



Talking Points: A Guiding Document for Media Response and Community Conversations

Created by the [Prevention & Education Subcommittee](#) of the [Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force](#) (2015)



When an incident of sexual violence occurs, often we, as statewide experts and policy makers, are asked to respond. It is critical for us to understand the importance of framing the conversation, and having the tools to feel confident doing so. When we influence the way the media talks about sexual violence, we are thus changing socio-cultural norms at the highest level and reframing the way the community at large understands both the epidemic of sexual violence and the responsibility everyone holds in preventing it.

I. How You Can Use These Talking Points

These points can be used to support a very brief conversation or a much more in-depth conversation. These points are meant to help craft a response when something specific happens in the community. They are also intended to support proactive conversations that enable our communities talking and thinking about positive actions we can take – before violence happens.

- Talking points can be anchors that are reinforced with each new conversation, rather than mutable and relational facts that shift with each new event.
- Our role is not to articulate conclusions but rather to frame the important questions. These points allow us to frame our vision in positive terms that are also connected to understanding local as well as broader social conditions that support rape culture.
- Talking about prevention in local terms helps to start conversation with what is digestible and positive (before we get to next question).

Keep in mind: It's NOT our role to tell other communities what they are doing wrong – rather our role is to support/urge a community to take responsibility for, and ownership of, its culture, norms, and conditions that cause and support violence, and to create new value systems that support healthy relationships.

With this in mind, here are some pertinent questions that often arise when talking about sexual violence in the community, and ways to pivot the conversation to our advantage.

II. Talking Points for Prevention Promotion in Our Communities

1. **Starting the conversation: *Sexual violence is preventable and we all play a role.***

We are actors even when we believe we are doing nothing: we are making choices all the time that either support or challenge culture of violence.

Why start here?

This is our vision for the community/state/society. This is why we do what we do and our goal to end violence that drives us to seek change. It's our aspiration and our inspiration. We start here in order to provide a frame for what we believe is possible for our community.

Beginning the conversation here:

- Avoids talking about the specifics of individual cases and redirects the general media focus towards the solution and away from potential victim-survivor blaming.
 - Example: *“We know something may have happened in this community that is shocking/upsetting; there is much to be learned from understanding that the same thing happens in all communities and understanding why that is.”*
- Allows us to look at institutional, and broader, culture rather than narrowly fixing on the specific and individual results of that culture.
- Allows us to move past the wall -- and myth -- of “inevitability” (i.e., that sexual violence is inevitable and part of the human condition).
 - Example: *“Sexual violence may be epidemic, but it is not endemic. It’s not a natural part of human development; it’s a learned behavior, and understanding how we learn it is one step in creating healthy and safe communities.”*

2. Building a bridge from the problem to possible solutions: *How do we talk about sexual violence?*

Sexual violence happens at epidemic proportions, yet each community has its own resources to promote safety and health.

Here is where we can use statistics, but need to be careful in doing so. We want to define the problem from our understanding and viewpoint, but not overwhelm people with numbers. Being intentional about what statistics we use is important. **People remember stories, not numbers.** We need to be clear, concise, and talk about the epidemic of sexual violence in a way that allows everyone to see their stake in addressing the issue, and also real and possible ways in which they can engage.

Using statistics in a way that is accessible (not overwhelming), relates to what we’re being asked about, and does not lose sight and sense of individuals. This is where the word “trauma” comes in. Reach into health issue and individual and community costs.

- “Sexual violence happens worldwide in epidemic proportions, which has a great deal to do with why it happened here.”
- “The pain that this event has brought to us is so personal and local; it reminds us how much we care about our community. We are most conscious of the pain right now, and

the anger/frustration it causes, but we can act out of our caring. Sexual violence is not inevitable. We have the tools and resources to support healthy relationships and challenge the norms, rules, attitudes, and beliefs that allow for sexual violence to happen.”

- “If something like 10% of men are likely to perpetrate, then 90% of men are likely to support healthy, respectful and loving relationships. Working with youth, giving them the space to act on these positive inclinations, helps our community to thrive.”
- “The Oregon Healthy Teen Survey responses in our community indicate that 15% of teens engage in these risky behaviors. We can build on the 85% of teens who are already making healthy choices, and support that 15% with skills and information they need.”

Consider the role of oppressions/inequities in which violence is rooted. Also consider that it may be useful to invoke the larger context. This can be an opportunity to start talking about socialization; and to acknowledge the larger forces at work.

- *When we send clear messages about some people having more value than others, we create a power imbalance that can encourage or support people with power to take advantage of people without power. For example, when sex is framed as a commodity, it is set up as a zero sum game. Those with power (most often men) “win” when they have sex. That sets women up as the “losers” in that game. We can create healthier and safer norms around sex when we frame it as a mutually beneficial interaction where both people have the right to voice what they want, like, and need from that interaction.”*

3. Evoking positive values: *what are the values that sexual violence prevention supports?*

Equity, Inclusion, Health, Safety, Protection (NB: of the community, not individual people), Opportunity.

When we talk about sexual violence, we want to elicit a measured, intentional response from the community. Talking about the values that we intend to evoke gives us a frame for how to tell our story. These values are *why it matters*.

It is useful to consider which of the points resonate with the values of a particular community or group. Who is the audience for our talking points?

- In response to violence/trauma: *“Our community has a history of coming together when times are hard. Right now, we are in the midst of a tragedy and it takes time to recover; but our community has the strength to learn and to draw on our experience as we move through this pain. Our strengths are.....”*
- Proactive conversation: *“Our community cares about health and safety. We’ve accomplished X, Y and Z. With our caring and our energy, we can also”*

Equity and Inclusion may not be the first values people articulate; we can be intentional in invoking/including them.

- *“Our community values everyone having access to opportunity – [examples]. This is the foundation of creating violence-free communities.”*

It’s useful to relate general concepts to specific community priorities/values:

- In a learning environment, relate healthy interactions to the ability to learn.
- With a service organization, identify positive relationships as a protective factor against violence.

4. What we can do: *How do we envision solving the problem of sexual violence? What other ideas/thoughts might arise when we consider the idea of a “solution” vs. how the community at large thinks about a “solution?”*

Our 3-tiered solution: 1) Support those who have already been assaulted (listen and believe); 2) learn how to recognize and interrupt violence about to happen (raise your awareness about how perpetrators isolate and disempower their victims to make the assault easier to carry out); and 3) change the conditions that tolerate violence (Prevention! Healthy sexuality promotion! Creating and valuing a culture of consent! Socio-cultural norms change!)

This is where we have the capacity to change the conversation and move it to one that focuses on the importance of positive framing and socio-cultural norms change. This is *what we do*.

It is useful to **consider criminal justice vs. social justice solutions**. Criminal justice solutions often imply that it’s someone else’s job is to take care of the violence (law enforcement, the courts, corrections). Social justice solutions mean that we all have a role and responsibility. That can feel big and heavy and overwhelming, but (see #2, above), when we focus on specific possibilities or actions, and specific aspects of prevention already happening/present in our community – i.e. protective factors – we can begin to see community-based solutions.

- For example, when a teen offends, the we might ask: *What is the role of punishment in community healing? What other/additional response might support community health? How do these questions play out for different groups within the community? What happens to offenders after the punishment ends? What happens to victims after the crime? How is our community a healthy and “just” place for all of us?*
- Asking these questions affirms that violence prevention is everyone’s issue, and everyone plays a role.
 - *“We are actors even when we believe we are doing nothing: we are making choices all the time that either support or challenge culture of violence.”*

Listen, believe, and validate the experiences of people who have experienced trauma from sexual violence. Useful questions might include: What happens to survivors after the crime?

How can our communities be healthy and safe for them? Does community safety involve more than punishing the offender? – if we can get someone to ask us this question, we can be ready with the conversation that follows.

Talking about the role of gender in sexual violence in ways that resonate with communities. Identifying empowering women as part of the solution: consider where your community is at. Is it a problem to say this too soon? Will the larger message that incorporates both responsibility and empowerment be lost? Challenging social norms that teach us that women are objects and men are sex robots benefits the whole community.

- *“People/genders can be different from each other. Diversity is a sign of community health. The problems come when the differences are differently valued; when male ‘freedom’ is more important than female well-being.”*
- *“It’s not about women protecting themselves, or about men protecting women: it’s about changing the culture so that all our community members can be safe.”*
- *“When women are valued more for their humanity than for their ‘purity’ our communities will be safer and stronger.”*

Changing the conditions that allow for violence to happen means directly confronting rape culture. This gives us the opportunity to call out unhealthy and harmful norms that continuously misappropriate responsibility for sexual violence (e.g., victim-blaming, slut-shaming). Here, we can focus on what we all can do to address sexual violence and make our communities healthier and safer. Here we can promote a focus on affirmative consent, healthy relationships education, discussions of healthy masculinity, and what it means for everyone to practice/achieve healthy sexuality.

5. Ready to reframe for prevention: *Statements to pivot away from; and positive frames we can use.*

Be prepared! It’s important for us to have a good picture of HOW the community might think about sexual violence so we can be proactive in preparing to address it.

Often, we will be asked questions that imply values that support violence: *Didn’t the victim help bring this on? Doesn’t this only happens to certain people? Aren’t men who commit rape mentally ill, or monsters? Don’t certain women deserve what they get? Aren’t male sexual urges sometimes beyond their control? Aren’t women also guilty of violence in intimate relationships?* The following are samples of negative questions and positive reframes.

Pathologizing trauma

Statement: Didn’t he do it because of mental illness?

Reframe: Sexual violence is about entitlement; he was more likely following the messages coming from media, peers, institutions that tell him that violence is normal, victims will be blamed for it, and perpetrators will not be held responsible. If we were barraged by healthy, pro-social messages, you wouldn't be asking me this question.

Reframe: There's no evidence that mental illness is associated with committing sexual violence. Most people who have mental illness don't rape or commit sexual assault, and it adds to the stigma of mental illness to inaccurately link the two this way.

Statement: [victim has mental illness]

Assuming that victims of child abuse will become perpetrators of violence

Statement: The perpetrator had a history of child abuse that caused him to be sexually violent.

Reframe: Child abuse is all too prevalent in our communities. Even so, the great majority of people who are abused do not grow up to be sexually violent, and making this assumption simply adds to the burden that victims of child abuse already bear. Child abuse puts people at higher risk for continued victimization and the resulting traumatization.

Gender equivalency (men are victims as often as --meaning in the same ways as -- women)

Statement: Aren't both men and women victims of this kind of violence?

Reframe: It's important not to confuse the use of any physical force with power and control, and exercise of entitlement, that are fundamental to gendered violence. Our culture upholds attitudes and norms that support men's dominance and the subordination of women in society and in interpersonal relationships. We actively encourage men to be dominant and controlling in their lives, so that violence and manipulation are acceptable reactions for men who perceive their dominant status being threatened.

Thus, while the rates of victimization among men and women may, on the surface, appear similar in terms of the number of individual acts perpetrated by or against men and women; when we add the context of exercising power and control to maintain dominance, the rates are much more skewed. For example, the 2010 National Intimate Partner Violence Survey (NISVS) found that 72% of women and 18% of men experienced fear as a result of their experience. 62% of women and 16% of men were concerned for their safety; and the same % experienced any PTSD symptoms. Additionally, virtually all stranger sexual assault is committed by men.

Same-Sex IPV and SV: A 2013 special report of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) revealed that sexual minorities experience rates similar to, and in many ways higher than, heterosexuals. In considering these rates it is important to keep in mind that factors such as the internalization of homophobic,

biphobic, and transphobic cultural beliefs, have been shown to be highly correlated with the existence of intimate partner violence within the LGBTQ community.¹ These oppressive attitudes play out in both heterosexual and LGBTQ communities.

Victim-blaming and endorsing abuser excuses

Statement: Wasn't she asking for it by... [fill in the blank]?

Reframe: Sexual violence is always the responsibility of the person who chose to commit sexual violence. Sexual violence happens when someone feels entitled to power and sex and makes the choice to not get consent. When we look to the victim for fault, we're often looking for reasons it wouldn't have happened to us (and therefore we can feel safe). When we do that, we let danger live on and any one of us could be the next victim. *What made the park dangerous that night was the perpetrator being there, not the victim walking alone, or wearing a short skirt, or stiletto heels, or!*

Using coded language depending upon the perpetrator's race

Statement: Didn't he do it because of mental illness [when perpetrator is white]?

Reframe: {see above}.

Calling abusers/perpetrators "monsters" which disconnects from the roots of violence – again with racial/racist alignment. Whereas when the abuser is a person of color the violence becomes a racial/ethnic characteristic.

Statement: He must be some kind of monster to do what he did. [often, when the perpetrator is not white].

Reframe: Sexual violence is monstrous for every victim, yet it is perpetrated by our neighbors, relatives, coworkers – regular people who believe they are entitled to exercise power over others without their consent. To call a perpetrator a "monster" fools us into thinking that we can recognize rapists by how they look, and that's dangerous because often those looks involve racial stereotypes.

Mythologizing male violence as an immutable characteristic of gender.

Statement: Men have been doing this since the beginning of time. He just couldn't help himself.

¹ See, e.g., Balsam, K. F., & Szymanski, D. M. (2005). Relationship quality and domestic violence in women's same-sex relationships: The role of minority stress. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29, 258–269; Johnson, M. P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 283–294; and Smith, R. M., Parrott, D. J., Swartout, K. M., & Tharpe, A. T. (2014). Deconstructing hegemonic masculinity: The roles of antifemininity, subordination to women, and sexual dominance in men's perpetration of sexual aggression. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035956>

Reframe: A small percentage of men commit the majority of sexual violence. So it would be more accurate to say, “A small number of men have been doing this since the beginning of time.” And that makes me ask, “What about the majority of men who can help themselves?”

Reframe: Sexual violence is not inevitable. When we actively promote healthy speech, interactions and relationships, we create critical mass/peer pressure that can interrupt violence. We can dismantle the support system that lets violence happen.

Minimization of violence

Statement: Wasn't this just a hook-up gone wrong?

Reframe: Sexual violence is most frequent between people who know each other, that is, people who have a preexisting relationship. What goes wrong is when one person stops caring about what the other person wants, needs, likes or feels, and opts for entitlement and/or power rather than consent.

Statement: The induction ceremony got a bit out of control (*e.g. sodomy in athletic or fraternity groups as “hazing”*).

Reframe: Sexual violence is sexual violence. This is a clear example of how violence is about one person using their power to hurt another person; in this case it's also about how our social message about what it means to be a “real man” leads to real harm.

Myth of a perpetrator dark night/bushes in the park vs. in your own living room with a friend you trust. (*reframe can be that our fear is based on pervasive messaging, and not on the actual risk*)

Statement: Shouldn't women take measures to keep themselves safe, like carrying mace and avoiding dark places at night?

Reframe: Most women are hurt by people they know – family members, dates, acquaintances, coaches, teachers, or friends. Telling women they should defend themselves against strangers probably does less to protect them than to reinforce the notion that victims are responsible for the criminal actions of perpetrators, and thus to blame for their own assault. Our fear of dark corners is likely more the result of pervasive messaging than of the actual risk. And, to repeat, what makes dark corners dangerous is the perpetrator that may be hiding, not the woman walking past.

Alcohol causes violence

Statement: She was drinking, so it's at least partially her fault. She should have known better than to get drunk around guys.

Reframe: Entitlement and the perpetrator's choice, not drinking, causes sexual assault: giving youth good information about health, including sexual health, opens the lines of communication and supports them in making healthy choices.

Statement: She was drunk and she never said no, so it couldn't have been real rape.

Reframe: Giving youth good information about health, including everyone's responsibility to get consent and how consent is impacted by drug and alcohol use, opens the lines of communication and supports them in making healthy choices.

6. We can use what we already have going for us! *What statements do we want to be sure to include in our argument? What frame are we creating by including them?*

Everyone deserves to reach their full capacity for healthy sexuality.

Again, it's important to be intentional about what we're saying here. Why are we choosing to include one particular statistic over another, or tell one story as opposed to another? How will our choice help people better understand our values and our proposed solutions?

Women being sexual is not the reason there is sexual violence. Celebrating women's sexuality openly and healthily would decrease the likelihood of sexual violence. Instead of blaming a woman for bringing on violence, we'd understand that the perpetrator had assaulted her good health, just as we would understand someone putting poison in her food.

When women have full access to sexual agency, sex becomes an equal exchange rather than something to be hidden and taken.

Envisioning a world where female sexuality is valued and every woman has the power to make fully autonomous choices allows us to reframe discussions of sex from commodity to a performance framework.

- Consider the statement from earlier: *When sex is framed as a commodity, it is set up as a zero sum game. Those with power (most often men) "win" when they have sex. That sets women up as the "losers" in that game. We can create healthier and safer norms around sex when we frame it as a mutually beneficial interaction where both people have the right to voice what they want, like, and need from that interaction"*
- *We support everyone's right to decide when sex is right for them.*
- *Youth are hungry for good information and examples about sexuality and we keep them healthy when we provide that!*
- *Consent lets people express what they want, like, need, and what gives them pleasure in a relationship.*
- *In our experience working with men, almost all of them we spoke with have said that they would prefer to have a world without men's violence against women. Our job is to give them the tools to help create that world.*

Holding perpetrators accountable is important community work in addressing sexual violence. By doing so, we can be proactive in making our community healthier and safer.

- **Example:** *Justice is an important factor in addressing domestic and sexual violence. We can better achieve social justice by holding ourselves and others accountable. We can practice this by examining and interrupting oppressive jokes, comments, and assumptions and thus, step forward as partners in prevention.*