

"It was a moment in time."



*Catching Sight of
Thelma & Louise*

ACADEMIC VIEWING AND ACTION GUIDE



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about the documentary

For many moviegoers, the 1991 feature film *Thelma & Louise* proved life-changing. *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* is a film about that film.

The documentary takes an in-depth look at the profound impact this box office sensation had on audiences and the culture at large. Through insightful commentary and personal accounts from people who were deeply affected by the movie's story and its messages, the documentary explores *Thelma & Louise's* revolutionary themes against a backdrop of the present day.

Thelma & Louise blasted through expectations about gender and power, outlaws and heroes, freedom and justice. The trigger for its story was a sexual assault, but the real story, the breakthrough power of the story, was the title characters' *response* to that assault.

Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise explores the original movie's characters and story elements through the eyes of women and men, feminists and film scholars, and the documentary filmmaker herself – along with two of the male actors from *Thelma & Louise* and the film's editor. Each participant recalls their initial reactions to the feature film, and how those views have changed over time. Through this chorus of voices, we discover how *Thelma & Louise* became a cultural milestone with the power to alter the way women and men see themselves, each other, and the world.

Thelma & Louise was a radical departure for Hollywood, and its strong female leads took on a mythic quality that gave the film lasting personal and societal resonance. Instead of becoming victims, the fictional Thelma and Louise take charge of their own destinies and refuse to let go of their power. They even visit vigilante justice on a crude truck driver who disrespects and harasses them. The sheer audacity of their actions – the drastic shift of power from men in positions of authority into the hands of these “ordinary” women – created a new film archetype: the outlaw female. Audiences went wild.

It's not surprising, then, that when *Thelma & Louise* hit theaters in 1991, it provoked an immediate and fierce debate. Written by Callie Khouri, directed by Ridley Scott, and starring Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon as friends whose weekend getaway turns deadly, the movie became a rallying cry for female empowerment for some, while others labeled it “male-bashing” and “toxic feminism.” The film's treatment of sexual violence and a justice system stacked against women continues to elicit strong reactions from viewers and social critics across the globe.

why this film?

Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise was born of Seattle-based documentary filmmaker Jennifer Townsend's profound reaction to seeing the original feature film in 1991. Townsend wanted to gauge the response of other film viewers around the U.S., so after its release, she created a national survey to investigate the effect *Thelma & Louise* had on audiences. Years later, Townsend pulled out the survey letters and audiotapes and began contacting people who had responded to her questionnaire. "The voices in the box were clamoring to be heard," she said.

The lawyer-turned-filmmaker flew across the U.S. to conduct on-camera interviews with nearly two dozen women and men who had taken part in her survey years earlier, as well as others with close ties to the movie. Her documentary interweaves their personal stories with key scenes from *Thelma & Louise*.

The result is a thought-provoking, intimate look at the impact of this watershed film, the pervasive issues of gender inequality and gender-based violence, and the truth of women's lives. The documentary shines a light on harassment, sexual assault – including rape culture – and a criminal justice system that often fails to protect the vulnerable.

Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise offers viewers a yardstick by which to measure society's progress on these issues since the feature film's release. *Thelma & Louise* left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape. But since then, the documentary asks, what has changed in terms of how society treats women? And what urgent work still lies ahead?

about this guide

This **Viewing and Action Guide** is designed to deepen and expand learning opportunities for viewers of *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*. **Part One** contains sections for instructors at the college and university level in three academic disciplines:

- Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies; Sociology; Social Work
- Film, Media, and Communication Studies
- Law and Criminal Justice Studies

We've included **pre-viewing guidance**, as well as a section on **defining the terms** and a list of common **myths v. facts** about sexual violence. There are **resources** pages for sexual assault survivors and their allies, and **tips for documentary making**.



Part Two of this guide, **Taking Action**, lists concrete actions individuals can take to help achieve gender parity, stem the tide of sexual violence, and advance criminal and social justice for survivors. It is our hope that all viewers of the documentary will consider taking some sort of action – from a simple change in personal behavior to supporting organizations whose missions align with one’s own. It could mean creating an original media project that addresses issues raised in the documentary, or engaging in cultural, civic or political action to accelerate remedies and replace “rape culture” with a culture of respect and consent.

Please note: This guide addresses the pervasive issues of gender discrimination and sexual assault in the context of U.S. and other western societies as they relate to sexually-active young adults, adults, and seniors. And although sexual violence is a crime perpetrated by and against people of all gender identities, much of this guide addresses one of the documentary film’s primary themes: the prevalence of sexual crimes committed by men against women. We look at factors that underlie this trend, and whether aspects of this serious human rights crisis have improved since the 1991 release of *Thelma & Louise*.

before viewing

Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise uses personal storytelling to explore not only the far-reaching impact of the landmark feature film *Thelma & Louise*, but also the harsh realities of gender discrimination and sexual violence in society. The documentary explores the movie’s themes of freedom and justice for its female characters, alongside frank discussions about rape culture, misogyny, and the often-devastating effects of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape. Engaging with these topics may be emotionally and intellectually challenging for some.

Throughout the documentary, selected scenes from *Thelma & Louise* play on screen as aspects of the movie are discussed. These clips, together with interview commentary, clearly reveal the plot of the feature film – making viewing the documentary a self-contained learning experience. Therefore, while it is not necessary to watch *Thelma & Louise* to grasp its impact and its themes, college instructors may wish to assign both the movie and the documentary for additional points of reference that may deepen and broaden the discussion.

Prior to viewing *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, instructors are encouraged to indicate their intention to create a safe classroom space where people can discuss the issues raised in the documentary openly, thoughtfully, and with empathy. They may wish to encourage students to practice self-care, allowing them to step outside if needed, or offer an alternative research assignment **Go Deeper** sections for those students who find the topics too distressing. We also encourage faculty to have

contact information for local sexual assault support services on hand, and perhaps invite a local rape crisis agency and/or campus advocate to class to answer questions that arise. The following national resources may be shared:

- **Crisis Text Line** provides live crisis counselors who will respond via text 24/7. Learn more at crisistextline.org. Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the U.S.
- For immediate free, confidential help 24/7, contact the **National Sexual Assault Hotline**: 1-800-656-4673, or by online chat: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online/>

tags

If tags are used to indicate potentially sensitive content, the following would apply:

Sexual assault, Rape, Sexual harassment, Misogyny, Gun violence, Killing, Policing, Race

Specifically, the documentary contains:

- A brief movie clip from *Thelma & Louise* that portrays an attempted acquaintance rape, verbal abuse, and the physical assault of a female character
- A brief movie clip in which a perpetrator is shot, and several quick scenes where people are held at gunpoint during a robbery
- Recollections from present-day women and men about their experiences with sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape, and recollections of similar incidents experienced by their friends and loved ones
- A brief clip of the final scene from *Thelma & Louise* that ends with the protagonists sailing off the edge of a cliff – a key element of the film’s storyline, often viewed in symbolic terms as an act of freedom in a world where justice for sexual assault victims does not exist
- A brief comment regarding policing techniques and whether race is a determining factor in the apprehension of suspects

defining the terms

Sexual assault is any kind of unwanted sexual activity that a person does not consent to. Sexual assault can happen through physical force or threats of force or if the attacker gave the victim drugs or alcohol as part of the assault. Sexual assault includes rape and sexual coercion. While adequate studies have not yet been done, it is estimated that rates of sexual assault are higher for marginalized populations such as LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, people with differing abilities and non-citizens. (U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services)

Consent is not explicitly defined in roughly half of the states in the U.S., and there is no clear consensus as to what counts as consent. Consent statutes have been adopted into other state penal codes, including California's, and by at least ten European nations. In general terms, consent is the clear, informed, and voluntary agreement between all participants to engage in sexual activity. Silence cannot be interpreted as consent. Consent can be given by words or actions, as long as those words or actions are mutually understood. Consent cannot be given by someone who is incapacitated. (See *Consent: Two Explanations*)

Rape has no uniform legal definition in the United States, as definitions vary widely from state to state. Some states have adopted comprehensive statutes prohibiting 'non-spousal rape,' 'spousal rape,' and other types of rape. Others no longer use the term rape, instead using terms like sexual assault, criminal sexual conduct, sexual abuse, and sexual battery.

The FBI has officially adopted the following definition of rape for use in categorizing crimes:

"Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."

This definition includes instances in which the victim is unable to give consent because of temporary or permanent mental or physical incapacity, and states that a victim can be incapacitated and thus unable to consent because of ingestion of drugs or alcohol. A victim may also be legally incapable of consent because of age. The ability of the victim to give consent must be determined in accordance with individual state statutes. (U.S. Dept. of Justice)

Acquaintance rape is a sex crime committed by someone who knows the victim, and this includes **date rape** and **marital rape**. It occurs

when a person known to the victim has sexual contact with the victim without their consent. This could be a friend, classmate, spouse, relative, or coworker. Acquaintance rape includes forced, manipulated or coerced sexual contact. (Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault)

Date rape drugs are used to sexually assault a person. The drugs often have no color, smell, or taste and are easily added to drinks without the victim's knowledge. They usually cause a person to become helpless, barely able to move, and unable to protect themselves, and can result in an inability to remember the assault. Date rape drugs can even cause death. (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services)

Sexual harassment is most often defined as unwelcomed sexual advances in the workplace or learning environment, like a school or university. According to Equal Rights.org, to meet the legal definition of "harassment," the conduct in question must either be *severe or pervasive*. It does not have to be both.

Sexual harassment encompasses requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when:

- Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, or
- Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or
- Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance and is so severe or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.

Unwelcome behavior is a critical element. A victim may consent or agree to certain conduct and actively participate in it even though it is offensive and objectionable. Therefore, sexual conduct is unwelcome whenever *the person subjected to it* considers it unwanted. It is important to communicate (verbally, in writing, or by actions) to the harasser that the conduct makes the person uncomfortable and wants it to stop. (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission)

Sexual harassment outside the school or workplace is unwanted behavior of a sexual nature directed toward an individual that is generally considered to be annoying, threatening, or tormenting, such as catcalls, whistles, touching on public transportation, and the like. How this behavior is characterized by law, and whether it is prohibited, depends on the jurisdiction in which it occurs.

Rape kit or Sexual Assault Kit (SAK) or Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK), while sometimes thought to be a post-assault forensic exam, actually refers to the kit itself—a container that includes a checklist, materials, and instructions, along with containers to package any spec-

imens collected during the exam. The contents of the kit vary by state and jurisdiction. In most cases, DNA evidence needs to be collected within 72 hours in order to be analyzed by a crime lab—but a sexual assault forensic exam can reveal other forms of evidence beyond this time frame that can be useful if you decide to report. Place your belongings, including the clothes you were wearing, in a **paper bag** to safely preserve evidence. (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, RAINN)

Restorative Justice is an innovative justice mechanism that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior. It is best accomplished through cooperative processes that allow all willing stakeholders to meet, although other approaches are used. It can seek redress for victims, recompense by offenders and reintegration of both within the community. (The Center for Justice & Reconciliation)

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, yet most people recover from initial symptoms naturally. Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Interpersonal Violence (also called **Domestic Violence**) occurs between people in an intimate relationship, and can take many forms, including emotional, sexual and physical abuse and threats of abuse. Men are sometimes abused by partners, but domestic violence is most often directed toward women. It can happen in heterosexual or same-sex relationships. An abuser uses intimidating, hurtful words and behaviors to control his or her partner. (The Mayo Clinic)

Dating Violence is defined as the physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional aggression within a dating relationship, including stalking. It can occur in person or electronically and might occur between a current or former dating partner. (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Sex-based discrimination occurs when employment decisions are based on an employee's gender or when an employee is treated differently because of his or her sex. The law forbids discrimination when it comes to any aspect of employment, including hiring, firing, pay, job assignments, promotions, layoff, training, fringe benefits, and any other term or condition of employment. (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission)

Gender bias refers to beliefs and attitudes that involve stereotypes or preconceived ideas about the roles, abilities, and characteristics of males and females that may contain significant distortions and inaccuracies. (American Psychological Association)

consent – two explanations

Central to rape and sexual assault law is the concept of consent: *did the alleged victim consent to have sexual contact in this situation, or not?* Consent laws vary by country, state and situation.

Sexual assault crimes in the U.S. are defined in the Penal Codes in the laws of each state. California's, as one example, can be found here: <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/penal-code/pen-sect-261.html>.

Due to epidemic levels of sexual violence at all levels of society, organizations and universities are now providing their own explanations of what constitutes consent as the demand for a safer, consent-based society grows. Two examples:

1) Adapted from published guidelines by Whitworth University, Spokane, Washington:

- a) Consent is clear, knowing and voluntary. It is active, not passive. Silence alone cannot be interpreted as consent.
- b) Consent to sexual activity can be given by words or actions, as long as those words or actions create mutually understandable, clear permission regarding the willingness of both parties to engage in, and to agree on the conditions of, sexual activity.
- c) Consent to any one form of sexual activity does not automatically imply consent to any other forms of sexual activity.
- d) Previous relationships or prior consent cannot imply consent to future sexual acts.
- e) Consent can be withdrawn. This means that even if a person agreed to engage in sexual acts, that person has the right to change their mind, regardless of how much sexual interaction may have already taken place.
- f) In order to give effective consent, one must be of legal age.
- g) Consent cannot be given if the person is incapacitated, a state in which a person cannot make reasonable decisions because they lack the capacity to give knowing consent (e.g., to understand the “who, what, when, why or how” of the sexual interaction). *Consumption of alcohol or drugs alone is insufficient* to establish incapacitation. The question of incapacitation is determined on a case-by-case basis. It will include an analysis of whether the responding party knew, or should have known, that the complaining party was incapacitated, or if the responding party played a role in creating the circumstance of incapacitation. Incapacity can also result from mental disability, sleep, involuntary physical restraint, or from ingesting date rape drugs if the responding

party knew, or should have known, of the incapacitating condition, or was themselves the cause of it. Use of alcohol or other drugs will never function as a defense for sexually inappropriate behavior.

2) RAINN.org, the largest victim assistance network in the U.S. explains consent this way:

Consent is an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. There are many ways to give consent. Consent doesn't have to be verbal, but verbally agreeing to different sexual activities can help both you and your partner respect each other's boundaries.

How does consent work in real life?

When you're engaging in sexual activity, **consent is about communication**. And it should happen every time. Giving consent for one activity, one time, does not mean giving consent for increased or recurring sexual contact. For example, agreeing to kiss someone doesn't give that person permission to remove your clothes. Having sex with someone in the past doesn't give that person permission to have sex with you again in the future.

You can change your mind at any time.

Consent does NOT look like this:

Refusing to acknowledge "no"

- Assuming that wearing certain clothes, flirting, or kissing is an invitation for anything more
- Someone being under the legal age of consent, as defined by the state
- Someone being incapacitated because of drugs or alcohol
- Pressuring someone into sexual activity by using fear or intimidation
- Assuming you have permission to engage in a sexual act because you've done it in the past

The sexual orientation and/or gender identity of individuals is not relevant to sexual assault allegations.

sexual violence: myths v. facts

Many scholars have asserted, based on a wealth of data, that the widespread acceptance of “rape myths” works to undermine the fair and neutral application of the law in cases of sexual violence. Therefore, many argue that in addition to reforming sexual assault laws and the criminal justice process, attention needs to be paid to educating the public about rape myths – many of which are widely accepted as true – in order to allow current laws to function as intended.

myth #1 Sexual violence is an act only directed towards women and girls.

FACT: Studies estimate **one in three women** and **one in seven men** will experience some form of contact sexual violence. **One in five women** and **one in 71 men will be raped** in their lifetime. (National Sexual Violence Resource Center)

- Women ages 18-24 who are college students are **three times more likely** than women in general to experience sexual violence. Females of the same age *not* enrolled in college are **four times more likely**. **One in 9 girls** and **1 in 53 boys** under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult. (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)
- A report across 27 universities found that **19 percent** of TGQN students (those who identified as transgender, gender-queer, nonconforming, questioning, or something not listed on the survey) were victims of sexual assault or misconduct that year, compared with **17 percent of female students** and **4.4 percent of male students**. (Association of American Universities)

myth #2 Most sexual assaults are committed by strangers.

FACT: In most cases (**75-80%**), the survivor **knew the perpetrator** prior to the attack, whether as a classmate, friend, acquaintance, or sexual partner. (Students Active for Ending Rape)

myth #3 Victims invite rape by the way they dress.

FACT: People are sexually assaulted while wearing **every type of clothing**. Activists are tackling this myth:

- Dixie State University in Utah displayed a powerful traveling exhibit called “*What Were You Wearing?*” featuring re-created outfits that represent the clothing people were wearing when they were sexually assaulted. See the story on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDwhg2RDIWM>

- A similar exhibit featuring items of clothing and quotes from survivors called “*Is it My Fault?*” went on display at the Centre Communautaire Maritime in Brussels. Organizers sought to promote awareness by displaying recreations of outfits worn during assaults, including pajamas, tracksuits, even a child’s *My Little Pony* shirt – clothing, the organizers stressed, as innocent as the victims themselves. (BBC, UK Independent)

myth #4 Attractiveness is a factor in rape.

FACT: Rape and sexual assault are crimes of violence and control. They stem from a person’s determination to exercise power over another. Multiple studies, including those by the FBI, suggest that sexual assault is most often a crime against young people, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, and that **vulnerability is a factor**, rather than attractiveness. (FBI)

myth #5 Older people are not at risk for rape or sexual assault.

FACT: While the majority (54%) of sexual assault victims are ages 18 – 34, a significant percentage (**28%**) of victims are ages 35 – 64, and **3% of victims are over the age of 65.** (RAINN)

myth #6 Using alcohol and drugs has nothing to do with rape.

FACT: **43% of sexual assaults involve alcohol or drugs**, according to Alcohol.org. Drugabuse.gov cites the figure at “about half.”

myth #7 Rape kits are taken from all victims and processed as evidence.

FACT: Thousands of untested rape kits remain the norm in communities across the U.S. The overwhelming backlog of DNA evidence is currently one of the greatest obstacles to prosecuting perpetrators of sexual violence. “The rape kit backlog is one of the clearest and the most shocking demonstrations of how we regard these crimes in our society,” actor Marissa Hargitay says on EndTheBacklog.com, an organization she founded. “Testing rape kits sends a fundamental and crucial message to victims of sexual violence: You matter. What happened to you matters. Your case matters.”

myth #8 Most alleged victims of sexual violence report the crime.

FACT: The reporting rate in the general population in the U.S. is thought to be around **15%**. **Fewer than five percent** of completed and attempted rapes of college students are reported to campus administrators or law enforcement, according to one study. (National Institute of Justice)

myth #9 Victims who remain in an abusive relationship are responsible for any subsequent sexual violence within that relationship.

FACT: In the U.S., generally speaking, rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse are defined as crimes in which there is **sexual contact without consent**. RAINN provides a tool for a customized, state-by-state analysis of legal definitions and laws related to sexual violence: <https://apps.rainn.org/policy/>.

- Regardless of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, **sexual contact without consent is against the law** in Australia, Canada, and some European nations. (Dept. of Health, Western Australia; INSPQ, The Institut National de Santé Publique du Québec)
- In the UK, the law is clear: having any kind of **sex without getting consent is illegal** and is rape or sexual assault. If someone asks *repeatedly* for consent and is refused, this can count as sexual harassment.
- Sweden passed a new law in 2018 saying that **sex without consent is rape**, even when there are **no threats or force involved**. The new law says a person must give clear consent – verbal or physical. (BBC)

myth #10 Most college-aged rapists just commit such acts once or twice.

FACT: Repeat rapists commit **nine out of ten** college rapes. (U.S. Dept. of Justice)

myth #11 Ordering drinks for another person with the purpose of getting them drunk enough to engage in sex is a not crime.

FACT: Sexual assault, or nonconsensual sexual contact, occurs when a sexual act is intentional and (a) is committed by physical force, threat or intimidation; (b) ignores the objections of another person; or (c) takes advantage of another person's incapacitation, state of intimidation, helplessness, or other inability to consent.

Consumption of alcohol or drugs **alone** is *insufficient* to establish incapacitation. The question of incapacitation is determined on a case-by-case basis. It takes into account whether the responding party knew, or should have known, that the complaining party was incapacitated, or if the responding party played a role in creating the circumstance of incapacitation. (U.S. Dept. of Education Title IX guidelines)

myth #12 Colorless, odorless, tasteless substances are the number one date rape drugs.

FACT: Alcohol is the number one date rape drug. The vast majority of **incapacitated sexual assault victims (89 percent)** reported drinking alcohol and being drunk (**82 percent**) before their victimization. (National Institute of Justice)

Alcohol contributes to sexual assault through multiple pathways, often exacerbating existing **risk factors**. Beliefs about alcohol's effects on sexual and aggressive behavior, stereotypes about drinking women, and alcohol's effects on cognitive and motor skills contribute to alcohol-involved sexual assault. (National Institute of Health)

myth #13 The legal system will protect the rape victim and move their case to trial.

FACT: Currently, there are **extremely low conviction rates** for rape. Despite the many survivor-activist movements raising awareness, conviction rates remained **unchanged** in many countries as of 2019.

- In the U.S., the vast majority of perpetrators will **not** go to jail or prison. Research indicates that out of every 1000 rapes, 230 are reported to police and 46 reports lead to arrest. Of these, nine cases get referred to prosecutors, five cases will lead to a felony conviction, and 4.6 rapists will be incarcerated. In other words, **995 of the 1000 perpetrators will walk free.**

part one:

viewing guides – college and university

This portion of the guide is designed to elicit meaningful exploration of how gender, power and sexual assault intersect – in the landmark film *Thelma & Louise*, in the lives of some of its most ardent viewers, and in society at large. It assumes students have watched the documentary prior to classroom discussions.

The guide is divided into three separate disciplines: A) Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies; Sociology; and Social Work, B) Film, Media and Communications Studies, and C) Law and Criminal Justice Studies.

A. Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies; Sociology; Social Work

A Watershed Film

- 1) In the opening sequence of the documentary, a series of voices recall exactly where they were when they first saw the movie *Thelma & Louise* and some describe the film’s impact. One woman says: “It gave me some kind of power.” Another says: “It was this feeling of affirmation, like my story was being told.” A third remembers: “I had a profound emotional, psychological reaction.”

Q: Why do you think the movie *Thelma & Louise* struck such a powerful chord, particularly with women?

- 2) One of the movie’s actors, Christopher McDonald, describes the movie as, “prophetic, thematic, life-changing.” Another of its actors, Marco St. John, calls it “a watershed film – changed the way we see the world.”

Q: Why do you think these men describe the movie in such exceptional terms? From what you learned in the documentary, what was so groundbreaking, so “ahead of its time” about *Thelma & Louise*?





- 3) One of the documentary's interviewees, Dianne, says the movie was about "truth and honesty and freedom."

Q: Truth *about what*, specifically? Freedom *from what*? Freedom *to do what*?

- 4) Darlene says, "This is people's, some people's, reality. This is their story."

Q: What aspects of the movie's story and its characters did viewers in the documentary relate to in their own lives? What are some examples?

- 5) Peter remembers the *visceral* reaction he had to seeing the movie. Jennifer, the documentary's director, says as soon as she saw the characters Thelma and Louise she felt connected to them. She says she "stayed with them all the way through, and we went off the cliff together in the end."

Q: Why do you think these characters gave some viewers such a strong physical, emotional charge?

- 6) **Q:** What did you learn about the bond of friendship Thelma and Louise formed in the movie, and how that resonated with some viewers? What did going on a "Thelma & Louise trip" mean to Romana, who went to Burning Man with her best friend? What is that phrase now shorthand for?

- 7) The documentary's director, Jennifer, refers to a "scathing article" social critic John Leo wrote that called the film "toxic feminism on the big screen."

Q: Why might a white male social critic like John Leo label the film *Thelma & Louise* "toxic feminism?" What point was he making?

- 8) Jennifer reasons that critic John Leo has probably never been threatened like a woman's been threatened, and that women are threatened all the time – so he couldn't understand the film the way a woman does, saying "men don't live in fear like women do."

Q: Do you agree with Jennifer's assessment? Today people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ persons are also targeted for violence. But is there a *particular kind of fear*, a *particular kind of danger* that comes with living female? State some examples.

- 9) Callie Khouri won an Oscar for her original screenplay for *Thelma & Louise*. The story blasted through gender expectations in terms of its portrayal of women and power, and women with guns who were unafraid to use them. The film created a new modern screen archetype: *the outlaw female*.

Q: Based on what you learned watching the documentary, could a



writer who doesn't identify as female have written the movie's story? Why or why not?

10) The impetus for making the documentary film *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* was the profound reaction its director, Jennifer Townsend, had to seeing *Thelma & Louise*.

Q: What might she have been seeking when she conducted a national survey about the film's impact, and later, when she set out to make this documentary as a first-time director in her seventies?

Gender and Power in Relationships: Thelma's Marriage

1) One of the subthemes in *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* is Thelma's relationship dynamic with her husband, Darryl. Christopher MacDonald, the actor who played him, recalls being recognized at a stoplight in LA and a woman yelling, "Shoot him!" because of his character's sexist on-screen behavior and sense of "ownership" he had over his wife.

Q: Is Darryl's controlling, belittling behavior a form of abuse? Have you witnessed this dynamic firsthand? How does Thelma's attitude towards her husband change throughout the course of the movie, and what does this reveal about her state of mind?

2) In the documentary, Ruthe reads from her survey letter: "Despite the cartoon-like stupidity of Thelma's husband, his attitude towards domestic life looked uncomfortably like what I experienced in a 10-year marriage with kids. There are a lot more Thelmas out there than many people imagine." Ruthe reveals she was in an abusive marriage, getting hit, getting called all kinds of obscene names, her children seeing this. *Thelma & Louise*, she says, was what she needed to see at that time.

Q: What do on-screen role models – especially for women, LGBTQ+ individuals and other historically marginalized people – do for viewers who may be in similar situations? What function do role models serve?

3) The portrayal of the men in *Thelma & Louise* still generates controversy. There were some sympathetic "good guys" in the story, and others who were easy to dislike. In the documentary, June says, "All those men reminded me of males in my family. Sorry, Dad." She describes an "attitude of privilege, and know-it-all, and 'women should be ignored'; that belittling, that's still in my family."

Q: In your experience, are power imbalances like the one Thelma had with her husband still common in families? Do traditional gender expectations still play a role in dating and romantic relationships? What are some examples, and is this changing?



4) **Q:** Has sexist behavior in workplaces and public spaces declined since highly publicized cases of sexual predators across the fields of entertainment, sports, politics, and business have begun to come to light? In the era of #MeToo, has it stayed the same, or gotten worse? What are you seeing?

5) Many television and film crime dramas begin with the assault or death of a woman, an overused narrative device.

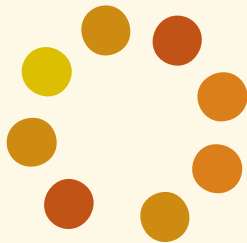
Q: What was different about *Thelma & Louise* in terms of the women's *response* to that attack, and the decisions they made following it? How did the attack and the events in its wake change the women?

6) The fictional characters Thelma and Louise became iconic, mythic heroes to millions of people around the world, including many interviewed in the documentary.

Q: Do mythic characters like these have the power to change how we view society? Do they help us rewrite our collective cultural myths? In what ways?

7) Louise and her friend Thelma became armed fugitives after the shooting. The men in the story – their husband and boyfriend, the police, the various guys they encounter along the way – could no longer control them.

Q: Why was this reversal of power such a thrilling thing for some viewers to see in 1991? Would it be seen as revolutionary today?



group discussion: In small circles of 6 to 8, invite each person to share an experience they've had with belittling or controlling behavior along gender lines: in their own relationships, a work or social situation, or in a relationship they've observed. Answer these questions: What constitutes gender discrimination, and what messages does it send? How does it affect self-esteem and self-worth? What can people do to take care of themselves if they are experiencing this kind of treatment? Take notes and report back the group's ideas to the class.

go deeper: Explore the idea of, "If you can see it, you can be it," in terms of role models in film, television, politics, activism, the music industry, and sports. Write an essay about a real or fictional figure that gave you the power to see an aspect of your life in a different way. What was it about the role model's story and character that spoke to you, and what changes of attitude and action did their example make possible?

Defining the Terms

Refer students to the *Defining the Terms* pages in this guide. Go over them in class, or assign as a handout.

Consent: The Finer Points

One of the core issues in determining cases of sexual assault is consent. It can sound simple: did the parties freely agree to engage in a sexual act? But in actuality, there are many factors to consider.

Refer students to the *Consent: Two Explanations* pages in this guide. Go over the points with students.

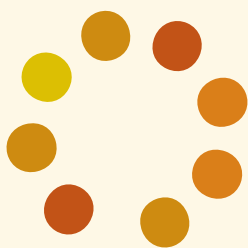
- 1) Geena Davis's character, Thelma, had been drinking and dancing with the cowboy Harlan in the bar the night she was attacked. In the documentary, Christi says: "The 'she asked for it' phrase has to do with all the rape culture stuff that's still going on now. I think that's why it was still devastating to watch this movie again just a few days ago because even though 25 years have passed and even though there's more acknowledgement that if a woman says no, she means no, she's not going to be believed. We see this in the courts now. We see this everywhere."

Q: What does the phrase "She asked for it" imply? Did Thelma "ask for it" – either to have sex or be physically beaten? Did she give her consent? Could she have consented, given that she had been drinking all evening?

- 2) One positive development since the release of *Thelma & Louise* is the widespread adoption of consent policies at colleges and universities, as well as some state and national consent laws.

Q: How many people in this room are clear about consent and what constitutes it – here on this campus, in this community, right now? Does this institution publish guidelines in its Sexual Assault policy online? How many people have read them?

group discussion: Break into small groups and discuss **consent:** the challenges involved in obtaining it, the difficulty in proving whether it was given or not, and the learning curve all of us must go through to establish clear-cut consent as *the norm*. Ask students to report back the three greatest challenges and possible ways to handle them.



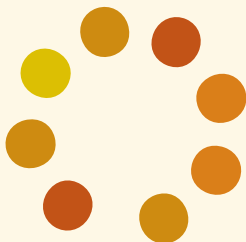
go deeper: Familiarize yourself with the laws, rules, and policies regarding harassment and sexual assault that affect your state, town and campus. “Yes means yes” – *affirmative* consent – has replaced the “No means no” standard for consent. But what other factors come into play? Report on the finer points of sexual assault regulations that apply to you, and how they will impact your personal behavior going forward.

go deeper: Review your school’s sexual assault policy and gauge its effectiveness in these key areas: Does it include meaningful efforts at educating students about the dynamics of sexual assault, the effect it has on survivors, and the many factors that allow it to continue? Is it readily available, easy to find, and understandable to students? Is it fair to victims and the accused, and does it provide crisis intervention assistance and prevention programs? Does it offer confidentiality? How could it be improved? Would your input, as students, be welcomed in revising it? Compile your answers into a narrative that rates your school’s policy in terms of what’s working, and what needs improvement. Refer to SAFER.org’s guidance on sexual assault policies.

After an Attack

Thelma thinks they ought to tell the police that Harlan assaulted her. Louise responds, “Just what do you think we ought to tell them, huh? Just about 100 people saw you dancing cheek to cheek with him. Who’s gonna believe that? We don’t live in that kind of world, Thelma.” In the documentary, Christi agrees: “Nobody was ever going to believe that that was a rape that was about to happen because even Louise...still had her doubts that Thelma hadn’t asked for it.”

Q: What kind of world *would* we need to live in for the police to believe Thelma? What societal norms would have to change?



group discussion: In small groups, give each person the chance to answer this question: In its purest form, what is the antidote to the epidemic of sexual violence we see in every developed country in the world? Kindness? Respect? Empathy? Power-sharing? Education? Communication? Deterrence? Where do we begin? Report back to the class on the ideas generated.

Rape Myths v. Facts

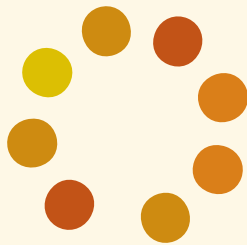
Blogger @Harri_Grace writes:

Most of us believe our friends aren’t capable of rape, but the fact is that if we position rapists as creatures of the night, boogeymen who

no one would make a coffee for in the office or a share a flat with, it helps nobody. Rape victims are seen as liars in such a world, and men who seem “normal” are automatically let off the hook. In this context, it’s clear to see why the majority of victims never come forward – and why rape conviction rates remain stubbornly low. We can change this, often by the simple act of taking the time to deconstruct unacceptably persistent myths. So why don’t we?

Refer students to the *Myths v. Facts* section of this Guide. Go over them in class.

- 1) Which of these myths have you heard someone say, or thought yourself, when you heard about a sexual assault or rape?
- 2) What impact do you think such myths have on victims, on police, on District Attorneys’ offices who decide whether to prosecute a case, and on juries? Why do these myths persist, and what can we do about this?



group discussion: Break into small groups and give each person the chance to say what they think the most damaging rape myths are from the list, whether they have any personal experience with them, and any facts that surprised them.

- 3) Does society treat men who claim to have been victimized, by clerical sexual abuse for example, the same way it treats women alleging sexual abuse? Do you hear people questioning male accusers’ honesty or motives, or blaming them? What are the rationales used to dismiss men’s allegations?

go deeper: Some artists and activists are directly addressing rape myths. The exhibition, “*What were you wearing?*” displays recreated clothing worn by rape survivors at the time of their attack. The exhibit has been recreated on college campuses in the U.S. and around the world, and was shown in Brussels. View the YouTube video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RxQyfCs0SQ>

go deeper: Research high profile cases involving powerful men in Hollywood, the music industry, broadcasting, politics, academia, and tech. Have their cases resulted in convictions, and have the new social movements that have sprung up around the world succeeded in changing any laws or company policies?

go deeper: We hear about “good guys” feeling confused, blamed, nervous and unsure of boundaries, since social movements exposing sexual assault have gotten more attention. People are worrying about what they thought was an innocent hug, or the age-old practice of

flirting. Women and LGBTQ+ persons are demanding respect, and yet this is now a contentious issue. Has a backlash formed against survivors speaking out? Where do you stand on these movements? Are they going too far? Not far enough?

Rape Culture: What has changed since 1991? What hasn't?

1) Revisiting the feature film 25 years later, Peter says: "I as a man can go for a walk in the park even late if I want...I may take my chances, but if a woman were to do that, there's just such a vulnerability. I don't know if the proper term is like a rape subculture, but that whole notion of that women are available to men for being degraded verbally, physically, I'm not sure we've come very far. In fact it makes me sad to think that we probably haven't."

Q: What does "rape culture" mean today? How does it affect your life? Does it seem to you that it's getting worse or better?

2) In the documentary, Dianne describes being raped twice, followed by a third attempted rape. She feels rage about this.

Q: Is rage an understandable response to these events? Is it a socially acceptable one? What was *your* response to seeing Dianne express her anger? Are there gender expectations about who can show anger and other strong emotions, and who can't?



Thelma and Louise's Journey: The Shooting

1) What did Thelma's attacker, Harlan, say just before Louise shot him? ("I should have gone ahead and f***ed her...Suck my c**k.") Given the impulsivity and speed of Thelma's response, what do you think was happening with her when she pulled the trigger? Was the shooting

pre-meditated, or committed in the heat of the moment? How do you think a jury would see it?

- 2) Later it's suggested that Louise may have experienced her own sexual assault in Texas. Might she have been triggered by this earlier trauma? Research the possible short and long-term effects of sexual assault, including PTSD and complex PTSD (C-PTSD). What treatments are being used to help survivors suffering from this?
- 3) *Thelma & Louise* works on two levels: as an adventure story of two women on the run, and as a metaphor about gender and power. Since Louise was not in imminent danger when she pulled the trigger, what could the character have been taking aim at destroying, in a larger, metaphoric sense?
- 4) In the documentary, June remembers seeing the film with a group of women friends from her feminist collective: "And she shoots him...and we stood up and screamed, applauding, and more, more, more! We thought this was women's empowerment." But in the years since, June has rethought this. She says that resorting to killing someone "doesn't seem feminist to me."

Q: Was shooting Harlan after he assaulted and attempted to rape Thelma a "feminist act?" Why or why not?



Reporting Assault

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the majority of sexual violence goes unreported to authorities and even to rape crisis centers. Figures indicate that only about 15% of such crimes are ever reported.

- 1) What do you think accounts for these low reporting numbers that are out of line with all other crimes of a similarly serious nature?
- 2) In the documentary, Sarah says: "Harlan represents the sort of the chaos and the danger that women are expected to be thinking about – all the time...when you are walking at night, whatever your circumstance, are you doing something for which, if you get in dire straits, you are going to be at some level blamed?" Romana says, "When they're raped they're usually in a bar and they're scantily clothed, and it's always implied she brought this on herself. She's a bad girl."

Q: Would the fear of being somehow held responsible for being assaulted or raped prevent you from reporting to authorities? Can you think of any other violent crimes in which victims are subjected to such blaming and shaming?

- 3) What are some other reasons someone might not report a sexual assault? What other negative impacts could follow?

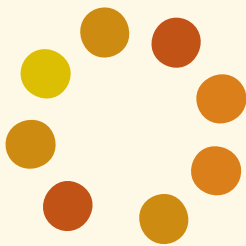


go deeper: The fictional characters Thelma and Louise, and the real women in the documentary, told stories about victims who faced few good choices after being sexually assaulted. So what should someone do after a rape? Research the immediate steps recommended for rape victims to take in order to preserve physical evidence, determine if date rape drugs were used, and make a report. Look at pressing charges and securing legal assistance. Discuss the pros and cons of telling a counselor and/or family and friends, and what to expect in terms of psychological and physical trauma. Cite examples of how preserving forensic evidence and the timing of reporting can impact the judicial process.

go deeper: Interview a counselor or other support service provider at your college or university's counseling office or your local rape crisis center, securing their written permission to record the interview on audio or on video. Explore the pitfalls of telling versus not telling, reporting the attack to police, and the long- and short-term impacts on the psychological health of survivors.

To tell or not to tell: family and friends

After a sexual assault, deciding who to tell – and what and when to tell – is a personal decision that can be difficult and complex. Experts advise to *always* allow survivors to choose the path that is best for them.



group discussion: In small groups of 4 to 8 students, discuss the pros and cons of telling family and/or friends about a sexual assault. How much difference it would make to disclose the crime to loved ones, both for the survivor and for the greater community? What risks are involved? Might family members want to seek revenge on the rapist? And, what difference would such a disclosure make, in terms of gaining justice?

go deeper: Interview at least two victims of sexual assault, including one who shared their story with family and friends, and one who did not. Paint a picture of why they made the choices they did, and the resulting outcomes over time.

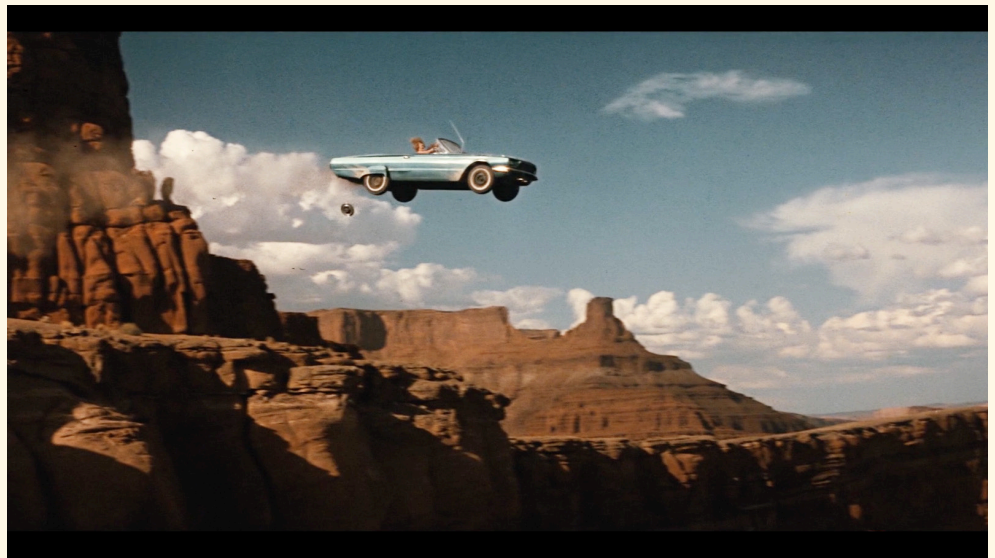
The Alcohol Factor

Does drinking alcohol in excess contribute to a person's likelihood of being raped? Studies conclude that physical abuse involves two factors:

both an aggressive perpetrator and a “disadvantage” in the victim that makes them a vulnerable target. According to the National Institute of Health, approximately **half of sexual assault cases involve alcohol consumption by the perpetrator, victim, or both**. In the movie, Harlan orders drinks for Thelma; he’s trying to get her drunk.

Q: Is ordering drinks for another person with the purpose of getting them drunk enough to agree to have sex with you a form of coercion? If you engage in sex with them while they’re inebriated, it a crime? Is drunk a “yes?”

Q: How can people protect themselves in social situations from the vulnerability that comes with social drinking?

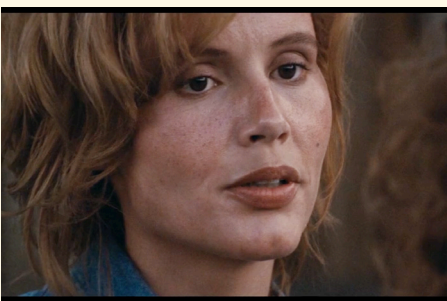


The Ending: Controversy and Choices

As the movie *Thelma & Louise* comes to a close, Thelma tells her friend, “Something’s like crossed over in me, and I can’t go back. I mean – I just couldn’t live.” Louise replies, “I know. I know what you mean.” The film’s editor, Thom Noble, says he teared up when he edited that scene.

As the women are driving through the desert, one of the film’s actors describes the scene: “They’re dirty and they’re happy. And they’re at their almost darkest hour on this crazy journey they’re on. They can’t go back, and they have this moment of peacefulness, of going, oh, my God! This is a life-changing ride we’re on.”

- 1) Pursued by a massive force of police and military, Thelma and Louise face the choice of surrendering to police or not. They decide to drive their car off the cliff rather than be captured and face criminal prosecution. They hold hands, kiss, and *drive forward*.



Q: What does this ending say about the women's state of mind? Why do you think they made this choice? Was it "true to the film," as the editor Thom says?



- 2) In the documentary, sociologist, author and educator Dr. Robin DiAngelo notes: "When you look at that lineup, it just represented the military and all of the institutions. They were going to have to go through the court system and the social work system and the prison system and stand before judges and get lawyers and almost all of them were going to be men because that is the society we live in. That is who, for the most part, controls the system and has power. That doesn't mean that women don't have power. We don't have *institutional power*."

In a literal sense, Thelma and Louise's death at the end of the film absolves the system of having to deal with them and deliver the justice Harvey Keitel's detective character implies they can get; it also absolves *us* of the hard thinking about how to change the system.

Q: How would the outcome for these two characters be different if women had more more institutional power? Are you seeing more women and LGBTQ+ individuals take up the mantle of power today and challenge patriarchal systems? In what ways?



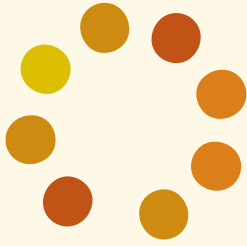
- 3) In the documentary, Jennine, a film scholar, says: "If they were to get away, get to Mexico, get jobs at Club Med, you know, drink margaritas by the sea, that would have been creating this sort of Hollywood fantasy about that women who are responding to male aggression with aggression of their own, that women who are standing up for themselves in the world *can* get away, they can get to have this great life. And what Khouri was really saying is "No. The way the world exists right now, that cannot happen."

Q: The ending of *Thelma & Louise* is a blaze of glory. It's *their choice*, but it's also an iconic Hollywood moment when they drive forward into the Grand Canyon. Do you agree that this was the only ending that made sense for this movie? Why or why not?

Q: What kinds of laws would have to be in place for T&L to actually get a fair shake if they *had* surrendered? In other words, what kinds of laws do we need to enact to ensure sexual assault victims have a supportive path to justice?

- 4) While many viewers in the documentary found the ending of *Thelma & Louise* inspirational, others, like René, disagree: "Okay, they were resisting male oppression...but I felt that they made a lot of stupid decisions."

Romana saw it differently. "Would I take my own life you know in this situation? Yeah, the answer is yes. The pros out-weighted the cons for me. Yeah, so I can't imagine any other ending, not for me."



group discussion: Break into small circles of 4 to 8 and discuss the ending of *Thelma & Louise*. Who found it inspirational? Who didn't? Was driving off the cliff a rational choice, given their options at that point? What would you have done? Take a group poll and report your answers back to the class.



5) In the documentary, Andrew says, "The very end, the moment where they know they're going off the cliff and there's such immense love between the two of them. That intimacy and that love I think is pretty overwhelming." June and her friends read that scene as empowering, saying, "See, the answer is women loving women after all because the world of men is so evil."

Q: What was your read of that moment of intimacy, the kiss and clapping hands? Was there a larger message in that moment about the love between women, or about the power of friendship?

6) At the close of the documentary, Selma says "Thelma and Louise live on flying over the desert and in our souls forever. That's what fiction, movies are supposed to do...give you that feeling of something that you can believe in."

Q: What do you think *Thelma & Louise* gave viewers, in terms of something to believe in?

go deeper: Write an alternate ending for the movie, *Thelma & Louise*. Defend why you think your ending is preferable, stronger or more inspirational than the women sailing over the cliff. Keep in mind the overall themes of the film.

Criminal Justice: A Flawed System

For independent documentary filmmaker, Jennifer Townsend, the need to create a research project about *Thelma & Louise* and later make this documentary film was deeply personal.

Jennifer's story, central to the documentary's mission and the filmmaker's motivation to make it, was her developmentally disabled sister's rape, along with the rapes of many of her other friends and their family members.

The director laments, "Nothing has been done. Nothing ever will be done. So when I saw a film where finally, I felt like finally in all of these horrible situations a rapist was held accountable for what he did, this was the first time I've ever seen that."



go deeper: Weak and disadvantaged persons are often targeted as victims of sexual violence, including those living alone, or a woman out alone, or a woman under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In the case of Jennifer's sister, at issue was whether she would be able to withstand defense questioning. The local district attorney advised the family not to press charges in this case, as the perpetrator, a police officer, had already hired the best defense attorney in the city who would "make mincemeat" out of Jennifer's sister on the witness stand. Research what advocates say should be done to protect the most vulnerable members of society from this kind of miscarriage of justice. Report on efforts underway to protect disabled, incapacitated, and elderly citizens from sexual abuse. Are they successful? What still needs addressing?

go deeper: *Victims' Services.* Victim service agencies provide survivors with support and services to aid their recovery, offer protection, guide them through the criminal justice system process, and assist with obtaining restitution. Research two agencies from the *Resources* list and describe the kind of support they offer survivors of sexual crimes.

go deeper: *Project Callisto.* Research this new tech-based sexual assault reporting system being implemented on some college campuses and workplaces. How does it work? What are the advantages to using it, in terms of catching serial rapists and empowering survivors to report as a group? What outcomes have been seen thus far?

go deeper: Describe the pathway available through the U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) to report Title IX violations that are not handled appropriately by your institution. Cite three cases that have received coverage in the press.

Sexual Harassment

In the documentary, Roz says, "The continuing encounters with the truck driver were scenes that I remember the most. You know, the sexist pig jerk with the nude girlie mud flaps on his rig."

Marco St. John, the actor who played the trucker, says: "And they lead me off the road, and they're going to lower the boom on me. They've made that choice...Their characters have turned. They're not going to put up with it. They're not going to take it anymore."

- 1) How did the women respond to the trucker's behavior? Were his sexist name-calling and unwanted sexual advances forms of sexual





harassment? Were they crimes, punishable by law?

- 2) Robin adds: “Oh, it’s just such a fun scene. It’s so gratifying...such a fantasy, and honestly how else could you do it except with a gun? Otherwise they’re not going to be able to teach him a lesson. And of course, look at the ultimate lesson they got taught for doing that.”

Q: What kind of recourse would these two women have today if a trucker made sexual advances on the road? While the scene played out as a fantasy, what role did the women being armed with guns play? What did you think of the women blowing up the oil tanker?

- 3) Sharlene reads from her survey letter, about the trucker: “I loved his free lesson in Feminism 101. There should be consequences for insulting casual abuse that women are presumed to tolerate or at least enjoy as some kind of compliment. Yet few women, much less moviemakers, have the balls to call them on it. It’s a delicious pay-back for all women.”

Q: Do you agree that there should be consequences for this kind of behavior? What would appropriate consequences look like?

- 4) Rene says: “I knew this particular person, and I would go to science fiction conventions and he would come up and put his arm around me and I felt like I didn’t really have the right to tell him to leave me alone.”

Q: Is what Rene describes sexual harassment? (See *Defining the Terms*) Is this type of behavior harmless, or a violation? What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of unwanted remarks or touching? How can people deflect that kind of behavior?

- 5) An older woman in the documentary, Dianne, calls being harassed in public by men “a daily occurrence for women in this world. We just think it’s part of life, and it shouldn’t be part of life.” She includes both sexual harassment and elder harassment.

Q: Have you experienced sexual harassment in public? Is harassment a something you see in your social circle – IRL and on social media? Is the amount of harassment and the fear of being verbally attacked getting better or worse? How can people protect themselves from this type of abuse?

Sexual Assault: Men Too

go deeper: Sexual abuse is an international problem and an often-overlooked public health issue for men. Given the prevalence of trauma and its well-documented connection to mental and physical health disorders, male survivor input and engagement in healthcare research is profound. Delve into the problem of sexual abuse of men,

how it compares in psychological and social impacts to similar abuse to women, and present your findings.

The LGBTQ Community

San Diego Pride’s Executive Director, Fernando Lopez, addressed this appeal to the city’s LGBTQ+ community:

“We as a community need to continue to find ways to address rape culture and prevent sexual violence; this means a broader network of individuals and industries working together to shift behaviors and narratives. Can we ensure our local bartenders and security staff know the warning signs of sexual violence? Do parents and teachers educate our youth on body autonomy and empower consent? How can friends and media outlets shift their language use away from victim blaming? When can our small business owners, their staff, and we as individuals be able to understand and safely execute bystander interventions?”

go deeper: Collect answers in your own community to the questions Mr. Lopez poses. How important are education and bystander interventions? Write up your findings.

On Screen Violence: A double standard

Thelma & Louise was criticized by some as being too violent. Dianne says, “Watch TV, watch a movie. Women are killed day after day after day after day in crime shows...One man is killed, and it’s just open season on men!”

Paul thinks it’s “bizarre” to criticize the film as being violent when “so many American films are drenched in violence.” He wonders if critics are criticizing it from an objective standard, or because “for a change you have strong women who are responding with violence in a way that’s *normally reserved for men.*”

Q: What are society’s expectations in terms of portrayals of violence and gender? Is violent behavior something only expected of men? Are these expectations changing? What underlies them?

Institutional Bias

Darlene points out that in that in her experience with military and police power, she doesn’t think the lead characters would have survived being captured in the film’s final scene. She goes on to say that she believes if Louise “had been a black man, she wouldn’t have been able to reach for the gun.” Her guess is that “the fact that they had the time to choose how they were going to die was the fact that they were white women.”



Q: Do you agree with Darlene’s statement? Does law enforcement treat white women with a different set of rules than it does people of color, particularly black men, or other marginalized groups? Does this extend to bias in bringing cases to trial, obtaining convictions, and sentencing? Research advocacy groups working to raise awareness of institutional bias and seeking reform in this area, such as The Innocence Project.

Creating a Consent-Based Society

In the documentary, Andrew comments: “In my lifetime, we have stigmatized drunk driving. In my lifetime, we have the phrase ‘stalking.’ There are laws. You know, when you objectify something and you put language on it, then you can have laws about it that that prohibit behavior. It doesn’t always change culture, but over time people grow up and begin to understand that these things are harmful.”

Q: Is western culture moving towards a culture of consent? Are incidents of sexual assault decreasing? Are conviction rates rising? In addition to naming the problem and increased reporting and legal justice, what other steps can we take to create a culture based in respect and consent?

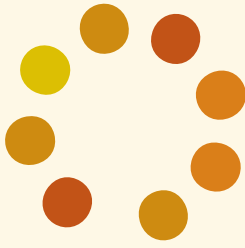
go deeper: Refer students to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC.gov) page, “Sexual Violence: Prevention Strategies.” Report on the CDC’s specific strategies that communities and states can use to stop sexual violence. Have students read the listed “example programs” and choose three that could be employed in their community, detailing specific actions.

The Role of Men

In the documentary, Eric says: “Men’s lust is women’s responsibility to control. That’s the whole assumption, that you, woman, are the temptress, and it’s your fault that I’m attracted to you. And so you must monitor yourself, your clothes, your behavior, your demeanor, where you can go, what you can do. It’s a radical idea to consider that it may be men’s responsibility. It’s a radical idea to consider that men should police their own behavior. It’s a radical idea that no means no. I mean, how can that be a radical idea? But it is.”

Q: Who holds responsibility for preventing sexual assault? Why is the responsibility often laid at the feet of women? What is the role of men in this social justice movement?





group discussion: Break into small groups and come up with five strategies – legal, social, or cultural – five initiatives that could help widen the focus and shift responsibility for ending sexual assault to men. All people in the group must support the actions. One person from each group will report ideas to the class.

go deeper: Is the documentary *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* a feminist film? What is your definition of a feminist film, and how does it apply to this film? Support your thesis with a currently accepted definition of feminism, your *own* understanding of what feminism is, and five specific points made in the documentary.

go deeper: Select a modern-day artist, political activist, writer, or filmmaker who is shaking up perceptions around gender-based violence. Create a presentation that showcases this person’s point of view and explores at least two of their creative works that deal with these issues.

Women In and On Film

go deeper: Watch the 15-minute TEDWomen Talk: *The Data Behind Hollywood’s Sexism*, by Dr. Stacy Smith, at TED.com. In it, she says, “I want to talk about gender inequality in film. I want to tell you how it is perpetuated, and then I’m going to tell you how we’re going to fix it.” Report on the big ideas she is proposing to achieve inclusive storytelling in the television and movie industries.

Survivor Movements

Historically, when a disenfranchised group achieves significant gains in its quest for equal opportunity and fair treatment, a backlash follows. For example, after the second wave of feminism in the 1970s ushered in a host of social and legal advances for women, LGBTQ persons, and people of color, a wave of negativity towards gains in equality followed. This phenomenon is explored in Susan Faludi’s book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.

go deeper: Research and report on the topic of backlash against today’s increase of sexual assault survivors speaking out. Focus on media coverage and published opinion pieces, as well as online male supremacy groups such as incel communities. Conduct interviews with members of your community. Is a backlash forming today against those demanding accountability for sexual crimes since survivor movements

burst onto the global stage? How extensive is it? Who's leading it? What causes underlie it? And how should it be addressed?

go deeper: Look at this live interactive globe that displays where people are using Google to search for #MeToo content across the world: <https://metoorising.withgoogle.com>. Select a "top searching city" by passing your cursor over it. Set your criteria for a particular day, such as today, and look at the graph along the bottom for trends over time. You will see a list of articles relating to the #MeToo movement and sexual assault in that particular city. Choose five articles from different countries and report on them.

go deeper: Research the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, a United Nations initiative marked annually from November 25 through December 10. Pick three countries and create a detailed presentation about their EAW Day actions, highlighting aspects of their particular approach and pressing concerns.

go deeper: What made *now* the right time for sexual assault survivors to come forward – and, even more importantly, to be taken seriously? The Harvey Weinstein scandal came to light in late 2017, ushering in a powerful social movement that burst forth as a reaction to the decades-long, sexual assault history of famous men in the entertainment industry. The movement it sparked quickly branched out to reveal sexual crimes by perpetrators in all walks of life, revealing a proliferation of accusers from every institution and every industry in every developed nation. Write an opinion piece discussing what tipping point was reached, who some of the movement's heroes are, and what roles conventional and social media are playing in this cultural shift.

go deeper: Create a research project to explore a movement to end sexual assault and misogyny in a culture other than your own. Focus on one country, such as Spain, where artists are finding an online community around these issues through a collective called Pandora's Box. Or, explore this issue in India, where culture and religious customs play a significant role and speaking out could have fatal consequences. Or research the subject in Sweden, Iceland or Norway – countries with progressive human rights agendas where change is happening. Point to high profile cases, legislative initiatives, and media coverage of current social movements addressing sexual harassment and assault.

go deeper: Time's Up™ is pushing for entertainment-industry unions to enact new codes of conduct that hold *employers*, rather than individuals, responsible for sexual harassment in the film industry –

where women account for only 2% of cinematographers, 8% of directors and 10% of writers. Conduct research on this demand and other steps activist organizations are taking in Hollywood to “partner with leading advocates for equality and safety to improve laws and corporate policies.”

Title IX

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces, among other statutes, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive Federal financial assistance. Title IX states that:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex can include sexual harassment, rape, and sexual assault. A college or university that receives federal funds may be held legally responsible when it knows about and ignores sexual harassment or assault in its programs or activities. The school can be held responsible in court whether a faculty member, staff, or a student commits sexual harassment. In some cases, the school must pay the victim monetary damages. Some states have laws that go farther than Title IX in protecting victims of assault.

go deeper: Research the role of Title IX in the handling of cases of sexual assault and rape on college campuses. How often is it the remedy used, what are the possible outcomes, and how often are the claims successful in achieving justice? Read your institution’s Title IX policy, and report on three examples of Title IX complaints by students and/or faculty and staff at colleges and universities in the U.S. Start with Yale.

Addressing Sexual Violence: The Role of Culture

What attitudes and behaviors drive violence against women? And how far can storytelling, activism, and the arts go towards reshaping societies to move beyond a culture of sexual violence?

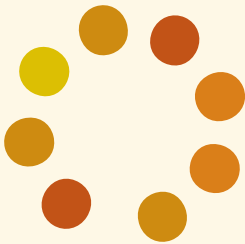
go deeper: The U.N. International Day Opposing Violence Against Women is marked every November. Pick five countries that took part, and present about their actions, current pressing issues, and any legislative victories in addressing sexual violence.

go deeper: Screenwriter Callie Khouri, says the movie *Thelma & Louise* didn't "man-bash," it "idiot-bashed." Research gender portrayals in television and film, including how frequently strong women carry mainstream movies and dramas. Present your findings. Has there been a cultural shift since the movie's release in 1991? Are stories featuring female empowerment being told more often, and if so, by whom?

go deeper: Consider your own media intake. How do TV shows, movies, and popular music you consume represent women? How do they represent sexual harassment and assault? Do they critique it? Do they tacitly (or otherwise) excuse it? Somewhere in between? Write up your answers.

Personal Safety

In the documentary, June recalls hearing about the movie *Thelma & Louise* and says "women were gonna take back the night." That phrase references Take Back the Night rallies for women's safety that have been held for decades. Studies indicate that nearly two thirds of both student and nonstudent victims experienced the victimization at night, from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.



group discussion: In small groups of 6 to 8 students (ideally with differing gender identities), direct students to tell about a time when they've felt vulnerable to physical harm, what the circumstances were, and whether they believe their gender identity or sexual orientation was a factor. After each student has the opportunity to speak, go around a second time and ask students to say a few sentences about how they think gender identity affects their personal safety in their everyday lives. Invite students to share any insights with the class.

Gender and the Criminal Justice System

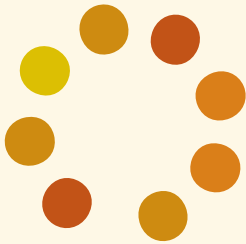
The overwhelming majority (90%) of sexual assault victims are women, and the overwhelming majority of sexual offenders are male. This is true across the board for students and nonstudents. The percentage of rape and sexual assault victimization by sex of victim in student populations is: 83% female, 17% male. Among non-students, it is: 96% female, 4% male.

And with low reporting rates and ever dropping conviction rates, some are suggesting a multi-disciplinary approach is needed. Dr. Yvette Russell, Feminist Scholar and Professor of Law at England's Bristol



University believes cultural myths and the law are intertwined:

I argue that there is a link between myth and practice in law over some 3,000 years. In my view, such a 'multi-disciplinary' approach is necessary if feminist and legal scholars more generally are to grasp what rape means and why legal responses to it continue to flounder.



group assignment: Split into teams of four to six. Brainstorm a list of six factors from history, mythology, philosophy, theology, biology that may be influencing the success or failure of the current criminal justice process for survivors of sexual violence. Assign research on these to each team member. Meet again next week to report results and form a group thesis. Create a presentation that summarizes your findings.

go deeper: **The Gillette Ad.** A Gillette razor ad released in 2019 stirred great controversy on social as well as traditional media. It asked men to step up and point out sexual harassment and misogyny when they witnessed it being committed by other men. (Watch the ad on YouTube.)

Write a position paper answering these questions: who holds the responsibility for stemming the tide of sexual harassment and assault? What would it take for men to speak out en masse to advocate for respect and safety for women? What obstacles must be overcome?

go deeper: The same week the Gillette ad dropped, the American Psychological Association issued a report containing its first official warning on the toxicity of “traditional masculinity,” which “has been shown to limit males’ psychological development, constrain their behavior, result in gender role strain and gender role conflict and negatively influence mental health and physical health.” The study is the result of a 13-year effort that involved scientists poring over more than four decades of research. It notes the harmful effects tied to traditionally masculine traits, including being competitive, aggressive, and stoic. Read the report in the APA’s Monitor on Psychology magazine, summarize its findings, and present your own views on modern masculinity and sexual assault.

go deeper: Gender violence pioneer educator Jackson Katz’s TED talk, *Gender violence: It’s a men’s issue*, outlines a blueprint for change that begins with men examining the problem of violence. It has been viewed nearly two million times. View the talk and note the new concepts brought forth. How can the insights in Katz’s talk reach further than “preaching to the choir” to permeate society at large?

go deeper: Explore the subject of “toxic masculinity” through the work of poet/activist Guante or author and Irish Times columnist Fintan O’Toole. Write up your findings and take a position either agreeing or disagreeing with one of these cultural voices.

go deeper: **Transgender Attacks.** According to multiple studies, transgender students are particularly vulnerable to campus sexual assault, with even higher rates of attack than those found among cisgender female students. Research this disturbing trend and report on your findings. What societal factors may be contributing? What solutions can you suggest?

go deeper: **Express your truth.** The arts have traditionally been a way for people – even those with limited economic resources – to address structures of power about issues of concern. What aspect of society’s challenges around gender, power and violence can you tackle? What creative project lives inside you?

- What would have happened next if Thelma and Louise had surrendered to police? Write a short story or create fictional short film about what happens to the characters next, based in what you’ve learned from the documentary and in class. Include victim impact statements, public sentiment, and their defense – either then or now.
- Write a story, poem or song and present it: sing, rap, blog, or make visual art that centers on the theme of safety and the sexual assault experiences of women and LGBTQ persons.
- Write a one-act play with at least three characters that centers on the subject of sexual assault, incorporating some of the myths and facts about rape.
- Explore feminist art from the 1970s, 80s, 90s and beyond. Look for inspiration in the political art of other cultures. Blog or write or create your own art project (visual, spoken word, installation), revealing a deeply held personal truth and your own unique insight about personal safety, sexual assault, and living free.
- Devise a poster campaign with a slogan like, *Let’s be Better Humans*, the one adopted in the Toronto community after that city’s “incel” mass murder. Distribute your posters through social media and IRL, putting them up on your campus and in your community.

See the *Taking Action* section of this guide for more ideas on how people can make their voice heard on the issues raised in *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*.

B. Film, Media, and Communications Studies

It's rare for a Hollywood movie to enjoy immense popularity, generate lasting controversy, and make a profound personal impact on large numbers of viewers. The 1991 feature *Thelma & Louise* did all three.

The Power of Story: The Script

Thelma & Louise tells the story of two women friends who go on a life-changing journey. It has a strong point of view about gender politics and justice for survivors of sexual violence. Callie Khouri won the Oscar® for best original screenplay for the film.

In *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, one of the film's actors, Christopher McDonald, explains Khouri's reasons for writing the screenplay: "Callie talks about it a lot in her interviews, about how she was just sick of being an actress and just being the girlfriend or the wife of the husband. So she sat down and wrote this story that is just, to this day, empowering to women."

1. What was the consensus among the women and men interviewed for the documentary, in terms of whether they found *Thelma & Louise* to be an empowering film? Did everyone interviewed find the movie inspiring? Who didn't, and why?
2. It's been said that in film scripts, "the ending is the reason the story happened." It's the resolution of the story's central conflict, the "point" of the film.

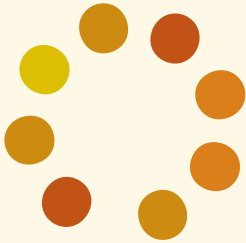
Q: Given *Thelma & Louise's* controversial ending in which the two women fly off the cliff rather than face arrest and imprisonment, what point is screenwriter Callie Khouri making with her script?

go deeper: *Thelma & Louise* shares a narrative structure with *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), directed by George Roy Hill and written by William Goldman. The earlier film is a highly romanticized version of the life of iconic American outlaws, a character type for whom American audiences have a longstanding affection. View the 1969 film's closing scene and discuss the value of choosing to use a similar narrative structure. Does it add any special meaning to Thelma and Louise's journey to invoke Butch and Sundance? How do the women fit or modify the outlaw stereotype? Write up your analysis.

3. Is *Thelma & Louise* a fable, or is it a realistic portrayal of what can happen when a sexual assault sends events spinning out of control?



Or is it both? Name another successful movie that operates on more than one level: a small, personal story echoing a larger, universal one? An example would be *Black Panther*, a film about both a young man's ascent to lead his people, and self-sustaining nations' rights to interact or not interact with the outside world. Write a one-sentence logline description of the plot of *Thelma & Louise* for each one: the immediate story, and the larger universal one.



group discussion: Consider the ending of *Thelma & Louise*, and make a case for or against the title characters' decision to end their lives in a state of "freedom," rather than face certain prison time. What message did the ending deliver to audiences? What was the mood in the final seconds of the film, evidenced in the film score and cinematography, and how did they enhance the film's theme of freedom?

4. The documentary's director, Jennifer Townsend, is, in some ways, her film's protagonist. She was compelled to create a national research project after seeing the film in 1991, and later decided to reignite the project by locating and interviewing respondents.

Q: What did you learn about the director's personal history that may have influenced her decision to make this documentary? Why do you think she and so many others, primarily women, had such profound psychological reactions to seeing the fictional Thelma and Louise refuse to cater to the patriarchy, demand their freedom, and take the reins of power over their lives?

go deeper: Compare one of the actual accounts of sexual assault described by a present-day interviewee in the documentary *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* with the sexual assault depicted in the feature film, *Thelma & Louise*. Write down everything that you think may have contributed to the real life attack, and to the on-screen attack. How are they similar and how are they different? How realistic is the feature film's treatment of the sexual assault suffered by Thelma?

5. In the documentary, Dianne talks about her anger at having been the victim of three sexual assaults and numerous incidents of sexual harassment. June recalls she and her friends cheering when Louise shot Thelma's attacker.

Q: Can you recall any other mainstream feature films that depict outlaw female heroes who unapologetically express their anger and outrage at the lack of justice for women? Why are such films so rarely made?

6. The movie *Thelma & Louise* was a radical departure for Hollywood. The strong female leads took on a mythic quality that gave the film profound personal and societal resonance. In the documentary, Ruthe says the movie gave her "some kind of power." Robin says, "It

was this feeling of affirmation. Like my story was being told.”

Q: What do you think accounts for these viewers’ strong association with these characters and their story? What did the film tap into in their lives, in their psyches?

go deeper: In the documentary, we learn that the friendship depicted between fictional characters Thelma and Louise rang true with a lot of viewers. In fact, the term “Thelma & Louise” entered the lexicon almost immediately as shorthand for close friends who go off on a journey together. Plot the arc of the friendship between characters Thelma & Louise. Describe the transformation in each woman. Who changes the most? What was state of their friendship by the final scene of the film?

7. When the feature film *Thelma & Louise* was released in theaters in 1991, one of the documentary’s participants remembers hearing a lot of buzz about it, saying: *There was this feminist film.*

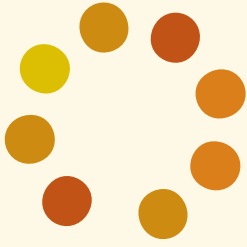
Q: What defines a feminist film? Is the definition evolving – different today than in 1991, or even 1971? Or is the term feminism a constant, simply a belief in equal treatment, regardless of gender?

8. How would you describe the point of view of the movie *Thelma & Louise*? Could someone who doesn’t identify as female have written this story? Why or why not?

go deeper: The book **Thelma & Louise Live! The Cultural Afterlife of an American Film**, edited by Bernie Cook, is a collection of essays by leading film scholars and an interview with screenwriter Callie Khouri explore the significant, on-going influence of the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*. Select three essays and report on their contrasting views and approach to film criticism.

9. How would you describe the point of view of the documentary, *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*? How is “point of view” expressed differently in documentary film versus narrative features? In each stage of production, how is a documentary filmmaker’s POV expressed, from concept to production, post-production, outreach and distribution?
10. Is *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* an advocacy piece? If so, what changes is the documentary advocating? What is it asking us to consider, and do you feel compelled to change your own behavior or take any action?
11. How important is “real people casting” as an element in documentary storytelling? What process would you use to select participants for a documentary you were making on a cultural phenomenon such as this one? What should one consider during the casting process?





group discussion: In small groups of 6 to 8, give each student an opportunity to speak from their own experience and answer these questions: have you ever been deeply affected by a fictional character in a story? What character, and what was the connection you felt? In a second round in the group, pose this question: can a character in a film have a positive impact on one's self-esteem? Can it be a conduit for personal power? ("If you can't see it, you can't be it.") Share any insights with the class.

group discussion: Census figures indicate the U.S. population consists of 50.8% women and 49.2% men, yet 88% (or seven out of eight) protagonists in the 100 top-grossing U.S. feature films were men, and only 12% were women. Consider the protagonists of four films you've seen over the past year and discuss whether those films' stories necessitated a protagonist of a specific gender identity, including non-binary.

group discussion: One way to approach film analysis is to recognize filmmaking as a series of choices on the part of the screenwriter(s) and director. View the feature film *Thelma & Louise* and ask, as you go, Why *that* camera position for that scene or narrative event? Why *those* words at that juncture? Why reveal the catalyst for Thelma and Louise to go on the lam, but *not* reveal Louise's sexual assault history? Pick a key scene and discuss how different writing or visual choices would have changed its meaning.

go deeper: Film is a collaborative medium. View several other films written by Callie Khouri (or read those films' scripts), and several others directed by Ridley Scott, to try to ascertain each artist's contributions to *Thelma & Louise*. Afterwards, write your thoughts on the issue of women, LGBTQ+ people, and gender non-binary people directing and producing films, as well as writing them. What new possibilities emerge?

go deeper: Emily Gould, author and blogger says: "If a woman writes about herself, she's a narcissist. If a man does the same, he's describing the human condition." Who is allowed to tell their stories, their truth, in your country's mainstream media? Are stories featuring male characters measured by the same criteria, the same critical standards, as those with female leads? Examine published reviews of three female-centered films and three male-centered films. What assumptions or generalizations are made in terms of gender? Look for subtle differences. Note the gender of the reviewers and whether you think the reviewer's gender is a factor in their response to films. Write up your findings.

go deeper: How influential are true-to-life, honest film depictions of underrepresented people? What are the cumulative effects of the absence of complex stories that feature women, people of color, LGBTQ+ and disabled persons as central characters? Write an opinion piece that answers these questions, citing concrete examples.

go deeper: In the documentary, Ruthe says: “I was in this terrible marriage, getting abused, getting hit, getting called all kinds of obscene names, my children seeing this. At the time, that’s what I needed to see.” Write an essay about the power of on-screen role models, using examples from your own life or the life of someone you know well. Compare the fictional and actual life circumstances. What aspects of their own behavior did this person see in one of the characters? How did their behavior or life change as a result of seeing the portrayal?

go deeper: Create a two- to three-minute video documentary on how friends and family members have coped with a sexual assault. Offer to provide anonymity to any participants who would prefer that. Experiment with ways you can shoot the interviews that preserve their privacy. Use text on screen as your narrative voice for set-ups and bridges. Brush up on video interviewing techniques, pay close attention to sound and compose a background for each interview shot that is visually interesting and provides some subtext. Write up questions ahead of time, avoiding yes/no questions, and maintain eye contact with your interview subjects. Find free music online, and edit your piece in iMovie or Adobe Premiere. Screen for the class and post to social media.

Gender Expectations

In her documentary interview, Dianne says, “Watch TV, watch a movie. Women are killed day after day after day after day in crime shows...one man is killed, and it’s just open season on men!” Another interviewee, Paul, thinks it’s “bizarre” to criticize the movie *Thelma & Louise* as being violent when “so many American films are drenched in violence.” He wonders if they’re criticizing the film because it’s violent from an objective standard, or because “for a change you have women, strong women who are responding with violence in a way that’s *normally reserved for men.*”

1. What are society’s expectations in terms of film depictions of gender and violence? Is there a double standard at play? Is it still shocking to see women on screen seeking justice at the end of a gun?



go deeper: Analyze how popular TV shows and films deal with the subject of sexual assault. In addition to the ever-present female murder victims, how prevalent are women survivors of sexual abuse in dramas? How and how often is the aftermath of sexual crime explored? What are the effects of employing sexual assault as a plot point without such exploration of the aftermath?

Some specific resources: The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University is home to the longest running and most comprehensive studies of women in film and television: <https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu>. Womenandhollywood.com is a site that educates, advocates, and agitates for gender diversity and inclusion in Hollywood and the global film industry. Geena Davis's Institute on Gender and Media (www.seejane.org) has educational, community-based, and media analysis resources to support increased gender justice.

go deeper: Watch the *Will & Grace* episode, "Grace's Secret," Episode 5, Season 10, in which Grace confronts her father about a rape she experienced as a teen at the hands of his friend. What did you think of the handling of this sensitive subject on this comedy program? How do the visual, narrative, emotional ways a sensitive subject like this is explored affect its reception by audiences, and its ability to make positive social change?

go deeper: Some commentary on *Thelma & Louise* and popular film in general criticizes the appropriation of violence by women protagonists because it seems to perpetuate violence as an acceptable way to solve problems. Discuss what other ways there are to resolve conflicts besides violence. Screen the episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* entitled "The Void" and discuss how Captain Janeway achieves results in a situation in which violence seems essential.

Critical Reception

Documentary's participant Marita Sturken's book *Thelma & Louise* is a detailed analysis of the landmark film. From the book's synopsis:

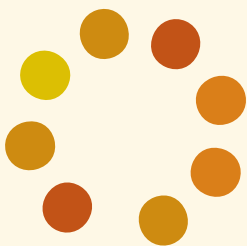
Thelma & Louise (1991) sparked a remarkable public discussion about feminism, violence, and the representation of women in cinema. Subject to vilification in the press for its apparent justification of armed robbery and manslaughter, it was a huge hit with audiences composed largely but not exclusively of women who cheered the fugitive central characters played by Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis.

go deeper: Examine the wider cultural impact of the feature film *Thelma & Louise* by reading popular and academic criticism of the film. What do the personal testimonies in the documentary offer that critical reviews and scholarship don't? And the reverse: what do critics and scholars have to offer that individual testimonies might not? How do the priorities and emphases of critics' reviews differ when prepared for audiences of different gender identities, races and social classes? That is, how might a review for Jezebel.com differ from one in Esquire Magazine or the New York Times? Compare three reviews of the same film and report your findings.

Women's Stories on Film

As reported in *The Wrap*: producer Amy Ziering received pushback from executives when she and her partners were trying to sell their documentary *The Invisible War* about systemic sexual abuse in the military. The film later received an Academy Award™ nomination for best documentary feature.

"We could get into any room," said Amy Ziering, the Oscar-nominated producer of "the Invisible War," who had a proven track record of multiple successful documentary features and an Emmy nomination. "But what was so amazing to me was that what we heard was that no one cares about women's stories. No one cares about women being raped. And of course, no one's going to care about women being raped in the military. So we couldn't get a penny."



group discussion: Film distribution companies like those Ziering refers to above are businesses that need to turn a profit to exist, but they also provide – or don't provide – information access to citizens. Very often business decisions become decisions that affect civil discourse. This is true of smaller companies in various traditional media, as well as giant corporations like Google and Facebook. What is the practical effect of these film companies choosing not to finance and distribute Ziering's film to a wide audience? How can filmmakers telling unpleasant or unpopular stories best access the cultural power of profit-driven industries devoted to entertainment?

go deeper: Research statistics on women's employment in the film industry at these sites: womenmakemovies.com, hollywoodreporter.com, and deadline.com. WomenandHollywood.com reports trends, year over year. What is the current picture in terms of who is securing funding to make films, and how has that picture changed since 1991 when *Thelma & Louise* was released?

go deeper: What is an “inclusion rider,” and how does it work? How does it address persistent gender inequity in the Hollywood film industry? Write up your findings, and include Frances McDormand’s Oscar acceptance speech in which she lit a fire on this issue. The concept is also explored in a TED talk by Stacy Smith, founder of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California, who says:

“I want to talk about gender inequality in film. I want to tell you how it is perpetuated, and then I’m going to tell you how we’re going to fix it.”

See the initiative's full report at uscannenberg.org.

go deeper: View the film *Support the Girls* (2018), about the women who work in a Hooters-style sports bar or “breastaurant.” The film is a personal story that speaks to the kind of indignities working women face every day in this kind of business and in workplaces generally. It was written and directed by a man. Does this matter? Would the film have been different if it had been written and directed by a woman or someone non-binary? Write up your analysis.

go deeper: What more could be done to assure that the independent and Hollywood film industries remedy systemic gender bias? Why has the problem been so intractable? Write up your own recommendations that addresses the persistent issues of representation of women in film, behind and in front of the camera. What needs doing? Who needs to get on board? Out-of-the-box thinking is encouraged.

A Transgender Story of Sexual Assault

go deeper: Watch the acclaimed 1999 feature film *Boys Don't Cry* – the story of a brutal gang rape and murder of a young transgender man, Brandon Teena. Based on a true story, the film’s co-writer and director, Kimberly Peirce, is an open lesbian. Research the screenwriter/director’s personal role in bringing this story to the screen. Watch her University of Chicago interview about literary influences in dramatic storytelling. Examine how Peirce translated this true story into a narrative film. How does the fate of its lead character change the public’s perception of living trans? Citing at least three analyses of *Boys Don't Cry*, write your own appraisal of the film’s strengths and potential impact.

Reviewers and Speaking Roles: The Gender Factor

Men write 80 percent of the film reviews in the U.S., and 65 percent of critics are white men. There are 2.15 male speaking roles to every one female role in the movies, with no meaningful change in the last decade. The female voice is still marginalized.

In *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, director Jennifer Townsend refers to a scathing review of the movie *Thelma & Louise* by social critic John Leo, who called it “toxic feminism on the big screen.” The website IMDB lists all 121 external reviews of the original film. Select six reviews from reliable media outlets such as Janet Maslin’s review published by *The New York Times*, Peter Travers’ review in *Rolling Stone* or Margaret Carlson’s review in *Time Magazine*. Report on the way each critic responded to the Hollywood movie’s feminist themes.

go deeper: Watch the two feature films, *Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid* and *Thelma & Louise*. Compare these two outlaw movies, the treatment of their protagonists as anti-heroes, the lead characters’ motives, and the film’s endings. Did the violence committed by Butch Cassidy and his friend stir critical debate? How did the bond of friendship change and grow in the course of each film? What separates the two films, thematically, and what do they have in common? Create a presentation or research project.

go deeper: Create a wish list of three fleshed-out ideas for movies that embrace points of view and stories you’d like to see made. Introduce them with your reasoning for why they are needed and how they would likely be received. Identify the inciting incident, the goal your characters are trying to achieve, and the major conflicts they encounter. Decide on an ideal cast for the film’s major roles, write out a two-sentence logline description for it, prepare your elevator pitch to get funding, and make a movie poster for each of your ideal Hollywood films. Present your project in class.

Feminist Films

The British Film Institute lists ten great feminist feature films from around the world on its site. A list of “The 100 best feminist movies of all time” can be found here at timeout.com.

Great feminist films that focus on women of color include:

Beauty Shop, The Sapphires, Waiting to Exhale, Banditas, Akeelah and the Bee, How the Garcia Girls Spent Their Summer, Real Women Have Curves, Frida, Anita and Me, Bend it Like Beckham.

In the documentary genre, *Audrey & Daisy* is a documentary (available on Netflix) about rape and social media bullying that focuses on two

Is This What Feminism Is All About?

By playing out a male fantasy, *Thelma & Louise* shows Hollywood is still a

By MARGARET CARLSON

So few movies place women at their center that when one does it is held up to the light and turned every which way for clues about the state of the gender. This may be more freight than *Thelma & Louise* can carry. But not since *Fatal Attraction* has a movie provoked such table-pounding discussions between men and women. Along partisan lines, men attack the movie as a male-bashing feminist screed, in which they are portrayed as leering, overbearing, violent swine who deserve what they get, from a bullet in the heart to being stuffed in a trunk. Women cheer the movie because it finally turns the tables on Hollywood, which has been too busy making movies about bimbos, prostitutes, vipers and bitches and glamorizing the misogynists who kill them to make a movie like *Thelma & Louise*.

Yet for all the pleasure the film gives women moviegoers who want to see the worst of the opposite sex get what's coming to them, it can hardly be called a woman's movie or one with a feminist sensibility. As a bulletin from the front in the war of the sexes, *Thelma & Louise* sends the message that lit-

and warns her not to ask about it. She turns home to Mexico without going through it into one of the movie's running jokes.

The pair can't seem to just have fun with woman's weekend in which they are final who hem them in. Thelma is still the teen party who gets bored and has to call a few less than an hour out of town, she talks L at a raunchy bar, where she dances with a to rape her in the parking lot. The wom enough characters by this time so that we b many adventure movies present—Why did lice?—and rationalize what might be a co as an act of self-defense. That way we can cl

Thunderbird, put down the roof and go alo But it becomes harder and harder to ro who make the wrong choice at every turn Clint Eastwood than Katharine Hepburn, near rape. Thelma is begging Louise to picl requires a breathtaking midair somersault Thelma would be eager to take up with i and would let him into her motel roo

different girls sexually assaulted on two different nights in two different towns. Bustle.com lists thirteen more feminist documentaries, and Ms. lists its top five.

go deeper: Select one feminist film, either a narrative feature such as *Wonder Woman*, or a documentary. Watch it in its entirety and write a critical analysis of what makes it a feminist film. What values does it espouse? What themes does it explore? Whose story is being told, and from what vantage point? Do female characters demand some measure of equality? And how does the film move the needle towards a more just and inclusive society?

go deeper: Go to Boxoffice Mojo.com and look at the top five highest-grossing films in each of the last five years. How do these films, which often become cultural touchstones, represent women and gender politics?

Satire

Some people think the feature film *Thelma & Louise* veers into satire to make its point: that is, it uses humor and exaggeration to criticize aspects of the male-dominated society in which the movie is set. An early literary example of this style is Jonathan Swift's 1729 satire, *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of the Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents, or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. In it, Swift is not sincerely suggesting the people of Ireland sell their children as food, but he's using that outrageous concept to deliver a message about the callousness of society towards the poor.

Q: In the movie *Thelma & Louise*, when Thelma locks the trooper in the trunk of his police car in the desert, and when the pair commit armed robbery and blow up a sexist trucker's oil tanker, what was your reaction? Were they satisfying in an emotional sense? Did they detract or enhance the power of the film? Did the screenwriter expect these acts to be viewed as satire, or actual events? Write an opinion paper on the use of comic satire in *Thelma & Louise*.

go deeper: A Short Documentary. The arts have traditionally been a way for people with limited power to address the wider culture about issues that concern them. What creative project lives inside you? Create a short video or audio documentary in response to the themes of justice, female empowerment, and/or friendship raised in the documentary, *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*. See "Tips for Documentary Making" in this guide.



C. Law and Criminal Justice Studies

The central conflict in the landmark Hollywood feature *Thelma & Louise* stems from the film's inciting incident: the physical assault and attempted rape of one of its lead characters. After Thelma is attacked, her friend Louise confronts and shoots the perpetrator, setting the movie's plot in motion.



The choices the two women make in the aftermath of these crimes, including the decision to become outlaws, are based largely on their knowledge of how rape and sexual assault charges have been handled historically by the American criminal justice system. In a broader sense, the movie depicts two women breaking free from a world where institutional power is entirely in the hands of men, where sexist behaviors and attitudes towards women are commonplace, and where justice for assault survivors is a rarity. The year is 1991.

The present-day documentary *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* reveals a select group of viewers' frank reactions to the movie's themes. They recount stories and reflections, including their own experiences with misogyny, sexual harassment and sexual assault – and the documentary asks us to consider whether society's norms have shifted significantly in this arena since the movie's release.

How are sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape defined under the law?

Refer students to the *Defining the Terms* section of this guide and ask them to review the definitions of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape.

1. Did anything surprise you about how these crimes are defined? What effect does an inconsistent legal definition of sexual crimes across jurisdictions have on the criminal justice process? Are nationally recognized definitions warranted?

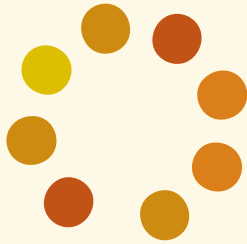
Consent

Rape and sexual assault cases often hinge on one pivotal factor: consent. Yet there are many misconceptions and disagreements about what constitutes consent.

The human rights organization Amnesty International declares:

“Sex without consent is rape, full stop. Until governments bring their legislations in line with this simple fact, the perpetrators of rape will continue to get away with their crimes.”

Refer students to the “consent” definition in *Defining the Terms*. For further clarification, refer them to the *Consent: Two Explanations* pages of this guide. Go over these in class.



group discussion: In small groups, ask students to discuss and report back five key challenges they see with regard to the issue of consent in prosecuting and defending cases involving sexual crimes. Should there be a national, or even international, standard for consent? Why or why not?

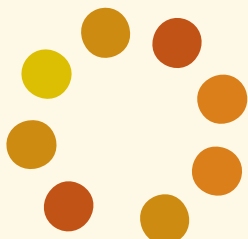
2. In the movie *Thelma & Louise*, after Thelma said, “quit it” and “stop it!” her assailant Harlan struck her in the face and began to tear her dress. At this point, when her friend Louise walked up, what crime or crimes had been committed?
3. If Thelma and Louise had reported the sexual assault and battery to authorities while still holding the assailant at gunpoint – what are the likely legal scenarios that may have followed? Based on evidence and eyewitness testimony of Thelma drinking, dancing and flirting with Harlan that evening in the bar, how difficult would a sexual assault case be to prove? Would the accusations have been dismissed as a simple case of “he said/she said” back in 1991? Today?
4. Stephen Schulhofer, Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, compares consent to when a doctor intrudes on a woman’s body with an instrument: the doctor has to obtain a signed consent form first because it’s an intrusion of the patient’s bodily integrity. In rape law, consent starts with the assumption that the *woman has consented* and her lawyer has to prove otherwise. How significant is this assumption to the prosecution of rape?
5. After the shooting, when the women are on the run, Thelma suggests they ought to tell the police that Harlan assaulted her. Louise responds, *“Just what do you think we ought to tell them, huh? Just about 100 people saw you dancing cheek to cheek with him. Who’s gonna believe that? We don’t live in that kind of world, Thelma.”*

Q: What kind of world *would* we need to live in for the police and the DA’s office to believe Thelma? What societal norms would have to change?
6. District Attorneys’ offices in the U.S. and elsewhere are often under-resourced. When there is not a clearly provable case, the DA may decline to prosecute. (See stats about outcomes for every 1000 rapes in the *Myths v. Facts* section of this guide.)

Q: If you were DA, would you argue that the case of Thelma’s attempted rape be moved to trial today? Why or why not?

Rape Myths

Assign students to read the *Myths v. Facts* section of this guide. Go over them in class.



group discussion: Ask students to break into small groups and discuss these questions: How do rape myths contribute to the difficult task of delivering justice in sexual assault cases? What formal steps might attorneys, judges and the courts take to address these myths and reduce their influence among jurors, attorneys and judges? Report back five possible actions to the class.

group discussion: Break into small groups and discuss these three questions: Of those rape myths listed, which ones might have come into play in the sexual assaults described by Dianne, the interviewee in *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* who survived two rapes and fended off a third? Had she reported, how potentially damaging would rape myths have been for Dianne, who was walking home through the woods alone the first time she was raped by three men, and was sleeping in her own bed when a friend’s boyfriend raped her in the second attack?

go deeper: With today’s increased focus on consent, how should police, prosecutors, trial lawyers and judges be trained to recognize rape myths and steer legal proceedings away from them? Investigate the curricula of several law schools for what they offer, or make mandatory, in terms of defending or prosecuting sexual assault cases. If law schools do not currently offer such training, what steps can be taken to ensure that they do in the future?

Whether to Prosecute

1. Among the actual rape cases described in the documentary is the powerful account by its director, Jennifer Townsend, about the rape of her developmentally disabled sister by a serial offender, a police officer.

Q: Did Jennifer’s local district attorney act appropriately when he told her family he would not prosecute because the assailant’s high-powered defense attorney would “make mincemeat” out of her sister on the witness stand? What do you think he meant by that? In today’s climate of women coming forward to report sexual assault, would the DA be obliged to “do something” about these kinds of allegations today?

2. How could eyewitness testimony or CCTV footage of Thelma's actions in the bar, in particular her excessive consumption of alcohol, be used by the prosecution and the defense? Would the assailant's efforts to "get her drunk enough to rape" be a provable crime? How would you prove it?

go deeper: Choose District Attorney's offices in three cities in your state or region. Conduct research on the criteria these DA's offices use to determine which sexual assault accusations to bring to trial. Interview attorneys from prosecutors' offices about the current path to trial. Are the current criteria working? Given the dismally low number of sexual assault cases that result in trials and convictions, how could the process be improved? Present your findings and recommendations.

go deeper: Attrition is a term for when prosecutors find a reason not to prosecute a rape case. Often, they employ rape myths or claim that juries will be unable to overcome their adherence to these myths. Contact three prosecutors offices and interview them about attrition rates. Why are prosecutors not required to report such rates? Should their declination rates on fully prosecuting rape cases be a matter of public record, since top prosecutors hold elected office and are paid by the public? Write up your findings and recommendations.

go deeper: Most European countries still define rape as *sex carried out with the use or threat of violence*. Ten nations, including the UK, Sweden and Ireland, now classify rape as *sex without consent*. Report on this trend and how consent is now being handled in three different Western nations. Have conviction rates in rape trials changed in these countries? Or does proving consent remain an intractable issue?

Case in Point: Sweden Passes Consent-based Legislation

From the New York Times article published May 18, 2018 entitled, **Swedish Law Now Recognizes Sex Without Consent as Rape:**

"Sex must be voluntary — if it is not, then it is illegal."

This is the straightforward language of a new Swedish law set to change the way rape and other sexual crimes are prosecuted in the country.

Sweden's Deputy Prime Minister Isabella Lovin said the #MeToo campaign had shown the need for action to counter

sexual assault and harassment. The Parliamentary vote in favor of consent legislation “marks a huge victory for women’s rights activists in Sweden who have been campaigning tirelessly for this change for more than a decade.”

Anna Blus, Amnesty’s women’s rights researcher for Europe said: “Shockingly, this change in law will make Sweden only the tenth country in Europe to recognize that sex without consent is rape. Most European countries still define rape based on physical force, threat or coercion, and these outdated definitions have caused immeasurable harm.

*However, the Swedish Bar Association said the new law would not lead to more convictions: “The new legislation has not lowered the burden of proof, since the prosecutor has to prove that a crime was committed and they have to prove intent,” Sweden’s secretary general Anne Ramberg told *The New York Times*.*

go deeper: Research the current consent law in Sweden, along with two other countries (such as Spain) where consent laws have been passed. What short and long-term benefits do such laws provide? How effective have they been in terms of addressing low reporting and conviction rates for sexual crimes? How might they change how victims are treated in the judicial process?

go deeper: Feminist legal expert Dr. Yvette Russell writes:

“Many scholars assert, based on a wealth of varied empirical data, that the pervasive acceptance of ‘rape myths’ mitigate against the fair and neutral application of the law in cases of sexual violence. The argument, therefore, made predominantly by liberal theorists, is that rather than law reform the focus needs to be instead on correcting attitudes in order that the law can be implemented as intended.”

Russell advises we be “conscious of the cost of putting too much stock in the hope that law will save us from ourselves.” Support or refute Russell’s theory.

Consent – Case in Point: Social Attitudes in England and Wales

From the Independent article published on November 24, 2018 entitled, **Only a Quarter of EU Countries have Consent-based Definitions of Rape:**

Katie Russell, a spokeswoman for Rape Crisis England and Wales, said: "The legislation on its own can't affect real change because we're talking about deeply engrained social attitudes and that kind of cultural shift can't happen overnight.

"It must be accompanied with real investment in specialist training, education around consent for children and adults at the earliest possible age."

Ms. Russell said that investment and funding is desperately needed in specialist support services and within the criminal justice system. She argues:

*"Consent is not just about 'yes means yes' and 'no means no' – it's about understanding with **a level of human empathy, decency and logic** that consent is straightforward, but we need to collectively take responsibility for raising real awareness and understanding."*



In the documentary, Andrew comments: "In my lifetime, we have stigmatized drunk driving. In my lifetime, we have the phrase 'stalking.' There are laws. You know, when you objectify something and you put language on it, then you can have laws about it that prohibit behavior. It doesn't always change culture, but over time people grow up and begin to understand that these things are harmful."

Q: Who holds the responsibility for raising awareness and promoting a "culture of respect and consent" with, as Ms. Russell puts it, "a level of *human empathy, decency and logic*?" What measures could be taken? Where do we begin?

go deeper: Some U.S. states, including New Jersey and California, now mandate that consent be taught in schools, starting in grade six. What are the advantages of this educational approach to remedying "rape culture"? Should consent education be mandatory? Write your arguments for or against this approach, including its limitations.

After An Attack

go deeper: Familiarize yourself with the laws, rules, and policies regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault that affect your campus and community. (Instructors may wish to provide the class with handouts or comprehensive materials on what these services are, where to find them, and what they are titled.) What legal recourse is available where you live, in the event that you or someone you love were sexually assaulted? What immediate steps would you take to preserve the right to report and prosecute the crime?

Low Reporting Rates

In the documentary *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, the women and men interviewed contend that justice for crimes of a sexual nature was inadequate in 1991 when *Thelma & Louise* was released, and remains so today.

In order to obtain justice as the survivor of sexual violence, a first step is to report the crime. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, more than 90% of sexual assault victims **do not report** the attack.

- 1) What factors may be contributing to low reporting rates for crimes of sexual violence in your country, as compared to other crimes involving bodily harm? What are the barriers, actual and perceived? In a general sense, what remedies could be put in place to encourage victims of sexual violence to come forward?

go deeper: Prepare a research paper on remedies being proposed by advocacy groups to increase reporting rates for rape and sexual assault and bring more cases through the system to trial. Include statistics on the reporting rate for sexual assault and rape in the U.S. and other developed nations.

Protecting Rape Survivors During Trial

In the documentary *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, Sharlene describes the rape at knifepoint of a friend in her own home: “And they said, ‘you were you were dressed in a robe?’ And her defense was ‘yes, I had taken my nightly shower.’ And you were painting? ‘Yes, I was doing art in my robe.’ And somehow that was some indication of her unsuitability and contributed to her victimization...her sexual history went on trial in this man’s defense. And it was horrid. She drove out to the outskirts and committed suicide with a gun that she had bought at a pawn shop.”

1. What limits should be placed on defense attorneys to prevent them from using innuendo and outright character assassination of alleged rape victims? Or are such tactics simply providing the best defense possible to the accused?
2. What is the role of the judge in stopping innuendo and harassing, shaming and humiliating lines of questioning? Are there clear-cut guidelines? How would such guidelines be enforced? Should there be retraining of judges and attorneys?



3. What protections are now in place to protect vulnerable victims who are mentally or physically incapable of standing up to questioning? What protections are still needed?

go deeper: Research rape shield laws in the U.S. states and other countries. When did they come into effect? What do they do? What difference do they make at trial? Cite at least three cases where the complainant's treatment on the stand was a point of controversy. Write a research paper, and draw your own conclusions about the effectiveness of rape shield laws.

go deeper: At a high profile rape trial in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a group of international rugby stars were charged with raping a woman. Attempts by the court to shield the complainant from the media spotlight included having her testify behind a curtain (only her voice heard by jurors) and on videotape, rather than ever being seen by the jury in open court. Eyewitnesses to the trial proceedings said the woman "did not seem alive and real." The alleged rapists, however, appeared sympathetic in court.

The defendants were found not guilty – despite what many consider credible evidence – sparking protests throughout Ireland. Conduct research on the pros and cons of attempts to protect alleged rape victims from the public spotlight in court. What other means could be used to protect these complainants, particularly in high profile cases? Or, is testifying openly in court the price of justice?

go deeper: The Belfast rape trial also renewed debate on whether high profile defendants in rape trials should be entitled to anonymity, with their names revealed only if they are convicted. Would this practice aid in the delivery of justice, particularly in cases like the four international rugby stars tried in Belfast? Or would singling out these well-known alleged assailants for anonymity simply shield them, and possibly encourage this type of crime? Research the subject of anonymity for defendants during trial, and its potential effects on the delivery of justice.

go deeper: Listen to the RTE Radio documentary, *Notes from a Belfast Rape Trial*. "The documentary paints a depressing picture of how such a traumatic personal experience can be reduced to a series of arid, intimately detailed arguments at trial," reported the Irish Times. Other protection issues during this trial process included: whether to open the courtroom's gallery to the public rather than restricting it to journalists, the burden on jurors in cases such as this, and the influence of social media on the trial's outcome, in particular, the practice of tweeting from the court. Consider these questions and write up your arguments for or against each.

go deeper: Victims' groups say persons reporting rape are frequently told their case will not reach court unless they allow police access to their mobile phones and private communications, or sign statements that let investigators access their health records and other personal information. Some fear that such intrusion will cause victims to drop charges or prevent them from coming forward. In fact, this happened in 2019 in the Kevin Spacey sexual assault prosecution in Nantucket, MA. The prosecutor dropped the case after not being able to access the reporting witness's phone. Research the subject of *invasive disclosure*. What steps should be taken in the digital age to limit the use of cell phone and tablet data to prove cases or discredit witnesses and complainants? Is subpoenaing the alleged victim's digital devices an invasion of privacy? What limits are reasonable? Write up your arguments.

Inconsistent Sentencing

In high profile rape and assault cases, we see instances of tough sentencing for serial offenders, such as former USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor Larry Nassar who was sentenced to 40 to 175 years in prison after more than 150 women and girls said he sexually abused them over two decades. "I've just signed your death warrant," Judge Rosemarie Aquilina told him after sentencing.

Conversely, we see headlines about sentencing that many people view as a failure of the courts to hold rapists accountable for their crimes. One highly publicized example: ex-Stanford swimmer Brock Turner, whose sexual assault of an unconscious woman in the presence of two eyewitnesses drew widespread attention when he received a six-month jail sentence and was released after three months. The judge in that case was sympathetic to Turner, having himself been a member of the Stanford swim team, an aspect of the case that led to a successful campaign to recall the judge.

go deeper: Research the subject of mandatory sentencing for rape and sexual assault convictions. Include the relevance of the passage of AB 2888, the mandatory sentencing for rape bill in California, a direct result of the Brock Turner case. Then-Gov. Jerry Brown said in a statement that he believed the bill would bring "a measure of parity to sentencing for criminal acts that are substantially similar." What remedies does it provide? Who championed it and who opposed it? And what aspects of the bill are seen as a victory for advocates of criminal justice for rape victims?

Evidence at Trial – Case in point: What was she wearing?

The Irish Times has reported extensively on a controversial aspect of rape trial procedure: whether an alleged rape victim's clothing at the time of the attack should be admissible in a rape case. In one rape trial that gained international attention in Cork, Ireland in 2018, the senior counsel, in her closing address, told the jury they should take into consideration the type of underwear the complainant was wearing on the night of the alleged attack.



“Does the evidence out-rule the possibility that she was attracted to the defendant and was open to meeting someone and being with someone? You have to look at the way she was dressed. She was wearing a thong with a lace front,” the counsel said.

Noeline Blackwell, the head of Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, responded: “The reference to the girl’s underwear and the assumption and inference that the jury was being invited to draw – that because she was dressed like that she was asking for sex – does not surprise us,” she said.

Ms. Blackwell, a human rights lawyer, argued that juries were influenced by stereotypes around rape that permeate society and called for more judicial direction to mitigate this. “We accompany people to court and the whole time we see rape stereotypes used to discredit complainants and to enforce elements of the defendant’s case,” she added.

Critics decried counsel’s remarks about the complainant’s underwear on social media – accusing her of victim blaming. An editor at The Irish Times tweeted. “Wondering what kind of underwear suggests a man is ‘open’ to meeting someone? Any legal experts know? Appalling.”

go deeper: Research any efforts to remove references to complainants’ clothing in sexual assault trials. Watch the YouTube videos about artist-curated exhibits in Brussels, Salt Lake City and elsewhere which display articles of clothing survivors were wearing at the time of their attack. Write up your findings.

A Broken System – Rape and Sexual Assault Evidence Kits

Review with students what comprises a Rape Kit, or Sexual Assault Kit (also called a Sexual Assault Evidence Kit) in the *Defining the Terms* section of this guide.

1. Are sexual assault kits obtained after incidents of sexual violence routinely processed? What have you heard?

2. Studies indicate that the strongest predictor of future sexual violence is past sexual violence, and that repeat offenders account for roughly two thirds of sexual crimes. Given this, in what ways would collecting and processing rape kits after all rapes advance public safety? How would they impact the delivery of justice for survivors? Is a national or global database of DNA and other evidence from sexual assault kits warranted?

go deeper: Read about endthebacklog.org, an initiative of The Joyful Heart Foundation, a U.S. non-profit whose mission is to heal, educate, and empower survivors of sexual assault. Started by actress Mariska Hargitay of *Law & Order: SVU* fame, Hargitay released her documentary film, "I Am Evidence," which takes a close look at why an alarming 175,000 rape kits throughout the U.S. remained untested. The film provides firsthand accounts from sexual assault survivors who have been forced to navigate a broken criminal justice system.

View *I Am Evidence* and conduct research on the rape kit backlog, exploring the prevalence of untested kits, stated causes for this, and what progress and remedies are being employed. For an overview on one contributing factor, the shortage of forensic nurses, see *The Rape Kit Backlog and Shortage Of Forensic Nurses* on Duquesne University's School of Nursing website. Conduct research on your municipality's processing of rape kits. Seek out concrete numbers and talk with elected officials and community advocates, summarizing the status of such evidence processing in your community.

go deeper: If your municipality has a backlog of untested rape kits, attend a "town hall" campaign appearance by a politician, and ask them their views on the backlog. Do they see processing these kits as a priority? What plan do they have for dealing with it?

Sentencing – Case in Point: Anchorage, Alaska

"A judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary, and shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety." - Rule 1.2, American Bar Association Model Code of Judicial Conduct

Explore the controversial sexual assault case in Anchorage, Alaska in which a white man admitted to kidnapping a Native woman, threatening her life, choking her until she fell unconscious, and masturbating on her. The man plead guilty, yet received no jail time because the district attorney and defense attorney made a deal to "give him a pass" because "they didn't think he would do it again." The man was sentenced to two

years with one year suspended, three years probation, and time served while wearing an ankle monitor and living at home with family. The defense attorney said that the man's losing his job was a "life sentence."

go deeper: Write an opinion piece that addresses these questions: 1. Were the attorneys and the judge in this case acting in a way that inspires public confidence in their "integrity" and "impartiality" (as noted in the ABA Code above)? Should there be consequences for them? 2. If this is the kind of thinking that pervades the institutions that determine the quality of life and safety of women and LGBTQ+ people, what other recourse might sexual assault victims have? 3. In instances where convicted perpetrators "get away with it," what role does the gender of those entrusted with carrying out justice play? Is it coincidence that the attorneys and the judge in this case were all white males?

go deeper: Research the "wolf pack" case in Spain that sparked nationwide protests after a Spanish court's controversial decision to clear five men of the gang rape of a teenager and grant them bail, a decision later upheld by five appeal judges. The case hinged on consent, and the group was sentenced to jail for a lesser offense of sexual abuse. The appeal judges agreed that the 18-year-old victim was not assaulted, as no intimidation or violence was involved. The case was referred to Spain's Supreme Court. Report on the facts of the "wolf pack" case, its current status, and the public outrage it sparked. Examine Spain's consent legislation at the time of the case, and whether it was a factor.

go deeper: With movements like #MeToo that grew out of high profile sexual assault cases of Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Louis C.K., Kevin Spacey, R. Kelly and others, victims are coming forward in unprecedented numbers and telling their stories of abuse. But are they obtaining justice? Is justice available to them? And how are their lives affected by publicized trials? Choose three high profile cases and answer the above questions.

go deeper: The sexual misconduct allegations against comedian and actor Aziz Ansari in 2018 deepened the conversation around #MeToo and complicated many critics' view around what separates assault from someone's dating partner being coercive, forceful, pleading or rude. Research this case, and then make an argument answering this question: was a crime committed?

go deeper: The Violence Against Women Act in the 1994 Crime Bill included the civil right to be free from gender-motivated violence. In a case that involved two football players taking turns raping a college freshman within a half hour of meeting her, the U.S. Supreme Court

ruled that the law exceeded Congressional authority to pass under the Commerce Clause (U.S. vs. Morrison, 2000). What was lost in this case? Why don't people know about it? How might women's – and other genders' –rights be different today if the right had not been struck down?

go deeper: Research the history of **victim impact statements**, when and how they came about, and their function in trials. Include a list of at least ten such statements you've reviewed from trials involving sexual assault survivors. Include key passages from three that you consider especially powerful. Answer these questions: What function do witness impact statements serve? When during trial are they used? Are they important, and if so, for whom?

go deeper: Create a fictitious victim impact statement written by Thelma about her sexual assault and the journey it set her and her friend on. Consider all the impacts of the assault in the bar parking lot, not just on Thelma, but also on her friend Louise, the police investigators, and the women's loved ones.

OR, write a victim impact statement in the voice of Sharlene's friend who was described in the documentary as creating art in her robe when a man broke into her home and raped her. Include the impact the trial had on the woman.

OR, write a victim impact statement for the sister of Jennifer Townsend, the documentary's director, who was raped by a police officer and whose case was not pursued by the DA because it was "unwinnable."

Cultural Remedies: Survivors Turn to Activism

After the #MeToo movement took off in on social media, powerful men with access to less powerful women and men across a wide spectrum of the entertainment industry, sports, business, and government faced public scrutiny as unreported abuse came into the public spotlight. Actress Mira Sorvino turned her own trauma into activism. Speaking at the *Know Your Value* conference in San Francisco, she delivered this message:

"We are going to change this culture brick by brick. Our children are not going to grow up into this same rape culture that we did. We are fighting it and we are going to end it."

Sorvino worked to lobby the California legislature to pass laws against sexual harassment in the workplace through the #TakeTheLead campaign, an effort spearheaded by the San Francisco-based law firm, Equal Rights Advocates.

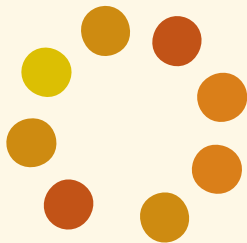
As a result of that campaign, the California state legislature passed a variety of laws, including one requiring employers to provide harassment prevention training, one that eliminates non-disclosure clauses in settlement agreements, and another that requires talent agencies to have sexual harassment educational materials available for clients. It also provides for state-provided sexual harassment training for minors in the Hollywood film industry.

go deeper: Research the Take the Lead Campaign’s legislative effort in California and in other states. Explore the impact of having a celebrity voice, in this case, Sorvino’s. Detail any changes to state laws, analyze the expected and actual results of these changes, and report on the challenges in enforcing them.

go deeper: At the 2018 Academy Awards, actor Frances McDormand uttered two words at the close of her acceptance speech: “inclusion riders.” What are they? Why was she calling for them to be signed into contracts for Hollywood productions? What impact has McDormand’s call made on the institutional level in Hollywood? Cite specific examples.

The Gender Factor

According to the World Health Organization, sexual violence is a common and serious public health problem affecting millions of people each year throughout the world. It is driven by many factors operating in a range of social, cultural and economic contexts. At the heart of sexual violence directed against women is pervasive gender inequality.



group discussion: Can we separate the failure of rape law from gender inequality – given the fact that the vast majority of victims of sexual assault are women, and almost all of the perpetrators are men? How do our history, religion or mythology, biology, and male-dominated systems of power influence the delivery of justice in cases of sexual assault and rape? Stage a classroom debate or discussion about conscious and unconscious gender bias in the law.

go deeper: Dr. Yvette Russell, feminist scholar and law professor, makes a controversial argument: “The various arms of the legal system have an interest in maintaining the status quo in which men enjoy mostly unfettered access to women’s bodies.” Agree or disagree with Russell’s bold assertion, using supporting research and arguments.

The Shooting



1. In the movie *Thelma & Louise*, when talking on the phone to the police investigator (played by Harvey Keitel) about shooting Thelma's attacker, Louise says: "Would you believe it was an accident?" From what you observed, was this an accidental killing, or was it premeditated? Did Louise have "intent" to kill? What charges would you argue if you were on the prosecution team in Louise's case?
2. Given what you learned about the two lead characters in *Thelma & Louise*, what possibilities existed for building Louise's defense for the crime of shooting her friend's assailant? Would PTSD be a plausible defense, since, in all likelihood, she had a history of her own sexual assault in Texas? Would the demeaning language the assailant used just prior to her shooting him have triggered extreme recklessness? What plea would you enter on Louise's behalf?
3. Once the women are on the run, they commit armed robbery, lock a police officer in the trunk of his car, and blow up the oil tanker of a sexist trucker. How would you defend their crime spree, as their defense attorney? How would you prosecute them? And what would be their likely fate in terms of prison time if convicted on all charges?

go deeper: Stage a mock trial of the character Louise for the shooting of Harlan, her friend's attacker. Ask students to act as counsel, choosing a side to argue that they don't support: students who are sympathetic to the shooter, Louise, and believe she acted without intent to kill, join the prosecution team; students who are unsympathetic to the defendant, join her defense team. Appoint a judge and jurors, call witnesses, include opening and closing arguments, and hand down sentencing.

Institutional Power

Books including *The New Jim Crow* (by Michelle Alexander) and documentary films like *13th* (Ava DuVernay, director) are illuminating the inherent racial injustices in the American legal system, and there is much work to be done in remedying these. Some writers and scholars are now beginning to look at the inherent *patriarchal* underpinnings in the institutions upon which the law was built.

In *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, sociologist, author and educator Dr. Robin DiAngelo comments on the final scene of *Thelma & Louise*:

"When you look at that lineup, it just represented the military and all of the institutions. They were going to have to go through the court

system and the social work system and the prison system and stand before judges and get lawyers and almost all of them were going to be men because that is the society we live in. That is who, for the most part, controls the system and has power. That doesn't mean that women don't have power. We don't have institutional power."

go deeper: What has changed since 1991 in the U.S. and other western nations, in terms of women and LGBTQ+ people gaining more institutional power? How does the number of women and other under-represented groups in the political sphere correlate with legislative remedies such as the passage of consent laws, stricter measures to increase enforcement of existing laws, court reform, and mandatory sentencing? Contrast two western nations' handling of sexual crimes since 1991 in the context of who holds institutional power.

Using Technology to Protect the Public

On average, one in five women and one in 13 men will be sexually assaulted during their undergraduate college career in the United States. Less than 10 percent will ever report their assault to the police and those who do, on average, wait 11 months to make their report.

Tech startups are asking the question: how can technology be harnessed to protect people from sexual assault and harassment, and support survivors?

go deeper: Research the San Francisco-based technology nonprofit, Project Callisto. Watch the TED Talk about it entitled, "The reporting system that sexual assault survivors want," by Jessica Ladd. How are products like Project Callisto and LegalFling employing blockchain technology to store information on assaults and record consent? What are the benefits to alleged victims? (i.e., Survivors using the reporting system Callisto Campus took four months to report their sexual assault experience, which is three times faster than the national average.) What are the benefits to the accused? How does the technology aid in identifying serial rapists? What other benefits does Callisto's database provide attorneys, victims, and the courts?

Sexual Harassment

Review the definition of sexual harassment in the *Defining the Terms* section of this guide.

1. In *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, several interviewees recall incidents of sexual harassment in their own lives, one calling it "a part of life," and saying it should not be. What remedies do the legal



and criminal justice systems offer those who are sexually harassed? When do remarks and behaviors cross the line?

go deeper: On the website of the California-based Equal Rights Advocates law firm, one of its achievements in the area of sexual assault in academia is described this way: “ERA is working with the Network for Women in Science to propose innovative sexual harassment policies for research and patent giant, The Scripps Research Institute. Sexual harassment is more rampant in the academic sciences than any industry other than the military. By creating the new gold standard of anti-discrimination and harassment policies at such a revered institution, we hope to influence scientific programs across the country, ending the rampant push-out of women scientists.” Review the progress of this initiative, and report on the protections it offers women in these positions. What are the long-term benefits of adopting such policies?

go deeper: Read the New York Times article entitled, **Dartmouth Professors Are Accused of Sexual Abuse by 7 Women in Lawsuit**, by Anemona Hartocollis, November 15, 2018. Next read the reporter’s follow-up article in the New York Times, **Dartmouth Reaches \$14 Million Settlement in Sexual Abuse Lawsuit** by Anemona Hartocollis, August 6, 2019.

Conduct a research report on this case: its historical timeline, its merits, its arguments, and what charges the plaintiffs attempted to file against the professors and/or Dartmouth’s administration? Did the University act in good faith? Refer to EEOC in the U.S., or Equal Employment guidelines in your country, and analyze whether justice was served.

Restorative Justice

Review in class the brief definition of restorative justice in the *Defining the Terms* section of this guide. It is a process in which those convicted and those harmed meet to increase understanding and, in some cases, devise solutions to repair harm.

go deeper: Conduct a research project on the various forms of restorative justice currently being utilized in countries around the world. The practice may be used both parallel to, and in place of, conventional justice (CJ). Citing studies you find, address these questions: 1. What benefits does restorative justice offer victims and offenders in cases of violent crimes such as sexual assault? 2. How does the practice affect recidivism, and how do those outcomes compare to how prison time alone affects recidivism? 3. Are victims more likely to be satisfied that justice has been served after they experience restorative justice

meetings? 4. How does restorative justice affect victims' post-traumatic stress and its associated costs?

go deeper: View the feature film, *The Meeting*, a drama based on actual events, from acclaimed Irish director Alan Gilzenan. The film is described this way:

During an intense, meticulously prepared and highly charged encounter, a young woman finally gets answers to questions that have haunted her. Based upon a real-life meeting between a young sexual assault victim and her offender after his release from prison, The Meeting exposes the raw truth of a woman who refuses to sacrifice her personal freedom on the altar of an inadequate justice system. By facing the dark source of her anguish with courage and grace she is transformed in a way that will inspire anyone who has ever known fear.

After watching the film, write a paper describing your emotional response to witnessing this restorative justice meeting and the ways in which you think it benefited both the survivor and the offender. Should this type of practice be more widely available, or even offered as a matter of course after rape convictions (as it has been for years in Belgium)?

Reporting Sexual Crimes: Title IX – A Civil Right

Under Title IX of the Education Acts of 1972, students have the right to equal access to educational opportunities. This means that sex discrimination is prohibited, and this includes sexual harassment, of which sexual assault and rape are the most extreme forms. A college or university that receives federal funds may be held legally responsible when it knows about and ignores sexual harassment or assault in its programs or activities. The school can be held responsible in court in cases when the harassment is committed by a faculty member or staff, or by a student. The institution may be directed, in some cases, to pay the victim(s) monetary damages.

While it is important to remember that Title IX is a civil right – separate from the criminal justice system that is responsible for prosecuting rape – there is an important overlap between the two systems. Given the failure of the criminal justice system to effectively address rape, the rights covered under Title IX are increasingly important.

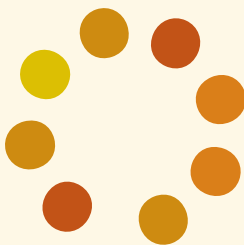
go deeper: What has been the role of Title IX in addressing cases of sexual assault and rape? How often, and for what types of complaints, is the complaint process used? Research three Title IX decisions, including allegations and the complaints' outcomes. Present your findings in a paper or presentation.

According to the ACLU, some states have laws that go farther than Title IX in protecting victims of assault:

- The New Jersey Supreme Court, applying the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination, ruled that a school will be liable when it “knew or should have known” about student sexual harassment, but “failed to take action reasonably calculated to end the harassment.”
- Other states have similar laws, including the Florida Education Equity Act, the Rhode Island Civil Rights Act of 1990, the Maine Human Rights Act, the Minnesota Human Rights Act, and the Washington Law Against Discrimination.

Still other states, like Missouri, have state legislative efforts to undermine Title IX’s protections by enacting laws to change it. Missouri Senate Bill 259 and House Bill 573 were introduced in 2019. According to Know Your IX, these bills were designed to drastically tilt the scales in favor of respondents to Title IX complaints, and discourage reporting. Provisions include:

- Allowing respondents to submit a survivor’s sexual history or mental health history as evidence.
- Allowing respondents to sue someone for making a “false statement.” But the bills do not differentiate between claims that are intentionally false and claims that cannot be corroborated, so **you could potentially be sued for coming forward if you do not have sufficient evidence.**
- Requiring schools to discriminate against survivors by adopting a “clear and convincing” standard *only* for sexual misconduct cases.
- Allowing respondents to directly cross-examine survivors



group discussion: How would the provisions of these Missouri state bills impact the redress process guaranteed by Title IX? Why would state legislators want to decrease protections for sexual assault survivors? Is this a form of backlash against the global movement in which assault survivors are speaking out? Report your answers back to class.

part two:

taking action

What actions can we take to reverse the epidemic of sexual assault in our communities? How can everyone get behind the fight to end this serious human rights abuse? How can we ensure a just legal process for all involved, and support the complex needs of survivors?

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month observed in jurisdictions around the U.S. and in indigenous nations. It's a great time to plan an action. But there are opportunities to act year round and ways to contribute ranging from career choices to individual goals. Even a small change in personal habits is a great start, and there is an increasing call for men to take a more active role in solving this crisis and creating a culture of consent and respect.

Some ideas:

1. Write a *personal pledge* that reflects the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors you hope to embody to help end sexual violence. Include the choices you intend to make in your relationships and your community. Tell friends or family members about it.
2. Take part in the White Ribbon Campaign, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, or other men's action to end sexual assault (see Resource pages) and abide by the organization's goals.
3. Train and volunteer at a hotline, rape crisis center, or women's resource center.
4. Get active on your campus or in your community to raise awareness of the injustices suffered by sexual assault survivors. Set up a resource fair, or table on your campus or in your community. Stage a candlelight march, or hold a speak-out against sexual violence.
5. Write to your elected officials about strengthening rape laws, processing rape kits, and adequately funding prevention, education and victim assistance programs. Start a petition, collect signatures and deliver them to your representatives.
6. Advocate for a technology-based reporting system for sexual assault

(such as Callisto) on your campus or in your place of business. Spread the word about its benefits and enlist groups to meet with the appropriate decision makers to pitch them the idea.

7. Write a letter, blog or first person essay on this subject and publish it.

8. Create a visual art exhibit, a one-act play, a performance piece, or a poster campaign to raise awareness about sexual violence and the urgent need for change. Find a venue for your piece and add your voice to the conversation.

9. Hold a fundraiser to benefit organizations whose missions of advocacy and support align with your values, such as Endthebacklog.org.

10. Start a conversation or “consciousness-raising circle” among friends and acquaintances about consent and sexual assault, allowing each person to voice their views and experiences in an atmosphere of respect and learning. Invite people from different age groups and a diversity of gender identifications to join the conversation.

11. Run for public office on a platform that includes ending sexual violence and providing justice for survivors, including a more humane legal process and harsher punishments for those found guilty of sexual assault.

12. Host a screening of our documentary film *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*, calling it a *Thelma & Louise Documentary Watch Party*. Ask people to share their own experiences in small groups, and brainstorm actions to keep the issue of sexual violence in the public eye.

13. Organize or take part in a *Take Back the Night* event in your community or campus. More than 800 *Take Back the Night* actions have been held across the globe since the first ones in San Francisco and New York City in 1978. On the last Thursday in October and April each year, TBTN holds a worldwide action with events that support ending sexual violence in all forms, raising awareness, and supporting survivors. The *Take Back the Night Foundation* also helps communities hold *Bike for the Night* events, *Yoga for Healing* events, *5K Glow Runs*, international conferences, and regional training conferences. It offers support and fundraising help to all who would like to work with them, and provides access to victims’ rights attorneys.

14. Stage a Vday.org performance of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. Donate a portion of funds raised to a local rape crisis center or shelter.

15. Invite an education-trained specialist from your area rape crisis center or counseling center to take part in a panel, workshop, or classroom visit coinciding with one of the international days of action. Invite survivors, legal experts, law enforcement officers, and/or allies. A silent auction of donated items could benefit an advocacy organization.

16. Hold a film festival featuring this documentary and other films that address sexual assault (i.e., *I am Evidence*, *The Hunting Ground*, *It Happened Here*, *The Invisible War*) during March for Women’s History Month, on March 8th for International Women’s Day, or during Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April.
17. Start a monthly “Movie Club” in which you attend a film in current release, and then gather to discuss its implications for gender justice.
18. Create and share a short video documentary about sexual violence and rape culture, relaying your message of why this serious human rights abuse must be eliminated from society. (See **Tips** that follow.)
19. Investigate a career in victim’s rights law, counseling, or social work.
20. Instill respect and gender equality into your sons, daughters and young siblings.
21. Train people in how to identify and intervene in potentially harmful situations: see Bystander Intervention Tips at www.itsonus.org.
22. Advocate for a requirement that students participate in sexual assault prevention programs.
23. Advocate for stronger enforcement of alcohol restrictions on campus.
24. Work to extend campus sexual assault policies to off-campus sororities, fraternities, and social organizations.

Resources

For Survivors of Sexual Assault

RAINN (the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the largest anti-sexual violence organization in the United States, offering help for victims of sexual assault from trained support specialists. Safe, free, confidential, and 24 /7.

The National Sexual Assault Hotline provides support, information, advice and a local referral based on your phone or zip code.

1-800-656-HOPE (4673) – by phone

<https://hotline.rainn.org/online/> – by online chat

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center provides leadership in preventing and responding to sexual violence.

<https://www.nsvrc.org>

Jane Doe, Inc. The Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence lists comprehensive resources and detailed information for survivors and allies.

<http://www.janedoe.org/>

The Joyful Heart Foundation has published a guide called *6 Steps to Support a Survivor*.

<http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org>

AEquitas works to improve access to and the quality of justice in gender-based violence through an informed, practical, and innovative approach. They publish a wide range of resources and training materials and offer advice and resources across disciplines 24/7 at no cost.

<https://aequitasresource.org/resources/>

The Victim's Rights Law Center is the first nonprofit law center in the United States solely dedicated to serving the legal needs of rape and sexual assault victims. Through free legal services, staff attorneys and volunteer attorneys help restore victims' lives.

<https://www.victimrights.org>

The National Alliance of Victims' Rights Attorneys and Advocates offers on demand trainings in aspects of sexual assault cases for members in the legal profession. Fee-based.

<http://navra.org/online-trainings>

Time's Up has set up a \$21 million legal-defense fund for women who suffer from harassment and assault at work in any industry.

<https://www.timesupnow.com>

Project Callisto develops technology to combat sexual assault and professional sexual coercion. Callisto's mission is to advance justice both on college campuses and in professional industries. Its products provide a way for those who've experienced sexual assault or professional sexual coercion to securely create an encrypted entry of their incident into its matching system. See Jessica Ladd's TED Talk, "*The Reporting System That Sexual Assault Survivors Want.*"

<https://www.projectcallisto.org/>

For LGBTQ+ Survivors of Sexual Assault

The Human Rights Campaign provides information and resources for LGBTQ+ survivors of sexual assault, including hotlines and the publication, *A Transgender Survivor's Guide*.

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>

Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence aims to create communities free of sexual violence and provide culturally affirming, trauma-informed advocacy, prevention, and intervention services centered on the voices of survivors. It offers LGBTQ survivor resources both locally and nationally.

<https://endsexualviolencect.org/lgbtq/>

For Male Survivors of Sexual Assault

1in6 offers a wide range of information and services for men with histories of unwanted or abusive sexual experiences, and for anyone who cares about them. Online helpline, support groups, trainings and webinars.

<https://1in6.org/>

Male Survivor has been a leader in the fight to improve resources for male survivors of all forms of sexual abuse in the U.S. and around the globe. It provides training across a wide range of disciplines to help ensure that all survivors of sexual violence have access to compassionate, and effective support.

<https://www.malesurvivor.org/index.php>

Additional Resources

SAKI - National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative provides a wealth of resources on SAK-related issues, including inventory, testing, and tracking of kits; training to address issues associated with unsubmitted SAKs; and guidance on multidisciplinary coordination, investigation, prosecution, and victim advocacy around unsubmitted SAKs. Download Adobe Connect for free to access these extensive educational webinars:

<https://sakitta.org/webinars/>

SAFER Started by Columbia University students, Students Active for Ending Rape (SAFER) is the only organization that fights sexual violence and rape culture by empowering student-led campaigns to reform college sexual assault policies.

<https://safercampus.org>

End Rape on Campus (EROC) works to end campus sexual violence through direct support to survivors and their communities, prevention through education, and policy reform at the campus, local, state, and federal levels.

<http://endrapeoncampus.org>

Prevent IPV offers tools for social change based in its vision that to end intimate partner violence, the problem must be addressed and confronted at the societal, community, relationship, and individual levels. Provides a list of organizations working to end intimate partner violence here:

<https://preventipv.org/vision/key-organizations>

Impact/Justice provides information about restorative justice as a path to accountability in cases of sexual assault and other crimes.

<https://impactjustice.org/a-different-path-for-confronting-sexual-assault/>

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has published a comprehensive look at ways to prevent sexual violence:

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-factsheet.pdf>

The **World Health Organization** provides research on the worldwide prevalence and health impacts of sexual violence. These publications are key:

<https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9789241564625/en>

http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf

<https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

The United Nations has declared November 25th the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

<http://www.unwomen.org>

The Americans for Civil Liberties Union provides an explainer on Title IX Sexual Assault Policy:

<https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/title-ix-and-sexual-assault>

On Men's Role in Combatting a Culture of Sexual Violence

White Ribbon: Prevent Men's Violence Against Women is the world's largest movement of men and boys working to end violence against women and girls, promote gender equity, healthy relationships, and a new vision of masculinity. Launched in Toronto in 1991 after the mass murder of 14 women by a shooter who professed to be "fighting feminism," the White Ribbon Campaign has spread to over 60 countries worldwide. It asks men and boys to pledge to never *commit, condone or remain silent* about violence against women and girls, and raise awareness in schools and workplaces.

<http://www.whiteribbon.org>

Men Can Stop Rape, an international men's anti-violence organization, mobilizes men to use their strength for creating cultures free from violence, especially men's violence against women. MCSR provides agencies, schools, and organizations with direct services for youth, public service messaging, and leadership training.

<https://www.mencanstoprape.org/Resources/>

Stand Magazine, The magazine for men who give a damn. Edited by Dwayne Hayes, *STAND* magazine takes a stand for a balanced and whole-hearted masculinity that embraces the expression of emotion as strength, promotes a healthy body, mind & spirit, appreciates style & good humor, and seeks to shape a world of peace for all.

<http://www.stand-magazine.com/>

Guante is a poet and educator who creates and publishes his own original zines. His poetry is an invitation to consider the epidemic of sexual assault and issues around consent in today's society. His provocative videos can be found on YouTube. His publication, *How Do We Build a Culture of Consent?* lays out a call to action for men, as well as women.

<https://www.guante.info/2018/10/how-do-we-build-culture-of-consent-new.html>

A Call to Men educates men on embracing a healthy, respectful manhood in an effort to prevent violence against women, sexual assault and harassment, bullying and other social ills. It partners with schools, universities, corporations, government, social service agencies, military installations and others.

<http://www.acalltomen.org>

It's On Us offers tools and tips for advocates, including an easy way to make a personalized *It's On Us* public service announcement. Provides Bystander Intervention Tips and a pledge to help create a culture of consent and survivor support.

<https://www.itsonus.org>

He for She invites men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women and commit to take action towards a gender equal world. With millions having signed its pledge, the organization is now a global movement. #HeForShe

<https://www.heforshe.org/en>

Jackson Katz, Ph.D. is an educator, author, and social theorist internationally renowned for his pioneering scholarship and activism on issues of gender, race and violence. He is co-founder of **Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP)**, one of the longest running and most widely influential gender violence prevention programs in North America.

<http://www.jacksonkatz.com>

Women's Influence in Hollywood

Womenandhollywood.com is a site that educates, advocates, and agitates for gender diversity and inclusion in Hollywood and the global film industry.

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media conducts extensive research and provides groundbreaking findings on gender and race representations in media. The Institute studies depictions of women and girls in cinema, television, advertising, and consumer mascots, in the U.S. and in other nations.

<https://seejane.org>

Women's News

Women in the World is a global news site dedicated to news by, about and for women.

<https://womenintheworld.com/>

Some grassroots social media campaigns powered by survivor-activists

#MeToo

#TimesUp

#MeTooLGBTQ

#HollaBack!

#BalanceTonPorc

#NiUnaMenos

#MetooIndia

#ibelieveher

#HearMeToo

#TakeTheLead

#ReimagineManhood

#Istandwithher

#iambrave

tips for documentary making

Recruit a team of two to three people to accomplish the production, including someone with shooting or audio recording skills, and someone with editing skills. Consider these fundamentals: What questions will your documentary probe? Who are the content experts who will address them? What is your POV? What style and mood will you use?

The specific subject and approach are up to you. Start with identifying what your mini-doc is *about* in one sentence. The exact story will be revealed in the making. Here are some ideas:

- a) Document a personal story of a sexual assault and its aftermath – either yours, or a friend or family member’s. Exercise sensitivity, respect and good judgment.
- b) Create your mini-doc around one aspect of sexual violence, such as its prevalence among people of every age group and gender identity, or its low reporting and conviction rates.
- c) Profile a trained sexual assault service provider at a counseling office or rape crisis center, and have them serve as the voice of survivors.
- d) Gather voices from men in your community about the role of men in taking steps to reverse this public health epidemic, and explore how toxic masculinity affects them.

Be sure to:

- Write up your interview questions carefully ahead of time to elicit complete, *stand-alone* answers, which you will later edit together to form your storyline. Supplement interview sound bites with text on screen to convey your narrative and facts. Record interviews on a digital audio recorder if you are making a podcast, or record digital video using a smartphone, digital video camera, or DSLR camera. Download your files immediately after shooting and make two backups.
- Record on-camera interviews in a quiet place with an interesting backdrop that has some depth of field behind the subject, not a white wall or window. If possible, use a video camera *and* an external microphone that you clip on or place near the subject, since audio is as important as picture and poor audio quality will render your interviews unusable. Watch tutorials on YouTube on shooting, lighting and editing techniques, including when and how to use a slate to sync up audio and video that may have been recorded on separate recording devices.
- Shoot b-roll scenes with and without your interviewees, on campus or in the community, and remember that each shot should be held for five to ten seconds. Think of your shots as long stills. Don't "edit in the camera" by not holding shots long enough, and don't swish-pan. Shoot a variety of close-ups, medium shots, and establishing wide shots.
- If your documentary interviewees prefer to conceal their identity, shoot only their hands as they speak, or carefully light the interview to show them deep in shadow. Audio filters are available to disguise their voices if need be.
- Remember to have anyone who speaks on camera sign an on-camera release form and print on it how they would like their name to be stated in their name super on video.
- Select free music (available online from Moby and others) and create graphics in the editing program for any text screens you need to help tell the story. Show your rough cut to others and get their feedback.

acknowledgments

The director of *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise* and the author of this guide wish to thank the legions of survivors, support providers, health professionals, legal advocates, educators, journalists, filmmakers, activists and allies across the globe who are working to reverse the tide of sexual violence in their societies and obtain justice for its victims. The community of people committed to realizing these goals is vast, and their work has informed and enriched this guide immeasurably.

Our aim with this Viewing and Action Guide is to ignite an urgent conversation that encourages people across all ages and backgrounds to work towards less predatory, safer, consent-based societies. Change is possible. It's happening. But complex challenges remain.

Thank you for joining us in this effort.

Jennifer Townsend, Director/Producer, *Catching Sight of Thelma & Louise*
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