

Society makes wrong assumptions with assault victims

In keeping with the pieces on Smurfettes and McDonald's hamburgers spanning the moon, I wanted to write a ha-ha column. But I can't really be witty right now. An assault incident that I heard about two weeks ago struck me as so frightening - and so frighteningly typical - that I'm still troubled by it.

My mother volunteers with an organization in New Jersey to help battered women and children, and she sometimes tells me of incidents she has handled. The circumstances vary: sometimes it is a jealous boyfriend slapping around his girlfriend, sometimes it is a child being abused by a parent unprepared for that responsibility. Other times it's a stranger accosting another stranger. But just as upsetting as the attacks themselves, for me, is the response these victims tend to get when they seek help.

It's apparent that there is a "blame the victim" attitude that taints the judgment of even those with careers to help others. "Victim blame," when phrased that way, causes most people to scoff at the notion as ridiculous. It's a bit more subtle than that, but it's adding up to a lot of rape and battery victims being told they "asked for it."

I don't know the attitude's boundaries, and I don't know its origins. I wish I did, because I might be more in a position to deal with it. I don't

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know why, or how, someone who doesn't know the details will automatically say, "Well, why did you make him do (whatever) to you?" But for whatever reason, it happens.

The incident I have in mind is one in which a 19-year-old woman fled her drunk boyfriend because he was kicking, punching and biting her. She knocked on a neighbor's door for help, hyperventilating, with a bleeding cut on her face and her blouse ripped open from an aborted rape attempt. And the first thing that her neighbor asked, after hearing her breathless tale, was (in these words), "Well, what did you do to him?"

In truth, she had done nothing, nothing even to ruffle his feathers. The man was a borderline alcoholic who was known in the area for an ugly temper, for a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality corresponding to his sober-and-drunk states. She wasn't aware of it because she just saw him on weekends in the summer. As the story goes, she was only at the house to break up with him because of a similar assault the night before, and he got mad because she was leaving.

Yet this neighbor, knowing the girl's character, and that she wasn't a troublemaker, and knowing the

man even better, not only assumed that she had provoked the attack, but obviously believed that there were actually certain actions which would justify a vicious attack. A cause-and-effect relationship. He is beating you because you did thus and such, so you're really to blame.

I've witnessed that same attitude in other situations, especially when a woman has been raped. The first question that pops up is, "Was she walking alone?" She was probably somewhere she shouldn't have been, and good Lord, she was wearing that? Well, how could she expect

anything else??

Call me old-fashioned, but women, men and children should be able to do whatever they desire without expecting anything to happen to them. They should, and do, have the right to be left alone. If somebody violates that right, they are to blame.

Sure, you can be cautious. You could call it a good idea not to walk alone, or not to frequent a place where assaults commonly occur. But if they do, they are only unfortunate. They are not the fault of the victim. When a crime is committed, it is the

criminal who did it. With an assault case, the victim is not to be blamed because someone found her attractive, or because someone was in a bad mood, or drunk.

To condone one who physically abuses another because of such trivial circumstances as time or place, or a misinterpreted look, or a sharp word, is to say it's okay for that abuser to act on wild, fleeting impulse, the seedy side of human nature. Everyone gets mad and may think for a second, "God, I just want to kill him," but the feeling passes. Every law in the world is designed

to regulate people's impulses, and to keep them from doing just whatever they feel like. Chaos would ensue if not.

But for these crimes, the victim is subtly, perhaps not consciously, certainly not openly, but most definitely, held as responsible for the crime as the criminal. It will continue to obstruct justice and deny help to those in need for as long as it prevails, either in the courtroom or at a neighbor's door.

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Citizen requests slow some state senators

By voting \$100 million in mostly military aid for the Contra guerillas in Nicaragua, Congress has handed President Reagan a victory that's remarkable even for a president who seldom loses.

Reagan worked harder for Contra aid than he had for few other foreign policy issues since becoming president, even overruling senior advisers who favored negotiations with the leftist Nicaraguan government.

As recently as January 1985, Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was pronouncing Contra aid as a lost cause.

"Aid to the Contras is not viable because it is no longer covert and because Congress will probably not continue to fund it," Lugar said in a speech to the National Press Club. As for giving aid openly, Lugar said, "that would be very close to declaring war."

Eighteen months later, the Senate joined the House last week in approving \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in non-military aid for the Contras.

Equally important, Congress removed the restraints preventing the Central Intelligence Agency from helping the Contras.

"It is remarkable," Mark Helmke, an aid to Lugar, said of the turnaround. He said Reagan succeeded because he persuaded a reluctant Congress that if the Contras weren't backed now, Nicaragua would become a Soviet base and American troops eventually would have to be sent. Moreover, he said Reagan's argument that Nicaragua posed a threat to its democratic neighbors in Central America was persuasive.

Reagan chose to ignore international law and charges by oppo-

R. Gregory Nokes
Associated Press

nents that funding the Contras was tantamount to an act of war. The administration ignored the World Court, which had ruled that aiding the Contras was an unlawful aggression against another country, and it vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution aimed at enforcing a World Court decision.

There were many other hurdles: ■ Embarrassments. There was the 1984 disclosure of the CIA involvement in the mining of Nicaragua's harbors and in preparing a guerilla pamphlet that seemed to advocate assassinations.

■ Domestic opposition. Besides the polls showing Americans against Contra aid, Reagan had to contend with the opposition of most mainline churches.

■ International opposition. Only one country, Honduras, openly advocated aid to the Contras. Canada, France, Italy and Common Market countries have continued to give aid to the Sandinista government.

■ Military ineptness and corruption by the Contras. After nearly five years of fighting, the Contras were unable to hold a single important piece of territory in Nicaragua. Moreover, charges are widespread that they committed human rights abuses, engaged in drug dealing and misused previous U.S. funds.

A senior State Department official involved in Central America policy-making said Reagan's own involvement carried the day.

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