

## What We Can and Cannot Say

I never thought there would be an issue with my eighth grade graduation speech when it was flagged for “mature content.” I planned to write about how the school dress code is a form of victim blaming and directly contributes to harmful perspectives at a young age, and I was excited to have a platform for my opinion. The school told me they could get into legal trouble if I said “sexual harassment” or “rape” in front of the seventh graders. So, I eagerly searched for an appropriate synonym, but was confronted with the truth.

There are no synonyms that even begin to match the intensity or brutality of rape and sexual harassment.

At home I saw my mom texted the family group chat. My sister had recently gone off to college and my mom was worried, “It’s okay to go clubbing, but don’t wear stuff that shows too much. Don’t let your drink out of sight.”

The phrases we *can* say tell us to protect ourselves, they tell us that there’s nothing we can change, and that it’s our fault if we fail to prevent sexual violence. The phrases we cannot say are bashed and censored when we try to speak up. Constance Grady at Vox aptly describes the situation, “I’ve started to feel that I am using a language that wants to make it as difficult as possible to describe this particular kind of violence, that wants it to remain unspeakable, in the shadows, unnamed.” Even just the prohibition of using the correct language affirms rape culture. When 10 million women report that they experienced rape or attempted rape before turning 18, then the issue is already prevalent at our age. If children can experience these issues, then they should be able to hear and speak up about them too.

Research confirms that parents talk more frequently with daughters than sons about these issues, and tend to frame conversations around reducing the risk of assault in the first place. These conversations are hushed and behind closed doors, and the imbalance in discussion and education presents a concrete issue. Survey data show widespread confusion (more pronounced among men than women) over the mere concepts of consent and sexual assault.

“Part of the solution will be more discussion about consent, gender and respectful behavior as a bigger part of sex education programs in schools.” Additionally, we can’t keep silencing those trying to bring awareness. I was ultimately forbidden from giving my speech, and schools need to start amplifying voices that understand the problem like no other. By having these conversations from a young age, we can begin to dissolve rape culture and ideas like victim blaming and silencing.

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