

Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse

Emily Lyon

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Ginny Walters

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Although the percentage of sexual assault victims has declined in recent years, this issue is still prevalent in our society. According to a survey conducted by RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), 23.1% of undergraduate females and 5.4% of undergraduate males experience “rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation” while they are in college. (2014). However, the unfortunate truth is that a very large portion of these cases go unreported. When we were asked to choose an issue that is present in our community to work toward social change, I couldn’t think of a better cause to work for than this. Cases of sexual violence and domestic abuse happen very frequently, and that is not something that should be a common occurrence in our community. Although I don’t have any personal connections with the issue, I chose to devote my time and ideas to this issue to advocate for those who are victims and survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse in hopes that one day, their voices will be heard, and that this issue will be one of the past.

Unfortunately, sexual violence and domestic abuse is not an uncommon problem across college campuses in the United States. This is due to many factors; the first is newfound independence. When a student arrives in college, they are overwhelmed with new experiences and opportunities. Living on their own for the first time allows students the freedom to go anywhere at any time, and the unfortunate truth is that this can lead to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The party scene is another factor contributing to more sexual violence cases, and is closely tied with the alcohol and drug related factors. According to College AIM (Alcohol Intervention Matrix) “In 2013, 59.4 percent of full-time college students ages 18–22 drank alcohol in the past month compared with 50.6 percent of other persons of the same age.” (2013). This demonstrates that if just under 51% of college students participated in some degree of

drinking, that puts them and even more students at risk of being assaulted. A related article on the same website stated that “696,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.” These statistics make the connection between alcohol use and assault clear. Partying is something that most teens are familiar with, and there are consequences if you don’t know your limits. Many students will try alcohol and possibly drugs for the first time in college, and this can lead to sexual encounters that are non-consensual and may have lifelong consequences. Meeting people online and dating them is another issue in the college community, simply because anybody can post anything online and there is no proof that someone’s online profile is the same as their real qualities. This can potentially put students in an unsafe situation, because if they go out with someone who they’ve never met before, there is no guarantee that the person they’re meeting is the same person that their online profile made them out to be.

The main reason why the issue of sexual violence and domestic abuse is very difficult to resolve is because a very small percentage of cases are actually reported to campus security or local law enforcement. According to the NIJ (National Institute of Justice), there are a number of reasons why. The first is that victims often blame themselves, or they feel guilty about it. Second, they are ashamed of what has happened and they don’t want others to know what they’ve been through. Third, the victim feels humiliated or is afraid of the perpetrator and what they may do if they find out that the victim reported them. In addition, they fear what other people will think of them after the incident occurs. Next, the victim may fear that no one will believe them or that they will be accused of playing a part in the crime. The last reason that these types of incidents go unreported is because of the victim’s lack of trust in the criminal justice

system. They may think that the perpetrator won't get what they deserve or that the issue won't be resolved in the right way. With these factors considered, it shouldn't come as a surprise that only 35% of sexual assault cases are reported (Washington Post, 2014). Another underlying factor that prevents this issue from being resolved is that it's simply not possible have eyes on every possible perpetrator at any given time, and where or when these incidents will take place is unknown until they happen and it is too late to prevent them. Although they patrol the campus and do their best to watch out for suspicious activity around the clock, campus security and local law enforcement cannot always watch for every sign of something that could turn into abuse. With over 15,000 students attending MSU, it is nearly impossible to make sure that every single one safe and accounted for at all times.

In the Mankato community, there are two main stakeholders that are essential for the prevention of and response to domestic violence and sexual abuse. These are not the only two stakeholders that bring awareness to this issue and are working to prevent it, but they are the ones that have the most obvious and immediate impact on it. The first one is VARP (Violence Awareness and Response Program). This on-campus organization does exactly what it's name states. The people involved with VARP work closely with victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and more to provide them with resources and support, all completely safe and confidential. In addition, VARP prepares and holds events to raise awareness of these issues. These events are anything from large scale conferences to displays around campus to draw attention to this ever-present issue. I have been attending some of VARP's events throughout the semester, and I have connected with the assistant director of the program to start to talk about what I can do through VARP to raise awareness of the issue of sexual violence and domestic

abuse. The second stakeholder that is very important in this issue is campus security. They are the ones who respond, along with local law enforcement, when cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse happen. Without them, cases would go unreported and unsolved, and many more people would fall victim to instances of abuse. My vision for change came after volunteering with VARP and researching this issue. I hope to work with VARP to increase awareness and education opportunities so that people know about this issue. My hope is that the planning I have done in VARP will eventually lead to some kind of social change in the Mankato community. Seeing actual results and working things out as far as planning goes has not been easy due to my demanding schedule, and because VARP's events are usually planned around the same dates and times during the week, it is a challenge to make it to the majority of them because I am either in class or at work during the times that the VARP events are usually planned. However, throughout the semester I hope to become more involved in planning events with the overall goal of raising awareness for victims and anyone who wants to learn more about this issue and what we as a community can do to stop it. I know that the resolution of this issue in the Mankato community will not happen overnight, but I think that the work being done by these stakeholders will have a profound impact on the presence of domestic violence and sexual abuse in our community.

Although the focus has been on the issue on the MSU campus and in the Mankato community, it is not just confined to those areas, and it is important to draw attention to how the surrounding communities are dealing with sexual abuse and domestic violence. On a national scale, there are varying degrees of success in dealing with this issue, and it is clear that domestic abuse and sexual assault are not affecting our community as much as they could be. In fact, there

are many other communities that are dealing with this issue less effectively than we are. For example, the state of Alaska may not be dealing with this issue very effectively based on the statistic that “The Alaska rape rate is 2-1/2 times the national average” (Restino 2016). Although there is not a clear reason why Alaska rape rates are so strikingly high, researchers hypothesize that the high rates may be due to the effectiveness of the law enforcement. According to a Business Insider article, a Native Alaskan woman was raped in a small village. She called the police, who reportedly did not answer and did not return her call. (Fuchs 2013). There are other underlying reasons why Alaska’s rape rate is so high, but the law enforcement factor can be used to explain why New York has one of the lowest rape rates in the country. In the past 25 years, the New York Police Department “has created and refined a crime-fighting system that led the nation and proved that police can drive down crime even as population grows significantly” (NYPD 2017). Since the police department has transformed the way that they fight crime, it makes sense that New York is very low on the state ranking for rape. Different communities deal with this issue in a variety of ways, and the data shows that Minnesota as a whole is sitting right in the middle of the list of states when it comes to cases of rape. Our community is doing well in terms of dealing with this issue, but it mostly depends on the law enforcement in the state.

The unfortunate truth in our society today is that cases of sexual assault and domestic abuse are still prevalent. However, there are organizations in place to combat the issue, and I am working towards social change through my involvement with one of those organizations: VARP. It is my hope that one day, the issue of sexual violence and domestic abuse will be one of the past. The social change process will be a long one, but I am hopeful that the work being done in the MSU community will make a difference.

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