

Sexual assault awareness advocate says rape culture a problem worldwide

April 4 2013

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, but Kansas State University's Donna Potts thinks every month should focus on the problem—especially on college campuses throughout the world.

Potts, professor of English, served on the subcommittee of the American Association of University Professors that drafted a statement on [sexual assault](#). The association's report, adopted in 2012, details the widespread problem of sexual assault on campuses, and includes proposed policies to curb instances of sexual assault and provide greater support to victims of assault. The report also explains current law and proposes an increased faculty role in ending campus sexual assault.

According to the report, up to 25 percent of females and 4 percent of males on U.S. college campuses are victims of sexual assault. Getting society to recognize the seriousness of the problem and to stop blaming the victim are among the reasons Potts is a strong advocate for sexual assault awareness.

"It's time to end the culture of rape," she said. "All too often we load potential victims with the entire burden for preventing this crime—which means that they blame themselves when they're raped, whereas their rapists are never made to feel any responsibility for their actions. As a society, we need to teach men to respect women, and we need to work to reduce the level of [inequity](#) between [males and females](#), so females who are victims of rape feel that they have a voice."

When it comes to sexual assault on campus, Potts said people in positions of power are more likely to be perpetrators and that relatively powerless people are the easier targets.

"We saw recently at Penn State how easy it is for people in positions of power, such as coaches, to target victims, commit serial rape and avoid detection for years," she said.

But Potts thinks the national reaction to the rapes at Penn State was more extreme because of the victims' sex.

"For one thing, our society has normalized rapes of postpubescent females, though we have not done so for boys," she said. "If society would muster the same level of horror about a crime directed overwhelmingly at college-age girls, the rape rate would certainly drop. But many people are too busy blaming the victims to make the issue a high priority."

Another recent high-profile rape case—in Steubenville, Ohio, where two high school football players were convicted of raping a 16-year-old girl—also raises an ugly aspect of the rape culture, Potts said.

"In the Steubenville case, it was deplorable that so many bystanders simply took pictures on their cellphones and posted them on YouTube or Facebook," she said. "Bystanders have opportunities to change the outcomes for rape victims."

The culture of rape is not just limited to U.S. college campuses. Potts recently returned from presenting a lecture series on her specialty, Irish literature, at Osmania University and the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad, India. While there, she offered to give a lecture about sexual violence in response to the December 2012 gang rape in New Delhi that made headlines across the world.

After talking with Indian students, including some who are writing dissertations on rape and rape narratives, Potts found victim blaming was just as common in India as in the U.S. She said she was told it can take years for sexual assault cases to go to trial in India, and that because the country lacks resources to support rape victims, like rape crisis centers, there is a deeper sense of hopelessness about the outcome of pressing charges.

"Many victims in India—I was given estimates of 14 to 16 percent—respond by committing suicide," Potts said. "Victims are led to believe that their defilements have shamed their families, and because women are regarded as more inferior in India than they are in the U.S., the shame they presumably bring to their families is more likely to outweigh the victims' own sense of personal indignation, rage and suffering."

Taking every sexual assault report seriously is an important first step, whether in the U.S. or elsewhere in the world, Potts said.

"If someone tells you she or he has been raped, do not dismiss, discount or trivialize his or her words," she said. "Rape is the only serious crime in which victims' stories are routinely dismissed. For all crimes, there is a tiny percentage of false reports, but it's no higher for rape than anything else. Discounting a rape victim's story is, to the victim, like being raped all over again."

Potts said she advised the students in India to promote the American Association of University Professors' statement on sexual assault, available at www.aaup.org/news/statement-sexual-assault.

"The AAUP defends academic freedom, and I strongly feel that academic freedom is an impossible dream if we do not heed the large percentage of students who are victims of rape," she said. "If they're

silenced when they attempt to report rape, they will never really feel they have a voice in the classroom."

Potts knows firsthand the power of giving sexual assault [victims](#) a voice firsthand.

"I recall a sullen, silent student in my class who, when we started discussing J.M. Coetzee's novel, 'Disgrace,' which deals with the subject of [rape](#), began talking about her own assault," Potts said. "She was suddenly transformed into an enthusiastic student who was eager to participate in class. And when the course was over, she gave me a beautiful sketch of a lion she'd made. It seemed to be her way of showing her gratitude for finally feeling empowered to talk about what happened to her."

Provided by Kansas State University

Citation: Sexual assault awareness advocate says rape culture a problem worldwide (2013, April 4) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-04-sexual-assault-awareness-advocate-rape.html>

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