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A Coordinated Collaborative Approach to Address and Combat Teen Dating Abuse

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A COORDINATED COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO ADDRESS AND COMBAT TEEN DATING ABUSE

Rus Ervin Funk*

I INTRODUCTION

In efforts to combat men's violence against women, the model of a comprehensive coordinated community response has become the latest and most promising direction in the United States (US), of activism, organizing and service delivery (Shephard and Pence, 2000). However, like most of the efforts to address domestic violence, teenagers have not been included in the development and practice of this model. The needs of teenagers who are in a relationship with an abusive person are rarely reflected in the services and responses developed, nor are they included in the analysis behind the efforts to create a comprehensive coordinated response.

For example, most domestic violence laws are not written with youth (under 18 or 21 depending on the jurisdiction) in mind and as such, cannot be used as tools for protection. In addition most domestic violence shelters will not take in young people fleeing abusers, and shelters that are for youth are not prepared to address issues of dating abuse, and intervention programmes for abusers are not prepared (nor are they appropriate) for young abusers. For these reasons (and others to be addressed in more detail in the paper), teenagers and young adults have limited access to appropriate resources, rarely identify the domestic violence services that do exist as accessible for them, and do not know what to do when in an abusive relationship.

In response to this lack of services for youth, advocates in Washington DC began developing a coordinated response specifically for teenagers. This paper will explore the

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efforts thus far in Washington DC, including what has been done, the difficulties found in these efforts, lessons learned, recommendations for other communities who are similarly interested, and an overview of the plans for the continued development and expansion of this effort. For the purposes of this paper, and the organizing efforts in Washington DC, “youth” refers to people 21 years of age and under.

II HISTORY OF THE COORDINATED COMMUNITY RESPONSE

The Coordinated Community Response to domestic violence was set up by Ellen Pence in the early 1980’s in Duluth, MN, USA - a community-based programme developed to work with battered women and their children. In her attempts to increase police accountability for battered women, and improve work with women who are being battered and their children, Ellen came to realize that the community as a whole is responsible for protecting women and for holding men who abuse accountable. In light of this Ellen focused her work on creating collaborative efforts between all systems within a community that have an impact on battered women - health, social services, legal, education, religious, etc. The goal being to develop comprehensive, community-wide efforts that provide services for, and protect, battered women; that hold men who abuse accountable; and change the social structures that allow women to be abused (Pence and Shepard, 2000).

The goal of any comprehensive coordinated community response is to identify all the partners that respond to domestic violence issues, who recognize their particular role in the response effort as well as the ways that their role is associated with those of others who are also involved. For example, shelters for battered women often require the protection offered by police and thus, require that police agencies understand the dynamics of domestic violence and are sensitive to the plight of battered women. The police, in their efforts to gather evidence, are often dependent (at least in part) upon medical services to assist in documenting injuries related to the abuse and thus, medical personnel need to understand the dynamic of domestic violence and know how to identify

those types of injuries. As Rose Thelen states, the goals of a coordinated community response include:

- Provide for the safety of the victim
- Hold the offender accountable - creating a specific deterrent against his repeated use of violence
- Change the climate in the community - creating a general deterrent against the use of violence as an acceptable practice in the home

Worth particular attention is the focus on social change - efforts to “change the climate in the community.” Keeping individual women safe and holding men accountable are also crucial efforts, but in order to truly eliminate men’s violence (and thus, make all women safe), a change in social attitudes and the social structures that reinforce and maintain these attitudes is needed - attitudes that allow individual men to see violence against women as an option. A social goal of gender equity is called for.

III THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Addressing men’s abusiveness begins with a theoretical base. The theoretical base for the comprehensive coordinated response model is a feminist analysis of men’s violence against women. Such an analysis recognizes that men’s violence is a result of a power imbalance between individual women and men that, in part, results from a power imbalance in society (Schechter, 1982). Accordingly, men are granted more power vis-à-vis women, are offered privileges resulting from this power, and learn to expect benefits or entitlement as a result of these privileges. It is from this dynamic that individual men choose to abuse the women in their lives. Violence and abuse becomes normalized and justified as a weapon to enforce the privilege resulting from a power imbalance. As such, in order to combat men abusing women, efforts must address the various forms of this power imbalance – as realized in individual relationships as well as in the society as a whole.

A part of this dynamic is men's views of masculinity and the degree to which they see themselves as "measuring up" to this view. As Michael Kaufman writes, "The very way that men have constructed social and individual power is the source of enormous fear, isolation, and pain for men... And on top of that, the internalised expectations of masculinity are themselves impossible to satisfy or attain" (Kaufman, 2001). Most men (if not all) are concerned with being "real men" and as such feel the need to constantly prove the degree to which they do achieve attributes of dominant models of masculinity. Bob Pease articulates this struggle this way, "...the more he felt the need to prove himself as a man, the more alienated he felt from the culture of manhood" (Pease, 2000). This results in a hegemonic model of masculinity that is both idealized and unattainable and which is experienced as external to men. For example, men are repeatedly told they are supposed to be in control of their life, but most men do not feel they are - particularly in relation to situations or relationships outside the home (in school, at work, in the market, etc.). Men may carry home this feeling of being 'out of control', and in an effort to re-assert their perceived masculinity, attempt to enforce their control in order to "be a man". Violence then becomes the main tool for both proving and enforcing one's control.

Teenage men are at a developmental stage within these constructs that makes it exceedingly difficult to manage having a moving relationship with the pressures of hegemonic models of masculinities that they face. They are simultaneously taught to expect the benefits (entitlements) of being a man whilst being kept from fully experiencing these benefits. They are, in effect, boys becoming men with the relationships to masculinity that this suggests.

A collaborative community response addressing teen dating abuse must include therefore opportunities for younger men to explore their ideas and understandings of masculinity. This exploration will provide them with an opportunity to explore different definitions and expressions of masculinity (or masculinities) – including different manifestations of power and privilege as well as different kinds of relationships with each other and with teenage women. One example of such an effort is the "men of strength" clubs developed by Men Can Stop Rape, Inc. (in Washington DC). Although focused primarily on

addressing issues of sexual violence, these sixteen-week groups give teenage men the opportunity to explore concepts of masculinity and strength. But to be effective such efforts need to be incorporated into the other comprehensive coordinated community responses – in isolation they will not prove effective in combating teen dating abuse. For example, the “men of strength” clubs would be enhanced dramatically if offered in conjunction with young women’s empowerment programmes - young men and women could meet together to discuss what they have learned and address these issues. Boys do not become men in isolation from girls, and as such, programmes working with boys should not be offered in isolation from similar programmes working with girls.

Some kind of process needs to be in place to hold younger men who abuse accountable for their abusiveness. Such processes should also be connected to services for teenage women who are abused (see, for example, Funk, 2001). These kinds of efforts will likely require changes in laws and agency policy to allow services for teenagers.

IV AN OVERVIEW OF THE WASHINGTON DC EFFORTS

In late 1999, a law student, Karen Cunningham, and I began exploring the services available for teenagers who are in relationships with abusive people. Cunningham and I, neither of whom was officially connected to an organization, initiated the outreach to form a working group to begin comprehensively exploring the issues and needs of teens in such relationships. The initial partners included a variety of social services, direct action, and legal services in the Washington DC metropolitan area. After the initial meetings, it was apparent that additional outreach was needed to engage specific populations that were not initially represented – specifically gay and lesbian youth, and Latino/a youth.

The initial activities focused on a comprehensive assessment of the services, laws, and policies that impact on youth in abusive relationships. Specific activities included: examining the domestic violence laws in DC to identify how they can be applied to youth; speaking to people who work in youth services for their knowledge, expertise and

skills about dating abuse; assessing domestic violence programmes to examine their accessibility to youth; identifying barriers to services for youth involved in dating abuse (abusers and victims); and identifying educational programmes that deal with dating abuse issues.

There is a grave dearth of services for youth who are in abusive relationships (as well as for youth who are exposed to the domestic violence – but this issue is beyond the scope of this paper). As a result, efforts to combat dating abuse require a multi-tiered approach - local efforts need to focus on front line work, policy and legal changes and prevention.

Some of the specific barriers that became apparent very quickly, include:

Legal

- Lack of protective or restraining orders for youth (or even any understanding of the degree to which those orders could be used by and for youth who are abused by other youth)
- Inability to enforce protective orders against a perpetrator who is a minor
- Traditional legal remedies are ineffective with teenagers (stay-away orders are insufficient with youth who ride the same bus, attend the same school, live in the same group home, etc.)
- Lack of legal representation for youth
- Lack of clear definitions of dating abuse
- Current laws are not applicable to youth
- Lack of clear lines of legal responsibility as to who should respond to youth
- No training for probation officers to address young offenders

Service Delivery

- No authority to provide services in the absence of parental consent or at least notification

- No designated shelter space for youth who need to escape a relationship with an abusive person
- Lack of legal advocates
- No clear access to services for youth
- Lack of training of youth service agencies and personnel
- Limited culturally sensitive programmes for youth

Intervention for Adolescents who abuse

- There are none

Education & Prevention Efforts

- Lack of a coordinated effort to educate youth
- Too few resources for any meaningful educational efforts
- Lack of specific educational programmes for young women and young men
- No mass media/public awareness efforts *
- Limited programming that is sensitive and specific to issues of gay, bisexual, and lesbian youth
- Limited culturally competent educational programming

In addition to these structural barriers there are also barriers related to youth themselves. For example, developmental issues and issues related to identity (race, class, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, etc.) are also of concern and have an impact on experience and understanding of dating abuse and available resources. For example, gay or lesbian youth may have additional concerns with reaching out to mainstream domestic violence organizations, police or other formal helping systems due to common perceptions of these systems and agencies as being homophobic. They may also have their own relative discomfort with being “out” as homosexual.

* At about the same time as this effort began, Men Can Stop Rape, Inc. launched a public awareness effort entitled “My strength is not for hurting” which was a sexual assault prevention public awareness campaign targeting men and male youth. As powerful as this effort is, it does not address non-sexual dating abuse.

One of the main barriers amongst youth themselves is their lack of awareness about what constitutes an abusive relationship, leaving many of them ill-prepared and often unwilling (and unable), to label abuse as such even when they experience it. This dynamic mirrors that of many adult battered women who also do not define their experience as abusive. As with adults, this is largely due to limited educational programmes that define the different kinds of abuse that takes place for teens. With limited information, youth tend to look to each other or the mass media for answers as to what constitutes a healthy, unhealthy, or abusive relationship. Given the general confusion about the issues of domestic violence and the ways that subtle forms of abusive behaviours are often characterized in the media (music, music video, music magazine, teen movies, etc.) as romantic and expressions of devotion, it is not surprising that youth are hesitant to define their experiences as abusive.

Furthermore, young people, in striving to achieve the “ultimate” expression of hegemonic masculinity and femininity - young men act “manly” and young women act “womanly” (as they understand those behaviours to be) in relation with each other - they may be relating in ways that are “hyper heterosexual” and which could, in some cases, verge on becoming abusive. These attempts to prove either masculinity or femininity, coupled with desires to “fit in” and be independent, often serve to obscure recognition that behaviours are abusive, and are even more unlikely to call for help if they do, in fact, recognize abusive dynamics.

Another barrier related to the youth themselves is developmental. Youth at this age are at a stage (according to Western models of development and maturation) of “individuation” and separation from adult caregivers. The teenage years are exactly the time when most US youth attempt to distinguish themselves from their parents and other adults. In the process of developing their individual sense of self as separate from their identity as “child of...” US adolescents turn to their peers as their primary relationships and look to these relationships to define what is “normal,” “acceptable” and “appropriate.” As a result, they are less likely to look to adults for assistance and support when troubled or confused, and often reject the patterns of behaviour of those adults who are closest to them.

For male youth, this developmental stage forces them to confront the hegemonic model of masculinity as manifest in their particular culture, as well as how it is depicted by the dominant culture. The role of men as powerful, in control and dominant is a model held up for which they strive, to varying degrees achieve and fail to reach (and perhaps reject), and to varying degrees are kept from achieving. Male youth are simultaneously expected in US culture to “be men;” and to be “men in training.” This “boys becoming men” status is impacted on male youth from a number of additional angles -- their sexual orientation, race, economic status, and other dynamics about which they have no control. The impact on individual youth, however, varies. Adolescent males are in a position of being stuck between what they feel they should and need to be in order to achieve proper identity status (“manhood”), and what they are allowed to express due to limitations placed on them.

It seems clear that vis-à-vis teenage women, teenage men receive privileges and are in a relative power (over) relationship. The sports they play receive more funding and greater attention; they are called upon more in class, and are expected to (and I would argue, supported to), achieve more than teenage women. However, vis-à-vis adults - both male and female - these same boys becoming men are in a relative powerless position. This relative powerlessness is emphasized for youth of colour, gay or bisexual youth, working class youth, or youth who come from other marginalized populations. Male youth’s experience of power and masculinity is one in which they both have it, and do not have it; one in which they have “the promise of power and entitlement” (Lang, 2001) as well as having achieved some forms of the promise fulfilled.

Given that the vast majority of services, policies and programmes addressing domestic violence are geared towards adults, meaning that adults provide the service and that adults will surround youth who attempt to access services, this developmental barrier cannot be overlooked. For teenage women, this means that the very attempts to empower (a basic foundation of work with battered women) will be in the context of a service that will most likely feel very dis-empowering.

The services, programmes, and efforts to address domestic violence are based on adult models of relationship with an abusive person, as well as adult based models of power. Whilst it is likely that the dynamics of adult domestic violence and teen dating abuse could be similar in many ways, there are also ways that clearly distinguish these two forms of relationship with an abusive person. There are major differences between adult experiences of power and powerlessness and those of youth. More research needs to be done to clearly understand the dynamics of teen dating abuse, but clearly teen men who abuse their partners do not have access to the same forms of control that adult men who abuse have (i.e. power to isolate, control of the money, controlling the household, etc.). As such, intervention efforts for youth who abuse, and support services for youth who are abused, need to recognize these distinctions and the “subtle” forms of control that adolescent men use in their relationships.

V WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Firstly, defining a “comprehensive collaborative response” is a community process. Each community must identify what the terms: “comprehensive,” “collaborative,” and “response” actually mean. In addition, each community needs to identify the partners that should be involved in the process. These two processes need to occur simultaneously – a small group gathers to begin defining the issues, whilst also reaching out to, and bringing in additional partners. As an attempt to offer definitions there is reference here to the work of the US based National Training Centre on Domestic and Sexual Violence* :

Cooperation:

- Relationships usually formed around one area of information exchange
- Resources and organizations kept separate

* The National Training Centre on Domestic and Sexual Violence offers professional training, technical assistance, and support to organizations, states, and other locales on issues of domestic and sexual violence. For more information, contact www.ntcdsv.org, or 2300 Pasadena Dr., Austin, TX 78757 (512) 407-9020.

- May be short term or project oriented
- Little planning or evaluation - but there is some problem solving

Coordination:

- Relationships are likely broader in scope
- More in depth communications occur
- Resources are specifically allocated by partnering organizations
- Usually longer in duration – seen as a programme rather than a project
- Involves some planning and evaluation

Collaboration:

- Relationships are intertwined with open communication systems
- Resources are avidly shared and may be sought jointly
- Responsibilities and roles are clearly defined with leadership coming from various sources
- The venture has an articulated vision and is planned with evaluation and redesign efforts based on performance

In preparing for outreach a careful balance should be struck between over defining the issues (in such a way that new partners feel like their perspective will not be welcomed, appreciated or acknowledged) and under defining the issues (in such a way that the new partners have an unclear idea of why they are joining the effort). Once this is started - and it is often an ongoing process - then the work of defining what is to be done can begin. Here, following the definition offered above, the goals, objectives and barriers to the success need to be defined, as well as some efforts to prioritise.

In Washington DC it was at this point that the need to bring youth more into the process was realized. If adults keep defining the issues (as we understand them) for youth who are abused, then such efforts will not only likely to miss issues that youth truly face, but

will also continue to dis-empower youth by these kinds of exclusionary practices. In order to be empowered, people need to be involved in the process of defining and naming their own experiences, and creating the solutions to those experiences that they find problematic.

With this in mind focus groups were organized with; youth, youth serving professionals, and domestic violence service providers. The idea was to explore how these different groups of people define, understand, respond to and identify resources for dating abuse. The focus group model allows for a small group of individuals (usually between eight and ten) to come together in order to explore an issue in some depth. A broad outline is used to guide the conversation initially but the process allows for more in depth questioning into areas identified by the group as being important. At each focus group session there is also an opportunity to begin identifying individuals who may be invited to participate in the collaborative effort.

Part of the process of identifying goals and priorities also involves defining processes and structures of accountability – to each other, to the goals, and to the girls/women who are being abused. To again refer to the definitions offered above, a collaborative effort requires that people and organizations have a clear understanding of their responsibilities in the overall effort. For this reason, a collaborative community response needs to identify the roles of each participant, and the responsibilities thereof. Some of the partners include:

- The local police^{*}
- Probation officers
- Youth service providers (including juvenile delinquency programmes)
- Domestic violence advocates
- Private practitioners
- Legal advocates and lawyers

^{*} Like in many jurisdictions, Washington DC has more than one police force that may come into contact with youth. As such, it is important to bring in partners from each police force, and identify the particular responsibilities for that police force, as well as for the police in general.

- Judges
- Child protection services personnel
- Clergy (specifically youth ministers or the like)
- Local schools (the school board as well as individual schools)
- Crisis lines
- Anti violence educators

After responsibilities are defined for each partner (these will likely change over time), the collaboration moves to prioritising and finding ways to sustain the efforts. These two tasks need to happen simultaneously. Prioritising involves examining all the needs listed and identifying the most pressing to address first. A part of this effort requires the coordinating body to identify what resources, skills and interests there are as well as what is seen as most urgent from the standpoint of the youth who are affected.

Sustaining the efforts requires that the coordinating body (or usually, a small sub-group of the coordinating body), make sure that progress continues to occur in such a way that members of the coordinating body see their involvement as important and worth their while. In other words, create and build on successes.

For example, it may be that changing the laws is crucial for any impact on the ability of youth in relationships with an abusive person to be served, but recognizing that changing laws generally require an enormous expenditure of resources and is very time consuming, the coordinating body may choose to work on this, while simultaneously working to train staff to better identify teens who are in relationships with an abusive person so that there is a better understanding of the extent of the problem in the local community. As the local community - including policy makers - become more aware of the problems and issues of teen dating abuse on the local level, there will be a greater chance of changing the laws and the coordinating group members encouraged by the success which will keep them engaged, interested and involved.

In order to address teenage dating abuse we need to develop and expand the availability of peer education, training or outreach efforts. By training teenagers to educate other teenagers, not only will communities increase the number of “eyes and ears” who can identify when abuse is going on and support women who are being abused, but also educational efforts will be much more effective. Teenagers (like most of us) tend to listen better to people they perceive as peers than those they perceive as “other.” Finally, developing peer educators is an effective process of developing the leadership skills of younger people – younger people who will some day be adults and thus in positions to take on the next generation of work to stop men’s violence against women.

VI LESSONS LEARNED/RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps the biggest lesson learned in the Washington DC effort was the need to select a facilitator. A facilitator – either a person, sub-set of people, or organizational partner needs to be appointed who will be responsible for ensuring that meetings are scheduled, meeting notices are sent out, minutes are kept and disseminated, that follow up is done with people who miss meetings or with assignments that are accepted - all of the administrative and logistical tasks necessary for this kind of effort. This person (or group of people), acts not only as the administration, but also as the cheerleader – keeping the momentum of the coordinating body moving and continuing to seek out new partners.

Since the local effort was made up largely of domestic violence advocates, there appeared to be a bias to the efforts we made and the underlying philosophy of these efforts. However, there is a need to have discussions about the philosophies and perspectives that people and organizations have regarding domestic violence, dating abuse, and acquaintance rape towards a common perspective (recognizing that there may be no common ground on certain issues and allowing room to disagree). Without a common perspective and space to have these conversations then the effort is likely to be undermined by philosophical differences. For example, there are two main perspectives in the US related to domestic violence – one sees domestic violence from a system’s perspective which defines domestic violence as a problem between couples and how they

relate and communicate with one another. The other perspective sees domestic violence as primarily based on power and control and therefore in order to find solutions the need for power and control and entitlement of the abuser needs to be addressed. Clearly if these two perspectives are represented in the same working group, and no opportunity is provided for dialogue about these differences, then the working group is likely to develop into two “camps” working towards the same goals but at cross purposes.

Working with, and for, youth about issues of dating abuse involves working in contexts of youth oppression. As adults working with and for youth, it is incumbent on us to find and create ways to work with them to address these issues through processes and structures that do not re-enforce the power structures (either adult-centric or the male-centric) that they face every day. Any time a group of people who are in positions of power or authority in relation to other groups of people begin to address the problems faced by the group with relatively less power, there is a danger of “doing for their own good.” This is certainly true of adults working on issues of teen dating abuse.

It is worth including a college or university as a partner in the effort, not only because they also work with youth who may be in relationships with an abusive person, but also because of the resources - especially resources in terms of research - that they offer. There is a desperate need for further research in this area. There is very little known about the dynamics, impact, or effects of teen dating abuse on youth, much less known about successful intervention strategies, support systems or accountability practices. If we base our work with youth on the models developed for adults, we are likely to miss some important differences.

VII CONCLUSION

Teen dating abuse is a community problem. Recent research in the United States indicates that as many as one in five teenage women are involved in a relationship with an abusive person (Silverman, et al. 2001). And as with adult relationships, whenever someone abuses a teenage woman, the community has failed to protect her (Hart, 2000).

Our obligation, as a movement and as a society, to keep women safe from domestic violence does not begin when they become adults. Our obligation is to create societies where all women are treated in just, kind and respectful ways – and this includes youth.

Many adult women who are abused report that their first experiences of abuse in relationships occurred while they were teenagers. This reinforces the need to develop intervention services and comprehensive approaches to interrupt the process of relationships with abusive people early to prevent further victimization.

Adults who abuse do not suddenly become abusive once they turn 21 – the patterns, attitudes, assumptions and behaviours are already well established and entrenched (supported by community standards and societal norms) well before this time. Men learn, early in life, that abuse, control, dominance, coercion, manipulation and violence are acceptable in relationships. In order to stop men's violence against women and create gender justice, local communities must create and hold up positive images of gender justice, and develop processes to educate younger men about bringing justice into their interpersonal relationships by redefining masculinities to be more about compassion, caring, community and justice. Today they are currently constructed as being primarily about power, control and dominance.

Recognizing that youth are not a monolithic population, efforts to create a comprehensive coordinated community response must also address the complex nature of the youth population in a local community. This means recognizing that youth of colour, poor youth, rich youth, gay and lesbian youth may all have different kinds of issues related to dating abuse, but also that they will likely have different relationships with the support and legal services that are involved in addressing these issues. If we are to be successful and comprehensive then these differences must be accounted for in our organizing efforts.

And finally, these efforts need to be organized in a strategic, collaborative and comprehensive manner. Each of strategy - changing laws, improving policies,

developing services, institutionalising processes of accountability, organizing for social change – are all equally important, each one insufficient if done without the other. Our obligation, as a movement, is to create communities in which all girls and women are valued as much as all boys and men, and as such, there is no longer the option to hit, abuse, disrespect, rape, harass, put down, threaten, or kill.

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Appendix 1

List of partners

Men for Gender Justice

A direct action and organizing profeminist men's group that raises funding for local feminist agencies and services, participates in lobbying efforts, organizes demonstrations and actions to raise awareness, and offers educational programmes for men.

My Sister's Place

A service for battered women and their children that provides shelter, counselling services, advocacy, community education, and additional services as needed.

Catholic University of America Law School

(which houses a Domestic Violence Legal Clinic)

Provides free legal services to battered women and their children.

Covenant House of Washington

A comprehensive youth service agency in Washington DC.

Sasha Bruce Youthwork

Youth service agency and operator of the only youth shelter.

Women Empowered Against Violence (WEAVE)

Provides holistic services for battered women including legal support, counselling and additional services.

Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL)

Offers an array of support, advocacy and counselling services to gay male, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning youth.

Latin American Youth Centre (LAYC)

Provides counselling, advocacy and support services to latina/o youth and their families.

Men Can Stop Rape, Inc.

Provides educational programming for men on stopping rape.