

There is widespread acceptance of non-consensual sex among young people. Girls are the obvious victims but boys suffer from the pressure to be seen as sexually dominant.

Is the cult of masculinity to blame for Britain's rape culture?

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we need to talk about men



The bedroom vibrates with bass and the buzz of laughter downstairs. Two teenagers come in kissing breathlessly.

She turns to check her phone. He pulls her into another kiss.

"Let's go downstairs for a bit," she smiles. He keeps kissing her. "Yeah in a bit," he says, pushing her onto the bed.

"Stop it," she murmurs as he unbuttons her jeans.

"Stop it." Her voice gets higher. "I don't want to."

He presses his weight on hers, tells her to "stop being weird".

She sobs quietly. He forces himself on her.

"If you could see yourself," the caption asks, "would you see rape?"

Would he see rape? Probably not. After all, he's not some dirty-raincoated stranger in a dark alley. He's just a lad trying it on with his teenage sweetheart, right?

This is a scene from a new television campaign by the Home Office: 'This Is Abuse'. But it could be a scene from any house party on any Friday night across the country.

Statistics from the Ministry of Justice reveal that 29 per cent of people tried for rape, domestic violence or sexual offences in 2010-11 were under 24 years old. And a 2011 NSPCC study found that a third of teenage girls said they had experienced some form of sexual violence from a boyfriend.

There is something rotten in the state of modern masculinity, it seems, and these figures suggest it starts early and runs deep. Deeper, perhaps, than any Home Office TV ad can touch.

TOUGH LOVE

The Home Office campaign was formed in response to recent evidence that experience of rape and sexual assault among teenagers is widespread. "Teenagers are inundated with information about relationships, from their friends, the internet and TV," says a Home Office spokesperson. "The 'This is Abuse' campaign aims to dispel the myths that can lead to acceptance of rape in relationships."

Rape in relationships is

depressingly common. According to Rape Crisis, one in five rapes is committed by the victim's boyfriend or partner.

The true figure is likely to be even higher since non-consensual sex is often not recognised as rape, especially among young adults.

The Havens – a group of sexual assault referrals centres – conducted an online survey of Londoners aged 18-25. The survey found that almost one in ten young women had said no to sex but been ignored. A quarter had silently allowed sex to happen even though they didn't want it. And two thirds of respondents said they would not be put off sex if their partner was crying.

Rachel White, a journalist who has researched the relationship between masculinity and consent, says that the potential scale of the problem is terrifying. "There are plenty of boys who don't realise they're committing rape," she says, "and girls who don't even realise they are victims."

So why do young men

"THE STEREOTYPE SAYS MEN ALWAYS WANT SEX AND WOMEN NEVER DO"

behave in this way? And why do women accept it?

'REAL MEN'

Chris Green is the founder of White Ribbon Campaign UK, an organisation that educates men about sexual violence and asks them to pledge never to commit it. He believes that mainstream culture tells young men that masculinity must equal aggression.

"Men are 'meant' to be seen as powerful," says Chris. "So we have to pretend to be powerful by adopting an aggressive persona and violent behaviour."

Today's boys have been born into the age of third wave feminism and metrosexuality. Yet the models of masculinity offered by mainstream music, magazines and TV shows are still pretty limited.

Feminist author Kat Banyard points out that the majority of mainstream music, for example, depicts men "doing" sex "to" women. At that very house party, the iPod might be

set to Love Rance's rap hit *Up*: "I beat the pussy up." Or perhaps to Chris Brown – convicted of beating his then-

girlfriend, Rihanna, singing on her *Birthday Cake Remix*: "Give it to her in the worst way, can't wait to blow her candles out."

And it's not just music that depicts sex in this way. A 2011 study found that participants had trouble differentiating quotes found in so-called lads' magazines from statements made by convicted rapists.

Compare, for example:

"ONE IN TEN YOUNG WOMEN HAS SAID NO TO SEX AND BEEN IGNORED"

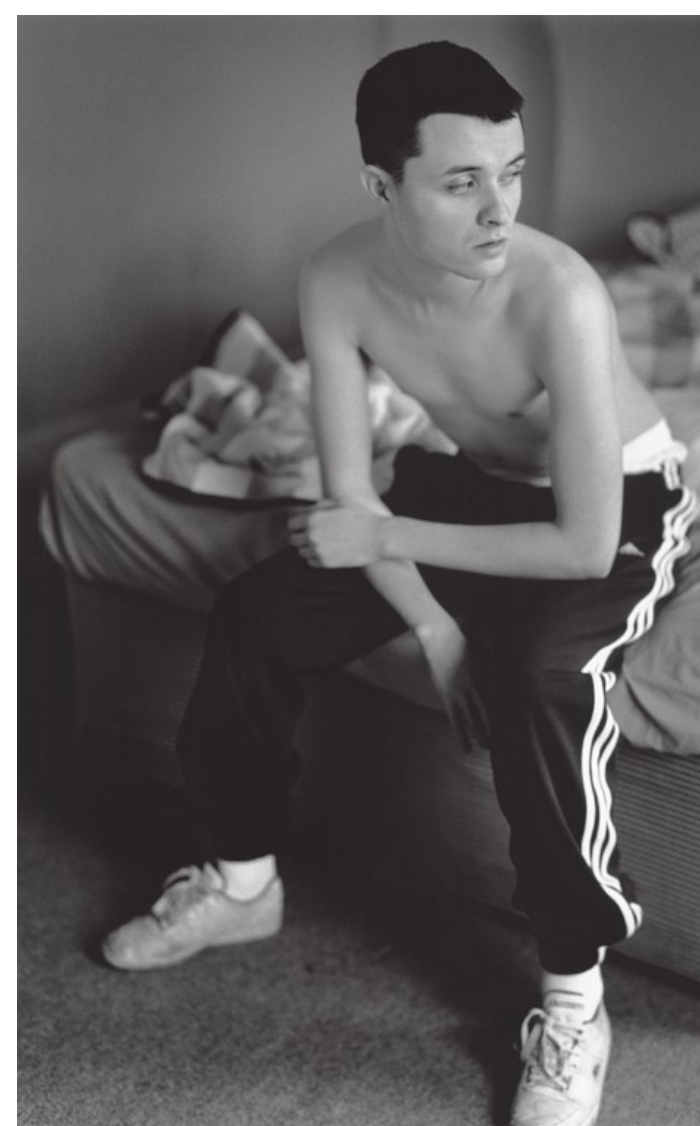
"There's a certain way you can tell that a girl wants to have sex... The way they dress, they flaunt themselves..." with: "Mascara running down the cheeks means they've just been crying, and it was probably your fault... but you can cheer up the miserable beauty with a bit of the old in and out."

The first statement was made by a convicted rapist. The second was taken from a British lads' mag. Is it any wonder that we have a generation confused about consensual sex?

And, of course, the young are also guinea pigs in a great, ungoverned social experiment: growing up with internet porn.

"99.9% of the porn images we see are of a subjugated woman being used by a powerful man," says Green. "That's sex education for a lot of twelve year olds. And now school boys have started copying that: filming their girlfriends and sharing the videos with their mates."

It's the prevalence of these cultural messages that leaves White less than overwhelmed by the Home Office's 'This Is Abuse' campaign.



"IS IT ANY WONDER WE HAVE A GENERATION CONFUSED ABOUT CONSENSUAL SEX?"

"It's better than nothing," he says, "but it's a drop in the ocean compared with the deluge of contrary information. I'd rather the government spent the same amount of time and money developing a more stringent code of conduct for the mainstream media. Then perhaps we could start to change the whole culture."

MTV and porn by no means make a rapist. But they feed a culture that normalises sex without enthusiastic consent. Young men do not expect to hear a resounding 'yes' and they date young women who may not even

know how to say it.

Noah Brand is the editor of the Good Men Project (goodmenproject.com), an online magazine and community dedicated to exploring modern masculinity. He says that our rigid gender roles feed into rape culture when it comes to sex.

"The stereotype says that men always want sex and women never do," he says. "That tells men that we're never going to get real, meaningful, enthusiastic consent, so all those so-called 'grey areas' – that's what everyone goes through, right?"

YES MEANS YES!

It's what Brand calls the "transactional" model of sex. "Women are the gatekeepers of sex: it's a commodity that they possess and men attempt to get from them," he says. "This model is poisonously wrong. But think about how many jokes you hear in the bar or on every sitcom which are based on that idea?"

"Rape is by no means to be reduced to miscommunication, but bad communication feeds rape culture. Studies show that people who commit rape will rape over and over again. But if we start making good communication and good consent the norm, those folks don't have all this background noise to hide in. Because the problem is, too often rapists think their attitudes are normal."

Good consent, says Brand, means recognising that young women, too, can initiate and enjoy sex just like a man – and vice versa.

It's an idea that's at the core of *Yes Means Yes! Visions of female sexual power and a world without rape*, the seminal book on rape culture by feminist authors Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti.

They write: "Imagine a world where women enjoy sex on their own terms and aren't shamed for it. Imagine a world where men treat their sexual partners as collaborators, not conquests."

It's a world which would be better not just for women but, Brand believes, for men, too. "There's a lot of pressure on men to be the one who always has to take the initiative, always has to make the first move," he says. "If we shared that a little more equally, I think everyone would be a lot happier."



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