Notes made by Jessica Woodhams and Mackenzie Lambine during a presentation by Karen Franklin, PhD entitled “Cultural schizophrenia and multiple perpetrator rape: An analysis of international media coverage” on 7th September 2011.

Karen highlighted the international nature of this phenomenon and that it has occurred for many years. That it survives in a society which condemns it means that it must serve an important function. Karen suggested that our society whilst openly condemning group rape must also provide messages supporting it. The role of spectator is also important in understanding it, as is the broader culture that drives the perpetrators’ views of masculinity and power.

Group rape is perceived by the perpetrators as a type of spectator sport. It bonds the spectators and they perceive that it shouldn’t be viewed too seriously.

Group rape bolsters masculinity and this is important for adolescents. Intra-male social dynamics are influenced by broader socio-cultural values which drive prevailing attitudes towards women.

The media minimises the severity of the offence and distorts the characteristics of the victim and the offender(s).

Victim accounts can’t tell you about these cultural dynamics and so Karen turned to media reports to better understand this. This was an international comparison. She used the term “gang rape” for her search in a well known database and found 81 cases from the past five years with sufficient details. Details were supplemented based on Google searches for public reaction and media coverage.

Most of the cases covered were associated with “parties” by young males, followed by those committed by adult males who were portrayed as opportunistic rapes, a male who was sexually deviant, and some committed in authority scenarios (e.g., military). For the remainder there was insufficient information to determine what category it belonged to or they fell into multiple categories.

For her presentation, Karen focused on these “party-rapes”. The victim is lured to another location and typically consumes alcohol or drugs. Other men join the “party” from either being called to the scene or by being present already. These offences seemed quite spontaneous, occurring when the opportunity presents itself.

Karen talked about the rape being triggered by a target becoming present. She drew parallels with thievery when young men see the presence of a target being a prompt to demonstrate their ability to take risks. She argued that the victim is a “prop” and not meaningful to the men. These men see the group rape as fun, entertainment and an opportunity for bonding. A feeling of group belonging may be particularly important for minority group men who feel marginalised from the rest of society.

Masculinity is not innate but it has to be accomplished; men have to “do” masculinity. It can be achieved by dominating females and other males. In younger males, masculinity is more “crude” and physical. There are many avenues for achieving hegemonic masculinity e.g., surfing, speeding, etc. However, group rape provides an avenue for “doing” this in a very direct manner. This is why the perpetrators video-tape the offences – to prove their masculinity at a later date. Denigration and humiliation of the victim also denigrates femininity therefore raising the level of masculinity.

There are many parallels between group rape and sporting competition as both are forms of cultural theatre. Also both involve heightened adrenaline, team members supporting one another and celebration. In group rape, intuition, social skills and physical attractiveness are needed to select a victim, gain her trust and cooperation. During the rape itself the men demonstrate their superiority by denigrating the feminine. After success, there is celebration and a heightened sense of belongingness. Under the superficial atmosphere of
fun and entertainment is a very real risk of losing face and status. Once collective action starts if any member tries to leave they are taunted playfully about their status usually drawing on feminine terms (e.g., girl).

Manhood is tenuous and needs to be protected at all times, achieved and reinforced. The use of social media and networking and hence spreading the word of their achievements speaks to the importance of the audience in this form of sexual violence. The admiring spectator is important in validating manhood and propagating the idea that MPR is socially acceptable.

Karen drew the delegates’ attention to the fact that some brands (e.g., Dolce and Gabbana) have used images in their advertising which reflect group rape posturing. Further, media coverage of group rapes (e.g., newspapers) illustrate rape as a “miscommunication”, “misadventure” and an error of judgment.

How does the media coverage of group rape reflect broader cultural values?:

- News outlets feature extraordinary, unusual and horrific rapes.
- They feature unusual victims and rapes committed by particularly large groups.
- THIS DOES NOT REFLECT THE TYPICAL SCENARIO FOR GROUP RAPE.

This media focus distorts the reality and makes it seems as if group rape only happens in “other places” to “other people” and by “other people”. This distances group rape from us. The media fails to examine the social climate within which MPR takes place and society’s subscription to rape myths.

This was particularly the case with media stories that have focused on ethnic minority offenders – there is a racialised subtext for how sexual violence is covered. Racialised reporting by the media (e.g., in Australia) fuels public panic which then fuels further coverage of the same nature. Karen commented on the over-representation of ethnic minorities in samples of perpetrators and questioned whether this was simply a result of ethnic minorities being over-represented in all forms of juvenile delinquency. Predatory street culture comes from economic marginalisation and hopeless futures. This can result in the distorted masculinity of group rape, as seen in places like South Africa. By focusing on inter-racial rapes the media fuels this problem as disadvantaged communities feel further marginalised by this type of reporting.

Karen argued that it is vital that we tackle societal attitudes that permit dominant males to victimize women or weaker males.

Within scenarios such as group rape to show empathy towards the victim is a sign of weakness – the boys therefore don’t lack empathy, they fear displaying it.

Aims for intervention:

- We have to address societal stereotypes
- We must give boys opportunities to show their masculinity in other ways.