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Differing perspectives on "preventing" adult sexual assault

Alexandra Neame

The notion of preventing sexual assault, particularly sexual violence against women, has traditionally been met with ambivalence by most feminists and victim advocates. This is largely a response to conventional prevention approaches that emphasised the role women should play in modifying their behaviour to reduce their risk of victimisation. Preventing rape was about women not wearing "suggestive" clothing, not going out alone, and so on; in short, not engaging in any of the activities thought to "precipitate" rape.

However, in recent years, prevention has assumed greater social and political currency in the context of adult sexual assault as communities are forced to grapple with ever increasing rates of disclosure from women reporting experiences of sexual violence.

This discussion piece aims to explore and prompt discussion about the unique challenges and complexities that adult sexual assault poses for prevention, and the extent to which traditional prevention frameworks have tended to work against the philosophical underpinnings of victim advocates committed to a broader social change agenda.

The article begins by tracing the work of the feminist movement throughout the 1970s where approaches to "prevention" were about challenging the many myths that served to reinforce the dominant perception of rape. It considers whether approaches to breaking the silence in relation to sexual assault and other community awareness raising strategies are examples of feminists "doing" prevention work. Finally, it asks whether there might be contemporary scope for feminist engagement with prevention in the light of more progressive models that seek to understand sexual assault within a structural context that sees gendered power relations as central to their frame.

Early responses to the notion of "preventing" sexual violence

Campaigns against sexual violence were particularly fervent in the early 1970s when the women's rights movement positioned women's personal experiences as a critical part of the struggle against gender oppression. Consciousness-raising was seen as instrumental in revealing the extent of sexual violence that women experienced and often remained silent about. "Speak-outs" became an important method through which victims publicly disclosed their experiences of sexual violence and, for those who reported, the often intimidating, insensitive and degrading treatment they received at the hands of police officers, the medical profession, and the courts. As women continued to describe the dehumanising processes that operated in these contexts, activists remained steadfastly committed to developing victim service frameworks that advocated for women's rights – to be believed, to access counselling, to be treated sensitively and respectfully, and to have their rights to justice acknowledged (Largen 1985; Scott et al. 1995; Orr 1997).

While advocates were unlikely to position their work as being "about prevention", there was an implicit assumption that more women speaking out about sexual assault would reduce men's capacity to offend with impunity. In other words, as women became more aware of their rights, their confidence in disclosing, making police reports, going to court, and securing convictions would presumably also increase.

Having successfully drawn the public's attention to the difficulties faced by women victims, there was greater potential for women's groups to engage the cooperation of relevant government institutions

and other professions (police, medical and legal) to reform policies and practices to try to improve the treatment of rape victims. Liz Orr (1997: 83) describes this as the start of a new era in which: "Feminist understandings of sexual violence attained state legitimacy. Women struggled to obtain state funding for services based on feminist principles and practices, and this was achieved."

The magnitude of this achievement, at a time when general public sector spending was limited, cannot be overestimated. An alliance was forged between the new area of women's health and victim support services, and new models of service delivery developed that continued to give emphasis to advocating for victims' rights at an individual and public policy level.

National momentum was also successfully harnessed by women's groups to ensure that legislatures and the administrators of criminal justice introduced reforms that would redress the systematic bias contained in sexual assault laws and procedures. However, the reform agenda remained firmly aligned with analyses that spoke of the broader social and cultural landscape of violence against women lying within institutionalised gender oppression.

In contrast, traditional prevention frameworks in response to rape and sexual assault have tended to call for individualised responses, in terms of crime control (for offenders); rape avoidance or risk reduction strategies (for potential victims); and therapy or treatment (for victims and offenders). Rape avoidance exemplifies the individualisation of sexual assault prevention, and the tendency to position women as responsible for stopping sexual violence.

Prevention through "rape avoidance"

The 1980s saw a great deal of interest in strategies of victim resistance, and rigorous attention was given to whether verbal and/or physical resistance is an effective rape avoidance strategy (Bart 1981; Bart and O'Brien 1984; Kleck and Sayles 1990). These studies examined completed and attempted rapes, statistically analysing the effectiveness of a variety of resistance strategies that may be employed singly or in combination – for example, pleading, fleeing, screaming and fighting, and so on. The efficacy of resistance (and the likelihood of further injury) [1] is assessed with reference to further variables, including the victim's relationship to the perpetrator, the location of the assault, and the perpetrator's use of verbal and/or physical violence.

Despite the large body of literature on the subject, and the sophistication of the methods used, a focus on victim resistance as a preventative measure was theoretically questionable. According to victim advocates, in attempting to prevent individual instances of rape, the broader consequences of a sexually violent society are likely to be ignored. Sparks and Bar On (1985: 3) describe victim resistance strategies as "stopgap measures, for individuals in crisis, which fail to link an attack against one victim with attacks on others". They further pointed out how the "knowledge that one can fight if attacked is also a very different kind of security from enjoying a certainty that one will not be attacked at all".

Seen in this light, little attention has been paid to whether women see forceful verbal or physical resistance as a realistic response to sexual assault. For example, Ullman (1998) says "the fact that so few women fought back forcefully in this sample is noteworthy and is also characteristic of other study populations"; yet her interest in a low resistance rate appears limited to its effect on the study's generalisability, not whether resistance is useful or possible for women.

Rape avoidance exemplifies the individualisation of sexual assault prevention, and the tendency to position women as responsible for stopping sexual violence.

This raises the most important critique of the rape avoidance strategy: its reliance on a limited conception of rape, as a surprise attack by a stranger in a public space. It is well established that the majority of rapes take place in a private home, and that the victim usually knows the perpetrator (VLRC 2003; ABS 1996), in a context where the potential for re-victimisation is highly probable, as is the case, for example, where the perpetrator is a current partner.

Feminists would certainly suggest these approaches place the victim as the regulator of their own victimisation. In short, they would suggest that the methods used to describe and evaluate a classic ➤

preventative measure, such as rape avoidance, are not capable of addressing the reality of sexual assault *as women experience it*. Rather, resistance strategies tend to presume that sexual assaults are isolated incidents, committed by strange and pathological men, which individual women may be creative and brave enough to avoid.

A brief explanation of classic prevention frameworks

In the simplest terms, prevention frameworks are concerned with systematic ways of preventing undesirable outcomes in a particular area. The idea of prevention is based on the recognition that undesirable outcomes are not randomly distributed, but follow patterns that can be discerned, with causes that can be defined. Prevention theory aims to elucidate the reasons for the non-random distribution, and then to identify modifiable risk factors that can be targeted for intervention (Mantak 1995; McMahon 2000).

Prevention frameworks are often described with reference to three levels of intervention: primary, secondary and tertiary. *Primary prevention* strategies tend to focus on stopping the problem from ever occurring. *Secondary prevention* aims to intervene in the early stages of a problem, to prevent it from escalating or spreading. Secondary prevention may also identify individuals or groups at particular risk for a problem, and target prevention efforts appropriately. *Tertiary prevention* attempts to minimise the harm resulting from an occurrence of the problem. There are obviously points at which these approaches cross over – a strategy identified as secondary prevention in one framework may appear as tertiary intervention in another.

Table 1 does not attempt to describe sexual assault prevention comprehensively. Rather, it positions some of the major responses to sexual assault within the broad categories of prevention. In addition to the three "levels" (primary, secondary and tertiary) of prevention, the target for intervention (victim, offender or environment) is also included.

Table 1 Major responses to sexual assault

		Strategies for prevention		
Level of prevention	Preventative goal	Victim directed	Offender directed	Environmental*
Primary	To prevent sexual assault from occurring in the general population in the first place	• Risk avoidance (e.g. do not hitchhike) • Rape avoidance (e.g. self defence training)	• Legislative deterrence (fear of punishment)	• Better street lighting • Security guards on trains • Cameras at stations • Train staff in licensed venues to intervene in cases of unwanted sexual attention
Secondary	Early intervention with sub-populations identified as particularly "at risk" for either offending or victimisation	• Programs for women who have experienced sexual assault to prevent re-victimisation	• Programs for sexually abused boys to prevent "cycle of abuse"	
Tertiary	To minimise the long-term harm following sexual assault	• Counselling (to minimise long-term psychological harm of rape)	• Treatment programs (to prevent recidivism) • Legal sanction, restraining order, incarceration (prevent re-offending)	• Sensitising the law to better respond to victims giving evidence in court (e.g. closed circuit TV facilities)

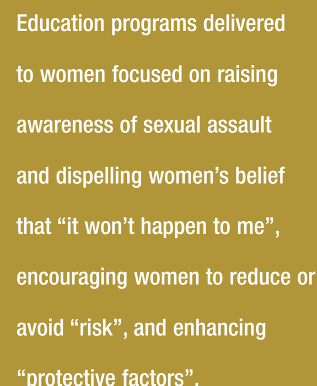
* Rather than the primary/secondary distinction, a more useful way of categorising strategies that target the environment is between those concerned with the *physical* environment (street lighting, cameras at train stations) and those that attempt to alter the *socio-cultural* environment (for example, decreased tolerance for sexually aggressive behaviour in licensed venues).

Proponents of prevention strategies for adult sexual assault might suggest there is far more common ground between victim advocates and prevention theory than is immediately apparent from a table such as Table 1. Indeed, they might point to victims groups' continued engagement with strategies

designed to increase community awareness and/or educate the public about sexual assault as an exercise in prevention from a feminist standpoint.

Preventative education

Education has been identified as a key tool for the primary prevention of sexual assault (New South Wales Standing Committee on Social Issues 1996), and school programs designed to give children the skills to "detect and avoid potentially abusive situations" (Tomison and Poole 2000: 59) have been implemented on a somewhat ad hoc basis. While education as a strategy to prevent adult sexual violence is rare in Australia, it has been widely adopted in United States universities since the 1980s, probably as a result of the impact of studies revealing a high incidence of "date rape" among college women (Koss 1988; Koss and Cook 1993). Programs of varying duration and intensity have been delivered to college-age students, employing numerous strategies including the discussion of rape scenarios, videos, peer education, presentations by victims and police, and the discrediting of 0rape myths.



However, there has been considerable debate about the effectiveness of preventative education (Lonsway 1996; Fonlow and Richardson 1992) and the difficulties of evaluating the programs (Schewe and O'Donohue 1993). While these debates will not be discussed here, the United States experience again points to a distinction between traditional prevention, and attempts by women's groups to integrate a gendered analysis of sexual assault into prevention strategies. A key way of categorising programs is by distinguishing those with a traditional focus on women's risk management from feminist education programs that attempt to create a space for *men's* responsibility in preventing sexual assault.

Education programs delivered to women focused on raising awareness of sexual assault and dispelling women's belief that "it won't happen to me", encouraging women to reduce or avoid "risk", and enhancing "protective factors". Proponents of these programs argue that "although men are always responsible for their acts of sexual aggression against women, ethical considerations suggest that methods need to be designed to educate women to lower their risk for victimisation" (Hanson and Gidycz 1993: 1046). Concern that educating women to avoid victimisation reflects the historical tendency to blame women for sexual assault led to feminist education programs delivered to mixed audiences and to men exclusively (Frazier et al. 1994).

Feminist education programs differ from both rape avoidance and education to reduce women's risk, by providing a *gendered* analysis of sexual assault, often organised around debunking rape myths. The target for intervention is transferred from women's risky behaviour to men's "rape supportive attitudes" (Foubert and McEwen 1998). This is an example of feminists actively attempting to shape prevention discourse. These programs tend to rely on a psychological model in which violence is positioned as the manifestation of individual rape supportive attitudes and beliefs. Thus, the vast majority of programs and evaluations focus on men's attitudinal change, although questions have arisen around how attitudinal change can be effectively measured, how long its effects last, and whether it is related to behavioural change.

New directions in prevention

While this discussion has focused on some tensions between feminism and traditional approaches to sexual assault prevention, contemporary prevention approaches have been developing in ways that respond to many of the concerns discussed above.

For example, an approach sometimes described as the "New Public Health" agenda has extensively critiqued models of prevention that focus on behavioural change strategies targeting individuals ➤

(Baum 1998). There is also increasing emphasis of the need to take an "ecological" view of social problems, which suggests attention be given to analyses of gender and power in understanding sexual violence.

These shifts in prevention theory have led to growth in the public health literature on primary prevention and sexual assault (Mantak 1995; Becker and Reilly 1999; McMahon 2000). While new prevention discourses cannot adequately be described here, it should be noted that they offer a productive site for a more successful integration of feminist work in sexual assault with more formal prevention frameworks.

Contemporary approaches to primary prevention

Victim advocates have recently begun to position themselves as participants in debates around primary prevention in relation to sexual violence. Work by Moira Carmody and Kerry Carrington (2000) exemplifies this new engagement. Carmody and Carrington acknowledge the achievements of radical and liberal feminists to promote better responses to sexual assault summarised above: raising community awareness; engaging with state institutions for the provision of victim support services; and securing legal reform to redress the criminal justice system's bias against sexual assault victims. However, they argue that despite these significant improvements in the *response* to sexual assault, little has been achieved in *preventing* sexual assault. Their particular concern is with sexual violence between intimate partners, which remains invisible and normalised, and therefore unresponsive to the kinds of preventative interventions discussed in this article.

A concern with intimate partner violence, and its resistance to prevention, leads Carmody and Carrington to propose a theory of primary prevention that begins with the recognition that sexual assault cannot be prevented by focusing on individual pathology in certain men, or the "risky" behaviour of certain women. According to these theorists, since sexual violence is rarely the result of aberrant behaviour, but often *normalised* under particular social conditions, it can only be prevented if models of "ethical sexuality" replace current configurations of gender and sexuality.

From this perspective, prevention work must "challenge those cultural norms that normalise intimate sexual violence as a 'natural' or 'exaggerated' expression of innate male sexuality" (Carmody and Carrington 2000: 355). One aspect of this project involves examining how masculine and feminine identities, and the practices that constitute sexual relations, are culturally produced, often in ways that sanction aggressive, coercive and exploitative sexual behaviour. Importantly, alternative sexual practices that allow men and women to negotiate consensual, reciprocal and mutually pleasurable sexual relations, are what these authors say needs to be promoted.[2]

Efforts to create spaces where women's sexual relations with men might be non-exploitative and non-violent signals a re-emergence of the initial anti-rape movement's interest in eliminating all forms of violence against women. However, there have been significant changes in analyses of the reproduction and transformation of gender relations and sexuality over time, and how active intervention in these processes can effect change.

Carrington (1995: 229) advocates shifting the burden for preventing sexual assault back onto men by problematising normative male sexual conduct, and cultivating a masculine sexual identity in which aggressive or coercive sexual encounters are viewed as "shameful, unethical, and undesirable forms of . . . conduct".

The work of Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) is one example of this type of primary prevention. MASA aims to challenge dominant forms of masculinity, and encourages men to see sexual assault not as an isolated act, but as part of a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviours that sustain men's power over women. MASA critiques the therapeutic approach to treating individual offenders, arguing that such programs have failed to recognise the benefits that men accrue from their violent behaviour, instead portraying men as helpless victims, and minimising their responsibility in favour of concepts of provocation and shared responsibility (Pease 1995: 261). MASA also identifies the focus

on individual behaviour change as problematic, given the lack of attention and resources directed toward social change.

Analysts have also examined the ways in which social governance mechanisms (including prevention programs) shape identity and gender relations. Margot Rawsthorne's (2002) work on preventing sexual violence among rural young people can be read as advocating a shift toward programs promoting "ethical sexuality". She notes that most school or health based education programs emphasise "responsible sexuality", which focuses on the risks and dangers of sex in terms of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, while remaining largely silent about pleasure. In contrast to this approach, Rawsthorne advocates "providing young people with the skills to "peel back" the layers of meaning surrounding sexuality" in order to interrogate the labels (for example, "frigid" or "slut") and relationship dynamics (an exclusive focus on heterosexual intercourse) that constrain the types of identities and practices available to them. In this way, young people may be able to fashion non-violent and non-exploitative ways of being masculine or feminine.

Contemporary approaches like this simultaneously challenge, and attempt to reconstruct, traditional models of prevention. An explicit feminist engagement with prevention theory, and the integration of feminist analyses of sexual assault into formal prevention frameworks, may signal the emergence of a new collaboration in the struggle to end sexual violence.

■ **Alexandra Neame** is a Research Officer with the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Endnotes

1. As interest in rape avoidance grew, researchers became concerned with whether resistance increases the violence of the perpetrator and, therefore, the risk of injury to the victim (Ullman 1998; Quinsey and Upfold1985). The question of whether there is a relationship between resistance and victim injury has been a difficult one, because it initially appeared that forceful resistance correlated with increased injury. However, the consensus now seems to be that what appeared as a causal relationship (victim resistance causes the perpetrator to become increasingly violent), in fact flows the other way: victim resistance increases proportionally to the *initial* violence of the attack. Therefore, while there is a relationship between injury and resistance, resistance does not seem to lead to a further escalation of violence, and may avert a completed rape. A number of debates weighing up the possibility of increased injury against the injury of rape itself have also taken place (for example, Kleck and Sayles 1990: 160-161).

2. Carmody and Carrington's interest in *promoting* "ethical sexuality" reflects moves in wider prevention discourse to develop a dual focus on prevention *and* promotion. It is well recognised, in child protection literature, for example, that "models framed around *prevention* without *promotion* may be considered to offer a somewhat restrictive means to address social ills" (Tomison and Poole 2000: 11).

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WE INVITE YOUR VIEWS

What do you think about prevention frameworks (new or old) in terms of their application for reducing adult sexual assault?

Given the uneasy alliance that has historically marked a divide between formal prevention models and victim advocates' agendas, the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault invites readers to discuss these issues through *ACSSA-Discuss*.

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