friend or sister she replied, "That's just not something you talk about. You just don't tell people." This is not the mentality we should be

having when we are sexually assaulted. She should want to go to the police and we should know something will be done about it. Not the exact opposite. And why shouldn't we be sharing our stories with other girls so they know they are not alone and that this happens to one in five women.

Lynn did leave me with a piece of advice: that I should never be alone with someone, even someone I consider a friend, because I shouldn't be putting myself in that situation. Yet, to me, that almost sounds like victim blaming in itself. Telling me to not be alone with a guy because then I would have been deliberately putting myself in a bad situation. I should be able to be alone with a guy at a party, to go somewhere and talk, and not have to worry about him raping me. Why do we teach girls to be cautious, carry pepper spray, look under our cars before we get in, never drink too much, don't show too much skin? Why are we not instead teaching boys (and girls) to just not rape people?

NIKKI*

Nikki fell in love with a guy she thought she knew so much so that she moved in with him after only three months. Everything was perfect until her boyfriend started to show his true colors. "He'd force me to have sex with him, but said it wasn't rape because he was my boyfriend." Regardless if he/she is your boy/girlfriend, if there is no consent it is still rape and the absence of a no is still not a yes. Nikki was being forced to have sex against her will, but was brainwashed into thinking it wasn't rape because he was her boyfriend and sex is just part of the package, right? No. Especially because if Nikki ever did say no and turn him down he would beat her for disobeying. What started off with him hitting her on her arms and legs so she could conceal them eventually lead to him beating her face. One time to the point where she was

hospitalized and yet, she didn't turn him in to the police. "I loved him so I kept my mouth shut, but I knew it was really because he made me keep it shut."

For another three months Nikki endured this making up lie after lie when people asked about her bloody noses, black eyes, and cut lips until she finally came clean to her mother. Together they went to police and he was arrested freeing Nikki of the physical abuse, but not the mental. "Sometimes I can still feel his hands around my neck, it makes me throw up." So many people think the trauma stops when the perpetrator is locked up, but one day they will get out and who knows if they'll hold a grudge and come after you, or if they'll coax their way back into your life by claiming they're changed. The mental trauma that comes with assault can sometimes be more unbearable than the physical assault, which is why counseling at the YWCA has been a part of two out of the three women I interviewed.

**names have been changed to protect the victims' identities*

These three ladies' stories, including my own, are why I chose this topic. We don't talk about rape or sexual assault because we are made to feel like it is all our fault and we are made to feel embarrassed by it. We are told we shouldn't have had so much to drink or that because of what we were wearing we were asking for it. Yet, no one ever stops to ask why the attacker thought it was okay to do what they did. Why they thought a blacked-out girl could possibly agree to have sex when she can't even open her eyes; how they thought the outfit I was wearing was an invitation into my vagina. Why do we only feel people over eighteen should hear about sexual assault? Children learn when they are young and many of them will already be well into their bad habits before high school, so we need to stop those habits before they are second nature. Girls and boys get raped, so we need to stop victim blaming and start blaming the only thing that is responsible for sexual assault: the rapist.