

“I Got Raped By That Pizza”

Language & the Trivialization of Gender-Based Violence

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Throughout history, atrocities other than sexual assault have been described as rape. One example of this is the World War II Japanese massacre known as the Rape of Nanking. This serves the rhetorical purpose of bringing home the horrible nature of a crime, since rape itself is so horrifying.

Recently, however, there has been a trend towards trivializing it in common slang, assisted by its use as a descriptive for incidences completely unrelated to sexual assault. This obscures the meaning and nature of rape.

A friend of mine works part-time delivering pizzas. One day, she made a delivery to a military facility. As she was handing off the pizza, one of the soldiers started talking about the pizza he had eaten on a previous day.

“That pizza was so fucking small!” he complained. “I got raped by that pizza!” He laughed at his own statement, while his colleagues nearby said nothing.

The soldier’s statement is not an isolated incident. It is emblematic of the way rape and other forms of gender-based violence are trivialized. This trivialization is an essential mechanism of patriarchal culture, in which rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based violence are dismissed and implicitly condoned in order to uphold patriarchy.

However, rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based violence are far from trivial problems. According to a 2003 United Nations Development Fund for Women report, one in three women will be beaten or raped in her lifetime. If women are half the population of the Earth, this means that around one billion women living have experienced this kind of violence.

Were violence against women a disease, one-seventh of the population affected would be considered an epidemic. However, violence against women has historically been under-reported, meaning that in all likelihood, the numbers are even higher than the report suggests.

The prevalence of sexualized violence in our society is reflected in the language we use. When someone is raped, they are sexually violated. They may be drugged or terrorized into acquiescing, or they may feel obligated to have sex they don’t want by internal and external forms of pressure and manipulation.

The violation may come from a stranger, but given that in the West nearly two-thirds of rape and sexual assault are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, it is most likely that the rapist will be a friend, partner, or family member. It may happen as a tactic of war, at a party, or as part of their everyday life in an intimate relationship.

Regardless of the circumstances, sexual violence is never okay, and never the victim’s fault. It happens to people of all ages, backgrounds, and gender identities.

The variety of situations in which such violence occurs reveals rape as a mechanism of domination by which the rapist asserts their power.

Though it is popular to assume rape victims are always women, and blame the victim’s dress, behavior, or past sexual experience for their violation, the reality is that rapes occur under a variety of circumstances which have nothing to do with the victim and everything to do with upholding patriarchal standards.

The word rape has now been de-contextualized in popular vocabulary to the point that it has become a synonym for anything a speaker dislikes.

That soldier was not raped by his pizza. He disliked the fact that it was small, but his experience was nothing akin to the experience of a rape victim. He certainly knows that, but this linguistic trend has allowed him to distance himself from the deeply patriarchal culture in which he lives.

Worse yet, it has allowed him to turn an incredibly violating experience that affects billions of people around the world into a joke. About his pizza.

After becoming involved in the radical environmental movement, I noticed a lot of people described the destruction of our planet as rape. They are using the word correctly, in the purely definitional sense.

However, it is important to make the actual problems—mountaintop removal, fossil fuels, and deforestation, to name a few—shocking in and of themselves, not because they are associated with sexual assault.

Appropriating rape to describe other experiences upholds patriarchy, but it also strengthens capitalism and its offspring, industry. All three of these systems of oppression depend on othering in order to maintain power and domination by elite groups of people over the marginalized.

The privileging of men, money, whiteness, urban life, and technology, among other things, is done by various means, but one important way privilege is reinforced is through language.

Patriarchy is built into the structure of industrial capitalism. It is present in the military, in the radical environmental movement, and in everyday life. It is present in our language.

If we are to begin to fight patriarchy, we must start with language so we can better fight against all systems of dominance and oppression.

One will not end without the end of the others.

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“Stop Rape Now” campaign of the UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict raises awareness and inspires action against rape as a tactic of war. The “Stop Rape Now” campaign brings attention to the alarming stories of thousands of millions of women and children survivors of sexual violence.

“Stop Rape Now” encourages supporters to join its “Get Cross” campaign by taking cross-armed pictures and uploading them on their website at stoprapenow.org.

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