

## **Sexual violence does not occur because the victim ‘asked for it’**

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“Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.”

That is the advice of Toronto Police Constable Sanguinetti when he was speaking to a group of students at York University.

Although Constable Sanguinetti did issue an apology, there are still far too many people who believe that sexual violence happens because of something the victim or survivor did.

Sexual violence does not happen because the victim or survivor ‘asked for it.’ Sexual violence happens because of ‘advice’ like Constable Sanguinetti’s; the broader issues of victim-blaming; and the lack of understanding of the societal context that permits sexual violence.

We know that what someone is wearing has nothing to do with whether sexual violence is perpetrated against them. We know this because girls and women of all ages, from all walks of life, in any variety of scenarios, no matter what they are wearing – from bikinis to burkas, from summer dresses to sweatpants, from onesies and diapers on babies and toddlers to long skirts and saris on teenage girls and senior citizens – are sexually assaulted and most often by someone the victim or survivor knows.

Statistics Canada data tells us that women are more likely to experience sexual assault, unwanted sexual behaviour in public, and unwanted behaviour both online and in the workplace. Women are also more likely to experience multiple incidents. Being young, being gender- and/or sexually-diverse, being Indigenous, and/or having a disability increases the likelihood of sexual assault. Ninety-five percent of women who have been sexually assaulted and 87% of men who have been physically assaulted experienced that violence at the hands of a man. Forty-four percent of women who experienced sexual assault said their perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance and 12% said they knew their perpetrator in some other way.

Given these statistics and what we know about systems of patriarchy, misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of stigma and oppression, we know that individuals who commit sexual assault do it because of a power imbalance. They perceive their victim as unequal to or lesser than them.

Ask women you know and you will learn that women live by what is referred to as a “rape schedule,” which is the way in which women organize their lives and take the precautions they take to not get raped.

Walk with keys between your fingers. Talk on the phone when you are walking alone. Look up, but do not make eye contact. Do not go for a run at night. If you do go for a run at night, do not run alone. If you do run alone, do not listen to music (so you can hear someone approaching).

In the same way that the impacts of intimate partner violence come with significant costs, dealing with the aftermath of sexual violence was estimated in 2009 to cost more than \$4.9

billion annually. Adjusted for inflation, that number is \$6.5 billion today. And sexual assault is the only violent crime in Canada that is not in decline.

When sexual violence is not reported by the media in a responsible manner, feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and concerns about not being believed or being dismissed are further entrenched or legitimized.

When incidents of sexual and gender-based violence are reported as one-off or isolated events, or as something that happened because of the victim's behaviour, it is a disservice to the victims and survivors of these attacks. It is also a disservice to the public, as it impedes their ability to have the best understanding of the wider societal context that creates the conditions for these attacks.