

## **A Simple Truth – She Was 12. She Was (allegedly) Sexually Assaulted – Let’s Start There**

In 24-hours I witnessed the public revelation of how unchanged Canadian attitudes are about sexual assault victims.

The case is that of the alleged sexual assault of a 12-year-old girl by a 16-year-old boy in NE Calgary. Support and understanding for the victim flourished when the case was first thought to be a stranger assault. As details began to come out about their previous online contact, and the use of alcohol, sympathies began to turn into victim-blaming.

After 27 years of working in this field, it is still discouraging to have to educate people about the myths around sexual violence. It is still discouraging to have to explain how these myths blame adult survivors of sexual assault for their victimization, let alone to publicly view these myths at play in the case of a child.

The crux of the problem is that society still refuses to recognize sexual assault and sexual abuse for what they are: crimes of violence where sex is used as the weapon. Just as fists are used to harm in physical assault, sexual activity is used to harm in sexual assault. It really is that simple.

It is easier for people to say this happened because they were all drinking, or because she had previous online contact with her attacker and may have agreed to “hook up” so what does she expect. It is easier to say she “consented”, which under the consent law is impossible for her to do, and that this was simply a misunderstanding. It is easier to say this happened because modern communications have corrupted the morality of our youth.

It is easier to sit back and make comments that are subtly blaming her for the assault, or as part of “kids today” comments. While these words may not be meant to blame, they are heard as such by adult and child victims alike.

Instead, the issues we should be talking about are much more difficult to voice, like why a 16-year-old might want to use his age and influence to meet up with a 12-year-old for sex. Why the young bystanders were unable to recognize the situation for what it was. Why these bystanders were unable to challenge their own stereotypes and myths about women and girls and sexual assault. Why society is still so quick to want to ignore and deflect the real issue of sexual violence and how it hurts individuals and our communities.

These are uncomfortable topics for any adult, because they not only require us to look deeper into the causes of sexual violence, but also to act. When we know why this happens, then we are required to respond to stop it before it becomes another child’s reality.

Violence of all types begins with the abuse of power and control, and sexual violence is no different. These kinds of incidents have been a part of society for a long time, but now we have the access to information and the skills to do something about them.

It is time we recognize that our attitudes affect our reality – as long as we blame people for their victimization, we will never address what causes offenders to use violence in the first place. As long as we dismiss these kinds of assaults as being caused by something not related to violence, we deny perpetrators access to changing their behaviour. As long as we deny children information about healthy relationships, sex and sexuality, sexual violence, their rights, and the laws as they apply to them, we cannot expect them to recognize sexual violence when they see it.

The longer we turn a blind eye to the realities of sexual violence, the longer this issue will stay with us, buried deeply in silence and secrecy.