

**She said, he said. She said, he said. She said, he said. She said, she said,
she said ...**

Liam Fitzpatrick

Numbers 5:31 || Numbers 1:20

Men, if experiencing even the slightest inclination that their woman has committed the grave sin of premarital sex, are to drag her before the altar. There, the Priest is to etch the accusations into parchment. Upon running water over them, the husband is to force the now muddied, inky water down her throat.

If she has made herself impure, *'the water will bring a curse and cause bitter suffering'*. As it enters, her abdomen will swell and her womb will miscarry. She will be made forever infertile, barren, and sentenced to a life on the margins; stripped of her dignity, robbed of her womanhood.

Throughout this ceremony, *'the husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing, but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin.'*

No matter her innocence, the woman, now accused, stands besmirched.

Sexual morality, misogynistic law and the vilification of a sexualized woman; so describes the Book of Numbers. We read these tales, and to absolve ourselves of exploring their inferences, label them antiquated. We've evolved, we say. Women's sexuality is accepted, never admonished. When abused, perpetrators are met by the chilling grip of the law; women empowered by the system.

Or so we say.

And yet, for decades' thousands of women, from campuses across the world, have emerged from the periphery and disclosed being victims of rape. Their dignity, autonomy and consent stripped away in the most violent of ways; a grimacing story invariably told.

University management becomes the Priest in this exercise, so, seduced by financial and reputational incentives, suppress the stories and rights of survivors. Instead of treating their experiences with respect and earnestness, these women are blamed. These women are characterised as anomalies and disruptive, rather than symptomatic of a culture where women's sexuality is taboo, consent is misunderstood and where disclosures are met with lowered tones, vicious denials and the shirking of responsibility.

The whispers of victims, once muffled, are now represented starkly by the Human Rights Commission's report into campus violence.

Last year, one in 20 students were victims of rape. Nine in 10 went unreported, as victims either did not think the matter was serious enough or because their peers wouldn't believe them.

We are all complicit in this behaviour, ourselves embroiled in victim blaming, participants in this cycle of abuse.

President of the National Union of Students, Sophie Johnston, at the report's launch stated; 'for too long victims have been rendered silent by vague reporting systems and a society not properly taught lessons of consent. We have not recognised their trauma, but the difficulty

is in starting the conversation’.

Seemingly supplementary to our coursework, universities have taught us how to pardon perpetrators of blame and how a sophisticatedly phrased press release can dispense of accusations of systematic and ongoing administrative failure.

So here we stand, before the altar, the ink dripping from the Commission’s report down the throats of rape victims, poisoning their very existence.

She was drunk. We insist. He’s ultimately a good kid. We swear. Where’s the proof? We ask. Endemically, women bear the consequences of this most vile sin.

‘The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing, but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin.’

How times have changed. We say.

Andrea, a student at Wollongong University was raped last year by a student in her tutorial. Too intimidated by the process she applied for her rapist to be moved to another tutorial. A simple request? Instead, and after a five-week delay, university management sent her a document titled ‘Safety Plan’. Articulated over 11 pages was an agonising tutorial in how Andrea must adjust her university experience: ‘Keep alert for the unexpected. Don’t take unnecessary chances. Walk confidently. Walk in groups of two or more after dark. Stay in well-lit areas and keep to well-constructed paths’. Perhaps most perversely; ‘if you see the alleged perpetrator reconsider your need to visit that side of campus’.

Before the altar, Andrea’s perpetrator was absolved of his sin. For Andrea? She, to this day,

continues to be persecuted for the crime committed against her, besmirched for coming forward and disrupting the peace.

A study commissioned by Boston University studied a thousand people, and explored their propensity to blame rape victims. Found were two streams of people; Binders and Individualisers. Binders, whose instinct is to protect the group and who believe in societies 'justness' were more likely to 'responsibilise' rape victims and stigmatise their 'choices'. Whereas, Individualisers were more focused on fairness and preventing harm to an individual. Where a Binder associated the word 'rape victim' with 'contaminated', Individualisers gravitated towards 'injured'. On a count of 8:2, most were identified as 'binders', though all showed tendencies for both.

It seems we have the capacity, but not the instinct, to be on the right side of injustice. Change begins from within, they tell us. So how will you be remembered when this murky truth is retold to the generations to come?

Flora Jessop, an American activist for victims, speaks to this culture of victim blaming. She says; 'to those who abuse, the sin is all yours, the crime is yours and the shame is yours. To those who protect perpetrators: blaming the victims only masks the evil within, making you as guilty as those who abuse. Stand up for the innocent, or go down with the rest'.

The personal is political, and in the war against campus violence, our bodies are the battleground. I think we've trained ourselves to hold our tongues, to never agitate for change. We mightn't admire them, but we are intimidated by university management, so we acquiesce to them. We betray our sense of justice and stand by as victims are ravaged on our

campuses, and before our very eyes.

Victims are doused in documentation, doubt and words of discouragement. The ink trickles down their throats, poisoning them. For us, standing beside them, a different poison lingers in our psyche, festers in our college dorms and dictates university policy.

We isolate these women, we vilify them, and we challenge their stories. We pat them on the back, say a well-intentioned 'sorry' but ultimately delegitimise their experiences by not standing in strict solidarity with them.

Ultimately, in the war against victim blaming, it is impossible to stay neutral. In opting for silence, in not behaving disruptively, we have sided with the oppressor. The rapist.

Surely, that's the greatest sin of all?