



Day 7 -- 16 Days of Activism

WHAT WAS SHE WEARING?

Red leggings and a white t-shirt -- that's what I wore the night I was raped. It was 1985, and I was 15 years old. Right now, you are probably trying to picture what my outfit looked like. Were my leggings tight? Was my T-shirt cropped? Was my cleavage showing? Did it have a suggestive slogan?

Does it matter? **No. It does not.**

When assessing a sexual assault, the only question that matters is whether there was consent. But **rape culture** (the normalization of sexual violence) has caused people to believe that what a victim wears does matter. Because of rape culture, when trying to figure out why a rape occurred, the obvious answer — because the attacker is a rapist — is often overlooked. Instead, what the victim wore, consumed, said, and how they acted is questioned and scrutinized.

Classic **victim blaming is NOT acceptable**. Anyone who does not believe that victim blaming is prevalent in this society needs to watch *The Hunting Ground*. The documentary substantiated that when college students report rape or sexual assault, they are routinely asked, “What were you wearing?” “Were you drinking?” “What could you have done to avoid this situations?” **WHAT ABOUT THE PERPETRATOR???** If the perpetrator is a collegiate athlete, the investigation goes nowhere. The victim is blamed or is assumed to have given consent.



An exhibition which originated at the University of Kansas and is sweeping the nation provides clear evidence to dispel the myth that clothing can provoke a sexual assault. “What Were You Wearing?” displays 18 outfits worn by people during sexual assaults, along with a brief narrative from each of the survivors. The exhibit is powerful testimony to the fact that clothing worn by a sexual assault victim is completely irrelevant to why they were attacked.

An American is sexually assaulted every 98 seconds, yet only 1 in 3 sexual assaults are reported. The cycle of victim-blaming starts when victims are interrogated about their clothing, their alcohol consumption and their sexual history, taking the focus away from the only cause of rape: rapists. Victims begin to question themselves (“Did I do something to cause this?”) and with that questioning comes shame. With that shame, fewer victims report sexual assaults and suffer alone, which leads to less rapists being brought to justice. All this blaming and questioning of victims simply feeds rape culture.

Society needs to recognize that the only question to ask a victim of sexual assault is “What can I do to help?” Asking a victim what they wore when they were attacked is irrelevant, damaging, and ignorant. Exhibits like “What Were You Wearing?” help eliminate the notion that a victim is in any way responsible for their attack. Removing blame and shame from the dialogue will empower victims to report their attacks and begin their recovery, without shame or fear. What can you do? BELIEVE and SUPPORT victims.

