



How can we move the conversation on?

It seems like the media has exploded over the past couple of weeks with 'controversial debates' about rape and alcohol, starting with Emily Yoffe's Slate piece and Mia Freedman's defence in Mamamia, and yesterday with UK barrister Barbara Hewson stating that rape victims who were drunk must accept some "moral responsibility".

I'm almost too weary to wade in seeing as I thought we'd put this 'radical idea' about blaming victims while claiming that we're not to bed once and for all. Then again, on reading some of the exchanges, it seems like what is drifting into the mainstream with respect to condemning these statements is an argument that simply centres on 'you're victim blaming' / 'no I'm not' / 'you can't say that' / 'yes I can because it's practical'.

Though I wish the reasoning behind placing blame on the perpetrator was more widely understood, while it clearly isn't we can't leave the debate to this. We need to talk about why victim blaming is damaging. We need to talk about the predatory nature of sexual violence. And we need to talk about rape myths and how even those who claim to be aware of them still buy into the more subtle ones.

Mia Freedman claims that she has been unfairly castigated over the fact that her stance on alcohol and rape may make survivors of rape "feel bad", and that this argument is "facile". While yes, I would absolutely prefer that mainstream journalists didn't keep publishing stuff that makes me and other women feel complicit in our own assaults, I will agree with her that this isn't actually an analysis (although I think "feel bad" to describe the extreme distress that her views can and have caused many women is disingenuous at best).

What IS an analysis, founded on both my experiences and my experiences working with other survivors, is that placing responsibility on women to prevent rape re-victimises survivors and damages their attempts at recovery. Part of what is fundamentally damaging about rape and sexual assault is that the attack uses what should be a mutual, consensual act, and often the perpetrator will directly manipulate the victim into feeling that they were complicit, or tell them that this is the case. Not feeling like a party to your own humiliation and violation is half the battle for survivors. Hearing about the 'risks' and 'what women could do' pushes us right back to that place where all we can do is endlessly re-hash the assault in our head, thinking about what we did, what we could have done differently and how we are somehow complicit and therefore to be ashamed.

Interestingly enough, one of the correlates of living with this degree of self-blame for me was very problematic alcohol use, which I couldn't resolve until starting to look at the actions of the perpetrator and how they rendered any resistance I could have put up futile. Looks like Mia's argument is becoming somewhat self-defeating in my case.

Going back to the actions of the perpetrator, looking at women's alcohol use directly elides an understanding of how and why rape is perpetrated. I'm not just talking about 'placing responsibility' which is trotted out in these arguments with little to no analysis of what it means,



but about understanding how perpetrators operate. That rape is deliberate, and planned, and that they will manipulate both societal attitudes and the women they choose to attack in order to get away with their crime. I would be very happy to have a direct conversation about why there are a large number of rapes perpetrated when the victim has consumed alcohol. My first contribution to the conversation will be that a) it is because views like Emily Yoffe's, Mia Freedman's and now Barbara Hewson's give perpetrators a green light, and b) because predatory men know that as a society we 'code' nights out and alcohol as a location for casual sex, and therefore it will be easier for them to gaslight the victim into blaming herself, and convince society (and the police if they are reported) into believing that she consented. These reasons begin in the mind of the perpetrator, not in a Smirnoff distillery. If our culture was constructed differently, perpetrators might use different methods. Let's talk about that. But with an understanding of sexual violence, not with a lack of consideration of the perpetrator beyond 'some men are bad' and complete stubborn-ness. This others men who choose to rape and essentially argues that we should just give up on trying to stop the extreme prevalence of violent assaults on women.

We can accept that sexual violence perpetrated by men is an ever present risk for women and girls, and be honest with each other about the nature of this risk without making arguments which create a false causal link. Refusing to imply that alcohol was a causal factor in the sexual victimisation of thousands of women need not imply that we encourage unhealthy heavy drinking or complete disregard for our own safety - it merely requires that we understand the complexities involved.

So if this is the case, why shouldn't women drink a bit less, if we know perpetrators will use it against us? Three reasons. One - it is completely unrealistic, and sexist. It expects women to retreat from what is often an integral part of many communities' social lives in order to prevent men from attacking them. Two - we know how to do it anyway, and are taught to do it from birth. We don't need columnists telling us again. Three - we would have to never drink at all to reduce all the 'alcohol related risk' these women talk about. I used to moderate my drinking while out and only really get drunk in my own house - I don't recommend this to other women but I had been raped before while very drunk so it made me feel safer. However, I was raped again, after drinking. I had just graduated and was about to move away from where I'd lived for three years - it was my last chance to go out with my friends. I made a cost/benefit analysis in the way that women do every day and decided to have a few extra glasses of wine with everyone else. I guess in the 'reduce your alcohol risk' world, I'm just a bit stupid and probably should have decided not to celebrate. But I don't just write this on behalf of myself, and the only reason I'm using my own story is that I would never use another woman's experience of rape to make a point - my story is common and that is the problem here. To be honest, many of those women who ardently push telling other women to drink less as a prevention strategy probably have or have had a drunken night out once in a while.

Unfortunately, victimisation doesn't follow some kind of moral compass where your overall compliance with 'risk reduction' strategies gets totted up on a karmic balance and makes you proportionately less likely to be attacked. Once is enough, if you happen to be unlucky enough to be around a perpetrator, but you don't know that until you've been there, and the problem is compounded by the fact that many women internalising self-blame about their own experiences,



or fearing sexual violence themselves, can go on to blame other women in order to make the world feel that little bit safer.

The final major issues I have with Freedman and Yoffe's analysis are that they buy into rape myths about the way in which most women are attacked and the way in which they respond.

Freedman argues that when drunk your ability to "assess and manage risk" is drastically reduced. This ignores the fact that these abilities do not prevent women from being raped. During my recent experience of rape, I wasn't too drunk to react. I was pretty much on high alert the entire time, which is not so great given the graphic memories I have of it, but is pretty common for someone going through a traumatic experience. I assessed and managed risk constantly in the way that I responded - this didn't prevent the attack, it helped me survive it. Drunk or sober, women's response is usually to freeze, and this is usually the best way to protect themselves under the circumstances. By implying that a sober victim would somehow apply some ninja moves and remove herself from the situation, Freedman is showing her lack of understanding both of trauma and of the strategies perpetrators use to remove these options from their victims and to gain their trust, which after all is a natural human quality, not one created by alcohol. And yes, her comments do buy into the myth that most rapes are perpetrated by strangers, not because she refuses to accept that some aren't, but because they treat rape as a problem that we can treat without addressing the root cause, male sexual entitlement over women. When you imagine that 'risk reduction' strategies will make a difference to women on a structural level, you are effectively trying to chop at branches of a tree while ignoring the fact that it has roots and the branches are going to re-grow. While recent comments have ignited discussion on this with respect to rape and alcohol, the same point applies to all factors surrounding violence and abuse which are commonly focussed on instead of a more honest analysis of how perpetrators operate.

I'm tired of this facile analysis and I'm tired of us invisibilising perpetrators yet again. How can we move the conversation on?