Journal of Philosophy of Education, 2025, **59**, 751–759
https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhaf033
Advance access publication 20 May 2025
Interview
Suite: Violence against women and girls and the education of voice

Challenging persistent rape myths: an interview with Joanna Bourke

Joanna Bourke[1] and Rowena Azada-Palacios[2,*]

[1]School of Historical Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1E 7HX, UK
[2]Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University, Katipunan Avenue, 1110 Quezon City, Philippines

*Corresponding author. E-mail: razada@ateneo.edu

ABSTRACT

Joanna Bourke is a prize-winning social and cultural historian, a Fellow of the British Academy, and a public intellectual. Her books, which have been translated into multiple languages, have explored the history of gender, working-class culture, emotions, war, and the relationships between animals and humans. Her most recent books are *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence* (Reaktion Books, 2022). The latter was written as part of her Wellcome Trust-funded project SHaME (Sexual Harms and Medical Encounters), of which she is the Principal Investigator. Her book *Five Evil Women* will be published by Reaktion Books in January 2026. Philosopher of education Rowena Azada-Palacios spoke to Joanna Bourke about how historical approaches can help us understand and find solutions to present-day issues of sexual violence.

KEYWORDS: sexual violence, rape, history

Rowena Azada-Palacios (RAP): To begin, would you like to tell us a little bit about the work that you do?

Joanna Bourke (JB): It's difficult to categorize what kind of work I do. I tend to think of my work as writing histories of different kinds of violence. My early work was very much on military history—*An Intimate History of Killing*, *Dismembering the Male*, *Wounding the World*, and other books. But I am not only interested in wartime violence. After those books, I diversified into different kinds of violence. I wrote a book on the history of fear, for example, and a book on the history of pain—in other words, I moved from *perpetrators* to *victims* of violence.[1] I wrote a book on what it

[1] In this interview, Bourke used the terms 'survivor' and 'victim' interchangeably. She has addressed this decision extensively, see Bourke (2022: 20) and Bourke (2017).

Received: May 17, 2023. **Revised:** March 1, 2024. **Accepted:** May 1, 2025

means to be human, which is about the way constructions of the human are predicated on violence, but it's also a book that looks at violence against non-human animals. If we ask 'What is it that makes the human', violence is one of the things that is used to distinguish the human from the semi-human and non-human.

More recently, sexual violence has become important to me. A decade ago, I wrote a book exploring the history of *perpetrators* of sexual violence, trying to work out how people who have committed these sorts of crimes have been understood over time. Historically, how have ideas about people who commit sexual crimes changed? Very briefly, this entails a number of shifts, moving from the idea of the rapist as being a sinner, someone who has the devil inside; to the rapist being a throwback to earlier evolutionary times; to notions of culture and cultures of violence, particularly within slums and poor areas (in other words, sexually violent men are nurtured within certain environments); to more psychological theories, often related to personality issues or pathologies; to cycles of violence; to psychoanalytical interpretations. I was tracing these shifts through time (19th century to the present) in the book called *Rape*. Just last year, I followed up this work with a book examining global problems, entitled *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence*.

My current work explores medical and psychiatric aspects of sexual violence. This is part of the SHaME project, Sexual Harms and Medical Encounters, which is a Wellcome Trust-funded interdisciplinary project.

RAP: You mentioned that sexual violence has been looked at from so many different perspectives: medical, psychological, psychiatric … How do you think specifically *historical* approaches can help us understand present-day issues of sexual violence?

JB: I'm an historian, so I obviously believe that history is a powerful way to address the present; it's important to understand our history if we are to change the future. For me, history as a discipline provides us with three central insights. First, it gives perspective. We stand where other people have stood before. Perspective is important. One of the reasons I'm an historian is because I know that if I can look back in time and see how things have changed over time, then there's hope for the future. Things have changed in the past—they can now change in the future.

Second, an historical approach provides context. The only way we can truly understand why sexual violence continues to be such a major issue in our world, despite so much activism against it for such a long time, is to understand the context within which these ideas about the sexual entitlement of men, etc., emerged and became so embedded within our society. Rape myths have a long history, which helps us understand why this kind of violence is so difficult to eradicate. Here I am largely referring to the longevity of rape myths such as 'no means yes', 'it's impossible to rape the resisting woman', that some forms of sex are not 'really bad' or harmful. We can only understand why sexual violence is so difficult to tackle by acknowledging that they have a long and deeply embedded history.

The third thing history provides is inspiration. It suggests new ways of thinking about how we can challenge the myths that exist in our current society. I get inspiration from activists, feminists, and other thinkers in the past.

RAP: You mentioned the longevity of rape myths, and I'd like to ask you a little bit more about that. In your latest project, one of the things that you've looked at is the relationship between textbooks and sexual violence from the early 19th century to the present. And you've specifically looked at medical myths found in medical jurisprudence textbooks related to sexual violence.[2] Can you describe for us one or two examples of such myths that have stood out for you in your work?

JB: One of the recurrent myths that is very strong in medical texts and medical jurisprudence texts (i.e. texts that negotiate the relationship between medicine and law) is this idea that in order to be raped you need to have a wound, or that rape is, by necessity, a physically violent act. This myth links up with ideas that 'a man cannot rape a resisting woman'. This was explicitly stated in historical medical jurisprudence textbooks. Lawyers and judges were explicitly taught (it's a horrible phrase) that it is 'impossible to sheath a sword into a vibrating scabbard' (Storer 1868: 55 as cited in Bourke 2022: 55-7). You can't put a sword into a scabbard that's moving. In other words, if a woman is resisting, then she cannot be raped. The penis is the sword; the vagina, the vibrating scabbard. So, this pernicious logic goes, a woman who resists cannot be raped; therefore, if she is raped, she didn't resist, and if she didn't resist, then it's not rape.

One of the things I found really interesting in terms of this rape myth is the way it changed over time in medical textbooks. At some stage in the late 19th century, medical textbooks were revised in ways that implied that 'You cannot rape a woman who's used to working, a *strong* woman.' In other words, it was possible to rape a delicate middle-class woman but impossible to rape a working-class woman because working-class women are assumed to be strong. In these jurisprudence textbooks, Victorian gentlewomen are perceived to be weak, sensitive, so the myth does not apply. In other words, the texts are making a distinction between classes. Working-class women become 'unrapeable'; their accusations disbelieved.

Another myth is that there have to be physical wounds. Violence has to manifest itself on the body.

If I was to choose another myth that comes up a lot in these textbooks, it would be one that sounds strange to our ears today: the idea that you cannot get pregnant if you are raped. Before the 18th century, medical theories of the body, such as the Hippocratic theory, regarded the female clitoris as the equivalent of the male penis. Therefore, clitoral orgasm was necessary for conception in a similar way that male ejaculation was necessary for a woman to conceive. Female and male orgasm is necessary for pregnancy. This was a reason trials might be delayed for nine months to see if the complainant was pregnant. Pregnancy was proof that a woman had an orgasm and therefore enjoyed the sex act.

Of course, this medical theory is bogus. In fact, there is at least some medical evidence to suggest that there's a higher probability of pregnancy through rape than through consensual sex. But even as late as 2012, a Republican congressman in the USA, Todd Akin, commented that it is 'really rare' to get pregnant if you get

[2] Some of the textbooks that Bourke explores in *Disgrace* include Bartley (1815), Ghani (1911) and Ray (1925).

raped, implying that if a woman gets pregnant, she very probably 'wanted it' (Gentilviso, 2012). Akin later said he had 'misspoken'.[3]

Another version of this myth is the psychoanalytical one that became prominent in the mid-20th century: women are masochists or they get pleasure from being hurt. Conversely, men are sadists; they get pleasure from hurting. The most prominent proponent of the idea that women are masochists is the prominent psychoanalyst and personal friend of Sigmund Freud, Helen Deutsch, in numerous papers and a two-volume book *The Psychology of Women (1944–45)*.

RAP: The description that you gave of these myths seems to indicate that our understanding of rape and sexual violence in general also changes over time, and the way that it's defined in different disciplines—whether it's jurisprudence or medicine—also seems to change over time. Now, in your books you have chosen to define sexual violence as any act identified as such by a participant, victim, or a third party. I would imagine that this definition might be a bit controversial, and not everybody will take that definition to be sufficient. Why do you choose this definition, and how do you find it helpful as an historian?

JB: The definition I use was never intended to be normative. In other words, it's not a definition that tells us how we *should* define rape in terms of law or morality. The definition is profoundly useful for an historian because what constitutes *violence*, what constitutes *consent*, and what constitutes *sex*, change so dramatically over time. There's nothing universal about any of those things. As an historian, if I'm trying to understand, let's say, 18th or early 19th-century views of sex, violence, and relationships, it makes no sense for me to impose a 21st-century definition on them, because that's not their experience. It messes up what they are experiencing, or what they feel, and so is profoundly disrespectful to the people I am trying to understand. My definition is a useful one as an historian because it allows me to problematize violence, sex, and bodies in ways that are contextually relevant to the people I am writing about, and true to their lives, not manipulating or not distorting their narratives.

The definition emerged out of my historical consciousness. I have to be true to the way people at the time were thinking and experiencing certain acts. But, secondly, the definition enables me to bypass male-dominated definitions of sexual violence. For centuries, sexual violence has been defined according to white, extremely well-off men, particularly jurists. This definition allows me to take seriously what women were saying in their letters and diaries about what they think constitutes abuse, even though they couldn't take it to court because it was not a legal definition.

The third reason the definition works for an historian is because it also enables us to get around very rapid changes in the *official* definitions of sexual violence. What is

[3] In an interview for a television station in St Louis, Missouri, *The Huffington Post* reported that Representative Todd Akin said, about pregnancies from rape, 'It seems to me, from what I understand from doctors, that's really rare … If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down'. Akin later released a statement on his website saying, 'I misspoke in this interview and it does not reflect the deep empathy I hold for the thousands of women who are raped and abused every year' (Gentilviso, 2012).

sexual violence? Some of us may think that the age of consent is one aspect of sexual violence: if someone has sex with a person who is under the age of consent then, by law, that is sexual abuse. But ages of sexual consent differ dramatically over time; it differs dramatically when a person steps over a border. In some states in the USA, on one side of the border the age of consent is ten; you step literally one foot, and it's eighteen. I can't then say, 'Well, it's sexual abuse here, and not sexual abuse one foot away.' The question 'what is sexual violence?' is actually a really big question, and people disagree very strongly on that. This means that as an historian it is useful to take a contextual and temporally based definition.

Now, to repeat: this is not a normative distinction. We are perfectly entitled to then go on and say, 'Well, actually, *they* didn't think this was sexual violence, but actually it is.' That's perfectly legitimate with my definition, and in fact we have to do that with my definition. But that is a second step. The first step must be, 'This is what they are saying. This is their definition of sexual violence.'

RAP: This connects to my next question, which is about voice. What do you understand by that word, 'voice', and why do you think it's so significant when investigating violence towards women?

JB: Voice is absolutely crucial to anyone thinking about sexual violence. We need to be thinking about: Who are heard? Who are not heard? Where are they heard? Where are they not heard? What are the contexts within which someone can not only speak, but actually be heard? Voice is as much about being heard as it is about the speech-act itself.

Since the 1980s, scholars of all disciplines have found it extremely useful to think in terms of intersectionality. Kimberly Crenshaw is the scholar who drew attention to the issue of intersectionality, even if she did not invent it—the first use of the concept 'intersectionality' is by the Combahee River Collective, which was a Black lesbian group in Boston who used that term much earlier than Crenshaw. But Crenshaw is the one who brought it into public awareness. In other words, if we are to understand voice, we need to understand the multilayered, complex nature of identities.

RAP: One of the things about voice you've said that has really struck me is the need to also be cautious when centring voices. The recent #MeToo movement, for example, has generated a lot of greater public awareness about the need to centre the voices of victims and survivors when discussing sexual violence. Yet you also include the caveat that the speech-acts might also be harmful to them, and it's really important to think about that. Can you say more about this?

JB: It's a very Western idea that speech itself is somehow transformative or redemptive. That may be the case—indeed, it *is* often the case. But not always. We need to be sensitive to the issue that speech can harm people, and it is for survivors of sexual abuse to make that decision about speech or not-speech. Speech may do some survivors harm in terms of economic issues, in terms of their relationship with their community; for example, speech about sexual violence could increase policing in their neighbourhoods. It could harm their communities. I'm thinking particularly of minoritized communities where having dealings with the police (given high levels of intra-racial abuse) can be very harmful. Which is the other reason why, if

we are to tackle sexual violence, voice is one thing—speech and #MeToo can be important—but if it doesn't go alongside other objectives, such as tackling racism, misogyny, systemic poverty, and other forms of discrimination, it won't be effective. Women often lead lives where they simply cannot survive without the 'breadwinner', coded male. We need to tackle the bigger questions, not simply the question of sexual violence, not simply sexism, misogyny, racism, ageism, ableism, and so on, but the ways these things are all linked.

RAP: What you're describing highlights this multilayered reality of violence. We might be focusing on the sexual nature of sexual violence, but really there are so many different things happening in that context which contribute to that violence. In relation to that, at the end of your book, *Disgrace*—and this is a rather hopeful, inspiring aspect of it—you give readers suggested ways forward towards attaining the long-term goal of creating a rape-free world. In that chapter, you draw on the work of Donna Haraway, and you suggest that activists should pay attention to the situated knowledges of subjugated peoples and their accounts of sexual violence. Can you say more about what this means and why it's important?

JB: One of my broader arguments is about the need to develop a kind of transversal approach when we're looking at sexual violence. Let me go back a couple of steps. My theory is based on four chief tenets, which nestle beneath two umbrella terms: *intersectionality* and *transversalism*. I think it's important to understand how they all fit together.

First, the most debilitating myth that all of us face when trying to work for better worlds—whether this is a rape-free world or whether this is a more equal world—is the view that there is no alternative. What the last chapter of my book tries to do is say, 'There are alternatives to our current state.' Indeed, the problem may actually be that there are so many things that we can do to work for a rape-free world, that it's sometimes difficult to make decisions. There is also the fact that, by its nature, politics is conflictual, so we can never expect 'women'—whoever they are—to agree on one or more strategies. However, we need to acknowledge that there are some groups who are actually more likely to have insights into ways to effectively counter sexual violence because of their situated knowledges. Minoritized communities, for example, are actually much more likely to have access to effective counter-knowledges because they don't have their privilege to lose. You mentioned Donna Haraway. As she put it, minoritized people are more likely to see through the 'god trick' of universalism with all 'its dazzling—and, therefore, blinding—illuminations' (Haraway 1988: 584).

The four tenets I look at are *local*, *diversity*, *pleasure*, and *the body*. By *local*, I mean that activism has to be based on local needs and carried out by local activists. That is absolutely central. What this means is that all of us, however we are situated, can contribute to the fight. Whether we are academics, engineers, home workers, journalists, doctors, scientists, and so on, we have our own local communities of influence that we can use to make a difference to the world. The political labour of anti-rape activism cannot be outsourced.

The second one is *diversity*, which is meant in two ways. The first way it's meant is diversity in terms of personnel. There's a lot of talk about encouraging people in all

walks of life to engage, but feminists today also need to think much more about how we can involve boys and men, non-binary, trans people; there is a small group of feminists today who are very hostile to this proposal but it is necessary.

The second way of thinking about diversity is in terms of strategy. Sexual violence is historically so deeply embedded that there is no one strategy; there is no simple answer. We will need to engage with a huge range of strategic approaches.

The third tenet is *pleasure*. Activism against sexual violence (or any kind of violence, for that matter) is dispiriting. It's tiring. It's depressing. So thinking about pleasure (perhaps through literature, theatre, song, and dance) is important. It will help bind us together and keep us strong.

The final thing is *the body*, and this links back to what you were talking about earlier—#MeToo—which obviously is great and has changed our world. But it has limitations especially because it risks being very isolating. It risks becoming a commodity—how many 'likes' you get on social media. It risks being individualizing, focusing down on one's own experience of abuse as something personal, as opposed to something more systemic. It risks making the political, personal.

When #MeToo was coined by Tarana Burke, it was incredibly powerful because it was established within a *community* of Black girls and women. We have lost that sense of belonging together. So the fourth tenet aims to get the body back into activist politics. #MeToo has shown us that we're not alone, and there are so many of us out there. This is crucial. But if we are to affect real change, we need to gather together, fight together. Change is not going to happen if we are all sitting in front of our computer screens.

Those are the four tenets; and they nestle beneath the two umbrellas I mentioned: intersectionality and transversalism. Intersectionality: there's no point just fighting sexism or misogyny, there's no point just fighting racism, there's no point just fighting ageism or ableism, and so on, because we need to fight all these pernicious views together.

Transversalism is the second umbrella. It says: 'We are facing a huge problem of sexual violence. We have to address it in multiple ways, and we are going to disagree, because different communities want different things, have different priorities and different needs, desires, and ways of thinking of the world.' Transversalism asks us to put aside identity politics, and emphasize goal-orientated politics. It doesn't mean we have to stop disagreeing with each other. I'm a pro-sex feminist; anti-porn feminists and I disagree strongly. They want less pornography; I want better pornography. I'm always going to be fighting carceral feminists: they want more prison; I want less prison. We can keep fighting. But we need to adopt a goal-orientated activism if we are to eradicate sexual violence. As a concept, transversalism emerged from debates between Palestinian and Israeli feminists who acknowledged their huge differences but agreed to unite in order to achieve specific goals.

We all have *situated knowledges*. I'm a New Zealander, spent part of my youth in Haiti, and identify politically as a socialist-feminist. That's who I am; that's where I'm rooted. Transversalism acknowledges rootedness but also requires a shifting: 'What's *your* situated knowledge?'. This requires listening and shifting our approaches.

RAP: That's so rich, and my mind is full of questions. But one of the things that you talked about was the importance of bringing boys and men into the conversation as well. At the same time, you also say that there is a point at which there are certain types of identity politics that could actually not help us towards the shared goal. And one of the reactions sometimes of certain groups of people is that when you talk about feminism, when you talk about issues that affect women and girls, it becomes a kind of identity fight between men and women. You talk, for example, in your book about masculinism, and how masculinism along with inequity is the context in which sexual abuse is fomented. Can you say more about masculinism, and at the same time address the possible critique that by describing it as masculinism it might retreat back into a kind of unhelpful identity politics?

JB: Yeah, absolutely; I certainly don't want to retreat back to that. My first book on sexual violence was 100 per cent about, 'all *men* are not rapists, rape fantasists, and beneficiaries of a rape culture', which was the 1970s/'80s mantra of an earlier generation of feminists. I definitely don't want to go down that route, and that's why I say 'masculinist' as opposed to 'masculine'. Men who perpetrate acts of sexual violence are the rejects of masculinity.

I also don't want to retreat to a sort of binary here between femininity and masculinity, which, of course, has long been eroded, thanks in part to the political labour of trans and non-binary people. Again, this is where situated knowledges become important, because it enables us to be much more complex about where we are coming from, and where and how our gendered, sexual, and other forms of identity emerge.

This is not to deny that a large proportion of sexual harms are carried out by people who are gendered and gender themselves as male. But not all: many people who carry out these harmful acts are not gendered male. The world of victims and survivors—and I deliberately distinguish these two terms—are of every possible gender. The infamous statistic still holds: one in every five women will be sexually harmed in some way in their lifetime. But one in every ten men will also be sexually harmed in their lifetime. That's a high number. And among minoritized gender and sexual communities, there are even higher proportions of people being harmed.

In what kind of society is sexual violence low? These are societies with low levels of military spending, high rates of equality, and high female earnings.

RAP: That's both sobering and helpful. Those statistics remind us of how sexual violence continues to harm so many people, many of whose voices are still unheard. At the same time, you've also shown us how an historical understanding of the beliefs that underpin this violence can teach us that they are changeable. And this in turn, can empower and inspire us to work towards a rape-free world. If I may ask you to summarize what this means for educators: what role do you think education plays in working towards a less violent world?

JB: Education is everything. We can think of education on so many different levels. Education is really just communication.

If we are talking about education in the sense of the labour of mothers, teachers, lecturers, professors, and other people who have that formal role of 'teaching', it is incredibly important. And it's two-way: it's not only teachers educating pupils, but it's also the pupils educating the teacher: the different generations have a great deal to teach each other.

RAP: Your work has straddled the worlds of academia and activism. And among people who share this common dream of a rape-free world, or a less violent world, what can academics and activists learn from each other?

JB: Everything! Let me just talk personally for a while. In the last ten years, while writing *Disgrace*, I have learnt so much from survivors and activists. They have enabled me to understand the varied concerns of diverse communities, and they have taught me how in very practical terms we can help improve lives—our lives, our communities. Their very different approaches (work in communities, rape crisis centres, classrooms, government, and NGO offices) have strongly informed my work.

Other academics have also been crucial in developing my ideas, even in those cases where we disagree with each other. By engaging in those debates, I have hopefully improved my arguments.

But of course, I don't want to draw a line between being an activist and being an academic. I consider my academic work to be activist orientated and political as well as being scholarly robust. I write books that I want people to read. I want to engage with my readers. I'm a writer who wants to participate in the world through my books.

RAP: Thank you very much, Joanna!

REFERENCES

Bartley, Onesiphorus W. (1815) *A Treatise on Forensic Medicine; Or Medical Jurisprudence*. Bristol: Barry.

Bourke, Joanna (2017) 'Victim or Survivor', *Gresham College*, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/why-do-you-use-word-victim-rather-survivor, accessed 9 Jun. 2025.

Bourke, Joanna (2022) *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence*. London: Reaktion Books.

Gentilviso, Chris (2012) 'Todd Akin on Abortion: "Legitimate Rape" Victims Have Ways to Try to Shut That Whole Thing Down', *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/todd-akin-abortion-legitimate-rape_n_1807381, accessed 23 Apr. 2025.

Ghani, Muhmmad Abdul (1911) *A Handbook for Police Officers and Students*. Vellore.

Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14: 575–99.

Ray, Rames Chandra (1925) *Outlines of Jurisprudence and the Treatment of Poisoning: For Students and Practitioners*, 6th edn. Calcutta: Digital Library of India.

Storer, Horatio R. (1868) 'The Law of Rape', *Quarterly Journal of Psychological Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence*, II: 47–67.