

## **Women May Not Be the Problem, but They Can Be Part of the Solution**

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In the past year the national news, the White House, and college campuses have all been focusing on incidents of, how to adjudicate cases of, and how to prevent sexual violence. This issue is especially relevant for sorority women. Studies show that “given fraternity men’s disproportionate representation in rape statistics and the frequent social interaction between fraternity men and sorority women, the potential for sorority women to experience sexual assault is concerning” (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013). That said, the greatest disservice fraternity and sorority advisors can do is to see all women as victims rather than activists and to spend all our energies focusing on how to correct men’s behavior rather than teaching our women how to be effective bystanders and rejecters of common rape myths.

College Panhellenics are often the largest women’s organization on campus. Mobilizing these women to take a stand on sexual violence and to refuse to tolerate a culture that allows violence can be powerful. Further research is needed to know if women taking action will motivate men to do the same, but research suggests that “‘opinion leaders’ in communities can spread knowledge and ideas to others and thereby diffuse the information throughout the community. Key to the theory is the communication channels by which the innovation is diffused; those introducing the idea must be well respected within their community. In order to be persuasive, those who deliver the message must be similar to those who receive it” (Cox, Lang, Townsend, & Campbell, 2010).

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month and the perfect time to start getting women involved. Sorority sisters have an obligation to take care of each other. The mere use of the word ‘sister’ versus ‘friend’ demands more from these women. The Center for Disease Control reports 37.4% of female rape victims were first raped between ages 18-24 and a study of undergraduate women shows 19% experienced attempted or completed sexual assault since entering college (2012). These statistics are scary, so we must be courageous in attempts to reduce the amount of violence committed against women *and* men. If working with college age students has taught us anything it is that when students choose to act they can achieve powerful results. As advisors we need to help our students make violence prevention popular.

One of the greatest obstacles to creating this movement on campus is the lack of personal relevance to the issue. Unless a student knows someone who has been affected or they themselves have been victims, students may say, “Sexual violence isn’t happening here. Not on our campus.” Without much thought or any investigating, it is easy for students to write this issue off as something that is in the news but is happening somewhere else. If our community members took the time to look up the nationally required campus security reports, they would know sexual violence is indeed happening on campus and complacency cannot be an option.

Once students accept the reality, it is easier to rally them around awareness, prevention, and intervention efforts. It is critical that as advisors we encourage women to act and connect them to the campus resources whose work revolves around this issue. Our campus partners who are advocates or Title IX coordinators can always use more help and support from eager students. Here are some examples of how to engage our women in this cause:

- **A Values-based Approach.** The values of our organizations require a response to sexual violence. Appealing to the core purpose of fraternities and sororities is an easy way to connect with members of any fraternal organization. As an example, steadfast love requires us to care for a sister who has been a victim of violence or to intervene when a sister is at risk. A true gentlemen does not take advantage of another person and confronts his brother who is taking advantage of another. One creative way students can share their values and be a part of the cause is through taking the “It’s On Us” pledge. Students can modify the pledge to stand not only against violence, but also a statement about living their values, which is what fraternal organizations do when they are at their best.
- **Participation in Awareness Events.** Students must be engaged in raising awareness. Hosting events that include role-playing or brainstorming what to say to a sister or brother gives students the opportunity to consider their thoughts and actions prior to being put on the spot. In addition, events like Take Back the Night allow students to hear from their peers who have been affected by sexual violence and to come face to face with the fact that it *does* happen on our campus. Events like Take Back the Night build respect for this issue because of the courage of those sharing their stories. Finally, events like Walk a Mile in Her Shoes can be effective in helping the men in our community show the women on their campus they support them and they too will not tolerate violence.
- **Bystander Training.** “According to proponents, the success of programs that implement a bystander intervention approach, as opposed to those that focus only on education and risk reduction, is due to their focus on altering community norms that contribute to sexual violence” (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013). Our students want to act and bystander training gives them the tools to do so. There are many bystander programs out there, but at their core they empower students to act in ways that do not involve social liability because status can be an important dynamic in fraternity and sorority communities. Bystander training allows students to discuss and role-play scenarios they might see on a regular basis and practice how to intervene so they have ideas for what to do the next time they are out.

Involvement in all of these areas will empower women (and men) to be a part of the solution rather than the victims of societal problems or accepted norms of the college campus and/or fraternity/sorority communities. It is not required that all women are involved in all of these ways, but it is required that we engage our women. We need to remind them that more important than being a victim is being a survivor. Women need to know they do not need to do everything, but they need to do something – they need to be a part of the movement that creates a solution.

## References

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