



## **RAINN - when support services fail to eradicate victim blaming attitudes**

<http://time.com/30545/its-time-to-end-rape-culture-hysteria/>

Over the years I've had some concerns about the dialogue surrounding 'rape culture' - mainly that it can be used to articulate a message around sexual violence that blames 'lack of education' or 'social attitudes' without interrogating the role played by masculinity and patriarchy. So when I saw an article about RAINN, America's national support network for survivors of sexual violence, having critiqued the concept, I was vaguely optimistic. Unfortunately, seeing as the article ended with a TIME journalist lauding RAINN's 'sane' counsel and contrasting it to the 'hysteria' and 'thought police' of American feminist activism, I was disappointed.

Firstly, I'm concerned that a country's largest support service seems to be completely divorced from and derisory of the feminist activists who are challenging sexual violence around it. While RAINN doesn't appear to consider itself a feminist organisation, I would challenge whether they can effectively support female survivors of sexual violence without this grounding. The fact that they have allowed a journalist to frame them as 'sane' because they have effectively exculpated most men from the responsibility to end sexual violence suggests they are minimising and pathologising sexual violence, which unsurprisingly are responses the mainstream media will lap up.

While I appreciate where some of RAINN's concerns are coming from and share a couple, for example that we retain our understanding of the agency and choice of perpetrators of sexual violence, they appear to have framed this as an 'either/or' issue, suggesting that some men are just 'born' perpetrators (which ironically pathologises their behaviour and erases our understanding of their choices!). We can understand that society colludes with and enables perpetrators without losing our appreciation that those perpetrators choose to rape and abuse. And while a support service should understand perpetrator decision making, they should also understand sexual violence as a continuum, and the multiple factors (in the context of patriarchy, which I'm imagining may be tricky in RAINN's case!) which can facilitate and enable perpetrators. They should absolutely not be separating rapists out into a 'small percentage' which is 'immune' to any kind of intervention. This does not place blame on perpetrators, it exculpates them as abnormal, incapable of change and as RAINN states, not like your 'average guy'.

My discomfort with this narrative was exacerbated tenfold when I looked at the RAINN website and found pages such as 'reducing your risk' (focussing entirely on rape by a stranger in a public place) and 'reporting' stating that reporting is a good way to stop your perpetrator from raping another women and that RAINN 'hope' that survivors will report. These are both entirely inappropriate and consistent with the above, as they suggest that perpetrators are not men that we know, and also that reporting is somehow an effective method of getting your perpetrator locked up, which I think most women know is pretty laughable!



RAINN may have concerns about some of the activism going on around it, and indeed there is often a tension between activism and direct work, particularly around sexual violence. I would recommend that they get in touch with those women and discuss them, rather than trashing valuable feminist activism for cookies from people who want to believe that rape is rare and rapists aren't like the guy at work or the one living down the road. However, I would also recommend that they listen to their service users rather than imposing a narrative upon them, because I can imagine how damaging it could be to be supported by an organisation which denied the interplay between perpetrator's decisions and societal factors entirely.