

Asking For It

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Introduction

Rape culture affects every single person without us even knowing it. It is an idea that has been around for so long that sometimes we cannot even recognize it as a problem. Like all social issues, it must be addressed and discussed with applied perspectives and logic in order to be understood and for us to begin to solve the problem. In the book *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture- and What We Can Do About It* by Kate Harding, rape culture is explained and deconstructed with logic, examples, and personal experiences. The book discusses rape culture and offers one major thing that all victims and allies alike can appreciate: hope for justice.

Summary

Asking For It by Kate Harding is a complex and powerful work, as it not only illustrates the history of sexual violence, but also offers personal insight and solid evidence, specifically focusing on women in the U.S. The book consists of three parts; “Slut Shaming, Victim Blaming, and Rape Myths”, “Law and Order”, and “The Culture of Rape”, each comprised of three or four individual chapters, specific in content. Harding breaks her arguments into chapters so each subject matter can be discussed individually and have a greater focus.

The first part, “Slut Shaming, Victim Blaming, and Rape Myths” explains how sexual assault is perceived by people and in our society. Slut shaming is criticizing a woman for her real or assumed sexual activity. Harding explains that when girls are slut shamed, they are often seen as “asking for it”: a common idea that a person deserved to be sexually assaulted. The author writes that in no case is a woman asking to be assaulted, and the idea of slut shaming is imbedded rape culture. Victim blaming is when the victim of a crime is held completely or

partially responsible. Victim blaming happens so often it can even go unnoticed. Harding explains this with common remarks in response to an act of sexual violence, especially rape, such as “she shouldn’t have been drinking”, “she shouldn’t have been alone”, or “she shouldn’t have been wearing that” (28). These type of reactions in turn cause people to seek ways that they can avoid being raped, which Harding points out as ironic because we should instead be enforcing people not *to* rape. Rape myths are attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape, which often give social advantages to the rapist. Harding refutes common rape myths, describes how harmful they are to rape victims and addresses false accusations.

Part two, “Law and Order”, describes the justice system and the process people go through when they report sexual assault. Harding explains rape kits and how thousands of them are not tested, reactions from law enforcement when a rape is reported and how they can discourage the victim from taking the crime further, and the relevant abortion debate. Often law enforcement does not treat cases of sexual assault as serious as they should. Regarding abortion debates, Harding quotes multiple politicians who have made crude and absurd comments regarding the “true” rape cases (127). She also reports in depth about sexual assault in the military and the retaliation against victims if they chose to report their cases. She discusses the unfair actualities of rape victims and those who choose to report their rapes, and why they do not usually see justice.

Part three “The Culture of Rape” focuses on how rape is presented in society. Harding examines popular reaction to rape by the media, how rape is portrayed in mainstream entertainment, and misogynists. She presents several examples of rape in television shows and movies and how it is claimed to be consensual, but clearly is not. She also focuses a great deal on “trolling” on the internet; which is deliberately offending people on the internet to make them

react angrily. These users attack many feminists by posting their private information on the internet, and they are widely known for being aggressive misogynists. Misogyny is the dislike or prejudice against women. In the last chapter of the book, Harding tells her story in detail of her rape and the events that followed it. She then discusses her reasons for hope and specifically cites instances on college campuses when protests have occurred due to violations of Title XI rights, which states that a school prohibits sexual violence and harassment. She offers inspiring stories and ends the novel by leaving the reader feeling hopeful for change.

In *Asking For It* Harding focuses on United States rape culture regarding women, because she notes that exploring rape cultures worldwide would be an extensive, lifelong, and continuous project (5). She encompasses topics such as controversial rape allegations, the ongoing abortion debate in politics, institutional failures in places with high power, and angry internet misogynists who aim to destroy feminist efforts. She approaches each topic with thorough research from both sides of each argument and combines it with her individual and sarcastic voice. Though Harding doesn't directly acknowledge to taking a sociological perspective in her book, one can apply conflict theory to her reasoning. According to Steven Barkan, an established sociologist, in the textbook *A Primer of Social Problems* conflict theory is "the view that society is composed of groups with different interests arising from their placement in the social structure" (20). Harding's arguments conclude that groups of certain types of people experience specific issues within rape culture, which leads to the intersectionality of it with other social issues. Each part of the book coincides with one another and leads into the next topic, leaving very little arguments unexamined. Harding leaves her readers with a profound understanding of rape culture and the problems society faces as we advocate for change.

Reasons For Change

Harding makes many claims throughout her book, and continues to back up those claims with examples and logic. Her main claim of the book is for her readers to understand the problems within rape culture and advocate for change, however she makes several other claims to back up her main claim. She frequently examines cases and explains what is, by definition, considered rape. Harding writes “a person is guilty of rape in the first degree ‘when he or she engages in sexual intercourse with another person who is incapable of consent by reason of being physically helpless’” (117). She also explains the definition of being physically helpless as when “a person is unconscious or for any other reason is physically unable to communicate unwillingness to an act” (117). With this, Harding claims that any situation in which an individual is unconscious, intoxicated, or otherwise physically helpless and they are raped, then the crime must be considered rape. This argument is addressed after she analyzes several rape cases, most of which ended with the accused being found not guilty even though they had all the components necessary to consider the crime rape. Juries even have a hard time distinguishing what rape is, which ultimately leads to unfair rulings and no justice for the victims. Harding reasons that when a victim does not or is incapable of giving consent, then that is the very definition of rape.

In part one of the book Harding explains public perception of rape and in part two of the book she addresses cases of sexual assault in the legal system. Both of these parts build her claim that all rape cases should be handled professionally and seriously, regardless of who the victim is or what their story is. Rather than blaming the victim and explaining to them the ways in which they could have avoided the situation, she asserts we should focus on comforting the accused and seeking justice for them (31). Harding also explains that law enforcement is very discouraging to

some victims who report their rape. They are often deterred from even continuing the process of going to trial, which leads to no justice and allows the rapist to walk away free. Harding makes a point to note how cases of sexual assault should and should not be handled. She explains that police reports have shown that some officers have chosen not to believe alleged victims and make the process seem like a hassle for them, to which the cases then became ignored (88). She couples this fact with another from US police departments' annual reports, in which regarding how many rape cases they thought were false "some estimated that 95 to 100% [of cases] were false reports" (qtd. in 87), however Harding earlier states that only 2-8% of rape accusations are false (61). She explains that this inherently stems from rape myths and public perception. This fact is not known well by the police officers, as many alleged victims' cases are declared "unfounded" and are not pursued. Harding makes a claim that alleged victims should not be judged or blamed by law enforcement for their rape. Even the lack of tested and processed rape kits is due to the shortage in budget to test them. Harding offers a quote from Eric Eckholm, a *New York Times* reporter, who wrote "The reasons for the backlog, experts say, include constraints on finances and testing facilities" (qtd. in 99). A lack of financing is a highly unfortunate circumstance to an even more unfortunate crime, which further defers victims from coming forward. Several cases prove that had the victims' rape kits been tested, their rapists would have been identified and would've prevented future rapes from occurring. Not only is this a matter of seeking justice for victims, but also preventing the same crime from happening to someone else.

In chapter two, "Simple Safety Tips For Ladies", in Harding's book she discusses the ways in which society attempts to prevent rape. She explains that in anti-rape campaigns companies and organizations use threats towards the rapists, such as that they could go to prison

for the crime, however she asserts “the suggestion that ‘you don’t want to go to prison’ is the best rationale for not raping. As opposed to say ‘you don’t want to be a horrible...human being’” (19). She points out the irony of, rather than pointing out moral reason for people not to rape, we advocate legal reasons. This stems from boys not being taught early on not to rape, which although to parents seems absurd is evidently necessary, as Harding notes. She claims that parents should teach their children about consensual sex, as it is a moral duty to prevent one from possibly becoming a rapist in our rape-supportive culture. (37). She simply states that we must promote consensual sex and the presence of “yes” as a necessity for everyone in their sex lives.

Harding notably uses all these claims to inspire the most important claim and purpose for her book: we must advocate to change our rape culture. The previous claims point out the absurdities and injustices within the legal system regarding sexual assault cases, victims, and even the falsely accused rapists. They also highlight the portrayal and assumptions towards alleged rape victims and the common public reaction that many cases are false allegations. Her voice in the book certainly gets across the importance of the issue to her readers, and her clear combatting research used to back up her arguments is especially supportive and crucial in her main claim. The purpose of Harding’s book is, as she explains in the introduction, to “contribute to this miraculously ongoing conversation about a subject that’s historically gone unremarked” (8). Harding’s book is ultimately a call for her readers to recognize the injustices and immoral behaviors within rape culture. The last chapter of the book especially focuses on the already impressive movements from certain people regarding their own cases. Most notably, Harding references a student at Colombia University who vowed to carry a mattress with her around campus until the school imposed a punishment on a student who allegedly raped her. Eventually other students came together and left a total of twenty-eight mattresses on the door of the

university's president (222). Harding notes that stories like these are what gives her hope and claims that we, as readers and moral humans, should come together and move towards a fair and understanding rape culture.

Legitimizing

In *Asking For It*, Harding remains aware of her claims and the information that she is presenting. She often explains both sides of her arguments thoroughly and respectfully, while providing evidence for the reader to draw their own conclusions. Regarding false convictions, she explains how majority of the false accusers are often former victims or they suffer from mental illness (72), she writes "I certainly don't want to downplay how that choice [to falsely convict a person] can devastate innocent lives...I'm not interested in making excuses for fraudulent victims, who make it that much harder for real one to get justice" (65). Harding is fair and honest when presenting evidence and uses logical reasoning, which adds to her logos and ethos. She also notes in the very beginning of her book that when her book is eventually published, the information might have changed or more relevant evidence may have arose (221). For example, had Harding written the book more recently she more than likely would've included the recent rape trial of the singer Kesha. The readers might wonder how Harding would've used recent trials and accusations to further assert her claims. By acknowledging that her book will not be current to date, she gains likability and credibility as an author.

Harding cleverly uses comedy to her advantage in her book. It adds to her credibility, as well as incites emotion within the reader. Rape, being such a complex subject, can often be perceived as intense and serious. While it should definitely be taken seriously, that does not mean the manner in which it is discussed has to be. Harding often makes jokes in her writing at those whom she criticizes. This makes her likeable to the audience, as it makes the subject

enjoyable to read about, and builds rapport between the author and the reader. Her comedy can also be viewed as logical due to this factor, because she is smart in how and when she uses it where it isn't too much to overpower her arguments, but it also isn't too subtle where it goes unnoticed. Harding's dialogue makes her engaging in several ways, most notably being that she seems to talk directly to the reader throughout the book, making it seem as though they are having a conversation. This makes the material seem more intimate and personal with the reader, which can add to the overall experience and how well her arguments are recognized. This type of bond can be very helpful towards the author's ethos because it builds the audience's trust in her. Harding constructs her arguments very carefully so that the audience can follow along while feeling as though they are part of the argument. Her style is crucial in how her claims are perceived by the readers.

The author also frequently mentions her own rape and eventually tells her story. This technique is especially helpful because it prominently helps her credibility as well as forms a bond with the reader. Reading her story was deplorable, and I can only imagine how someone would feel if they went through the same ordeal of a trial that didn't lead to justice. Trials that result in no justice for the victim are mentioned frequently throughout the book, which also helps Harding build a strong connection with readers and with those who are also victims of sexual assault. Her story can assure them that they are not alone, which further adds to the credibility of the book and appeals to pathos. Her story sets up the ending chapter of the book, which explains her hope for change in culture, overall leaving the reader feeling empowered and inspired.

Social Issues

Conflict theory can be applied to Harding's arguments because she focuses on the inequalities within society and certain groups of people. Feminist theory also applies because she

focuses on women being victims, and all the rape myths that appear regarding women and female stereotypes that are inherently engrained in people's minds. Steven Barkan defines feminist theory as "the view that society is filled with gender inequality characterized by women being the subordinate sex in society" (20). Due to common stereotypes of women, concerning personality or physical traits and habits, this leads to the absurd idea that women are "asking for it" (to be raped) and causes an unfair biased justice system in which we take part in victim-blaming, as opposed to holding the rapist responsible, which is the righteous action to take. Conflict theory and feminist theory do not just pertain to the book's main social issue of rape culture, they also apply to the intersectionality which contributes to and further complicates the issue. Harding also discusses gender roles and stereotypes and racial discrimination in depth. Because these issues are intertwined in many rape cases, it is necessary to address and understand them.

Gender inequality is a prominent social issue in today's society, with numerous large advocacy groups and nationwide recognition. In *Asking For It*, Harding mainly focuses on women as victims and men as rapists. For the first part of the book, she spends a large portion explaining slut-shaming, which in popular culture is directed towards women. Derogatory names such as "slut", "whore", "tramp", and more are thrown around often and casually between people. They are used to describe a woman based on her sexual encounters or even her physical characteristics. What some people fail to understand or recognize is that a woman's clothing, features, or sexual activity do not make her a "slut". These presumed social norms, however, increase the idea that a woman could be "asking for it", as though she deserves to be raped. Harding notes that in John Gray's book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, a popular and top-selling relationship book, he writes that men and women are "wired" to think differently

(qtd. in 13). This type of thinking is not uncommon, as it is considered “normal” in society for women to be weak, delicate, and sexual beings while men are tough, irresistible, and lacking emotion. Gender stereotypes are not only harmful to women, but also men as they teach them that rape is normal of their behavior because it is their nature. Harding even writes that “every American boy is at risk of growing up to become a rapist” (37). This is partly because our society perpetuates the double standard that men who have a lot of sex are “studs” but women who do so are “sluts”. Unfortunately these standards have been in place for a while, even when we do not realize it. Gender stereotypes not only cause people to blame the victim for their crime, but also excuse the rapist for his actions.

Racial discrimination is also a prominent social issue within rape culture. It primarily intersects with gender stereotypes, which Harding points out frequently in her book. She gives an example of an eleven year old girl in 2010 from Texas who has repeatedly gang-raped. Harding notes that she is Latina and therefore subjected to “hot and spicy” stereotypes (20).

Unfortunately these stereotypes are common and resulted in a bevy of victim blaming, even though she was an eleven year old girl. Even male stereotypes are harmful because they create a stereotypical rapist and can lead to false victim blaming by racial law enforcement, such as a stereotypical image of a rapist being an aggressive, angry, person of color with a violent object. Even racially discriminatory law enforcement can perpetuate this idea. Harding gives the example of a rape case in 1989 in which law enforcement put the blame on a group of black and Latino teenagers and falsely convicted them (74). Racial discrimination can also be due to the jury, in which defendants of color are convicted more often than white defendants, which gives an unfair advantage and emphasizes another issue of white privilege. Race plays a key issue that can also lead to intersectionality of other issues, leading to an unfair outcome.

There are many more social issues that appear and intertwine with rape culture. Social class plays a big part, where public figures can receive sympathy from fans or are able to discretely resolve the case, where someone of lower social class would most definitely not be able to do. Politics and law enforcement also offer injustice because often cases are dismissed, contradictory to the victim's desire to prosecute. Misogyny also interferes because it enforces victim blaming on women, and further enhances the idea that a female victim was "asking for it". As shown, many issues correlate and intercept with rape culture and Harding notes that they all contribute to the stereotypes and perception of sexual assault. Social issues can be combatted by people who recognize them and are devoted to finding ways to end the issues.

Conclusion

Though rape culture has certainly gained a large movement of people who aim to see its end, Harding notes that much still needs to be done. *Asking For It* offers logical reasoning to arguments and well-thought-out evidence to allow even the least knowledgeable of readers to understand this issue. Conflict theory and feminist theory can be applied to better understand Harding's arguments from a sociological perspective. Harding specifically explains that in recent years there has been a vast amount of coverage on this issue, and there are many people coming out with their stories to share and help other victims realize that they are not alone. She notes that change, advocacy, and synergy is needed in order to reshape society's view of rape and eliminate rape culture, as it is immoral and harmful to victims and society as a whole. She describes hope as an important motivator in the ongoing fight for justice. Her hope in the outcome of this book is that "all who read it will be moved to join that conversation [about rape culture]" (8). The more people who become informed on the subject, the more they will become motivated and

advocate for change. Hope is something to drive and inspire people to seek the end of rape culture.

Works Cited

Barkan, Steven. *A Primer On Social Problems*. 1st ed. Creative Commons, 2012. Web. 26 April 2016.

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