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Community Action Strategies to Stop Rape

Women Against Rape of Columbus, Ohio, has recently completed a three-year research-demonstration project on rape prevention in a large urban university area. The project, Community Action Strategies to Stop Rape (CASSR), is one of the first systematic research evaluation studies of rape prevention programs fielded by a grass-roots feminist organization. The project team's objective was to assess the impact of theoretically grounded feminist prevention programs that combined education, experiential learning, and community action in the target-area community.¹

The demonstration component of the project included four community prevention programs: a series of women's rape prevention workshops that included discussions of the politics of rape and feminist prevention strategies, confrontation training, and self-defense; a Whistle Alert program; a Shelter House program; and a Women's Rape Prevention Network. The research evaluation component of the project was a quasi-experimental time-series study of the effectiveness of the four community awareness and action programs. The project team pre- and posttested program participants in the women's rape prevention workshops at the time of the workshops and did a follow-up two months later.

¹. The project was funded by the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape of the National Institute of Mental Health, grant R18 MH29049. The project team members who developed the project are Bat-Ami Bar On, Deborah Chalfie, Sunny Graff, Karen Jensen, Sarah McKinley, Elaine McCrate, and Caroline Sparks.

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Members of the Women's Rape Prevention Network received pretests when they joined the network and posttests three to six months later. All participant data were compared with data from random samples of the general community population who were questioned at yearly intervals over the three-year project period. We monitored the Whistle Alert and Shelter House programs and obtained corollary information about changes in media coverage of rape and in rape prevention programming by community organizations.

The project's primary goal was to change women program-participants' attitudes about their status as potential rape victims and increase their ability to act to alter their status. The secondary goal was to increase community concern about rape and community responsiveness to programs in which women were encouraged to act to reduce their vulnerability to rape. The CASSR project team approached rape as a social and political problem that affects all women and developed a theoretical model of rape prevention upon which to base the research and demonstration components of the project. Our approach to rape included the following points:

1. that rape is a mode of systemic violence against women;
2. that rape functions as a control mechanism in patriarchy, serving a maintenance function in it, while its occurrence is facilitated by existing patriarchal conditions;
3. that women's vulnerability to rape needs to be understood in terms of women's place in patriarchy;
4. that rape prevention efforts need to be directed toward the elimination of women's status as potential victims; and
5. that rape prevention work needs to be conducted on both individual and communal levels with women leading the change.

Within this conceptual framework, the problem of rape has two dimensions: the actual incidence of rape and the threat of rape that affects women who may never become actual victims. Rape prevention also has two dimensions: reduction of actual rapes and the reduction of the effects of the threat of rape.

The CASSR team developed a theoretical construct for rape prevention in which we operationally defined women's status as potential rape victims as women's vulnerability to rape. Rape prevention, therefore, is defined as the reduction or elimination of women's vulnerability that would require changes in the structural and cultural conditions that contribute to women's vulnerability. The three contributing conditions that CASSR posited are: (1) lack of information and understanding of rape; (2) women's subordinate relationship to men in patriarchy and the characteristics women develop as a result of sex-role socialization and dependence; and (3) women's isolation from other women and their isolation in the larger community. Since these conditions are sociopoliti-
cal, rape prevention is a process of change that will ultimately produce systemic change in women’s status in society.

Given this orientation, where prevention is viewed as both an end product and a process of change, the CASSR project staff confronted the difficult problem of designing short-run interventions that relate to long-range prevention goals and of finding measures of effectiveness that distinguish between the two. The project team considered the four prevention programs offered in the target area to be first steps in developing strategies that parallel the three areas of vulnerability outlined above. We designed the programs to inform women about rape, to decrease their isolation from one another in the community, and to begin to increase women’s power to change their condition of dependence upon men under patriarchy. We designed indices of impact that would show change in a direction that leads toward the elimination of women’s vulnerability to rape. The short-range changes that we sought were changes in awareness about rape that were expected to impact first on women’s isolation and ultimately on women’s dependent status. Within our time frame, however, we hoped at best to create some of the preconditions for this kind of social change. The staff intended to work primarily with women to enable them to become catalysts for change in the rest of the community, in its agencies, and in its institutions. By taking charge of rape prevention efforts, women could begin to change the patriarchal “rules” governing rape and reduce their dependence upon men for protection.

We were concerned that strategies designed to reduce women’s vulnerability not be accompanied by undesirable social change. The project team, therefore, established four criteria to be used to evaluate specific prevention strategies. Strategies ought to (1) build women’s strength, (2) extend women’s mobility, (3) promote women’s independence, and (4) guarantee women’s freedom.

Once the project team had posited three contributing conditions of women’s vulnerability to rape, we identified specific components under each of the three conditions. These components were an initial subset of conditions that the project team thought had important consequences for women’s ability to develop rape prevention strategies. Once defined, they gave the project team a set of content areas around which to develop program materials and specific strategies. This framework allowed us to identify the ways in which each of the four prevention programs fit into an overall schema for changing women’s vulnerability to rape even if a given program addressed only a small area of change. For example, we presented self-defense as a change in socializing practices that keep women physically dependent upon men for protection.

2. A complete discussion and illustration of the components of vulnerability is beyond the scope of this brief report but does appear in the project’s final report.
Framing the tactic in this way permits women to see the value of self-defense not only as a practical individual prevention tactic but as a means for creating alternatives to women's traditional dependent status.

The project team designed its outcome measures to assess changes along each of the components of vulnerability that the programs addressed. Data analysis of the first two years of the project indicates that the rape prevention workshops had a striking effect on participants in several areas that the project had identified as important for prevention. Participants' knowledge of rape was more accurate at the end of the workshops, and their attitudes and beliefs about rape and rape prevention were strongly profeminist by the end of the workshops. Support for social change prevention tactics increased, as did awareness of women's oppression. Participants reported increased practice of confrontation and self-defense skills, decreased fear, and increased confidence in their ability to defend themselves if attacked—effects that were sustained over the two-month follow-up period. The project considered these changes a sign of increased readiness to act both individually and in support of organized action on the part of women. The general community showed a heightened awareness of the problem of rape, awareness of crime prevention programs, and belief in the utility of various prevention tactics. Knowledge of the two neighborhood programs, Whistle Alert and Shelter Houses, doubled over a year's period, although Whistle Alert was the more popular program. In contrast to the workshop participants, the general public maintained support for a number of popular myths about rape and showed stronger support for restrictive prevention tactics than social change tactics. We are currently analyzing the Women's Rape Prevention Network data and the third-year survey data. Results of all three years of project data will be available after June 1, 1980.

Columbus, Ohio