



## Sexual Violence in the 'Manosphere': Antifeminist Men's Rights Discourses on Rape

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role that men's rights activism (MRA) is playing in a contemporary backlash to feminist anti-rape activism. We engage in a discourse analysis of popular MRA websites to reveal a set of interrelated claims, including: that sexual violence, like domestic violence, is a gender-neutral problem; that feminists are responsible for erasing men's experiences of victimization; that false allegations are widespread; and that rape culture is a feminist-produced moral panic. We argue that sexual violence is emerging as a new focus of the men's rights movement, competing with a longstanding emphasis on fathers' rights. The subject of MRA activism has shifted and is becoming less familial and more sexual. MRAs appear to be using the issue of rape to mobilize young men and to exploit their anxieties about shifting consent standards and changing gender norms.

### Keywords

Sexual assault; rape; antifeminism; men's rights activism; backlash.

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## **Introduction**

The problem of sexual assault has re-emerged as a politicized issue in the public sphere, with allegations against well-known media personalities, including Canadian radio host Jian Ghomeshi and American entertainer Bill Cosby, and publicized sexual assault scandals at several universities. In the midst of these stories gripping North America, there is strong evidence that feminist claims have made inroads into public discourse. Media coverage has begun to deploy feminist concepts like 'rape culture' and there is growing outcry about institutional failures to respond (for example Kingston 2015; Kohn 2015; Venton-Rublee 2014). At a time when feminists have again broken the silence around rape and sexual assault, there are also growing signs of a backlash. This echoes an earlier antifeminist backlash that emerged in the 1990s in response to feminist social science research demonstrating the pervasiveness of sexual violence.

In this paper, we explore the role that antifeminist men's rights activism (MRA<sup>1</sup>) is playing in a contemporary backlash to feminist anti-rape activism. While there have been many scholarly analyses of men's rights campaigns around father's rights (Boyd 2004; Boyd and Young 2002; Collier 2009) and domestic violence (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011; Mann 2008), the only explorations of MRA activism surrounding sexual violence, to date, have been journalistic accounts (for example Matchar 2014). Here we examine popular MRA websites to reveal a set of interrelated claims about sexual violence, including: that sexual violence, like domestic violence, is a gender-neutral problem; that feminists are responsible for erasing men's experiences of sexual assault; that false allegations of sexual assault against men are widespread; and that rape culture is a feminist-produced moral panic. This paper contributes to a feminist literature that has critiqued MRA deployments of discourses of inequality, disempowerment and silencing to frame feminism as persecuting and denigrating men, and as seeking to take away their human rights (Dragiewicz 2011; Kimmel 2002; Mann 2008; Messner 1998). While these highly misogynist discourses are challenging sites for feminist research, we contend that it is important to engage as there is a real danger that MRA claims could come to define the popular conversation about sexual violence.

## **Situating ourselves: 'Don't be THAT Guy/Girl'**

We did not come to this research through scholarly interest. Instead, when MRAs sought to undermine a local anti-sexual violence campaign, this project found us. Edmonton has been home to an award-winning campaign against sexual assault, 'Don't be THAT Guy'. Labelled Sexual Assault Voices of Edmonton (SAVE, see <http://www.savedmonton.com/>) and comprised of a coalition that included the University of Alberta's Department of Women's and Gender Studies, this campaign used social marketing directed at men as a tool of sexual violence prevention. The edgy ads from SAVE's first campaign begin with the tagline 'Just because ... ('she isn't saying no'; 'you helped her home'; 'she's drunk'), and end with 'doesn't mean... ('she's saying yes'; 'you get to help yourself'; 'she wants to f\*\*k'). The ads challenge the social norm of male sexual entitlement and seek to delegitimize common excuses for sexual assault. Don't be THAT Guy intentionally 'Others' the rapist, who becomes THAT guy, that guy who you don't want to be. The campaign also seeks to raise awareness about Canada's strict legal standard for consent. Largely as a result of feminist law reform and litigation, Canada has moved towards an affirmative consent standard (Gotell 2010). There is no implied consent in Canadian law; silence and ambiguity cannot be taken as indicating agreement to engage in sex; and consent must be active throughout a sexual encounter. Don't be THAT Guy disrupts rape myths by reminding its audience that the reality of sexual assault is not solely confined to having sex with someone who is saying no; sexual assault is legally defined as having sex with someone who is not saying yes.

In July 2013, Men's Rights Edmonton (MRE), a group closely affiliated with the well-known antifeminist website A Voice for Men (AVFM), created a copycat poster that distorted one of SAVE's original ads. Entitled 'Don't be THAT Girl', the poster plays on the myth that false allegations are widespread and states: 'Just because you regret a one night stand, doesn't mean

it wasn't consensual. Lying about sexual assault is a crime'. Displayed around Edmonton and disseminated online, the poster quickly spread throughout the 'manosphere,' the cyber-world of men's rights that, as Robert Menzies has argued, unveils 'a truly remarkable gallery of antifeminist content' (Menzies 2007: 65). The MRE poster and antifeminist dialogue surrounding Don't be THAT Guy stand as powerful examples of an increasingly prominent focus of MRA, the challenge to feminist claims surrounding sexual violence.



**Figure 1: Photo posted on Twitter by James Muir ([https://twitter.com/ephraim\\_quin](https://twitter.com/ephraim_quin), accessed 16 September 2013)**

MRE's copycat campaign drew us in, politically and personally, though in different ways.

*Lise Gotell:*

As a spokeswoman for SAVE, my phone rang off the hook the day these posters went up. I did ten media interviews in the space of twenty-four hours. I felt it was important to respond to misrepresentations disseminated by MRE's poster by emphasizing that false accusations are very rare (Lisak, Gardinier, Nicksa et al. 2010). Instead, high prevalence rates, under-reporting, high police un-founding rates, and low conviction rates cause what researchers in the field call a justice gap (Tempkin and Krahe 2008). Survivors are still routinely blamed, stigmatized and disbelieved in the criminal justice system.

It was not long before I realized that by engaging with MRE's message in the media, I had given this group a platform and painted a target on my own head. Following my public response to Don't be THAT Girl, MRE created a poster (Figure 2) and a blog post entitled 'Lise Gotell, Bigot Extrodunaire [sic]' (MRE 2013a). Through these widely circulated attacks, I experienced first-hand the intimidation and harassment that are common tactics used by MRAs in efforts to silence and discredit feminist scholars and activists (Blais and Dupuis-Deri 2012).



Figure 2: 'Don't be THAT Bigot' poster (MRE 2013a)

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When these MRE posters went up, the communities I move in were shaken. I walked to University the day they were posted and tore down several that had been put up both on and off campus. Speaking with others, it was clear we shared feelings of violation and anger. The presence of these MRE posters made my progressive community and the University area feel unsafe. Quickly, a community response was created. Feminist organizers asked that folks rip down these hate-propagating posters and we held a series of community meetings to talk about the discomfort they created. We strategized about the best way to respond to MRE, as well as how to keep each other safe at rallies and lectures. In many ways, this paper is a way of continuing the dialogue started then.

### **Anti-anti-rape backlash**

In the past few years, counterclaims to anti-rape feminism have intensified, casting contemporary feminism as a force of stultifying political correctness (Gotell 2015). This resistance shares much with earlier manifestations of what some have called the anti-anti-rape backlash (Bevaqua 2000: 181). In the 1990s, amidst law reform inroads as well as the first representative studies of sexual assault (Dragiewicz 2000), postfeminists Camille Paglia (1992) and Katie Roiphe (1994) pushed back against feminist research revealing the pervasiveness of sexual violence. They criticized a sexually correct form of feminism that they saw as convincing women to redefine bad sex as rape, in the process manufacturing a crisis. These polemical claims took the form of an ideological battle waged through the media and were eagerly taken up in a cultural context by those anxious to put to rest the troubling claims of anti-rape feminists.

We need to be mindful of the analytic problems with the metaphor of backlash. This concept presents an overly simplified view of both feminism and anti-feminism, obscuring historical, social and cultural complexities, and failing to capture intertwined periods of change and resistance (Chunn, Boyd and Lessard 2007: 6). Nevertheless, an analysis of backlash usefully draws our attention to intense periods of resistance to feminist successes (Gavey 2005: 64). Antifeminist counter-movements gain momentum in times when feminists make political and cultural inroads, intensifying in reaction to the apprehended loss of, or challenge to, male privilege (Blais and Dupuis-Deri 2012). We wonder if now is not one such moment, a moment as in the 1990s, marked by multiple voices pushing back against feminist struggles around rape.

The contemporary anti-anti-rape backlash consists of overlapping sites, both academic and popular. What weaves together these expressions is their shared dissemination of a caricatured depiction of anti-rape feminism as harmful. The recent scholarly critique of 'carceral feminism', for example, constructs feminism as politically regressive, complicit in the consolidation of the neoliberal law and order state, associated with the rise of a retributive ethos, the social disenfranchisement of the poor, and the disproportionate incarceration of racialized populations (Bernstein 2012; Reece 2011). Ignoring the complex feminist politics surrounding criminalization strategies, critics single out feminist law reform campaigns as having played a central role in consolidating punitive politics (Gotell 2015).

A backlash to anti-rape feminism has been similarly reflected in popular culture. In newspapers and on popular news websites, the concept 'rape culture' has been identified as a feminist-produced moral panic (for example Kitchens 2014). Statistical evidence of rape's pervasiveness has come under fire (for example MacDonald 2014). Efforts to respond to sexual violence on university campuses have been condemned as abuses of due process that stigmatize innocent young men (MacDonald 2014). Media critiques blame 'ideological' feminism for constructing men as rapists and for absolving women from taking reasonable steps (avoiding binge drinking, for example) to prevent rape.

These counter-claims respond to feminism's recent legal and cultural successes; specifically, to the consolidation of an affirmative consent standard in law, as well as to the growing cultural acceptance of prohibitions on victim-blaming. Backlash voices converge on common themes, including the suggestion that feminist reforms have gone too far and that, rather than succumbing to the protectionist impulses of 'victim feminism,' women should take responsibility for preventing sexual violence. According to backlash claims, a feminist-inspired political correctness has taken hold, producing an ideological ban on victim-blaming that prevents reasonable advice about behaviours that increase the risk of rape. In this context, it is increasingly clear that the injunction against blaming victims constitutes a radical challenge to the disciplinary messages of rape prevention, threatening to undo a set of rules that have constrained women's behavior, and unsettling responsabilizing codes that hold women accountable for the violence they experience. In response to this challenge, we are witnessing a move to reinstate gendered rules that cast women as safety-conscious victims-in-waiting, while leaving men's behaviours unscrutinized (Gotell 2010). As we illustrate, MRA claims about rape play a central part in this emergent backlash, positioning men as the scapegoated and silenced victims of anti-rape feminism.

### **Researching MRA sites: To engage or not to engage?**

In this article we present our cyber-ethnographic and discourse analyses of sexual violence-related content posted on three MRA websites between mid-2013 and the end of 2014:<sup>2</sup> AVFM, the most visible North American antifeminist MRA website, which receives as many as 12,000 hits per day; the *Canadian Association for Equality* (CAFE), the website of the main Canadian MRA organization; and MRE, a website maintained by local group that gained attention through its Don't be THAT Girl campaign. We also analyzed some of the videos posted on these sites,



including *YouTube* videos produced by the popular female MRA Karen Straughan, who is associated with both MRE and AVFM, and who has spoken at CAFE-sponsored events. Together, websites such as these form a dense network of MRA content, through which articles that originate on 'brother' sites are frequently reposted, with many of the same activists producing content across sites. By way of example, when University of Ottawa Professor Janice Fiamengo's CAFE-sponsored talk 'Why Call it Rape Culture?' was closed down by students from a campus socialist group, the text of the talk appeared as an article on AVFM (Fiamengo 2014). Although MRAs condemned this disruption as censorship, Fiamengo's views nevertheless reverberated across the 'manosphere'.

Our experiences with MRE prompted us to become close observers of MRA web activity, monitoring websites, blogs and online discussions. Our analysis of MRA sexual violence discourse draws on this ethnographic background. Like Molly Dragiewicz's (2008) examination of fathers' rights web discourses, our exploration of AVFM, CAFE and MRE was qualitative and purposive, closely interrogating constructions of sexual violence and of anti-rape feminism. The line between sexual violence and normative sexuality is socially constructed and a site of intensified struggle. Through our discursive analysis of MRA texts on sexual violence, we teased out the gendered ideologies and cultural scripts they articulate. Our objective was to analyze MRA arguments in order to identify key themes, which form the basis for the sections of the paper which follow. In addition, we have attempted to situate core elements of MRA discourse on sexual violence and gender norms in relation to the wider context of neoliberal governance.

While any casual examination of MRA websites reveals their intense preoccupation with feminist struggles around sexual violence, there has been no scholarly analysis of this political development. This neglect may well be a function of the vile misogyny characterizing this material. As Menzies writes in his influential work on MRA websites:

For feminists ... these cyber-sites can be arduous territories to negotiate. The seemingly endless torrent of hostility, petulance, propaganda, and downright hate-mongering that cascades from these pages is hard to digest and capable of evoking all manner of visceral reactions. (Menzies 2007: 87)

The Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC), which monitors hate groups, has started listing MRA organizations in its annual survey of hate sites, citing their virulent misogyny and encouragement of violence against women (Coston and Kimmel 2013: 376). AVFM has found a prominent place on this list (SPLC). On this misogynous site, women are frequently referred to as 'whores' and 'cunts'. In 2010, AVFM's founder Elam (2010a), proclaimed 'Bash the Violent Bitch' month. Elam and other contributors regularly organize campaigns of harassment against feminists, including through the affiliated website register-her.com ([http://www.register-her.com/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://www.register-her.com/index.php?title=Main_Page)), which is devoted to exposing women who make false allegations, as well as to so-called (feminist) bigots (see also Men's Rights Edmonton 2013b). Extreme antifeminist content makes it challenging to undertake careful empirical research analyzing these websites. Simply put, engaging with MRAs can be nauseating and infuriating work.

As many activists have learned through participating in online or in-person debates, MRAs rely almost parasitically on feminist outrage. Scholarly attention can thus have the unintended consequence of amplifying their messages. In addition, serious engagement with the men's rights movement (MRM) reinforces a simplistic 'us versus them' framework that leads to a number of strategic problems. This dichotomized framing can have the effect of shoring up feminism against an external enemy. We can certainly understand the seduction of focusing on an external enemy at a time when feminist politics seems disunited and riven by internal conflict (with feminists divided around issues like sex work and prostitution, for example). Yet a rich theoretical and political pluralism has always marked feminism, and this needs to be

understood as a source of strength. The desire for a unity that never was can result in the suppression of contestation within feminism, reinforcing an image of feminist politics as uniform and lending credence to the 'feminazi' caricature propagated by MRAs and social conservatives.

Treating feminists and MRAs as two sides of a one-dimensional struggle also misdiagnoses resistance to feminism. In a context of neoliberal governance, feminist movements have been decisively delegitimized, their critique of gendered systems of power swept aside in favor of individualized rhetoric of 'responsibility' and 'autonomy.' New norms of governance encourage us to see ourselves as self-managing, degendered citizens, responsible for our own well-being. 'Postfeminism', celebrating personal agency and promoting the view that feminism is passé, has become the dominant discourse on gender relations (McRobbie 2008). A decontextualized focus on MRA backlash obscures these profound challenges. Ignoring this broader context also ignores how MRA claims gain ground because of their resonance with neoliberal discourse, including an emphasis on gender-neutrality, formal equality and individual responsibility (Menzies 2007).

So why engage with MRAs when this project seems to be so fraught? Ultimately, we agree with Menzies that the analysis of MRA claims can deliver important lessons about the contemporary status of feminism (2007: 66). The escalation of MRA discourses on rape provides an indication of feminist success in reshaping social norms about sex and sexual violence. However, there is also a real danger that this highly visible MRA mobilization around sexual violence could foreshadow the erosion of feminist influence. MRA claims about sexual violence threaten to move the mainstream in regressive, antifeminist directions (Matchar 2014). Undeniably, these antifeminist discourses can seem compelling, particularly since they redeploy progressive concepts like rights and equality, and play upon widespread anxieties about feminists having swung the pendulum too far.

### **Shifts in MRA tactics and discourse**

Until recently, the MRM has been largely synonymous with fathers' rights activism (Boyd 2004; Boyd and Young 2002; Collier and Sheldon 2006; Menzies 2007). Throughout the 1980s, the 1990s and the early 2000s, MRM politics took a decidedly state-centered form, focused on feminism's perceived attack on fatherhood through family law. During this time, groups sought to shape law reform and policy discourse on child custody, access and support (Boyd and Young 2004). MRAs also contested feminist assertions about the gendered character of domestic violence and challenged anti-violence policies for being biased against men (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011). Claiming discrimination against men, advocates sought to disband domestic violence services that protect women (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011; Mann 2008). Sidestepping structural understandings of inequality, the antifeminist MRM appropriated formal equality arguments, asserting men's equal right to parent and insisting on gender symmetry in domestic violence.

Fast forward to contemporary times, when MRA tactics have become decidedly virtual and focused on shifting attitudes through cyberactivism rather than by influencing law. Aside from the push for presumptive joint custody (for example CAFE 2013), there is now relatively little MRA engagement in the realm of public policy. Interestingly, this anti-statism echoes developments in feminism, with third-wave feminism emphasizing grassroots direct action and cultural struggles, while turning away from engagement with the state and law (Snyder 2008). This mirroring of feminism lends support to the interpretation of the MRM as a reactionary 'counter-movement'. Yet the decline of state-focused strategies also needs to be understood in relation to the context of neoliberal governance. Given a political context in which gender and the gender equality agenda have been largely erased from political discourse (Gotell 2010), gender conflicts have increasingly moved outside formal politics. Cyberspace, in particular, has emerged as a new terrain of struggle. The Internet offers a decentralized mechanism for the

dissemination of MRA politics. Extremists and hate groups are increasingly embracing new media forums (such as websites, blogs and *YouTube* channels) as avenues to deliver their messages (Dunbar, Connelly, Jensen et al. 2014). In these spaces, MRAs are building virtual communities founded on malice against feminists and mobilizing men on the basis of a claimed identity as victims.

While fathers used to be constructed as the principal 'victims' of feminism, MRA attention is increasingly shifting to young men and sexual politics. As we discuss below, if you are brave enough to visit AVFM, you will find that much of the site's content is focused on rape, with the repeated message that feminism erases men's victimization, while unfairly depicting men as rapists. We do not mean to suggest that MRAs have abandoned their political focus on father's rights or domestic violence. However, as Emily Matchar (2014: online) argued in a recent article in *The New Republic*, the MRM has shifted its attention to the issue of rape: 'As the nation [United States] grapples with rape in increasingly public ways – Obama's January formation of a new task force to address rape on college campuses, the widespread publicity around the Steubenville and Maryville rape cases – the MRM is crying foul'. As our analysis demonstrates, MRAs are crying foul through a number of interrelated assertions that emerged as themes in our analysis: that sexual violence is gender-neutral; that feminists are responsible for a cover-up of men's experiences of victimization; that feminists have created a climate where false allegations are rampant; and that rape culture is nothing more than a moral panic.

### **Sexual violence as gender-neutral**

There is an obvious parallel between MRA arguments about domestic violence and the thrust of newer claims about rape. As Dragiewicz (2008, 2011) demonstrated in her work on fathers' rights rhetoric about the Violence Against Women Act, MRAs coopt the language of equal rights in order to undermine feminist gains. They do so by claiming a false symmetry between women's and men's experiences of domestic violence. Grounding the antifeminist discourses examined by Dragiewicz is a set of misrepresentative empirical claims about women as perpetrators of domestic violence (2011: 88). MRA rhetoric on rape is likewise preoccupied with refuting statistics that demonstrate how sexual violence is gendered. MRAs contend that statistics distort reality, exaggerating women's victimization, while erasing the sexual violence experienced by men. An insistence on the gender-neutrality of sexual violence is the theme of numerous articles and videos on AVFM (for example, Levental 2014) and a focus of recent campus talks organized by CAFE (Skedline 2014).

Statistics are an ongoing focus of struggle because it is empirical research that brings feminist political claims about rape into realm of scientific 'fact' (Gavey 2005). As Nicola Gavey has argued, feminist empirical studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s revolutionized the research on sexual violence by demonstrating that rape was not rare, that it coexisted with other forms of unwanted and coerced sex, and that most acts were committed by men known to their victims. These findings posed a serious challenge to normative heterosexuality by undermining the narrow view of 'real rape' as violent stranger-rape and revealing how sexual violence is linked to everyday gender norms. The norms of male sexual activity and of female sexual submissiveness, which are still largely viewed as unremarkable within the commonsense logic of heteronormativity, form the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (Gavey 2005), gendered ideologies that enable and excuse sexual violence. As Gavey contends, while the challenge posed by feminist empirical research had been clearly expressed within theoretical critiques of heterosexuality, it became 'more potent' 'when the message took the form of scientific data, rather than "merely" political rhetoric' (2005: 63). The significance of the methodological innovations pioneered by feminist researchers can be seen in their continued influence on approaches to measuring sexual violence used in government surveys (such as Canada's General Social Survey and the Center for Disease Control's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)). Conducted using expanded methods, these studies have yielded



considerably higher prevalence rates of sexual violence against women (Johnson 2012: 616). Official statistics continue to demonstrate the pervasiveness of sexual violence, as well as the gendered character of the crimes of rape and sexual assault.

MRA arguments about rape statistics move in contradictory directions. MRAs contend that feminist empirical research is 'junk science' that exaggerates a crime that is very rare. The repeated target of critique is the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) conducted by Mary Koss, Christine Gidycz and Nadine Wisniewski (1987). Based on random sample 6,159 college women, the SES found that one in four women has experienced rape or attempted rape. According to Diana Davidson (2013), a former writer for AVFM, Koss should be added to the 'Cunning Stunts of History' for producing an 'imaginary epidemic'. Echoing the 1990s backlash (during which postfeminists critics like Roiphe (1994) made virtually identical arguments), MRAs insist that the SES exaggerates sexual violence because it operationalizes rape using multiple behaviorally specific questions, rather than by directly asking participants if they have been raped (for example Davidson 2013; Straughan 2013). In short, MRAs assert that this methodology manufactures victims.

While feminist research is accused of constructing an 'American rape machine' (Honey Badger Radio 2014), the statistics produced by this 'machine' are used to bolster MRA claims about gender symmetry. American MRAs have seized on findings from the NISVS (Breiding, Smith, Basile et al. 2014) showing that, while women remain overwhelmingly the victims of rape, men and women have roughly equivalent 12-month rates of sexual coercion and unwanted sex (for example Roe 2014). The behavioral methodology pioneered by Koss, Gidycz and Wisniewski (1987) (for example, asking if you have had unwanted sex 'because someone gave you drugs or alcohol') is thus simultaneously spurned and embraced, used to underline men's victimization while rejected for supposedly inflating that of women (for example Levental 2014). If, as many MRAs demand, 'being made to penetrate' were considered to be rape within surveys like the NISVS, men's and women's overall rates of sexual victimization would be equivalent. Rather than recognizing how survey instruments operationalize legal definitions, which, for jurisdictions that maintain the crime of rape, preserve a penetrative standard, MRAs blame the exclusion of 'made to penetrate' from rape statistics squarely on feminists (Wallen 2013)

Although women and men can both be sexually aggressive, women disproportionately experience victimization, while men perpetrate the vast majority of sexual violence (for example Johnson and Dawson 2011; Statistics Canada 2013). As the 2011 NISVS concludes, for example, 'the burden of sexual violence ... is not distributed evenly,' with 'women, in particular, impacted heavily during their lifetimes' (Breiding, Smith, Basile et al. 2014: online). MRAs distort this evidence, cherry-picking findings to reinforce their insistence on gender symmetry. The gender-neutral picture painted is one that depoliticizes and individualizes sexual violence, honing in on isolated acts abstracted from the power relations that define them. The gendered sexual norms that constitute the dynamics of sexual assault are thus obscured. As Dragiewicz has astutely observed, MRA tactics of minimization and denial mimic the justifications deployed by abusive men (2011: 65).

### **Men as victims**

Alongside assertions of gender symmetry, MRAs deploy the rhetoric of male victimization in order to contest anti-rape feminism's claims. SAVE's Don't be THAT Guy campaign became a lightning rod for MRA outrage. According to many articles and videos posted on the websites we researched, Don't Be THAT Guy is depicted as 'misandry' (hatred of men) exemplified, constituting 'hate speech' because it 'targets a gender and all members of that gender as perpetrators of rape' (Straughan 2013). Straughan's widely viewed v-log 'Don't Be that Lying Feminist' (2013) (86,298 hits) is posted on both MRE and AVFM. Straughan contends that feminist 'ideologues' victimize men by 'associating the behaviour of a small group with the

group as a whole' (2013). 'Don't be THAT Guy', she argues, is based on the erroneous assumption that 'all men would rape if only you forget to remind them not to every 15 seconds' (Straughan 2013). Contrary to Straughan's depiction, this campaign's emphasis on men was not meant to construct all men as rapists, but instead to stigmatize perpetrators and to educate men about consent. SAVE was challenging the sexist thrust of prevention discourses that have long framed individual women as being primarily responsible for ending sexual violence through restricting their behaviour and mobility.

Seeking to deflect any male responsibility for sexual violence, MRAs construct men as the true victims of both women and feminism. As we argued above, men are first depicted as the literal victims of sexual violence enacted by women. MRAs contend that feminists have defined the social narrative on rape and erased this widespread victimization (CAFE 2014; Golden 2013; Wallen 2013). As Hannah Wallen argues in an article on AVFM, feminists are complicit in the erasure of men's victimization in order to 'maintain [women's] monopoly on perceived victim status', which allows them to preserve a 'government and corporate funding meal ticket' (2013). To pierce though what they present as being a feminist-enforced silence, MRA websites amplify stories of individual women perpetrators, while dismissing allegations against men, which are always represented as products of false accusations.

In addition to emphasizing literal victimization, the websites also position men as the victims of pervasive false allegations. David Lisak and his co-authors (2010) have concluded that the cumulative data soundly contradict the belief that false allegations are a common occurrence. Yet in typically hyperbolic tones, AVFM's Elam (2013) cites a discredited study by Eugene Kanin (1994) to argue that more than 50 per cent of police reports are fabrications. On MRA websites, cases of purported false accusations are routinely called upon to illustrate the perils of a hegemonic feminist ideology. 'Ideological feminism' is blamed for creating a culture of believing victims, even at the cost of wrongful convictions (Straughan 2013). Of course, these MRA claims fail to acknowledge the regularity with which police dismiss reports of sexual assault and the astronomical rates of attrition within the criminal justice system (Johnson 2012). Interestingly, in more recent activism, MRAs have begun to deploy progressive anti-racist rhetoric to bolster arguments about false accusations. Drawing on a longstanding history of racist rape allegations against black men, accusations against American entertainer Bill Cosby have been presented on AVFM as 'high tech lynching' (Ali 2015). While incorrectly deployed, this acknowledgement of structural racism stands out against the essentialist and gender-binarized framework that dominates the MRA discourse and that constructs men as a group as being under threat from feminists.

On the whole, and echoing Dragiewicz' (2008, 2011) observations about MRA domestic violence discourse, these arguments work to minimize men's responsibility for sexual violence. The claim to speak on behalf of powerless male victims lends moral status to the MRA claims, just as this rhetorical strategy serves to demonize feminists.

### **Rape culture as feminist-inspired moral panic**

Following from assertions of sexual assaults' gender symmetry and of men's victimization are MRA efforts to displace the feminist concept of rape culture, a concept that has begun to shape mainstream views. On the websites we examined, it was very often feMRAs – female men's rights activists – who were the strongest critics of rape culture, with activists like Straughan (2013), Fiamengo (2014) and Barbara Kay (2014a, 2014b) taking the lead in contesting feminist arguments. Women's voices can serve to legitimize claims that would likely be viewed as being clearly more offensive if put forward by men. And there is surely no shortage of highly offensive MRA writing on rape. As Warren Farrell, who is often represented as the 'moderate' academic voice of the MRM, has written, 'If a man ignoring a woman's verbal "no" is committing date rape, then a woman who says "no" with her verbal language but "yes" with her body language is

committing date fraud' (2000: 315). Elam (2010b) is even more overt in insisting that women are asking for it:

In that light, I have ideas about women who spend evenings in bars hustling men for drinks, playing on their sexual desires so they can get shitfaced on the beta dole; paying their bar tab with the pussy pass ... But are these women asking to get raped? In the most severe and emphatic terms possible the answer is NO, THEY ARE NOT ASKING TO GET RAPED. They are freaking *begging* for it [emphasis in original].

The claim that women are begging to be raped does not translate as well into the mainstream as the femRA emphasis on men's victimization and feminist extremism.

The assertion that rape culture is a feminist-inspired moral panic is a predominant theme within a broader backlash to anti-rape feminism (Gotell 2015). There are connections being forged between the MRM, and media manifestations of anti-anti-rape backlash. Right wing columnists writing in mainstream media venues, including Caroline Kitchens in *Time Magazine* (2014), Barbara Kay in *The National Post* (2014a) and Margaret Wentz in *The Globe and Mail* (2013), have repeatedly made the argument that rape culture is feminist hysteria. The articles by Kitchen and Kay were both reprinted on AVFM. Last year, Kay, who is a columnist on a national Canadian newspaper, joined AVFM as a contributor (for example Kay 2014b).

Efforts to refute the feminist concept of rape culture follow a script that weaves together many of the themes we have drawn out here. MRA rape culture critics typically begin by challenging statistical evidence of the pervasiveness of sexual violence (Byset 2014), instead depicting rape as being very rare (Kay 2014a, 2014b; Fiamengo 2014). The concept of rape culture underlines how sexual violence is normalized and excused. By contrast, MRAs insist that most men understand rape to be a horrific crime: 'Feminists routinely deny, as a core article of faith, that rape is widely considered a heinous crime in North America' (Fiamengo 2014). Of course, the issue underlying this emphasis on rape as a widely condemned crime is not really whether people view rape as right or wrong. Instead, it is that rape is not seen as rape. Implicit in the MRA assertion that rape is both rare and horrific is an appeal to the idea of the narrow category of 'real rape', thus making acquaintance sexual violence – which we know occurs far more frequently than violent stranger rape – disappear. The effect is to draw a clear line between rapists and ordinary men and between everyday heterosexuality and rape.

Repeating the refrain of male victimization at the hands of feminists, MRAs blame the rape culture moral panic for branding men as rapists. As if blind to evidence that women's allegations are so often discredited, Kay contends that 'official sympathy for rape victims is creating a climate so overwhelmingly sympathetic to female victims of sexual abuse that the emerging cultural injustice is injustice to alleged perpetrators' (Kay 2014b). Fiamengo (2014) analyzes events at the University of Ottawa, including sexual assault allegations against members of the hockey team and online misogyny posted by student politicians; she uses the unusually strong response by the University administration (or 'slavish pro-feminism', in her terms) as evidence for the non-existence of rape culture. Men, she argues, 'are browbeaten to wear the hair shirt of collective guilt as potential rapists'. And, as a result of the 'success of the feminist narrative', 'the problems of men are ignored', and the 'reality of male victimization' remains unacknowledged.

There have been too many recent reminders of rape culture's persistence: CNN's emphasis on the ruined football careers of the Steubenville rapists; circulated cellphone images that effectively celebrate rape; rape chants on university campuses; and male student leaders engaging in misogynous banter about raping their female colleagues. MRA challenges to the concept of rape culture are, in essence, attempting to erase the systemic character of sexual violence and to reconstitute an individualized framing that makes sexual assault into something

women are responsible for preventing through sexual safekeeping. Many rape culture critics hone in on the necessity of responsible drinking, arguing that the best way for women to prevent sexual violence is to avoid getting drunk. As Kay (2014b) insists, for example, 'it is fair comment to observe that those women students who do not drink to excess, who are prudent about the kind of parties they attend, and who are selective about their sexual partners in general will doubtless reduce their odds much further, down to statistically nugatory levels'. According to Straughan (2013), feminist discourse on rape denies women's responsibility for rape prevention, '[t]reat[ing] women as toddlers who can't be trusted to drink responsibly or plan ahead'. This focus on compelling women to be the risk managers of rape culture lets men off the hook. Sexual violence is treated as a horrible accident that women might be able to avoid if feminists did not insist on censoring the safety rules. Hyper-vigilance, then, becomes promoted as a natural feminine state, a version of neoliberal (sexual) citizenship. By contrast, male sexual aggression is normalized. These reasserted sexual subject positions, with idealized masculine subjects consigned to the role of natural sexual aggressors and with idealized feminine subjects cast as re-action heroes, typifies the antifeminist backlash to anti-rape feminism.

### **Conclusion**

Our analysis, though exploratory, suggests that sexual violence is emerging as a new focus of the MRM. MRA rhetoric on sexual violence works to contest a gendered analysis of rape and sexual assault, to accuse feminists of erasing the victimization of men, and to paint the feminist concept of rape culture as a moral panic. In many ways, these claims echo more familiar arguments about fathers' rights and domestic violence. Yet within MRA rhetoric on rape, it is young men, rather than fathers, who are being depicted as being feminism's principal victims. As some journalists have argued, the MRA emphasis on rape can be viewed as part of a deliberate strategy to mobilize young men (Cross 2013; Reikai 2013). CAFE, for example, has adopted an explicit focus on young men, promoting the formation of men's issues groups on Canadian university campuses and holding campus talks where the critique of rape culture figures prominently (Cross 2013). The subject of MRA politics has shifted and is becoming less familial and more sexual. MRAs appear to be using the issue of rape to exploit young men's anxieties about shifting consent standards and changing sexual and gender norms.

As Matchar (2014) has warned, MRAs threaten to define the public conversation on sexual violence unless progressives, including feminists, start engaging with the issues they raise more comprehensively. Evidence that these misogynist discourses are moving into the mainstream lends urgency to this Matchar's warning. Last year, Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), a prominent voice in the US public discourse on sexual violence, issued an influential critique of the concept of rape culture, arguing that blaming 'culture' erases individual responsibility. While 'rape culture' was never meant to excuse perpetrators, RAINN's critique ignores the role of systemic factors, most notably of sexism and of gendered sexual norms. Another recent indication of the mainstreaming of MRA politics was CAFE's attainment of charitable tax status, which in Canada requires an absence of political bias. CAFE gained charitable status at precisely the same moment that many progressive charities have had their status revoked.

What would it mean to take up Matchar's call for a thorough engagement with MRA discourses on sexual violence? Academics concerned about the rise of antifeminist extremism need to explore both continuities and changes in strategies, including the shift towards young men and male sexual subjects as new emphases of MRA politics. Even though we are fully committed to retaining a gendered lens on sexual violence and to resisting the erasure of women's victimization, we suggest that it is important to grapple with men as victims. Feminist denial of the realities (though unequal) of men's victimization plays into the vilifying rhetoric of MRAs. It is necessary, we believe, to adopt a gender-inclusive view of victimization, while still maintaining a gendered analysis of sexual violence.

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<sup>1</sup> We use MRA as the acronym for both men's rights activism and men's rights activist.

<sup>2</sup> In some cases we also refer to significant interventions that precede this.

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