The dilemma of rape avoidance advice: Acknowledging women's agency without blaming victims of sexual assault

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question of whether there is a legitimate role for rape avoidance advice for women as part of a larger suite of efforts aimed at reducing the prevalence of men's sexual violence. It highlights an apparent dilemma between acknowledging women's agency and placing the blame for sexual violence on perpetrators rather than victims. The article builds upon analysis of the phenomenon of responsibility by moral and political philosophers to suggest a clearer way of thinking about this dilemma. I argue that because causal responsibility is a necessary but not sufficient element of moral responsibility, it is logically possible to hold that some victims could have prevented their rape and at the same time hold they are not blameworthy. I go on to argue that this poses a dilemma for feminists concerned to end rape, in that the practical interests of individual women in avoiding rape might at times be in conflict with women's strategic interests in ensuring that the burden (task responsibility) for ending rape rests with men (as potential perpetrators). I argue that while it is logically possible that some rape avoidance advice could help some women reduce their likelihood of being raped, the legitimate role for rape avoidance advice is circumscribed by its impact on women's strategic interests. The worth of rape avoidance advice in general should not be dismissed out of hand. However, the legitimacy of particular pieces of advice need to be assessed in terms of their impact on women's strategic and practical interests and this will vary depending on the quality and source of the advice.

Introduction

This article addresses the question of whether there is a legitimate role for the distribution of rape avoidance advice to women as part of a larger suite of efforts aimed at reducing the prevalence of men's sexual violence.¹ Since the 1970s feminist efforts to reduce the intolerable prevalence of male violence against women have been characterised by the insistence that the responsibility for such violence lies with perpetrators and not victims (Henderson, 1992; Rozee & Koss, 2001). Challenging rape myths – in other words, beliefs which diminish men's responsibility for rape – has been important to making the criminal justice system and other authorities more responsive to victims who report sexual assault. Feminists have campaigned for and developed programmes for teaching men and boys that they are responsible for treating women and girls with respect. In societies permeated by 'rape culture' this is urgent and important work. Though the relative effectiveness of different approaches to changing the behaviour of men are

worth assessing (DeGue et al., 2014), the legitimacy of this avenue for reducing the prevalence of rape is beyond question.²

By contrast, rape prevention efforts that focus on changing the behaviour of women and girls at risk of rape has long been identified as problematic (Campbell, 2005; Mardorossian, 2002). Holding women responsible for taking precautions against sexual assault is thought by some feminists to amount to 'blaming the sexual assault victim for what has been done to her' (Randall, 2010, p. 415). Some think all victim-centred approaches to sexual assault prevention should be rejected as a matter of principle. Exasperation with rape avoidance advice that is absurdly broad, impractical and paranoia-inducing finds an outlet in public protests and social media. In 2013 the social media hashtag #safetytipsforladies was appropriated by feminists satirising rape avoidance advice (Rentschler, 2015). A year earlier women in Toronto organised a Slutwalk to protest victim blaming and slut shaming in response to a male Canadian police officer's claim that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised'. Their protest has

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¹ Rape is primarily (though not exclusively) a crime committed by males against females (Rozee & Koss, 2001). Because creators of rape avoidance advice expect sexual assault victims to be women and girls the present article focuses on the prevention of rapes involving male perpetrators and female victims.

² In the wake of #metoo there seems to be a more receptive male audience for advice on how men can ensure the consent of their sexual partners, and avoid making women uncomfortable. This form of advice is to be applauded. Advice directed at potential perpetrators of sexual assault is not the topic of this article.

since been emulated in many cities around the world (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Slutwalks are a new incarnation of 'Reclaim the Night' marches which activists have held in numerous countries since the 1970s to protest the allocation of the task of rape prevention to women.

Yet developers of feminist rape resistance programmes have argued that because programmes aimed at changing men's behaviour have not yet lived up to their promise, it remains important to help women stay safe (Roze, 2011; Senn, 2011; Ullman, 2007). In an article in the on-line magazine *Slate* 'College Women: Stop Getting Drunk', Emily Yoffe (2013) argued that young women should be warned against excessive drinking due to the link between alcohol and sexual assault. The article provoked anger, even outrage, in readers and drew sharp criticism from other commentators, as well as defences of her position (Coughlin, 2013; Freedman, 2013; Marcus, 2013; Matchar, 2013; McDonough, 2013; O'Brien, 2013; Teitel, 2013; Wentz, 2013).

Yoffe complained that feminist activists are now so fearful of blaming the victim that they deny women can take personal steps to make themselves safer. The responses to her article do lend some support to this view: some displayed a reluctance to accept the premise that drinking less alcohol is an effective way that young women can reduce their likelihood of being sexually assaulted in the course of a night out (Brodsky, 2013; Gray, 2013; Pennington, 2013). Similarly, the instigator of #safetytipsforladies expressed skepticism about the efficacy of vigilance: 'I am absolutely sick to death of being told what to wear and what to do and how to be, as though any of that will somehow save me from being raped' (Hilary Bowman-Smart, cited by Rentschler, 2015, emphasis in Bowman-Smart). Clementine Ford, a feminist commentator who writes regularly on this topic, denies any safety precautions women take to avoid rape are effective (Ford, 2013; Ford, 2016).³ I propose, however, that while much rape avoidance advice is very poor quality it remains plausible that there are steps individual women can take to lower (though not eliminate) their risk of sexual assault.

Could it be that Yoffe is right that a taboo on rape avoidance advice comes at the cost of making women less safe? Are feminists who mock rape avoidance advice patronising women and denying women's agency, in other words, denying that the actions women as individuals decide to take produce effects? Lamb has argued that refusing to blame victims injures their dignity and reinforces passivity (1996). Even if the bulk of attention goes to changing perpetrators' behaviour, is there still a legitimate role for rape prevention strategies directed at women? Or does rape avoidance advice necessarily reproduce the 'social norms that enable society to absolve itself of any collective responsibility for tackling interpersonal violence' as Thapar-Björkert and Morgan (2010, p. 50) assert? Some scholars have proposed that it is contradictory or even hypocritical to believe that no one is ever responsible for being raped while also engaging in safekeeping practices such as wearing sensible shoes (Fanghanel & Lim, 2017). Feminist appear to face a dilemma between acknowledging women's agency and avoiding victim-blaming (Wendell, 1990).

The article builds upon analysis of the phenomenon of responsibility by moral and political philosophers working in the analytic tradition to suggest a clearer way of thinking about this dilemma. The foundation of my argument is that causal contributions to outcomes do not in themselves amount to moral responsibility for those outcomes. It is logically possible to hold that some victims could have prevented their rape and at the same time hold they are not blameworthy. Affirming women's agency is not the same as blaming victims. To rebut a possible objection to my argument, I argue that everyday people (by which I mean people

who are not moral philosophers) are capable of comprehending the distinction between causal contribution and moral responsibility. As evidence, I point to fields other than rape prevention where this distinction is readily grasped.

I go on to argue that feminists seeking to end rape face a dilemma in that the practical interests of individual women in avoiding rape might at times be in conflict with women's strategic interests in ensuring that the burden (task responsibility) for ending rape rests with men (as potential perpetrators). While it is logically possible that some rape avoidance advice could help some women reduce their likelihood of being raped, the legitimate role for rape avoidance advice is circumscribed by its impact on women's strategic interests as well their freedom to enjoy social and economic opportunities.

Distinguishing between types of rape avoidance advice

I want to begin by acknowledging that some rape avoidance advice is so obviously founded in rape myths that it is not worth considering here. Much safety advice for women has implicitly made women responsible for managing men's sexual aggression and reproduced the myth that 'provocative' clothing or behaviour on the part of women can somehow render men unable to control their impulses (Henderson, 1992, pp. 130–131). Such advice normalises sexual coercion as a response to female sexuality or vulnerability and denies men's agency (Randall, 2010, p. 409). Warnings to women to avoid inviting rape through their dress or behaviour convey the understanding that it is women, not men, who bear the responsibility when men rape women (save in the exceptional circumstances when the victim's dress and behaviour are above reproach) (Henderson, 1992). Advice of this nature may be promulgated by people wanting to reduce the incidence of rape. Nonetheless, it seems more likely to increase its incidence by reinforcing the rape myths that enable rapists to justify their actions to themselves and which hamper efforts to bring rapists to justice. Advice on how to avoid attracting the attention of male strangers ignores the reality that the majority of rapes are perpetrated by someone the victim knows. Much advice offered to women by police, educational institutions and media outlets is not based on evidence, and is so vague, contradictory or impractical that it offers no readily implementable course of action which could reasonably be expected to have an impact on a woman's chances of being sexually assaulted (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015; Brooks, 2011; Gardner, 1990).

Yet some rape avoidance advice is neither self-evidently based in rape myths nor impossible to follow. I want to propose three types of advice which potentially have some merit. All of these types of advice seek to empower women to impede the operation of violent men. The first is the advice which circulates among networks of women to avoid working with or being alone with specific men known to be perpetrators. Such advice is widespread, but discouraged by defamation laws. The second type is advice on how to physically resist aggressors (Marcus, 1992). McCaughey and Cermele (2017) argue that teaching women how to verbally and physically resist violent men is a practical, effective and underappreciated way of improving their safety. Given that most rapes are perpetrated by people known to the victim, rape resistance programmes which help women develop confidence in asserting themselves when threatened by men they know seem especially promising. These programmes address an important barrier to women acknowledging danger and taking effective action to protect themselves - their socialisation from girlhood to be nice (Senn, 2011). Charlene Senn and her colleagues have demonstrated in a randomised control trial that female undergraduates who received a feminist self-defense training were less likely 12 months later to have been sexually assaulted than their peers who had not taken the training (Senn et al., 2015).

The third type of advice is about alcohol consumption. The claim that young women can reduce their risk of acquaintance rape by reducing their alcohol consumption is logically sound (Abbey, 2002; Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996; Benedet, 2010, p. 438;

³ Sometimes skepticism about the efficacy of advice is expressed through the idea that safety precautions taken by one woman lead only to the targeting by her would-be rapist of a different woman, i.e. individual rape prevention has no impact on overall incidence of rape. My argument presumes that this is not always the case, i.e. at least some rapes are opportunistic.

Messman-Moore, Coates, Gaffey, & Johnson, 2008). Alcohol impairs cognitive and motor skills making it more difficult for an intoxicated woman to notice signs of danger and to take action to escape or resist a rapist (Abbey, 2002; Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2008; Senn, 2011, p. 125). Moreover, empirical research has found that many sexual predators choose to rely on alcohol rather than weapons or brute force to defeat their victims' resistance (Abbey, 2002; Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 450; Lisak & Miller, 2002; McWhorter, Stander, Merrill, Thomsen, & Milner, 2009; Ullman, 2007, p. 418). These men target women (often women they know) who are drunk, or ply their victims with alcohol, and then isolate them from their friends before raping them. It is hard to argue against the claim that limiting one's alcohol consumption is prudent from a safety point of view.

Having identified some types of advice that could plausibly help women reduce their individual risk of being sexually assaulted, I now want to consider the proposition that disseminating this advice entails victim blaming.

Thinking about moral and causal responsibility

Is it possible to think of victims as agents – as people whose actions produce effects – without holding them morally responsible for their victimisation? I argue that victims of sexual assault are never blame-worthy, though it might be possible to identify choices they made that form part of a causal chain resulting in violence. People who work with survivors of sexual assault observe that they often identify a choice they made but for which the sexual assault would not have happened (Lamb, 1996). It has been suggested that rape survivors do this because they have been conditioned by society to blame themselves, but survivors' tendency to fixate on something that they could have done differently is consistent with the counterfactual thinking engaged in by people who have experienced all sorts of other negative experiences (Roese, 1997). Whether we blame victims depends on how we think about the choices they made but for which the rape would not have happened. Some opponents of rape avoidance advice maintain that women's choices are not the 'real cause' of sexual violence against them (McDonough, 2013). In this way of thinking, the intentional acts of the perpetrator are the real cause, and render the victim's actions prior to the rape (such as drinking alcohol) merely incidental, rather than part of a set of necessary causal factors.

When we identify the real cause of something we usually 'select out one and only one of its causally relevant conditions as more important than the others' (Feinberg, 1970, p. 162). Figuring out which of many causal factors is the 'real cause' is not an empirical task. It is inherently value laden and subjective (Feinberg, 1970, pp. 201–202). How we single out one causal factor as the 'real cause' – in other words, the most important cause – depends on our purposes: are we looking to attribute blame, award compensation, or to prevent the event recurring in future? Disputes framed in causal language can therefore be disputes 'over which necessary condition of what happened is the most important one for purposes of judgment, understanding, prevention, and control' (Feinberg, 1970, p. 164).

When seeking the real cause of an incident we are usually looking for a deviation from the normal course of events. Everything else will appear to us as just stage setting. Much turns on whether we see male sexual coercion as unremarkable and to be expected. If we think that in the normal course of events men will sexually assault anyone they encounter who is vulnerable, then women who, for example, incapacitate themselves with alcohol appear extraordinary and their intoxication helps explain why they are raped. If on the other hand we think that it is normal and expected for women to get drunk and highly remarkable that men rape, then men who feel entitled to rape drunk women appear deviant and these men's aberrant sense of entitlement helps explain why they rape.

The fiercest opponents of rape avoidance advice seem either not to comprehend that not all the people causally connected to an event are

morally responsible for it, or fear that other people (including survivors of sexual assault and potential rapists) are unable to grasp this. If activists believe this vital distinction is too cognitively taxing for their audience they may be tempted to deny causal connection in order to deny blameworthiness. It may lead them to insist all women are equally vulnerable no matter what they know or what they do.

However, it is worth considering that in some fields other than rape prevention the distinction between causal contribution and moral responsibility is readily grasped. For example, consider the case of people whose health is affected by living in a city with a high level of air pollution. Their decision to remain in the city as its air quality declines might be rational in the sense that the social and economic sacrifices entailed for them by moving away from that city would be great. While recognising their agency in continuing to live in the city, we continue to recognise the injustice the air pollution and its threat to their health represents. Their decision to remain is causally connected to their respiratory problems, but we blame the pollution for their ill health, we do not blame their decision. Moreover, a government agency charged with environmental protection that put all its resources into blaming people for not moving away from polluted areas would be widely criticised for its mistaken focus. Why? Because there is a strong, widely held presumption that people should be able to breathe the air where they live.

The presumption that people should be able to be safe from sexual violence is held strongly by some people, but far less strongly by others. This – rather than a tricky conceptual distinction – is the guts of our problem. Presumptions of this nature are socially constructed and contested. Political work goes into trying to shift societal expectations of which needs individuals are themselves responsible for meeting and which needs are the responsibility of the society they live in (Mounk, 2017). It may be that the strong, widely held presumption that people should be able to breathe the air where they live will in future collapse in response to the political efforts of those with interests in polluting industries.

Some feminist researchers on sexual assault contend that holding women capable of avoiding and resisting rape is entirely compatible with refusing to blame women for men's violence against them (Abbey et al., 1996; Ullman, 2007, p. 424; Hollander, 2009; Standing, Parker, & Bista, 2017). While insisting that perpetrators are solely responsible for their crimes, experts on trauma hold that learning strategies to avoid being victimised in future can help survivors recover from sexual assault because it helps them develop their personal agency and sense of safety (Herman, 2015, pp. 160–161). Charlene Senn's experience of implementing and evaluating a feminist rape resistance programme for female university students is instructive. The rape resistance programme she devised teaches women how to impede men who seek to rape them while also teaching them that the responsibility for sexual assault lies solely with perpetrators. She reports that the programme has been successful in achieving both these goals and reports evidence that 'the programme successfully decreases rape myths and beliefs in female responsibility and provocation of rape' (Senn, 2011, p. 125).

Senn's experience suggests that women-centred rape prevention strategies do not necessarily undermine efforts to hold men accountable for their violence. It is worth noting, however, one unexpected and undesirable outcome of her programme. The women who participated in the programme 'decreased their beliefs in [the] social causes of rape compared to women in the control group, whose beliefs in social causes increased over their months in university' (Senn, 2011, p. 130). She found this unintended outcome 'disturbing' because the programme explicitly addresses societal beliefs about rape from a feminist viewpoint (Senn, 2011, p. 130). She believes that asking women to focus intensely on what they can do as individuals to reduce their risk of sexual assault had the effect of undermining messages about the need for societal change.

Women's practical and strategic interests

The denigration of risk reduction as futile reinforces the idea of women as equally vulnerable, perhaps motivating a broader pool of women to be engaged in collective efforts to change men's behaviour. Denying that women as individuals can do anything to avoid being raped contributes to solidarity among women and maintains the unity of women's interests in addressing rape as a societal problem. By contrast, personal risk reduction strategies are more divisive of women. In Hall's phrase, they 'atomize women' (Hall, 2004, p. 6). They appeal to women's agency as individuals rather than their collective agency to change society through feminist activism. Rape avoidance advice resonates with a larger trend in crime prevention which emphasises prevention of victimisation, shifting 'the problem of crime away from the state and onto would-be victims' (Gotell, 2008, p. 878; see also O'Malley, 1992; Stanko, 1996).

Fanghanel and Lim (2017) found many participants in Slutwalk marches simultaneously asserted women's right to be free from rape while admitting to personally following rape avoidance strategies. While Fanghanel and Lim interpret their interviewees as bizarrely taking on the responsibility to safeguard themselves against rape – a responsibility which is not rightly theirs – it is clear that the interviewees perceive the unjustness of this burden. Taking individual precautions need not indicate apathy about or endorsement of the status quo. Fanghanel and Lim's study participants were, after all, engaging in collective political action. Separating out blameworthiness and causal agency helps to resolve what Fanghanel and Lim perceive as a paradox. Fanghanel and Lim imply that their interviewees do not truly believe that women have the right to occupy public space, as if their participation in activism against rape culture is somehow hypocritical. A better interpretation is that they sincerely believe they have this moral right, but they know that due to the current culture of male sexual entitlement this right is not upheld.

To use terminology proposed by Maxine Molyneux, promulgators and followers of rape avoidance advice can be understood to be concerned with women's 'practical interests' – that is, those interests which arise from women's current societal position – while feminist opposition to rape avoidance advice emanates from a concern with women's 'strategic interests' – in other words, their interests in transforming society (Molyneux, 1998, pp. 76–85; see also Vetten, 2011). I propose that this distinction is helpful in understanding much opposition to rape avoidance advice and in developing a nuanced account of the circumstances in which rape avoidance advice is legitimate.

Defending Yoffe's position that women should be advised not to get drunk, the Australian media entrepreneur Mia Freedman wrote that though she believed that every woman 'should have the right to live her life free from the possibility of abuse, assault and rape' (Freedman, 2013), considering the issue of sexual assault prevention in light of her desire to protect her daughter made her see it differently:

It's very easy – I've come to understand – to have idealistic views about how the world should work. But those views mostly exist in the theoretical realm. Apply them to real life and real people, people you know and love and fear for and they evaporate.

(Freedman, 2013)

What Freedman ascribes to a conflict between real life and idealistic principles could be better understood in terms of a contrast between practical interests and strategic interests. Different roles – such as activist, parent or police officer – encourage a concern with different types of interest. These roles give us different purposes for asking causal questions and lead us to different answers. Roles focused on improving women's practical interests encourage us to focus on the causal factors which appear quickest and easiest to change through our actions, whereas roles concerned with building a more just society encourage us to look at any causal factors which are unjust.

This distinction is useful for thinking about Steven Pinker's

contention that 'rape counselors foist advice on students that no responsible parent would ever give a daughter' (Pinker, 2011, p. 406). Feminists working in rape prevention on university campuses do not give the advice Pinker expects parents to give – 'don't get drunk, don't get into bed with a guy, and don't take off your clothes or allow them to be removed' (Pinker, 2011, p. 406). Instead they concentrate on reinforcing the message that everyone deserves to be safe from rape. I suggest the contrast in the messages given to college students by parents and feminist staff on campus should be understood in light of the different weight differently positioned individuals and institutions give to women's practical and strategic interests. Feminists working in rape prevention are more concerned with the strategic interest of female students in eradicating rape culture from campuses, whereas parents of daughters are generally more focused on their daughters' practical interests. While Pinker interprets the apparent disinterest of campus feminists in promoting safe keeping practices as evidence of a feminist delusion, I propose that it is rational for them to focus on changing sexist norms that support rape. Demanding that men change their behaviour distributes the burdens of rape prevention in a fairer way than requiring women to limit their movements and live in fear (Hall, 2004).

The heart of my argument is that rape avoidance advice is more often objectionable because of *mistaken focus* rather than a faulty understanding of the causal connection between victim's behaviour and the assault against them (although plenty of poor quality advice demonstrates this flaw too). The legitimacy of rape avoidance advice varies depending on the source offering it and what their proper focus should be. What capacity and responsibility does the person or institution offering the advice have to influence the behaviour of potential perpetrators, and how well are they using this capacity to meet this responsibility? Have they prioritised influencing potential victims at the expense of influencing potential perpetrators? I suggest that it is possible to integrate the long term project of changing gender norms with the goal of helping women stay safe in the short term (Orchowski et al., 2018). The feminist rape resistance programmes which use an empowerment model simultaneously work on imparting a feminist analysis of rape while offering practical strategies individual women can use to express their desires, assert personal boundaries and resist violence (McCaughy & Cermele, 2017).

We should judge differently the decision by police or universities to disseminate rape avoidance advice from the decision of private individuals to offer advice to their friends or daughters, or the decision of women to use safe guarding practices themselves. The everyday measures women take to make themselves safer are an important expression of their agency. However, it is problematic to devote public resources to the dissemination of safekeeping advice without simultaneously addressing men's behaviour because this ignores the public responsibility to create a just society. In 2018 an Australian police superintendent was much criticised for telling women to 'make sure you have situational awareness, that you're aware of your surroundings' in response to the rape and murder of a woman in a Melbourne park (Davey, 2018). By choosing to focus on women's behaviour, he squandered the opportunity to use his authority to direct public attention to the steps men can take to reduce the prevalence of rape. His advice also conveyed the impression that the police were trying to offload their responsibility for crime prevention onto women.

The most deplorable advice is that offered by perpetrators of sexual violence. When perpetrators offer suggestions of what victims could have done to avoid rape they are clearly attempting to deflect attention from their own wrongdoing and fighting the idea that all people deserve to be safe from sexual violence. If these men were genuinely concerned with women's practical interests, they would stop raping. This is a case of egregious focus, rather than mistaken focus.

Advice must also be assessed on the extent to which it asks women to sacrifice social and economic opportunities for the sake of lower risk of being victimised. Too often advice to women to protect themselves betrays the assumption that it matters less when women are forced to

constrain their use of public space than when men are. Creators of safety advice are rightly criticised for placing too little value on women's opportunities for pleasure and relaxation (Brooks, 2011). There is also the question of whether perpetual fear and constant vigilance against the possibility of sexual assault are burdens that women can reasonably be expected to bear.

There is a further element which I suggest should be considered when assessing the legitimacy of any particular instance of advice. This is the coerciveness of the advice. Following advice might be prudent, but it should not be compulsory. Just because women have the capacity to alter their behaviour to reduce their risk of sexual violence, does not mean they are obliged to. Nor should they be punished for refusing to heed it. The potential of women focused rape prevention efforts to disrespect and limit women's autonomy is a key concern driving feminist opposition to rape avoidance advice. Some feminist scholars interpret safety advice as a form of social control (Fanghanel & Lim, 2017; Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010). They argue that advice produces obligations and that women are not free to ignore rape avoidance advice (Stanko, 1996, p. 15).

When women are held accountable for following safekeeping strategies this harms their practical interests, rendering them less likely, if they are raped, to receive sympathy, assistance in bringing the perpetrator to account, and criminal compensation. Legal scholars have identified rape cases in which the protection of the criminal law was effectively denied to victims whose behaviour had not measured up to accepted standards of risk avoidance (Randall, 2010; Gotell, 2008; Grubb & Turner, 2012, pp. 449–450). Stanko warns that the expectations safety advice imposes has a bearing on which victims are perceived as legitimate recipients of care (1996, p. 15). Thapar-Björkert and Morgan contend that safety advice 'creates an implicit division between women who follow the advice and those who do not' (2010, p. 51). Unlike these scholars who assume that advice always has the effect and intent of increasing victim blame, I suggest that it is possible to offer advice in ways which do not hold women accountable for safekeeping. This can only be done by stressing the right of all people, including women who do not heed the advice, to be safe from sexual violence. The feminist position should be that 'women have the potential capacity to prevent and resist rape, yet are not responsible for rape on account of this potential capacity' (Stringer, 2014, p.76; italics in original).

Conclusion

The list of ways women are advised to constrain their lives to avoid rape is never-ending (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015; McKibbin et al., 2009; Stanko, 1996). Opposition to women's focused rape prevention stems in part from its significant costs to women's freedom and well-being. Rape avoidance approaches unfairly ask women to bear the burden of preventing rape. Such approaches are problematic when viewed as sufficient on their own to reduce the intolerably high incidence of rape. Rape prevention strategies directed at potential victims should never be a substitute for those directed at potential perpetrators.

In the light of the many pitfalls of focusing attentions on victims it might seem a good rule of thumb to avoid it entirely. However, I have argued that the worth of rape avoidance advice in general should not be dismissed out of hand because it is plausible that promoting evidence-based rape avoidance strategies will reduce the likely that some women will be raped. Instead I have argued that those who issue rape avoidance advice face a trade-off between women's practical interests in enhancing their personal agency and their strategic interest in building a better world – a world with a deep and widespread commitment to everyone's right to be free from sexual violence. While I have not given a definitive assessment of legitimacy of the three types of advice highlighted in this article, I have suggested that our thinking about particular instances of advice should attend to the evidence-base for the recommended strategies, the advice giver's role, and their

responsibilities arising from their role. I have also warned about the danger of advice being used coercively. Advice should come with the message that no one ever deserves to be raped, and that women should not be blamed if they choose not to follow the advice. Victim blame does real harm. The solution is not to deny women's agency but 'to de-link women's agency from victim-blame' (Stringer, 2014, p.76).

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