

## The Narrative of Consent

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On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano relayed through Twitter a suggestion for survivors of sexual assault and harassment to respond with the words “me too” (Garcia). #MeToo became the tagline of a movement encouraging survivors to share their stories and enabling them to know that they are not alone. However, many are unaware that the Me Too movement began 10 years previously when activist Tarana Burke founded Just Be Inc. with the purpose of providing resources to victims of sexual abuse (Garcia).

Just as the hashtag is a continuation of Burke’s campaign, so the issues it has brought to light are not new either. Sexual assault in all its forms is a longstanding problem. Women are primarily affected; 12.5% of Rhode Island women will experience sexual assault throughout their lives (Tempera, 2016). Rates are especially high on college campuses, with 20% of female college students in the United States falling victim to rape attempts (Tempera, 2016). As the Me Too movement has demonstrated, sexual assault and harassment impacts women of all ages and walks of life, even those in positions of power. Representative Teresa Tanzi, of South Kingstown, Rhode Island, was among the multitudes of women responding to the initial #metoo tweet. Said Tanzi, “I can say that as an elected official, as a state representative I have experienced this first-hand ... I have been told sexual favors would allow my bills to go further. ... it was someone who had a higher-ranking position” (qtd. in Tempera, 2017).

The prevalence of rape culture is the product of a society built around traditional gender roles — the powerful male figure forcing himself upon a submissive woman. While it is true that abusive scenarios do not always fit this mold, a majority of the cases are of a woman being

assaulted by a man. Part of the solution, then, is to shift the dynamic between men and women to one of mutual respect and communication.

The Me Too movement has been part of this effort, empowering victims to make their voices heard. With so many allegations coming out against celebrities such as Harvey Weinstein, the focus of the online movement's beginnings, the public was forced to hold accountable for their actions men who at one time would have seemed untouchable. This served as a wakeup call to the world at large that such behavior will not be tolerated any longer.

The approach embraced by millions of social media users since October 2017 is an important step in changing treatment of women and others, inspiring hope. However, the sheer number of responses to Milano's original tweet by survivors of sexual assault serves as a reminder of how daunting a task solving such a widespread problem will be. Exposing past actions, reporting assaults as they occur, and prosecuting offenders is just the beginning. All will be relevant in dealing with the present situation and supporting victims, but to truly change the narrative we need to take proactive measures to ensure that future generations will benefit.

Around the United States, education initiatives are taking root, focusing on the meaning and importance of consent in the context of intimate relationships. Consent is defined as verbal or otherwise clear agreement between two people prior to participation in any form of sexual activity ("What Consent Looks Like"). According to Rhode Island law, an offender can be convicted for first degree sexual assault if consent is not obtained, including situations in which the victim is mentally or physically impaired by drugs such as alcohol, and in which they are threatened or otherwise coerced ("Consent Laws").

Despite consent's standing in courtrooms and as an essential component of a healthy relationship, many adults and young adults are unaware of its meaning and implications. The root of this is that they were never taught about consent. Many colleges now address this through

classes, orientation speeches, and guest speakers (Marcantonio). Jonathan Kalin, a past employee of Brown University's Swearer Center and founder of Party With Consent, is one such speaker (Bennett, 2016).

Programs such as Kalin's are especially important due to the differences in how men and women perceive consent. For example, one study found that men tend to judge consent primarily through interpreting body language, whereas women are far more likely to define consent as requiring a definite verbal statement (Bennett, 2016). This imbalance illustrates the skewed societal relationship between men and women, which can become a major factor in abusive situations. Educational programs at colleges are one step in the process of remedying this confusion by encouraging more outright communication in sexual encounters.

While there is much to be said for addressing these issues in college, waiting until then to introduce consent education is too little too late. For many in Kalin's audiences, his lecture is the first or the most they have ever heard of consent. The topic is not traditionally included in high school sex education, which generally relies on a mantra about abstinence and the dangers of sex. The focus on abstinence blatantly disregards the fact that many teenagers engage in sexual intercourse, with 37% of Rhode Island high schoolers having done so ("Rhode Island"). This is a sizeable minority, not to be ignored. So is it really reasonable to delay discussion of consensual sex until after over a third of the students being addressed have already experienced sex without this knowledge as guidance?

It is time to move beyond education policies which ignore adolescent behavioral patterns and may even endanger students by keeping them in the dark about components of safe sex. The states of California and Virginia have already acknowledged this by codifying into law permission for secondary schools to teach about the nuances of consent ("Rep. Solomon"). Rhode Island has the potential to join their ranks with the passing of a bill introduced in January 2018. The bill

revises previous sex education requirements to include that “part of the course instruction may incorporate ... programs on the law and meaning of consent” which “[increase] student awareness of the fact that consent is required before sexual activity” (Solomon et al.).

If passed the terms of the bill will bring the issue of consent to health educators’ attention, where before it was not addressed at all. However, the precise wording that the curriculum “may” include consent is far too gentle; no changes are actually being made in the legal terms of consent education. Teachers will not be required to cover consent — but they should be. The road to passage of this bill has been and will continue to be politically fraught; nevertheless, in the future lawmakers and their constituents should push to make mandatory inclusion of consent in high school health classes a new standard. Every incoming college freshman should already be equipped with the knowledge of their undeniable right to give or withhold consent, and their duty to pay attention to and respect others’ boundaries.

By updating the statewide high school health syllabus, Rhode Island can be at the forefront of a nationwide movement to not only address sexual assault cases in the present day, but to also prevent such problems from occurring by educating future generations.

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