

Masculinities, Alcohol and Sexual Violence

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Fergus Hogan,
Centre for Social and Family Research,
Waterford Institute of Technology,
fhogan@wit.ie

*“No point [reporting the rape]. His word against mine and I had been drinking”
Rape and Justice in Ireland, participant 80.*

Introduction

It is a great honour to be invited to speak here today on the occasion of the launch of this stunning book *Rape and Justice in Ireland*. The craft of the socio-legal researchers and authors Conor, Deirdre and Stacey is to be commended as is the support, commitment and work that the Rape Crisis Network and centres throughout the county provide. Greatest thanks must go to the women who shared their experience of rape and societies response. Their contribution, their voice and this book will I believe make a difference.

Over the past week I have had the opportunity to read this book and these women’s stories; as I read it I text friends to say how difficult a read it was, how painful, how I cried in parts. “Yes” they replied “I’m sure the women’s stories and pain is shocking.” And indeed they are. Just one summary story from the report:

“The complainant is a young Irish woman, most likely under the age of 25, but most certainly under the age of 35. She is unemployed or in a low-skilled job. The defendant is male and somewhat older, usually between 25 and 35 years old, and has somewhat better socio-economic circumstances but it also employed in a low-skilled job. He is Irish, has no previous convictions but possibly has a troubled background. The complainant and suspect know each other in some way: they may have been friends, acquaintances, or they may have met in a pub or at a party on the night of the incident. They may have engaged in some level of sexual interaction such as kissing. For whatever reason, they went away together, on their own or with friends, to either his or her home. They were both severely intoxicated through the consumption of alcohol. When the incident occurred, the complainant asked the defendant to stop.

The defendant ignored her and probably used a low level of force; he did not threaten her, injure her, drug her or use a weapon against her. He simply disregarded her will. Afterwards, the complainant did not report the rape to the Gardaí immediately, but did make a report within 24 hours. When questioned, the defendant tells the Gardaí that sex was consensual. The chances are good that this rape will not be prosecuted.” (Rape and Justice in Ireland, 2009, p. 360).

However, if I am honest my tears and upset were not just for the women in this book. Maybe selfishly as a man, maybe understandable so, my upset, my concern, was also towards the men in the book; the boys, the men, the men who raped, the fathers, sons, brothers, the boyfriends, the ex-boyfriends, the one-night stands, the ex-husbands and the husbands.

Men are everywhere in this book on every page and in every case. The disclosure of men’s sexual violence against women, children and other men seems now to be a daily occurrence. The SAVI Report, the Ferns Report, the Ryan Report, the Murphy Report and Diarmaid Ferriter’s recent history of Sex and Society is a history of sexual crime and *Occasions of Sin in Modern Ireland*. Each and every report highlights the sexually violent behaviours and practices men engage in.

Yet, as men we have in general remained silent, colluding in a *culture of quietude* that leaves this work to women. The challenge in part for me today is to find my voice and speak up and out as a man about masculinities and sexual violence. The challenge, as Stephen Frosh reminds, includes trying to do more than following my protective and reparative urges; where I might try to protect men by saying “it’s the bad guys out there that do this sexual violence; where I might try to pretend “I’m a good guy, here to rescue women and children.”

So how can we as men find our voice in this conversation? How can we find a place within ourselves from which to speak up and out in the face of rape and sexual violence? Here is my attempt.

Are all Men Rapists?

No

Are all Men Capable of Rape?

I don’t believe so

Are those men who choose to sexually abuse and rape born a rapist?

No they are not

Men and boys are born just like women and girls, beautiful babies vulnerably reaching out to the world seeking to be held, loved, and wanted. And yet somewhere along the way, as we grow our boys into men something happens.

Sexual Violence is not a genetically inherited trait carried in our chromosomes, it's not hard wired into the left or right side of our brain or caused by testosterone (Kimmell, M). Rather it's a learned behaviour. It's one of the practices of masculinity – the ways of performing and conforming to a certain way of being a man.

The Social Construction of Masculinities

Raewyn Connell, an Australian sociologist argues that all men grow up being influenced by a shared thread of connection. Learning lessons about what a 'real' man 'should' do or be like, which he has termed '*Hegemonic Masculinity*.' (Connell,, 1995, 2000). Of course there are many ways of being a man; there are in fact multiple practices of masculinity. Hegemonic Masculinity is an idea that most men do not live up to or perform, many of us actively try not to, yet it remains as a cultural backdrop against which we measure ourselves and other men.

The key lessons in how we grow boys to me are most insidious. Traditionally the development male roles has been influenced by four key rules: No Sissy Stuff, Be a Big Wheel, Be a Sturdy Oak and Give em Hell! (Brannon, 1976; Ferguson, H, 1997). Boys and men are expected to repudiate all that is remotely feminine, including being seen to have feelings, emotions or the ability to care for ourselves or others. Gay Jokes and Gay Bashing for example is a system to keeping all men in their place. Being a big wheel and a sturdy oak have been valorised by men as qualities to respect, yet achieving such goals has led us as men away from our families and intimate relationships with women, children and other men. Giving them Hell has separated men from ourselves.

Proving you're a *real* man in Ireland has taken a very dangerous turn. Three key markers or performance indicators stand out in the construction of Dangerous Masculine Practices in Modern Ireland: Alcohol, Sex and Violence.

Alcohol in Ireland:

How we drink alcohol in this country has changed considerably. With men and women drinking more and in more dangerous ways as evidenced in this week's Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) analysis of data from the 2007 *Slán Lifestyle Study* suggests some four in 10 women are drinking excessively over an extended period, with seven in 10 men also at risk from this pattern of alcohol intake. However it is boys and men who are causing most violence to themselves and others through drink. Last week the Health Research Board launched their study on the *Social consequences of harmful alcohol use in Ireland*. The report found that the incidence of drunkenness, assaults and public order offences rose by almost one-third in the four years to 2007 (from 50,948 in 2003 to 66,406 in 2007). More than 13,000 of these Gardaí-registered offences involved minors, under the age of 18 years. The typical offender was a young male aged 24 years or under.

Sex and Alcohol:

Similarly attitudes, practices and information in regard to sex, contraception and fertility are also coming under the research spotlight. Over the last 5 years the Crisis Pregnancy Agency has commissioned a range of research studies which have informed policy, media campaigns and service provision. In many cases these research studies also highlight the *risky* interplay when alcohol and sex are mixed – even in negotiated and consensual sex. Studies into *Understanding how sexually active women think about fertility, sex and motherhood* (Murphy-Lawless, Oaks and Brady, 2004) and *Is alcohol a factor in unsafe sex among women seeking emergency contraception* (Loxley, Cahill and O'Keeffe, 2005) found that while Irish women were taking greater control and agency over their sexuality and contraception, they also admitted to taking more risks sexually when alcohol is involved.

Men and Sex:

In our own study *Men, sexuality and crisis pregnancy: a study of men's experiences* (CPA, 2007) Harry Ferguson and I interviewed 45 Irish men about their experiences of sex and crisis pregnancy. We *only* interviewed men, and men who volunteered to talk with us about what we presumed to be negotiated and consensual sexual relations with women. Similar to the women's studies we found that even men who considered themselves to be steady and safe sexually, men who practiced safe sex by wearing a condom also admitted to taking sexual risks when they had drunk alcohol. One 20 year old man who became a father during his leaving cert put it:

“I would be a very placid person when I am sober. I would be very set in my ways, I would know what I want and I would know what I shouldn’t do. I would be defined by the morals that I have but when it comes to drinking, you just loosen up and things go wrong, well I wouldn’t say that things go wrong but you do things that you normally wouldn’t do and you would have sex where you wouldn’t wear condoms where normally you would be 100% where you would wear condoms you know. Or the situations would arise where you are there and you are ready and the condoms are over in a drawer and you are entangled...but you don’t use them.”

While men and women in consensual sexual relationships both admit to the risky behaviour they engage in when drinking we also found evidence in our study of some deeply held misogynistic attitudes from some men to women. To a large degree this misogyny and macho bravado was again something learned by boys and men growing up – to prove our manhood, our virile masculinity, our power and privilege over women and children. Heterosexuality is experienced as being compulsory for men. In general young men growing up feel under pressure to not only be heterosexual but to *prove* it. Many did this by adopting a ‘conquest masculinity’, often exaggerating or lying about their sexual conquests and/or becoming sexually active just to prove their heterosexual manhood.

The pressure to be sexually active led some young men to have sex before they were fully aware they were able to cause pregnancy. Yet the phrase ‘losing their virginity’ meant nothing to so many of the young men we interviewed. Rather in the absence of any other clear social rituals that mark the transition of boys to men the occasion of first sex wasn’t a loss but rather a badge of honour, which meant for these boys that they were now in the men’s club.

Hedonistic Sexuality:

One 22 year old man who had recently returned from accompanying his then girlfriend to England for an abortion remembered his rather hedonistic sexuality:

“You know the way girls go on anyway. They come back from the pub and they’re locked, and you’re locked yourself anyway, you don’t give a shit if you’re wearing a johnny [condom] or not because. Well, you should, but back three or four years ago when you were in college, you didn’t give a shit because ‘oh, I’ll shag this one’ and that’s it, kick her out of the bed later...
...That was your attitude in college. Lads, ‘oh what did you get last night’ or ‘what was she like’ like, you know. But, to be honest with you, not being vain now, but it’s over two hundred [sexual partners/one night stands], seriously.”

A fifth of the men in our study fitted what we called a 'hedonistic pattern' of sexuality, characterised as being:

- very sexually active and take no responsibility for preventing pregnancies
- chronically irresponsible, narcissistic pleasure- seekers
- misogynistic, showing little or no respect for women or regard for women's welfare
- egocentric and do not learn from experience
- see their sexuality as testosterone driven, out of control and
- tend to be in denial about any pregnancies they have caused, or when that does happen and they find out, they generally fail to change their irresponsible behaviour.

Sexual hedonism is partly a phase that some younger men go through but it is about much more than age. Two of the oldest men in the sample (aged 57 and 48) displayed this pattern. Sexual hedonism has its roots in a combination of the men's arrested moral development in childhood, patriarchal attitudes and the legacy of failures in sex education - never having received any quality information about responsible sexual practice, been mentored by anyone or even challenged about their behaviour.

Growing risks and danger of sexual violence:

Every day boys and men experience the messages and lessons about how we need to prove our masculinity. The peer pressure on boys and young men is immense and it is growing. Of course men have benefited in many ways from learning to play this gendered game; where patriarchy has benefited men in general at the expense of women. While patriarchal power privileges men to the extent that we carry a sense of entitlement as feminists have pointed out men's violence is about power and control and based on an experience of entitlement.

And it seems to me that the sexual objectification of women in Ireland and across the globe is getting worse. For example, there has been quite a staggering increase in the sex industry and prostitution in Ireland which coincides with the development of new communication software. Mobile phones and the internet have exacerbated the objectification of women as sexual beings for men's pleasure. The search for sex without relationship means that with a few clicks of a mouse men can view women from all over the world currently visiting their

home town, listing under all sorts of sexual preferences again...for men's pleasure (Rogers, 2009).

Likewise internet pornography links to friendly free sites which categorise women and children as sexual objects for the taking. In a global world of internet communication where does the responsibility to address the classification and production of pornography that sells itself under the titles of Voyeur, Up-skirt, Forced, Rape?

Furthermore men's violence, sexual violence has also been supported or at least colluded with by the absence of any real social complaint – this book and study will I believe make a difference to how most of us in Irish society have turned a blind eye to sexual crime and we as men have certainly remained far too quiet in the face of Rape.

What can men do in speaking out about men's sexual violence and rape?

I believe there are three things we as men can begin to do today that will begin to challenge this dangerous construction of misogynistic masculinity and hedonistic sexuality.

Firstly, beginning with ourselves and taking a deep look inside. Once again, it might be safer for me to pretend to be something I'm not, to try to point the finger at other men and claim in some way that we have nothing in common. A key challenge for us as men to reflect and address the misogynistic practices we engage in our own lives.

How do I treat the women in my life? How do I show love or respect? What messages through my behaviour am I passing on to my sons? How do I use sexualised jokes or innuendo to keep in place the gendered hierarchy that supports and privileges patriarchy?

This self reflection about our practices of masculinities will be challenging if we do it honestly. So we will need allies in this work as we find our voice in speaking up and out about rape.

Secondly, we need to join with other men in speaking out against rape, sexual violence and the sexual objectification of women. Michael Kaufman is a founder of the White Ribbon Campaign, established initially in Canada but now developed in many countries throughout the world. Kaufman believes:

“Wearing the white ribbon would neither be an act of contrition, not a symbol of misplaced collective guilt; it does not indicate that the wearer is a great guy. Rather, wearing the ribbon was a personal pledge never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women. It would be a catalyst for discussion and soul-searching. It would be a public challenge to those many men who use violence against a wife, girlfriend, family member or stranger. It would be a call on our policy makers, opinion leaders, police and courts to take seriously this national and international epidemic. And it would be an act of love for the women in our lives” (Kaufmann, 2001, pp. 45-46).

Another vehicle for speaking out and in doing so deconstructing the dangerous messages young boys and men learn about how to prove their masculinity can be seen in the various media and add campaigns developed by the American network Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR). According to its Web site:

“Men Can Stop Rape mobilises male youth to prevent men’s violence against women. We build young men’s capacity to challenge harmful aspects of traditional masculinity, to value alternative visions of male strength, and to embrace their vital role as allies with women and girls in fostering healthy relationships and gender equity”

Recently The Men Can Stop Rape network developed posters and adverts in their My Strength Campaign, aimed at raising men’s awareness of their sexual responsibilities. The posters included direct messages such as:

‘Our strength is NOT for hurting. Men can stop rape’

‘So when she said NO, I said OK. Men can stop rape’

‘So when men disrespect women, we say that’s NOT RIGHT. Men can stop rape’

‘So when she was drunk, I backed off. Men can stop rape’

‘So when she was too high to decide, I decided to back off. Men can stop rape’

So when I wasn’t sure how she felt, I ASKED. Men can stop rape’

Thirdly, men must be involved in this critical work of personal change and social transformation. However, the key to engaging with boys and men in this work is that we approach them with a loving and respectful disposition. Remembering the babies born alike, beautiful and vulnerable our hope for humanity must be based on the possibility for men’s participation in a radically different gender order; the possibility that we as men can and will change.

The crucial work of holding men responsible for our behaviours while challenging and supporting us to engage in this radical transformation can be done so out of a respectful and loving disposition. One example of such development work is that facilitated through the Waterford based Men's Development Network, whose ethic in working with men is "Better lives for men mean's better lives for women and children."

The challenge set today with this milestone launch is to invite men into a dialogue with women to end sexual violence and rape and to redefine relations between the sexes, to redefine what it means to be a man.

It can be different. A poem...

The Rites of Manhood

It's snowing hard enough that the taxis aren't running.
I'm walking home, my night's work finished,
long after midnight, with the whole city to myself,
when across the street I see a very young American sailor
standing over a girl who's kneeling on the sidewalk
and refuses to get up although he's yelling at her
to tell him where she lives so he can take her there
before they both freeze. The pair of them are drunk
and my guess is he picked her up in a bar
and later they got separated from his buddies
and at first it was great fun to play at being
an old salt at liberty in a port full of women with
hinges on their heels, but by now he wants only to
find a solution to the infinitely complex
problem of what to do about her before he falls into
the hands of the police or the shore patrol
... and what keeps this from being squalid is
what's happening to him inside:
if there were other sailors here
it would be possible for him
to abandon her where she is and joke about it
later, but he's alone and the guilt can't be
divided into small forgettable pieces;
he's finding out what it means
to be a man and how different it is
from the way that only hours ago he imagined it.

Alden Nowlan

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Centre for Social and Family Research

College Street Campus

Waterford Institute of Technology

Waterford

051-845672

fhogan@wit.ie

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