



## **Issue 5: Violence against women in the university**

### Editor's note

With the #MeToo hashtag dominating media headlines and public consciousness, this is the perfect time for IFES to join the conversation on sexual violence. In this edition, violence against women on university campuses is discussed by four women from India, South Africa, the United States, and Brazil. While these are different continents, and these women live different lives, their stories and reflections share universal themes. They tell us that sexual violence on campus is rife and under-reported; that not nearly enough is being done to prevent it or assist survivors; and that religion is complicit in campus rape culture—although it can potentially also be a force for eradicating it.

Many of us find it hard to talk about sexual violence. Many of us find it even harder to look at religion in relation to sexual violence. But if #MeToo has shown us anything, it is that sexual violence against women is much, much more common than society is willing to admit.

By reading these articles and engaging with the discussion questions, you might be taking the first step to becoming part of a community that condemns all forms of violence, that values men and women equally, and that loves and supports survivors unconditionally.

In asking me to serve as Guest Editor for this issue, *Word & World* Editor Robert W Heimburger also asked me to contribute an article. **My piece** discusses the phenomenon of campus rape culture within the setting of South African universities. Explaining the background to the controversial term “campus rape culture,” the article explores why sexual violence is so rife on university campuses. The article examines the role that religion plays in its continued perpetration, but also—hopefully—in its eradication.

**Deborah Vieira** takes us to Brazil to show us how universities ignore the violence being perpetrated against women on campus. She shows Christian complicity in this, identifying various harmful beliefs and attitudes that are justified religiously. Then she turns to the Bible to explain why this should not be the case, and she uses the example of ABUB, the IFES movement in Brazil, to illustrate how Christian students can positively and constructively address the phenomenon.

**Kendall Cox** draws on her experience of studying and now lecturing at the University of Virginia in the United States to explore how rampant sexual violence is on university campuses. Reflecting on bystander interventions, she highlights how many typical Christian responses to the issue actually makes it worse, especially for survivors. She calls on Christians to “mourn with those who mourn” and to be angry about the injustice and violence that women face.

**Jamila Koshy** turns to the biblical story of Tamar to guide a discussion of male violence against women on campus. She shows us how this little-read “text of terror” has much to teach us about how badly patriarchal power structures abuse women, and then she proceeds to show how Christians should be responding to such violence and to survivors of such violence.

May these reflections on sexual violence on university campuses inspire and guide you.

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## What is campus rape culture?

Understanding an international problem within a South African setting

**Elisabet le Roux**

In 2016 the Vice Chancellor of Stellenbosch University (SU) in South Africa publicly acknowledged that a rape culture exists at SU and stated that “rape culture’ goes beyond criminal acts or legal aspects. It reflects a general culture of disrespect and the acceptance of the harassment of women as the norm” (Stellenbosch University 2016). SU is not the only South African Higher Education Institution (HEI) where campus rape culture has been receiving explicit attention. 2016 and 2017 saw, at various South African HEIs, a series of high profile attacks and student protests against campus rape culture and institutional responses to it.

At Rhodes University, for example, the 2016 Reference List protests (where students listed eleven alleged rape perpetrators and distributed the list on campus) drew headlines across the world.

## Campus rape culture

The term ‘rape culture’ emerged in the 1970s (Harding 2015). In academic literature, rape culture denotes an interrelated spectrum of sexual violence, as well as the normalisation and social acceptance of these practices within the society (Burt 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald 1994, 1995). Buchwald et al. (2005: xi) defines it as “a complex of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and support violence against women...” and highlights that rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women that is presented as normal. ‘Rape culture’ is thus not (only) about rape—heteropatriarchal micro-aggressions are also able to intimidate and limit movement and function of women (Prieto et al. 2016). Rape culture thus refers to a culture of male violence and aggression towards women—a culture that is played out in daily life in different ways. But while the term has been around for more than four decades, it remains contentious to this day, with detractors often arguing that it overstates and overdramatises the problem (Harding 2015).

The phenomenon of campus rape culture arguably leapt into public consciousness with the study of Koss et al. (1987) on the prevalence of rape for women during their college years (Wooten & Mitchell 2016). But over the past four decades various studies have shown that women at HEIs are at a high risk for attempted or actual rape (Baum & Klaus 2005; Fisher et al. 2000; Karjane et al. 2005). For example, in a 2015 study of 3863 American students, 25% of male students admitted to rape or attempted rape, while one in three men said that they would rape a woman if there were no consequences for doing so (Messina-Dysert 2015). Wooten (2016:48) notes that recent studies from the USA show that “campuses are failing disastrously to effectively address sexual violence”. Federal legislation was passed in 2013 that is meant to specifically tackle sexual violence at HEIs, and a national task force was set up in 2014 (Henriksen et al. 2016).

But research and recognition of campus rape culture is not limited to the USA. The Australian Human Rights Commission in 2017 launched a national report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities, which was based on a national independent survey conducted at all of Australia’s 39 universities (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017). In the same year Universities UK launched a report,

in response to a request from the universities minister, entitled “Changing the culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students” (Universities UK 2017). While research reports, legislation and taskforces do not necessarily mean that adequate steps are being taken to address the issue, it does show that there is growing awareness of the problem.

## **South Africa and campus rape culture**

Part of the challenge in responding to campus rape culture in South Africa is that very little empirical research on campus rape culture has been done at South African HEIs, which means that understanding of the phenomenon is not adequately contextually grounded and relevant to the unique, intersectional factors that shape its emergence in different spaces. In South Africa factors such as gender, race, and socio-economic ability all intersect to create a space that threatens women.

HEIs often form a closed community with their own norms, structure and practices that can become an intensified microcosm of wider society, with opportunities to either reproduce or reshape embedded social practices for a new generation of thought leaders. It is argued that, when a rape culture exists within the wider society, this easily ‘spills over’ into HEI spaces, and a sexually violent culture then becomes a normal part of campus life (Wooten & Mitchell 2016). However, campus rape is more than just a mirroring of wider society. South African students suggest that bonding trust is often prioritised especially in residences, and entrenched initiation rituals can lead to reiterations of harmful masculinity and femininity (Collison 2017). Social identity theory argues that individuals want a positive social group identity and that, in order to create and sustain such an identity, they will engage in beliefs and behaviours that enhance the in-group’s status and prestige, while discriminating against the out-group(s). While a person has a both a personal identity and a group identity (although these can of course be the same), under certain conditions group identity and ethics can replace individual identity and ethics (Milillo 1006; Meger 2010). Sexual violence can serve as a way of affirming the power of the in-group, while disempowering the out-group (Milillo 2006). Sexual violence can also actively promote group cohesion (Forster-Towne 2011). Sexually violent activities can therefore be created and maintained on campuses in order to foster group identity and cohesion.

Already in 1985, the link was made between campus rape culture and what is now recognised as harmful masculinity (Walsh 2015). Masculinity exists within the structure of gender relations, and as a concept it cannot exist except by contrasting it with femininity (Connell 1995, 2002). In this relationship masculinity is, per definition, inherently superior and dominant in relation to femininity. Hegemonic masculinity creates a social system—patriarchy—that supports and enforces the privileging of masculinity and men. Sylvia Walby (1990:20) defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”.

Research suggests that the ideologies underpinning practices of dominating violence have to be recognised and reshaped if such practices are to be interrupted longer term (Anderson 2004; Klaw et al. 2008). South Africa, unfortunately, has a history of socio-religious reinforcement of hierarchical social orders and identities in relation to colonisation, race, and sexuality as well as gender. Patriarchy supports, facilitates, and enforces gender inequality, is present in both the private and public sphere, and has proven to be impossible to eradicate. This is the case within all cultures in South Africa. Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs accurately grasped the comprehensiveness of the patriarchal project when he called it “one of the profoundly few non-racial institutions in South Africa” (Zalesne 2002:147). The dominance in South Africa of gender constructs that support patriarchy and are conducive to gendered violence should not be underestimated—South Africa is internationally notorious for its high levels of sexual violence (Gqola 2015).

## **Campus rape culture and religion**

Religion has been shown to be influential in problematic forms of gender construction, and in sexual violence ideologies of male domination/female submission. It has been shown that, without critical engagement, religion most often perpetuates gender inequality, providing religious justification for patriarchal injustices. The role of religion and its potential impact on rape culture has been theorized in the American context in particular (for example Anderson 2004, Messina-Dyart 2015). Sacred texts such as the Bible play a key role in ideas about men, women, and the relationship between them (Exum 1995). This also resonates strongly in the African and South African context, where local feminist theologians have identified patterns of patriarchy underpinning religious ideas and institutions (Le Roux 2014; Nadar & Potgieter 2010; Maluleke 2009; Pillay 2015). Here one sees male dominance ‘sanctified’ and male headship interpreted as a

divine order that reinforces a hegemonic masculinity where men are “wired by God to be king” (Pillay 2015:65). A key aspect of this research is the idea of complicit femininities that support and enforce patriarchy (Nadar & Potgieter 2010). At the same time, especially African scholars are conducting research on not only complicit gender constructs, but also transformative gender constructs, thus exploring the potential and ability of religion to transform harmful aspect of culture (including rape culture).

Unfortunately, the current debate, both politically and academically, on campus rape culture generally ignores religion. But on a campus such as Stellenbosch, where just over 93% of the 31 854 students enrolled in 2017 voluntarily identified as religious, the role of religion should not be overlooked when studying the attitudes and beliefs around gender and power. Religion can be a driver of action and behaviour within society, and can be used to create order, stability, and cohesion (Weber 1930, Berger 1969, Hervieu-Léger 2000). In relation to campus rape culture, these abilities can be used both for the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’: while religion can be supporting and enforcing harmful gender constructs that are conducive to campus rape culture, it can also be influential in transforming harmful gender constructs and creating a society that is safe and equal for both men and women. This is why, in an upcoming empirical study to be conducted at SU, we will look more closely at the religious underpinnings of gender constructs and campus rape culture.

## Conclusion

Campus rape culture is not only a South African problem. On the contrary, research across the world has ensured that this phenomenon is receiving increasing attention—but not nearly enough. In the South African context, at least part of the reason why campus rape culture is not receiving the attention it needs, is due to it being located within a country that is already rife with gendered violence.

While many of the underlying factors of campus rape culture on South African campuses and rape culture within South Africa in general are the same, one should not lose sight of what is unique. For example, at SU it appears that harmful in-group cultures that develop in university residences can be particularly conducive to the development of rape culture. Addressing campus rape culture thus requires one to understand and be sensitive to the unique particularities of how patriarchy and gender inequality is embodied and enforced within a campus community.

## About the author

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## Discussion questions

1. Do you think there is a rape culture at the campus where you are studying/studied? Why do you say so?
2. Can you identify effective strategies that your university has employed, or could employ, to counter sexual violence?
3. How *are* churches at your campus responding to sexual violence, and violence against women in general?
4. How *should* churches on campus be addressing sexual violence, and violence against women in general?

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## Girls beyond Ipanema

Violence against women in Brazilian universities

By **Deborah Vieira**, translated from the Portuguese by Melanie Joy Hänni

‘Garota de Ipanema’ (‘The girl from Ipanema’) is one of the most played songs in the world. It represents the Brazilian stereotype: beaches, sun, and bikinis. What most people do not know is that the girl from Ipanema, Helô Pinheiro, the muse of the song, was only sixteen or seventeen years old when Tom Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes wrote the song at the ages of thirty-five and forty-nine, respectively. In an interview with the Portuguese website *Sábado* [1], Helô Pinheiro says she only knew them “as a couple of men who were playful every time I walked by, coming back from school, frequently in my uniform”. Helô doesn’t seem to have presented this as something negative, but for

women who have suffered the horrors of harassment, usually at an earlier age than for Helô, this song can take on a new meaning. [A campaign promoted in Brazil by Think Olga in 2015](#) gathered accounts of women's first experiences of harassment shared in 82,000 tweets. Once analysed, the average age of first harassment was 9.7 years old, and one of the most frequent words in the accounts was 'school'. [2]

In Brazil, sexual harassment follows women from childhood into adulthood, and this includes the time they spend at university. A survey from *Instituto Avon* and *Data Popular* shows that 49 percent of women in a Brazilian university setting have suffered from intellectual disqualification due to gender bias, 67 percent claim they were subject to violence at university or related environments, 56 percent of female students have suffered harassment at university, 36 percent decided not to take part in academic activities due to fear of harassment or violence, 25 percent of female university students were insulted or attacked for rejecting men's advances within the university setting or in academic parties, and lastly, 63 percent did not react to these acts of harassment or violence.

We don't react because we feel insecure. The vast majority of universities try to cover up such cases. The chances of the accused being granted impunity are directly correlated to the wealth of the aggressor or the prestige of the university or course. One of the most iconic cases in Brazil happened in 2014 when a committee was established to investigate rape reports in the universities in São Paulo. Of the ten formal reports, six were related to the University of São Paulo's (USP) Medical School, and of the students involved, only one was suspended from academic activities—and not imprisoned, despite being accused of rape, which is a crime according to the Brazilian penal code. The suspension lasted a year, ending in September 2016. [The alleged perpetrator has since graduated with a medical degree, and in April 2017 he obtained a license to practice medicine granted by the Regional Medical Licensing Council of the State of Pernambuco.](#) [3]

Women are used to seeing that when they report a crime, they are the ones who are considered crazy or evil women who want to end the lives and careers of their aggressors. The woman is the real culprit because she was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, wearing the wrong outfit. Everything is wrong, except for the attacker. [A poll by Data Folha](#) found that a third of Brazilians blame the woman for being raped. [4] [Jornal GGM published](#) an article reporting that one of the female students who reported a rape connected to USP's Medical School was being bullied and threatened over social media: "USP's Medical School

scum should be eradicated from humanity... trash... these dirty prostitutes should disappear and go study something more relatable to their mentality and essence".[5] There are 3.5 times more rape reports than arrests. It is common for public bodies and universities to not act on these reports since they fear blemishes to their reputation, especially in the case of private universities. There is also concern that the police will not take action or that doing something about it may even be more detrimental to the victim.

On the other hand, the number of feminist collectives and women's support groups has grown, both in and out of Brazilian universities. An example is the *Coletivo Feminista Geni* (Geni Feminist Collective) which is responsible for bringing attention to the rape cases involving USP's Medical School. Many of these collectives are being mapped by project MAMU (*Mapa de Coletivos de Mulheres*, or the Women's Collectives Map) and, despite not having institutional power, they seek to denounce and support women regarding this issue.[6] A survey by Jornal do Campus da USP (USP's Campus Newspaper) found that of the seventy-seven female university students interviewed, forty said they wouldn't know who to turn to in case of harassment or assault, and twelve said they would take the case to feminist collectives or share it with their friends.[7]

## Being a Christian in times of violence against women in universities

The Christian response to violence against women in and out of universities is frequently discredited. Many evangelical Christians who defend women's rights in Brazil are met with resistance from non-Christians because of a negative view of evangelical Christians. Evangelical Christians are stereotyped as uneducated people whose leaders and pastors finance corrupt politicians and extort believers by promising blessings in exchange for money. To a wider audience and often in the university environment, the mention of evangelical churches is associated with the prosecution of homosexuals and Afro-Brazilian religions, money laundering, proselytizing, and corrupt political projects which many times are detrimental to women. The evangelical church isn't known as a church that shows the love of Christ with strength and candour or a church which defends and fights for the oppressed, as exemplified by pastor Martin Luther King, Jr., and the defence of civil rights for African Americans in the United States.

Sadly, people are not completely wrong to think this way. In fact, this has generally been where the Brazilian evangelical church has stood.

When mentioning the need to act with regards to violence against women it is not uncommon to hear things such as these:

- “You are not a Christian. This is creating dissention and factions (Galatians 5:20). You want to be superior to men! You prefer ideologies to the Gospel. The right thing to do is to preach the Gospel, and anything beyond that is taking on the issues of the world and distracting us from Christ’s commandment which is only to preach the Gospel (Matthew 28:19–20)”.
- “Women must be submissive to all men. This isn’t sexism, it is God’s will”.
- “The man is the head, the brain, not the woman. This means women don’t have the same rationality, and therefore it is correct for them to be subjugated by men”.
- “Genesis 1:26 says that man is made in God’s image and likeness, and not woman, and so it is correct to say that men and women are not equal in dignity”.
- “If a woman was abused or harassed it is because she, like Eve, tempted the man, she was the stone causing man to stumble”.

All this is at the root of violence against women, as it twists their value and supports violent practices, in addition to preventing victims from being cared for and allowing aggressors to go unpunished. What we see is that it is more important to protect the reputation of an ‘Adam’, who was unjustly tempted, than to take care of the victim.

A Christian woman at university will then discover she is in a crossfire. She is as likely as any other to suffer such evils, however frequently the weight of bad theology that surrounds her stops her from saying anything. Many Christian movements consider that opposing violence against women is a worldly issue, while mistakenly relating the submission to Christ and to others mentioned in the Bible to women’s submission and personal sacrifice to the abuse they suffer. Frequently the victim is blamed and derogatively called ‘Eve’. The mother of human beings is treated as the incarnation of sin and temptation. These people say abuse takes place because the woman is living in sin or without ‘spiritual coverage’, or because she doesn’t pray enough, or she has acted as a stumbling block. The sin of the aggressor is treated as the woman’s sexual sin, as if she had been an active participant and derived pleasure out of being raped or harassed. This consumes the victims and produces self-blame and shame, which, added to the accusations coming from pastors and leaders—the ones who should be by the

victims' side supporting them—ends up convincing them they shouldn't look for help or report the crime.

## Violence against women in universities and the Bible

In Genesis 1:26 we have the creation of the *human race* (“*adamah*”, meaning the word “*earth*”). The most frequently used Bible versions translate it as *man*, as in a human being of the male biological gender. Some people use this to justify that only men are made in God's image and likeness, ignoring verse 27, which presents the division of biological gender between man and woman, reaffirming that both are made to God's image and likeness, and therefore both have inherent dignity.

Another point related to translation can be noted in Genesis 2:18. Regarding the creation of woman, the New International Version says “I will make a helper suitable for him”, and the Portuguese translation *Almeida Corrigida e Atualizada* says “I will make him a competent helper” (in a free translation). In Hebrew the woman is ‘*ezer Keneghdô*’, with *ezer* acting as noun, not adjective, meaning ‘assistance’, ‘help’, ‘aid’—this same ‘*ezer*’ can be found in ‘*Ebenezer*’ meaning literally ‘stone of help’ and not ‘helper stone’. Therefore, the relationship is not one of subordination, of asymmetry and inequality, which we so often hear in churches, but the woman is presented as somebody who comes to add, with both man and woman forming an integrated unit. Once more, this shows how the woman is at an equal level to man, not beneath him.

In chapter 3, Eve and Adam disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit. Immediately their eyes are opened, and they notice their nudity, running to get fig tree leaves with which to cover themselves. The first consequence of sin, therefore, is the breaking of relationships. They don't feel comfortable in front of each other when God calls Eve, Adam, and the serpent to question what they had done, and to seal the consequence of their disobedience.

It is important to understand that what happens next changes everything, moving from a world that lived in perfect communion with God to the fallen world that we know, with clear and deep scars left by the rupture of the relationship between God and human beings, between humans and other humans, and also between man and woman. Eve is told: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” (Genesis 3:16, NIV). This sentence indicates a consequence—not a commandment—exclusive to the female gender.

(The suffering, sweat, tiredness and so on announced by God to Adam also affect women, but this passage is never used to exempt women from any type of work.) This consequence, in which a woman is dominated, shows a hierarchy of power and subjugation where one is greater than the other, and the Bible tells us this is not God's will (Luke 9:46–48), but a stain of sin. The understanding that woman is an inferior being which can, and must, be dominated is at the root of violence against women and in the lack of voice they have to speak up and fight against this.

Christ's death on the cross took place to restore and reconcile what was broken, to restore communion between God and humanity, and to restore communion between humans, men and women. This Good News breaks away completely from society's gender expectations. In the logic of the Kingdom, Emmanuel, God with us, chooses to walk with women, talking to them in public, and giving them a voice (like he did with the Samaritan woman in John 4:4–42), teaching them and preparing them to teach (Mary in Luke 10:38–42), healing them and fully integrating them with society (the woman with the haemorrhage in Luke 8:48), and presenting women as role models of faith to be followed (the widow who made an offering in Luke 21:1–4).

The Good News is so scandalous to our values that it was given to women to announce it first. These were the ones who woke up early to visit Christ's tomb and were surprised by the good news that Jesus was not among the dead but had in fact risen (Luke 24:11)! Only Peter gave the women some credit, despite the text not being detailed enough to tell us if he believed Jesus had risen or the body had disappeared. The other apostles considered the women's words to be madness and only believed them when Simon said he had seen the risen Christ. The reconciliation that Christ brings is scandalous. Where the last is first, the smaller one considered the largest, where there are no Jews or Greeks, no slaves or free people, there are no men or women—because we are called to be one in Christ (Galatians 3:28) and all equal in dignity.

The bad theologies which have been taught in churches for centuries blind us to structural sins. They turn us into accomplices with sin who are negligent towards victims of violence. The same violence that takes place inside universities is also deeply rooted in our churches. Many of the believers from these churches, who grow up learning to treat women as lesser creatures, are in the universities as students or teachers. How can a church that does not deal with its own sins of violence against women deal with these matters in the universities?

How have we as IFES students served our churches regarding these matters? What have we done for the expansion of the Kingdom of God and reconciliation between men and women in light of Christ?

## **ABUB students as an example of alternative**

A survey on violence against women carried out during the second half of 2017 interviewed 127 students from ABUB (*Aliança Bíblica Universitária do Brasil*), the IFES movement in Brazil. [8] One of the questions was “Would you like your local ABU [9] group to do something regarding violence against women?”, to which 96.3 percent of women replied ‘yes’, while 64.2 percent of men replied ‘yes’. Despite this, many university students who are part of ABUB, from a range of courses, universities, and cities in Brazil, by the grace of God are not conforming to the pattern of this world. They have reflected on these matters, and they are preaching about the Christ who is concerned about women and their suffering:

- The ABU in the city of Lavras organized a gathering in October 2016 with the theme “Woman, why are you crying?—Violence against women: what does the church have to say about this?”. The gathering included the recitation of poetry, lectures, and open discussions on the theme. Both Christians and non-Christians were invited to look at Jesus and his message of freedom for women.
- It is normal for ABU to have small groups at universities and schools that meet weekly to share Christ through inductive Bible studies. Many of these groups, associated to ABUB, in various cities, incentivized by *Projeto Redomas*—an interdenominational project which “seeks to bring attention to the problems caused by the oppression suffered by women that is already considered natural in faith environments, as well as giving a voice to these women”—carried out inductive Bible studies at universities about the lives of women in the Bible and about Jesus’ relationships with women.
- In June 2017 in the city of Pirassununga, the ABUB regional team for the states of São Paulo and Mato Grosso do Sul organized a men’s gathering to discuss healthy masculinity in light of the Bible which does not follow the standards of domination and violence seen in broader culture.

- In 2014, the ABU group from the city of Pelotas organized *Festival Mira!*, with the support from the university, city hall and part of the project financed by the IFES's creative evangelistic support. One of the panels took place in the Arts, Cinema, and Architecture Centre and focused on discussing women in the arts, and how the arts can deal with the issues of violence against women and representation of what is feminine.
- In many local, regional, and national ABUB trainings, there have been lectures, discussions, and workshops on the subject.
- In addition to this, or perhaps because of this, there are also many individual initiatives in which ABUB students are involved with the academic community through student representation (what we call academic centres or central student directories). Some also take part in demonstrations organized to oppose violence against women, both in and out of university settings, as this is a generalized problem and universities are a part of society which are not and should not be considered a separate world.

Many Brazilian students worry about violence against women, but they don't know how to respond to it with actions. I believe this happens also to brothers and sisters in other countries. I suggest opening our eyes and ears to see the woman who suffers and cries in our schools and universities. How about listening, like Jesus did, to the suffering of women who have no voice in society? How about meeting up with your local IFES group, listening to the women in the group and to their pain, praying about it, and thinking together about ways we can transform and reconcile our schools and universities with the love we receive from Christ?

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute” (Proverbs 31:8, NIV).

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## About the Author

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## Discussion questions

Some things might be complicated to discuss with men and women in the same space. Many women are used to being silenced, and therefore it is important to encourage them to speak up. However, many women who suffered harassment, violence and abuse may have difficulties opening up in group settings. It is important to be sensitive when dealing with this subject. Let the group know in advance the theme to be discussed and be understanding if some women decide not to take part in the meeting or discussion. If any woman opens up to the group, please keep what is shared only between the people present, and remember to hug her, support her, and pray for her.

Read the article “Girls beyond Ipanema” and the following Bible passages:

- Genesis 3:1–17
- Luke 24:1–11
- Galatians 3:28

1. How did Jesus treat those women? What does this treatment show? You can use the Bible passages you have just read as a basis to form your answer.
2. Even in countries with more equality, women still suffer challenges and violence, including within universities. How are women seen in your country? Think of your female colleagues, professors, and workers at your university. How are they treated? Are they being silenced?
3. As a man, how have you been treating women around you in university settings? What has your witness been like? How do you

act when a male friend, colleague or professor does something against a woman? Have you been an accomplice?

4. In a survey done with ABUB students regarding violence against women in universities we found that of the ABUB women who answered the survey and who suffered some form of harassment or violence in university or related settings, 25.3 percent found shelter or comfort in their local ABUB group.[10] Does your local group listen to its female members? How do you think that women who are being oppressed see your local group? Is it a place of support? Or is it a place that sees them as being guilty or accomplices of what has happened?
5. How can we open the eyes of our local groups to these matters and make them more welcoming?
6. How are women viewed in the theology adopted by your church? Are they treated as being inferior?
7. How are women seen by your local IFES group? Is it different from how they are seen at your church? How can your local group contribute to the church? Or how can your church contribute to this matter within your local group?
8. How do you think Christ would welcome these women who are suffering today? Is this different from how society deals with violence against women?
9. Do the men from the group wish to ask the women for forgiveness for anything?

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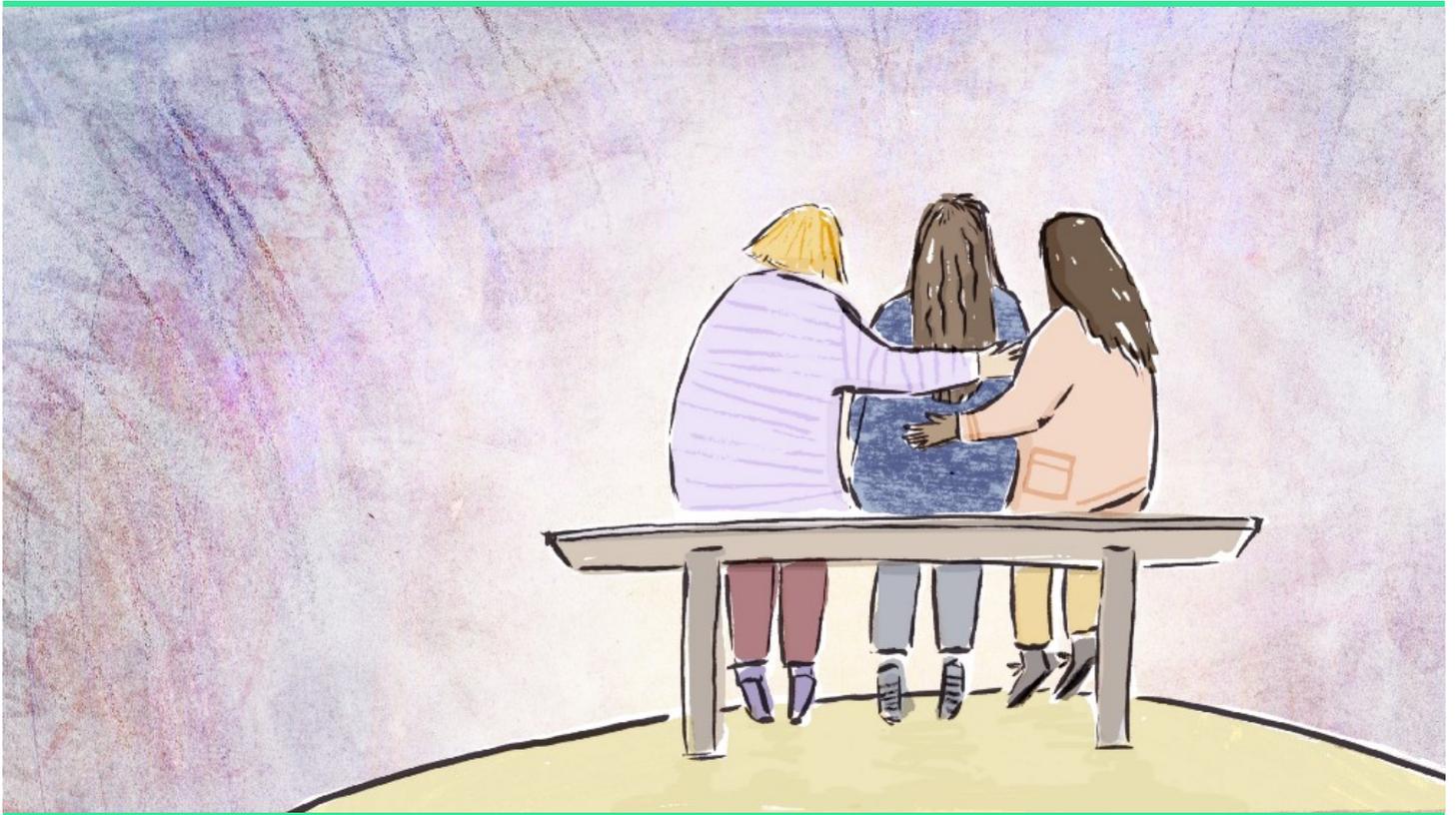
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[9] Translator's Note: ABU local groups are connected to ABUB (*Aliança Bíblica Universitária*), the national IFES movement in Brazil. They are similar to local Christian Union (CU) groups and most meet on a weekly basis.

[10] Vieira, “Abuenses e a violência contra a mulher.”

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## Everybody's business

Campus sexual assault and cheap forgiveness

**Kendall Cox**

*Sex is not and cannot be any individual's "own business," nor is it merely the private concern of any couple. Sex, like any other necessary, precious, and volatile power that is commonly held, is everybody's business.*

– Wendell Berry, "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community"[1]

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag relays the impact of encountering images of Nazi concentration camps for the first time. She was twelve. She later said about the experience, "Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs...and after." [2] Sontag calls

this a “negative epiphany.” Seeing sexual violence depicted for the first time was like that for me. My life can be divided into two parts, before I saw a rape scene and after. I was sixteen when I watched *A Time to Kill* in the theater with my boyfriend. The film portrays brutal racial and sexual injustice in the South. He went to get popcorn and I sat through the harrowing scene alone. I started to tremble. I felt sick. I was glad when the father of the young girl shot her rapists. Afterward, my boyfriend walked me to the car and told me his mother had been raped when she was young, as if to say: people survive. That didn’t help. It was a negative epiphany that redefined my whole imagination about the world. It was many years, however, before I understood either the prevalence or the insidiously enculturated dynamics of sexual violence and realized I should be grateful I only saw it in the movies and had not experienced it myself.

“You know school is back in session when the email reports of sexual assault on campus start rolling in. #mydaughterisnotgoingtocollege.” That was my status update a week into the fall semester of 2016. A friend replied: “maybe the hashtag should be #mysonisnotgoingtocollege.” The following year was a remarkable period of reckoning in America, with memes like #metoo and #timesup flourishing across media. It’s well known that sexual violence—and, more comprehensively, gender-based violence—is a global problem of horrifying proportions. The World Health Organization reports that “more than a third of women in the world have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence” and nearly 40% of “of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner.”[3] We envision universities as places of privilege, of respite from gruesome realities like this. The small picturesque college I attended was designed as a gated community, keeping outsiders off of its thickly groomed lawns. I suppose this gave my parents some consolation when they dropped off their only daughter at college. But when I went on my first fraternity “beach weekend” with a group of friends, my dad was only half joking when he said, “Buy a taser. Aim low.”

I teach now. For the first assignment of any applied ethics course, I have students practice reading their own actions. They are asked to consider an everyday situation in which they find themselves and identify the various moral categories at work in their reasoning. Actions speak; they produce a message or a text. If this is the case, then they can be read, interpreted, queried. The thing about our actions is that they tend to have patterns. It’s especially the patterns, the repetitions, that say

something. When you learn to exegete texts, that point is driven home: look for the repetition; it will tell you what matters.

So here's a pattern that says something. Women in America are especially vulnerable to sexual violence during their college years and shortly after. At the start of my first semester of undergrad, I attended a terrifying extracurricular talk that educated me about this. Until then, I had no sense of the rampancy. While statistics vary somewhat, a range of surveys suggest that between the ages of 18 and 25, as many as 1-in-4 women are "sexually assaulted" (where the phrase is defined to include most forms of "unwanted sexual contact"), and 1-in-10 are raped, more than half by intoxication or incapacitation.[4] After learning these things, I walked around campus counting the women I passed, "1 2 3 4." I also began watching the male students, not knowing how to count them. At parties, I only drank water I had poured for myself.

I was reticent to participate in the awareness raising of #metoo on social media last year for the same reason as many other women: out of respect for those who have suffered the most extreme violations of their bodies and personhood. Although the continuum from harassment to violence entails mere separations of degree in terms of its logic, in my experience, there is an acute qualitative difference when it comes to the impact on victims. For many of my friends who have been violently assaulted, it continues to be radically destructive for their sexuality and their sense of self.

But, of course, #metoo. Because if there hasn't been a direct hit, it's only because there have been a lot of near misses. In my own four years as an undergraduate student, I was stalked, chased, grabbed and groped, threatened, and subjected to all kinds of unseemly and aggressive comments. It was so routine I have forgotten most of the incidents. A classmate and friend left frightening messages on my voicemail after he found out I was dating someone. When I studied abroad, I had to flee a man who was following me to class with a knife behind his back. During grad school, an agitated stranger attempted to drag me out of my car late after I parked on the street in front of my apartment one night. I didn't have a cell phone with me. I sped off and drove around the city for a long time, hoping he would be gone when I got back. The same year, I saw three men trying to break into my apartment while I was walking home one evening with the groceries. They left before the police arrived. As a good Calvinist, I was raised not to believe in luck or fortune, but I count it incidental that none of these events transpired into something worse. Precisely because of that, the

experiences are their own kind of psychological burden. When I was younger, I don't think I went a week without being in a situation where I wondered, as one writer put it so plainly, "Is this my rape?" On my 26th birthday, I distinctly remember feeling relieved that I had crossed the imaginary threshold into the category "less likely to be sexually assaulted."

During my time at the University of Virginia, several acute events have brought sexual violence and the larger problem of violence against women to the fore: the abduction and murder of Virginia Tech student Morgan Harrington while she was at UVA for a concert (2009); the brutal murder of fourth-year UVA student-athlete Yardley Love by her boyfriend (2010); the abduction and murder of 18-year-old UVA student Hannah Graham (2014); and the retracted *Rolling Stones* article about an alleged sexual assault at a UVA fraternity (2014). The now notorious piece "A Rape on Campus" was meant to draw attention to the staggering number of mishandled sexual assault cases and the systemic reasons for underreporting and dropped charges at universities across America.[5] The failure to take reports seriously or connect the dots between cases has resulted in preventable repeat offenses by the same perpetrator. (Jesse Matthews, for example, was accused of rape at Liberty University and connected with a couple of other cases before he went on to abduct and kill Harrington and Graham.[6])

But these prominent tragedies don't reflect the more common incidence of sexual and intimate-partner violence on college campuses today. In 2012, UVA was rated the nation's "top partying school." [7] Researchers have consistently identified two primary risks for victimization on campuses: 1) alcohol consumption and 2) a hookup culture of casual, uncommitted sex. The combination can lead to many ambiguous scenarios like the one covered in the Washington Post article "He said it was consensual. She said she blacked out. UVA had to decide: Was it assault?" [8] This story shows the difficulty of relying on "yes means yes" in cases of intoxicated promiscuity. In the words of the female student, "I just think I was so incoherently drunk that like, there was, like, no way that this was okay." Indeed, according to "affirmative consent," it cannot be given in cases when a person is "incapacitated," which is meant to include "really drunk." In other words, don't drink and have sex (even if the other person is still technically awake and behaving agreeably). Good rule to live by. But in a drunken hookup stupor, how do one or both parties muster good judgment about whether or not consent is possible under the circumstances?

It has to be reiterated that sexual violence is not just a problem for women. Males are victimized at devastatingly high rates as well. As many as 1-in-6 boys are assaulted before the age of 18 and male college students report sexual aggression (mostly from other men) at about 1-in-16. [9] Increasingly, male students are also reporting sexual assault by female students. After the *Rolling Stones* article came out, a UVA professor wrote a reply downplaying the gendered dimensions of sexual assault and focusing on the wider problems of greed and exploitation. Two other UVA professors co-authored "Sex and Danger at UVA," which indicts the university for dismantling "the conventions and institutional arrangements that for generations had brought the sexes together in a more or less orderly and purposeful way" and leaving students in "dorm brothels" with "this fog of formless sex." [10] Jennifer Beste, author of *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics*, similarly observes "the complex cultural factors that contribute to this sexual assault epidemic." [11] It is true, we are all socialized today in a culture of rampant objectification and sexual opportunism. Further, a defining feature of sin has always been the instrumentalization and abuse of human bodies. So the high incidence of unwanted sexual contact is rightly connected with a number of dynamics that transcend sex and gender. However, when it comes to predation, it would be dangerous to deny the enduring correlation with masculinity and maleness. The advocacy group Know Your IX, for example, reports that 99% of rapists are male, 90% of victims are female, and 85% of perpetrators of sexual violence against males are male. Sexual violence disproportionately affects women and children, and youth of either sex are always at elevated risk.

So how do we count the perpetrators? Research suggests at least 1-in-12, for rapists among college men as well as the general public. However, in one survey, about 15% of male students reported intentionally using alcohol in order to sexually exploit women and 35% said this was socially acceptable to their friends. [12] Other studies show that young men in fraternities are three to ten times as likely to commit sexual assault. [13] This is one of the reasons why fraternities receive special attention when it comes to the safety of women on college campuses. This should come as no surprise, since they can be sites for a confluence of factors that are said to make a sub-culture "rape-prone." Increased risk of sexually violent behavior within a group has long been linked with things like hyper-masculinity, male dominance and entitlement, misogynistic attitudes, sexual objectification and pornography, as well as, within universities, lax institutional repercussions [14] for alleged offenders. These are among the dimensions of campus life, as well as the broader culture, that most

pressingly need to be addressed if we expect to curtail sexual assault. We must be thinking more comprehensively about sexual formation, especially the eroticization of violence.

Much is being done by universities, students, and local authorities to combat sexual violence on campuses. UVA, for example, supports many initiatives including Take Back the Night, Not on Our Grounds, Greendot, Its On Us, OneLess, One in Four, SARA and so on. The most promising programs involve bystander intervention training. [15] The method focuses on teaching participants to recognize sexual aggression and entitlement in public settings and intervene non-coercively to diffuse it. Assault is normally preceded by inappropriate behaviors and minor aggressions that bystanders observe but tend to ignore as “not my business.” For example, prior to crossing paths with Hannah Graham, witnesses report seeing Jesse Matthews openly harass other women at bars, and later Graham was overheard saying she didn’t want to get in the car with him, but no one intervened. [16] What if all of the witnesses that night had said to themselves, “This is everybody’s business?” Bystander training is not only effective in protecting potential victims in the moment; it also highlights one of the ways such behaviors can get socialized out of a group: others interrupt them, over and over again.

But is there a particularly appropriate Christian response that might attend these efforts? One of the most important things to be said here is that not every concept is equally illuminating in every case. There are many ways in which Christians can make matters worse precisely by recourse to otherwise sound theological, biblical, or moral principles—most notoriously forgiveness, but also mercy, long-suffering, forbearance, love, imitating the suffering of Christ, and so on. All of these terms have been used directly and indirectly to keep people, especially women, in abusive relationships, to silence or dismiss victims, and to cover over systemic injustices. Similarly, evoking standards like modesty, purity, chastity, or sobriety can do more harm than help. The matter warrants tomes by way of theological response. I’ll offer just one set of observations concerning the way Christians could be more self-aware in response to sexual assault crises.

When we are confronted with someone else’s suffering, our immediate inclination should be to “mourn with those who mourn” (Rm. 12:15, NIV)—not to question or moralize. I recall my Old Testament professor in seminary saying that when reality does not correspond to God’s truth, “we only move into God’s kingdom through lament.” In my limited experience in North America, Christians tend to avoid the work

of mourning and lament, even though scripture gives us a substantial basis for doing so (e.g., through Lamentations and the Psalms of Lament). “Negativity” of various kinds is suppressed, ecclesially as well as socially. This is especially the case for women, in whom even the most righteous anger is seen as unattractive and unfeminine.

One of the most spiritually constructive things I recall reading in college was this: “It is my thesis that we Christians have come very close to killing love precisely because anger has been understood as a deadly sin. Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring.”[17] When anger is a form of love, we need to practice voicing it collectively and lamenting the conditions that give rise to it. This is an important counterpart to confession. Some ecclesial traditions are good about building this into the liturgy, but many are not. Mourning together, bearing one another’s burdens—these are ancient practices commended to the church. They reduce alienation, forge solidarity, generate political will, and enable us to better love our neighbors.

Lament also helps us see the judgment of God in a new way. I grew up in a denomination that only spoke of divine judgment as a terrible thing to be dreaded by the individual sinner. When I began reading scripture and theology for myself, I was surprised to find that throughout much of the Hebrew Bible, “judgment” is portrayed as a balm for the weary and oppressed. It just depends on which side you’re on really. God’s judgment is also God’s grace and blessing for the brokenhearted. It means: God sees. For many of us, this is actually an enormous relief.

A related reason to hold out space for lament is that Christians can move prematurely to “forgiveness,” which is often the most counterproductive term to introduce in cases of physical violence. We can have a dangerously platitudinous understanding of what it requires and how it should function in the life of faith. Advising forgiveness—or mercy, or grace—at the wrong moment can heap further injustice onto the wounded. It is scripturally unjustifiable to pass over truth-telling and mourning in favor of a cheap and underdeveloped sense of “letting it go.” “Forgiveness” may, on closer observation, function as a whitewashing of deeply problematic human responses to the pain of others. Victim-blaming and denial are closely related to cheap grace. [18]

It's tempting to focus on managing the emotions of the vulnerable party before us, to insist on "peace where there is no peace" on pious pretenses, when really it's just disruptive or inconvenient. This can easily become a form of retroactive scapegoating. Victims earn their suffering after the fact if they are unable to bear up under it silently. Speaking of it, being unable to "forgive," makes them deserve it. It creates a neat little circle that leaves no remainder of wrongdoing to be dealt with. The perversity of this pattern is manifest, but surprisingly pervasive. In the case of sexual violence, it makes those who take this tack thoroughly complicit in any offenses the perpetrator or their victims go on to commit.

This makes me think of the graphic story in Chapter 35 of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which a rich old man capriciously sets his hounds on a poor young boy and they tear him to pieces in front of his mother. There is a sense in which Ivan's "impious" conclusion is exactly right: others have no right to forgive someone *on behalf of* the tortured. Sometimes forgiveness is ours to dispense with; sometimes it is not, and we must forego the unjust urge to overreach. In the latter case, our response to hearing real life "texts of terror," to use Phyllis Tribble's phrase, can only be Alyosha's, "I want to suffer too."

But it's estimated that victims tell an average of nine people before anyone believes them. One study shows that 94% of victims experience "unsupportive acknowledgement" from others and another 78% are "actively turned against." [19] Why don't we believe? Denial is psychologically complicated, but also patently unjust. Sexual assault is actually the most underreported felony and it's falsely reported at a relatively low rate (about 2–6%). [20] I am reminded of Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:7, "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (NRSV). What does it mean that love believes all things? Is disbelief, in a sense, the opposite of love? We should not be so worried about having the wool pulled over our eyes that our immediate impulse is not simply to listen and believe. The more faithful "way of the cross" in such cases is to accept the heavy burden of "suffering too."

## About the author

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## Discussion questions

### Reading and misreading the Bible

1. In your experience, what sorts of Scripture passages and church teachings have been interpreted in ways that could minimize or perpetuate sexual violence and violence against women and children? Examples might include 1 Corinthians 7:1–7, Ephesians 5:21–33, and Genesis 3:16.
2. How do you think such interpretations can be challenged through more thoughtful readings?
3. Are there other passages of Scripture that point ways out of violence and oppression toward women?

### Responding to stories of sexual violence

1. Think of a specific case when someone confided in you about abuse or you encountered a story about sexual violence. How did you respond and why?
2. How might you do things differently after reflecting on the facts of sexual assault?

## Handling forgiveness well

Read the relevant portion from Chapter 35 of *The Brothers Karamazov*[21] and Matthew 18:15–20. Discuss the proper practice of forgiveness.

1. How have you seen the process of forgiveness handled well so that justice and reconciliation are facilitated?
2. How have you seen the process of forgiveness handled poorly so that the most vulnerable are made more vulnerable?

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## Footnotes

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## Male violence against women on campus

Insights for today's universities from the story of Tamar

**Jamila Koshy**

The #MeToo campaign saw women from across nations and ages voicing the abuse they have gone through. Women on college campuses were not exempt. Different forms of sexual abuse and violence occur among young people on campus, mostly committed by males against females, and sometimes against other males. The examples are many—for instance, Brock Turner in the United States, who sexually assaulted a semi-conscious woman, [1] and M. Akash in Chennai, India, who stalked his class-mate for years before finally setting her ablaze. [2]

In Indian campuses, men students in groups frequently indulge in 'Eve-teasing', commenting on the women passing, an activity some protest is

harmless, but which reflects the same attitudes that lead to physical or sexual violence. Many women report inappropriate touch by the men in their colleges. This often happens at parties, or at events such as Holi, North India's spring festival celebrated with gaiety and colour. Unfortunately, the underbelly of all the fun and frolic is the frequent sexual violence women students go through at these events. Faculty members also sometimes become harassers, touching them inappropriately and making demands on their women students. Abuse and physical violence by boyfriends is an issue here as elsewhere, the stated reason often being that the men feel 'disrespected', or 'disobeyed'. The violence can also escalate into rape, brutal gang-rapes, murder, burning, or disfigurement by throwing acid. Violence by the state is also not uncommon. Female students of Banaras Hindu University in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India were recently caned by the police. They had been called to 'control' the women's protests. Ironically, the protests were being held to demand an end to violence on campus, better street lighting and safety measures.[3]

## Understanding men, women, and violence: the story of Tamar

This story from 2 Samuel 13 is not a comfortable story. If we read it through, we can understand how and why some societies both generate and function on attitudes to men and women that predispose people, especially men, to violence and sexism.

*1 ... David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. 2 Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. 3 But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. 4 He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." 5 Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" 6 So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand."*

7 Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." 8 So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. 9 Then she took the pan and set them[a] out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. 10 Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. 11 But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." 12 She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! 13 As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." 14 But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

15 Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, "Get out!" 16 But she said to him, "No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. 17 He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her." 18 (Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.) So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. 19 But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went.

20 Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. 21 When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry[4]. 22 But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar. (NRSV)

The whole episode happens in an atmosphere which is patriarchal—males and the male line claim public and private space and power. The women are adjuncts to the male story. 2 Samuel is about David, and Tamar's story is important only in explaining David's interactions with his sons, and heirs. Tamar is not even called the daughter of David, and

her mother, Maacah, princess of Geshur, is not named. She is noted to be ‘the beautiful sister of Absalom’, a point that is vital to the story. If she was a slave girl raped by Amnon, her story would perhaps never have been told. Patriarchal societies have a way of silencing the stories of women, except as they relate to men. Stop and think: how many stories or films focus on the stories of women? How many women have been assaulted in your own campus, and may not talk openly about it, but perhaps shared a #MeToo that surprised you?

The people involved in the story have imbibed many of the same patriarchal attitudes. It is permitted that the woman should bear the disgrace of one man’s disgraceful behaviour, while all the men—the rapist, the rapist’s friend, the rapist’s servants, the king, society, and even the protector-brother—conspire together to maintain a silence about it and let him off.

Consider **Amnon**, the rapist prince and brother. He internally normalised and excused his lust for Tamar, encouraged by his friend. He ignored her possible feelings and probable refusal and felt entitled to claim her and rape her, the sense of entitlement being strong enough to overcome any brotherly feelings, social inhibitions, or filial dutifulness as crown prince. He probably realised the enormity of his crime after the rape was over when it was too late. As many have done before and after him, he turned his disgust, hate, and blame on her, ‘this woman’, the seductress he no longer cared to name, and got her thrown out. This is reminiscent of so many sexual harassment cases in today’s world. Film-maker Alfred Hitchcock was revealed to have sexually assaulted actress Tippi Hedren and when she rebuffed him, threatened to ruin her career. After this, he would call her only ‘the girl’.

**Jonadab**, David’s nephew, was the archetypal wing-man who encouraged Amnon not to play the haggard lover but suggested plans to achieve the goal of bedding Tamar. He, too, legitimised male desire while ignoring the woman’s possible response and feelings completely. A truer friend and adviser would perhaps have pointed out what Tamar does, later: such a wicked, foolish thing should never have been done in Israel. Jonadab, here and in his later talk with David, appears to be an ingratiating hanger-on, willing to overlook anything for his own advantage. This enabling is seen all too often still, in campuses, where jilted lovers have friends who egg them on to violence, or in the many men and women who consciously or unconsciously enabled people like Harvey Weinstein or Indian environmental big-wig R K Pachauri to harass a series of vulnerable young women, college interns, and rising stars.

Most disappointing, perhaps, is the part played by **David** himself, the powerful king, the man who otherwise loved and tried to please God. He loved Amnon, his first-born. When Amnon requested that Tamar come to cook for him, David immediately sent for her. When he came to know about the rape, he was furious but did nothing. He did not punish or rebuke Amnon in any way for his deception, his crime, his cruelty. He did not provide any justice or a hearing to his daughter, left desolate in Absalom's house. David wanted to avoid the scandal of the heir to the throne being exposed as a rapist. Perhaps silence also benefitted David, as a public sexual scandal would have re-opened his own old sexual sins. How many professors, deans, hostel wardens and others in authority on campus keep silent about sexual abuse and let abusers go scot-free so that the institution, their guilty friends, or they themselves are not exposed?

**Absalom** is angry, but it is interesting that he, too, enjoins silence. The rapist is their brother, and the family should not be disgraced, so he temporarily joins the ranks of those protecting the rapist. Absalom is angry, yes, but it appears to be less about Tamar, and more about the insult to his own honour: that he, Tamar's brother and protector, was unable to stop the rape. Absalom hates Amnon for what he did, not to an innocent woman, but to *his sister*. In other words, for Absalom, this is actually a male issue. He does not really want to participate in Tamar's feelings. Do we react the same way to the women in our care? Are we more upset about the blow to our pride, or family honour, or institution, and not to the suffering of the victim? Do we cover up and try to handle things on our own, to save the institution?

The unnamed young man, **Amnon's servant**, was also complicit in the injustice. He obviously did not have much power, and had no scope to express his humanity, his agreement or disagreement with the crime committed. He did not question or protest the decree of the king's son. He may have felt, but demonstrated no compassion for the wronged woman, but did as he was bid: 'the woman' was cast out. The servant held his tongue and faded out of sight. So many in the campus are similar by-standers. They see, they do their part in the cover-up, and they refuse to be named or speak up.

What about **Tamar** herself? Tamar would probably have loved and looked up to Amnon as the eldest brother of the family. When Amnon asked her to sleep with him, she instantly rejected the notion, and perhaps in a desperate bid to save herself, tried to make him think that their father would allow their marriage. She tried to resist physically too, the record says, but failed to prevent Amnon from raping her.

When he turned from 'love' to hate and told her to get out, she once again was wiser. She told him that getting her thrown out, pretending the rape didn't happen, would only compound the harm he had already done to her. Once again, Amnon in his princely male arrogance did not listen to her, and in cowardly fashion, got his servant to put her outside.

Tamar did not keep quiet or do the 'walk of shame'. Rather she tore her robes, put ashes on her head, and wailed loudly as she walked away, announcing to anyone who cared to listen that her virginity and honour had been violated without consent.

She made it public, and she made a noise. No one cared to listen. Her public protest was ignored. No one dared intervene. Her father was furious but let her down. He said nothing either to her or to his loved heir, Amnon. Her own brother asked her to abate her protests and let it be. Quite likely Tamar's desolation was caused by the neglect of her cry for justice.

## What does Tamar's story tell us about male violence towards women?

**All the men are involved in the hierarchy and power structure**, and it suits them to keep it in place. David is king, Amnon prince, Absalom the second-in-line, Jonadab kow-tows to the ones in power, and the servant is unnamed in a lowly place in the hierarchy. They have a vested interest in preserving it, and Tamar **the woman has little place or power in it**. When she is violated and silenced, she has no options or method of protest. This unfortunately still holds true. Power structures in today's universities and other spaces are still patriarchal, dominated by men (and sometimes a few women) imbued with patriarchal ideas, and victimised women are often powerless. Few universities would have strong, independent women in governance or in equal numbers on staff who would call out victim-shaming or silencing. Rules and methods disempower women. The police and judicial systems often do the same. In some places, women students may outnumber the male, but the power balance still lies unequally on the male side, both systemically and in personal relationships.

The Old Testament men involved **accepted fulfilment of male desire without female consent** as male entitlement (Amnon), as normal (Jonadab and the servant), as inappropriate but trivial (David, by his actions of ignoring it despite some anger), or as wrong in as much as it violated their own honour (Absalom). This stemmed from the same patriarchal idea of male privilege which still exists and which belittles

and ignores today's woman's 'no' just as Amnon ignored Tamar's 'no'. Men and boys are rarely trained in responsible sexual behaviour, including the vital area of ensuring there is mutual consent for sex, whether one is at college or at home, whether the couple is meeting at a chance encounter, or in a relationship, or even in a marriage. Every human being has the right to refuse, and that should be respected.

The consequence is to **blame the woman for male violence** as Amnon tries to blame Tamar. Even women reared with these patriarchal ideas react to sexual harassment by asking what the woman wore, how much she drank, why she was out late. The woman being there is seen as her contribution to the situation—almost a tacit consent. Further expressed consent by the woman is not seen as necessary. A Christian I know once commented that Tamar should not have gone to Amnon's room, implying that her going there was as good as 'asking for it'. Women who drink or go out to the Holi celebrations in college, similarly, are in many people's opinions asking for it. Male desire is normalised and male responsibility for their immoral actions is ignored.

**Male violence against women is silenced, marginalised, and neutralised.** If men violate women in some way, other men (and sometimes also other women) still get together to silence the woman's protests. Even if the deed was morally reprehensible, whether an incident of rape or physical violence by a boyfriend or the police, there is a general agreement that there is no need and no point in making it public. Keep quiet, the women are still told, like Tamar. He is after all your boyfriend or teacher or friend. He is powerful. What can you do? Why make a scene? Don't take this thing to heart.

An interesting way in which **male privilege unconsciously plays out and the issue is marginalised** and neutralised is the way rapes or sexual harassment are often reported. The male gender is rarely called out for the violence. 'A woman was raped' is the headline, rather than 'A man—or group of men—raped a woman'. 'Violence against women' is the heading not 'Male violence against women'. Sometimes, this results in absurd situations like the article on rape or harassment appearing in 'Her corner' or 'women's page' or 'CT women'. The effect is to tell women once again that it is their problem, their task to avoid harassment and rape. The effect on men is to distance them from the issue. Men do not have to read about it and do not internalise it or see it as their problem. They are let off the hook, yet again.

All agree **the incident should be forgotten**. In a very revealing act, Amnon's rage turns on Tamar, and he wants to get rid of her, wanting no reminder of the event. The servant and Jonadab have completed their small but disreputable parts in the drama. David obviously wants to pretend it didn't happen. Absalom also wants no emotional discussion with Tamar, or public airing of her feelings. All conspire to silence Tamar. This holds good today as well. Any number of women tell the same story after sexual harassment. They attempt to file a complaint, and they are persuaded against it by their teachers, their friends, the police, their parents. Everyone is more comfortable forgetting about it. Discussing these issues is too messy.

The general tendency to forget this uncomfortable incident and silence Tamar continues. Barring a few feminist theologians and groups like the Tamar Campaign, mainstream Christianity does not discuss these issues. [5] In fact, a simple Google test would reveal how few of our famous preachers, bloggers and scholars have ever written or preached about the incident. Have any of my readers ever heard a sermon preached on this passage, or had a Bible study on it? Hopefully with the currently increased focus on sexual harassment, Tamar's relevance to the discussion should become clear.

The corollary to silence, of course, **is that the abuser is let off**. The conspiracy of silence leads to a conspiracy of injustice. The criminal is not punished, justice is not done. They do not all approve—certainly David did not, and perhaps the servant did not too. But punishing Amnon is another matter. David prefers not to let uncomfortable truths into the open. This injustice resulted, of course, in greater tragedy. How many abusers are roaming the streets of every city in the world because of this conspiracy of silence and injustice? The statistics tell us that in countries like South Africa three in five men agree that they have beaten, threatened a woman with violence, or forced a woman into sex. They are not locked up in jails but have gotten away with these crimes. There is a deadly spiral of more and more silence as those guilty of sexual sin, like David, are less ready to bring others' sexual sins into the open, for by doing so they condemn themselves as well. The sins are thus driven underground, both in society and into our psyches. The rot within our souls and societies goes very deep.

**Tamar herself is de-humanised; she is not the focus of concern** of the significant men in the story. She is not seen as a wronged human being who has the right to ask for justice. Her body is the vehicle of family honour and the personal honour of the men around her. Tamar is incidental. Her humanity is taken from her. And this, too, is repeated

in our day and age. Brock Turner's victim was not even mentioned by the many people who wrote in letters asking for clemency for the Stanford student caught in the act of raping an unconscious woman. It was all about him, how sweet and good he was, a star swimmer, how much he was suffering. Not a single person mentioned the woman or expressed sorrow at what she had to go through because of their protégé.

Tamar's story also tells us that **it is possible to speak up and protest violence**, both when it is taking place and afterwards as Tamar did. More than that, it points us to the deeper malaise, the systemic undervaluation of women, and unquestioned granting of male privilege, which both shaped Amnon's proud rapist mindset, and enabled him through the encouragement and silence of many to get away with it. None of this is pleasing to God, and as students of the Word, the challenge to us is to confront these deeply seated gender biases in our own minds and lives. Where have we sinned and ignored a woman's 'no', unconsciously applying male privilege? Where have we undervalued and enabled sexual sin? Where have we gone along with patriarchal, sexist systems because it is too disturbing to stand up and speak out? We are called to present the same challenge to others in our families, churches, and society.

## So—what can Christians do?

In this violent, patriarchal, and sexist world, what can Christians do to bring change?

We can teach and live out equality and harmony between men and women. We can recognise women as full human beings, with choice, emotion, minds, that need to be respected. We can demonstrate in our living that men and women can be friends and partners at home, work and in society.

Men and boys from a young age need to be taught to un-learn what they learn from the world, that men are superior, women are to be subordinate, women exist to fulfil male desires, women are the 'other', and womanhood is to be feared and disliked. They need to learn to treat women as their own master did; Jesus was comfortable, friendly, and accepting of women.

Christian men and boys need to discuss the issue of force and violence, to unlearn other lessons the world constantly teaches them, like the normalisation and glorification of violence through media and role

models. Initiating violence must be questioned and debate and persuasion internalised as the preferred Christ-like options in all situations. They in turn need to model and teach this to other men on campus.

Women need to learn to be more assertive. Like Tamar, they need to call out for justice, perhaps to persevere, even in the face of opposition, to not give way to desolation or anger, and to continue to work for peace, justice, and equality.

Rape and harassment should be clearly seen as the responsibility only of the man who did it. Both men and women must stop victim-blaming and shaming. What the woman wore, where she went, who she was with, or how much she drank still do not give any man permission to touch her without her consent. Call this out firmly and place the responsibility squarely where it rests.

We need to walk alongside the victims of sexual abuse and violence, encourage them to process their confused and mixed feelings, offer comfort, help them with physical details, give them the choice of taking action against their harasser, and helping them if they do choose to take action, whether through a college committee, or through police or legal action. These are complicated issues and training more people to help these women is important.

We also need to work with the perpetrators of rape and violence. Such men, also, need to be told about the transforming love of Christ. They need to process their psyches, attempting to understand what made them treat women the way they did, and what they need to change and perhaps even make restitution. This is a largely untouched area of huge need all over the globe.

May we as Christian men and women be salt and light in our broken, sexist, and violent societies and campuses, breaking the silence that prevails on these issues. May we call men to repentance and change and women to assertiveness and trust and together show others what equality, friendship, and fellowship between the genders can be like in the kingdom of God.

## About the author

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## Questions for discussion

Read 2 Samuel 13:1–22.

1. What parallels do you see between this story and your college or university? If you are not at a university, are there parallels to your professional setting or your society?
2. Discuss how misogyny, male privilege, patriarchy, and male violence in general are linked to violence towards women.
3. How do men and women on campus respond to sexual harassment or rape on campus?
4. In what ways are women still silenced and men let off when it comes to violence and sexual harassment?
5. Are there any positive examples you know of change, reconciliation, and the seeking of forgiveness on this issue? The examples could be either individual or social.
6. What can we as Christian students do to stop male violence and privilege on campus?
7. How can we as Christian students walk alongside those who have gone through this kind of abuse?
8. Are there any means of identifying and reaching out to perpetrators?

## Further reading

- Tribble, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
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- Muneja, Mussa. “Cakes, Rape and Power Games: A Feminist Reading of Story of Tamar (1 Samuel 13:1–19).” *BOLESWA Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2006).  
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## Footnotes

[1] Liam Stack, “Light Sentence for Brock Turner in Stanford Rape Case Draws Outrage,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2016, sec. U.S.,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/us/outrage-in-stanford-rape-case-over-dueling-statements-of-victim-and-attackers-father.html>.

[2] “She Refused to Talk to Me, Says Killer,” *The Times of India*, November 16, 2017,  
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/she-refused-to-talk-to-me-says-killer/articleshow/61666776.cms>.

[3] Namitai Bajpai, “Banaras Hindu University Wardens Recall Horror of Saturday Night: Girl Students Booted to the Ground,” *The New Indian Express*, September 26, 2017,  
<http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/sep/26/banaras-hindu-university-wardens-recall-horror-of-saturday-night-girl-students-booted-to-the-ground-1662640--1.html>.

[4] The Dead Sea Scrolls add, ‘but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn’, a phrase the NRSV normally includes.

[5] Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story That Became a Campaign: The Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and Beyond),” *Ministerial Formation*, July 2004, 4–12.

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