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**NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS,  
MARCH 6, 1983-  
MARCH 22, 1984:  
The "Before and After"  
of a Group Rape**

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*Following the highly publicized New Bedford rape case, in which a young woman was raped by several men on a pool table in New Bedford, Massachusetts, on March 6, 1983, a segment of the local Portuguese community responded with great hostility to the rape victim and with sympathy for the rapists. The victim was blamed for the ethnic prejudice that erupted after the rape and culminated in the trial of six rapists in 1984. This article's purpose is to analyze the Portuguese community's response, particularly the negative reactions of Portuguese women to another Portuguese woman who had been raped, and the conflict that developed between ethnic and sexual forms of prejudice.*

On March 6, 1983, a young woman went into Big Dan's in New Bedford, Massachusetts, about 9:00 p.m. for some cigarettes and a drink. She emerged several hours later, screaming and half-naked, reporting that she had been gang raped on a pool table in the middle of the still-open bar while a group of male spectators watched and cheered the others on. No one called the police.

On March 14, 1983, a crowd estimated at between 2,500 (*New York Times* 1983b) and 4,000 (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984c) marched outside New Bedford's city hall in a candle-lit protest organized by a coalition of 12 women's groups throughout the Northeast. One placard they carried read, "Rape Is Not a Spectator Sport."

On March 22, 1984, one year later, a crowd gathered around the same spot for another silent vigil. This larger group of 6,000 to 8,000

men and women lit candles, not to protest the rape, but to protest the conviction of four of the six men who were tried as rapists. This crowd asserted that the defendants, all of whom were Portuguese, had been victimized by ethnic prejudice. They held up signs urging, "Remember—Justice Crucified, March 17, 1984," and extended a hero's embrace to the two acquitted men who had been in the bar the night the rape occurred (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984).

Initially, New Bedford's sympathies seemed to be aligned behind the young woman: outrage, horror, and sadness were expressed in the area around Big Dan's as reports of the rape circulated (*New York Times* 1983c). Yet, within the space of a year, many Portuguese residents came to feel that the social and economic prejudice they had experienced as immigrants found symbolic expression in the treatment of the "Portuguese rapists." Their anger turned against the raped woman, their sense of identification toward the defendants (*New York Times* 1984b).

This article focuses on two issues: (1) how and why did large numbers of people within New Bedford's Portuguese community come to place their allegiance with, or shift it onto, the rapists rather than the rape victim, and (2) in particular, how and why did many Portuguese women participate and take leading roles in the pro-defendants' movement, a stance that at first glance seems to contravene their interests as women?

### RAPE THEORIES AND VICTIM BLAMING

Two theories of why rape occurs are particularly applicable to the New Bedford case because they illuminate the relationship between sexual and ethnic or class factors and the conflict that can develop between them. A classic representative of the first, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) explains rape in terms of power exercised by men over women through sexual coercion. This power is rooted, for Brownmiller, in biology, that is, differences of physical strength. The second position assumes the crime to stem from social conflicts other than the sexual one immediately implied in the act of rape. This argument is exemplified by radical criminologists Julia Schwendinger and Herman Schwendinger, who contend in *Rape and Inequality* (1983), that rape is a historically specific phenomenon linked to women's relative degradation as capitalism arose. According to the Schwendingers, capitalism

perpetuates not only women's oppression but ethnic and racial oppression as well, producing a culture of violence of which rape is symptomatic.

The two theories, therefore, are at odds. Brownmiller accords priority to sexual politics as an explanation of rape, while the Schwendingers stress ethnic, racial, and class inequities. The Schwendingers are explicit in their criticism of Brownmiller, accusing her of insufficient evidence and a tendency to universalize rape and treat all men as a "class" of possible rapists. *Rape and Inequality* suggests that rape will wither away with capitalism's demise and the concomitant lessening of ethnic and racial prejudices upon which it feeds. Brownmiller's feminist thesis suggests that sexual relationships based in a patriarchal system of power cannot be reduced to a function of class or ethnic powerlessness. The Schwendingers, however, contend that sexual oppression alone cannot explain why a particular act of rape takes place in a given social context.

Also relevant to the New Bedford rape is attribution theory, which studies the circumstances under which victims will or will not be held responsible for crimes committed against them (Acock and Ireland 1983; Alexander 1980; Burt 1980; Williams and Holmes 1981). Insofar as it is concerned with actors' own interpretations of situations, attribution theory is tied to the social interactionist tradition (Quinney 1974).

Some attribution researchers have been sympathetic to victims, while others have blamed victims. Feminists conducting attribution research have used Lemert's (1951) concepts of primary and secondary deviation to explain the "second assault" to which women are frequently subjected by their communities after they have been raped (Williams and Holmes 1981). At the other extreme is the work of Menachem Amir, who sought to dispel the notion that rape victims play no part in their own victimization. Amir (1971) studied 646 rapes in Philadelphia and concluded that 122 (or 19 percent) were situations in which the victim "actually, or so it was deemed, agreed to sexual relations but retracted before the actual act or did not react strongly enough when the suggestion was made by the offenders" (p. 266). In his view, "victim participation" can be derived from "risky situations marred with sexuality, especially when she uses what could be interpreted as indecency in language and gestures, or constitutes what could be taken as an invitation to sexual relations" (p. 266). Amir's criteria for judging which rapes were seemingly victim

precipitated are police records and his own interpretation of supposedly provocative behavior.

The empirical findings of feminist attribution theorists about factors that increase the likelihood that individuals will blame rape victims are similar to Amir's (1971) five criteria establishing which of his 646 forcible rapes he judged to be victim precipitated. According to both Amir and feminist attribution researchers, rape victims tend to be held more responsible for their own victimization under the following circumstances. First, when they have had some prior acquaintance with their attacker, as opposed to when rape is "stranger to stranger" (Alexander 1980; Weis and Borges; 1983; Williams and Holmes 1981). Second, when there is evidence of a previous bad reputation or nontraditional behavior on the part of the victim (Alexander 1980; Burt 1980; Williams and Holmes 1981). Third, when a pickup took place in a bar (Williams and Holmes 1981). Amir notes that 23.8 percent of what he himself classified as victim-precipitated rapes took place in a bar, compared with 7.2 percent of rapes he did not consider victim-precipitated. Fourth, when alcohol was present in the situation. For Amir, 35 percent of his victim-precipitated cases involved drinking, as opposed to 20 percent of those he considered non-victim-precipitated. Fifth, when the rape took place in close proximity to the victim's residence (Williams and Holmes 1981). Amir found that 86 percent of the rapes he called victim-precipitated took place close to home, compared with 67 percent of those categorized non-victim-precipitated.

Attribution researchers have also observed that victim blaming is more likely in communities with traditional sexual attitudes. Both Acock and Ireland (1983) and Burt (1980) related attitudes toward rape to general sexual beliefs. Williams and Holmes (1981) examined the way in which race and ethnicity affect reaction to rape victims and whether a second assault is more likely to occur among some groups rather than others. Following 61 women treated for rape in San Antonio, Texas, who were either "white Anglo," black, or Mexican American, Williams and Holmes found that Mexican American women had greater difficulty than blacks or white Anglos in recovering from postrape trauma because of their community's relatively more rigid notions of sex roles. The raped woman, they discovered, was likely to be blamed not only by Mexican American men but also by other Mexican American women, whom Williams and Holmes concluded to be even harsher in their judgments of the

victim. Their most important finding is that a rape victim is more likely to suffer secondary recriminations when the community or subculture of which she is a part holds traditional attitudes toward sexuality and male-female roles.

In her study of 313, mostly women, nurses in a major urban hospital, Alexander (1980) found a tendency for victims to be judged more harshly when the observer felt similarly vulnerable to possible rape. According to Alexander, the view of the rape victim as partly responsible stems from a "real world" thesis, which defines justice as the rewarding of good behavior and the punishment of bad. To the extent that rape calls the maintenance of this conception into question, the observer tries to neutralize the threat by believing the victim could have controlled the situation. The more a nurse herself engaged in rule-following behavior, the more likely she was to believe the rape victim was partly responsible and to exonerate her assailant to some degree.

In the next section, I will examine whether the rape in New Bedford confirmed or denied these theories of victim blaming. My account is based on mainstream news reports.<sup>1</sup> Mainstream news reporting has been accused of highlighting events rather than analysis (Gitlin 1980). In their reports of the New Bedford case, the media focused on the support of the Portuguese community for the defendants and said nothing about those (including women) who may not have felt sympathetic toward them. However, it is the phenomenon of these Portuguese men and women who were supportive of the rapists, no matter how large or small the group, that needs to be explained. There is little doubt that a substantial portion of New Bedford's Portuguese population participated in demonstrations supporting the defendants after they were convicted of rape. It is to this subgroup—and not to the entire Portuguese population of New Bedford—that I will be referring when I use the term *the community* or *the Portuguese community*.

## HOW AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY CAME TO CONFUSE THE RAPISTS WITH THE RAPED

### The Town

Herman Melville referred to New Bedford in *Moby Dick* as "the dearest place to live in all New England." First settled by the

Portuguese in 1652, New Bedford was a thriving center of both whaling and textile manufacture in the eighteenth century. It was a well-known fishing port in the nineteenth century, but by the twentieth, whaling had died out entirely, and the textile industry had deteriorated. John Bullard, leader of a project to restore New Bedford's waterfront, dated the onset of economic depression in the town to 1928, when a textile strike occurred. Because of the eroding manufacturing base, the city never returned to a state of prosperity and has had one of the highest unemployment rates in Massachusetts (*New York Times* 1984i).

Irish and English families immigrated to New Bedford in the nineteenth century and still constitute a substantial segment of the population. The change in immigration laws in 1965, which earlier had imposed a quota against the Portuguese, was rapidly followed by so large an influx of Portuguese immigrants that their numbers swelled to nearly 60 percent of the population of New Bedford. The Portuguese, therefore, including four of the defendants central to this account, were relatively new both to New Bedford and the United States. New Bedford and neighboring Fall River were able to support several Portuguese-language newspapers and radio stations that were especially important in fostering a sense of community.

New Bedford's economy still depends on the fishing industry and local textile mills. A New Bedford family frequently has two wage earners, the wife working in a mill and the husband working on a boat fleet harvesting scallops (*New York Times* 1983b; *New Bedford Standard Times* 1984k). Many new businesses, such as furniture outlets, variety stores, and car dealerships, have been opened by Portuguese immigrants, who have also made contributions to the renovation of the downtown area through the opening of pubs, shops, and restaurants. The Portuguese also take credit for purchasing more efficient boats, which boosted the fishing industry. Despite their numerical dominance in the town, the only Portuguese official in 1983 was District Attorney Ronald Pina. Northern Europeans dominated other positions of power.

### **The Rape**

On March 6, a 21-year-old woman of Portuguese descent (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984q) living in a Portuguese neighborhood, put her two small daughters to bed and went to Big Dan's, a local bar,

to buy a pack of cigarettes. The brief description of the rape that follows is based on information from the trial, as reported in the *New York Times* (1983a, b; 1984b, c, d, f, g) and the *New Bedford Standard Times* (1984a). The jury heard many, sometimes conflicting, stories, in the course of coming to the guilty verdict.

The young woman initially said she “lost count” of how many times she was raped, but later acknowledged that there were about 9 or 10 men present in the bar that night, which was corroborated by others. There was some question of the extent to which she interacted with two of the defendants, whom she knew in a casual way from living in the same area, but it was generally agreed that she had a drink at the bar while Daniel Silva, Victor Raposo, and several other men played pool in the middle of the room. At some point late in the evening, according to her testimony and that of bartender Carlos Machado, she had a verbal exchange with Silva, after which Silva and another defendant carried her across the room toward the pool table. The woman, all reports concur, screamed and sobbed. Two of the men then pulled off her pants while another two held her down. Silva raped her, and Raposo and John Cordeiro forced her to engage in oral sex. The *New York Times* reported that Jose Vieira’s role was “confined” mainly to tickling Mr. Silva with a straw. A few others who were in the room cheered, Machado testified, while a third pair of defendants (the unrelated Jose and Virgilio Medeiros), stopped the bartender from calling the authorities and shouted “do it, do it.” The rape went on for over two hours. After midnight, the woman ran out of the bar, was picked up by a passerby, and proceeded to call the police.

The story of the rape—with, as first reported, its extraordinary and horrifying imagery of a bar packed with cheering men as a woman was raped “countless times” on a pool table—rapidly spread through New Bedford and made its way into local and then national news. The community’s initial reaction appeared universally to be one of shock and outrage. In the area around Big Dan’s, one man spoke about what he would do to anyone who ever tried something similar with *his* daughter. Another, who identified himself as Portuguese, thought every man who cheered ought to be fined \$1,000 and the money given to a program that would help rape victims. The rape sparked a heightened awareness in New Bedford of sexual violence toward women, and a \$68,000 grant from the city permitted a 24-hour, decently staffed Rape Crisis Project to open (*New York Times* 1983b).

In the immediate aftermath of the rape, a coalition of women's groups marched through the streets of New Bedford.

Nevertheless, as we shall see, this initially sympathetic response within the Portuguese community toward the raped woman was short-lived and slowly was replaced by increasing hostility. The findings of the attribution theorists about commonly held attitudes toward rape are supported by the assignment of some degree of responsibility to the raped woman. The New Bedford case is a classic example of what attribution researchers have called a victim perceived as "illegitimate" (Holmstrom and Burgess 1978) and what Amir called "victim-precipitated" rape.

Returning to five of Amir's criteria for victim precipitation, which feminist attribution theorists also find to be associated frequently with victim blaming, the young woman in the New Bedford case was casually acquainted with several of the men who attacked her; she lived in the neighborhood; she was attacked in a bar where, of course, alcohol was present; and, according to the mores of the traditional Portuguese community, she was engaging in nontraditional behavior by leaving her children and going to a drinking place alone at night. However, while these victim characteristics might create a tendency toward the attribution of blame, they do not explain the extreme hostility to which the young woman was subjected more and more in the year following the rape as she brought the rapists to trial. This extremity differentiates the New Bedford case from those studied in the literature on rape. Nor can the characteristics of the victim explain why the rapists came to be defended. Even if victims are blamed for provoking the rape, the rapists are usually believed guilty and punishable. Fundamental to the difference between the New Bedford and other rape cases was the combination of ethnic and sexual prejudice, which then came to be magnified by the media.

### **The Media Reports and Community Response**

Subtle by-products of the rape started to nag at the minds of people within the Portuguese community as the case gained notoriety. Radio broadcasters and news media kept referring to the "Portuguese rapists." *Hustler* magazine, combining sexism with an ethnic slur, printed a postcard of a nude woman waving from a pool table that was captioned, "Greetings from New Bedford, Massachusetts, the Portuguese Gang-Rape Capital of America" (*Hustler* 1983b, p. 21).

Ronald Pina, the New Bedford district attorney prosecuting the case, criticized the terminology, saying, "When was the last time you ever heard of an Irish rapist?" (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984d). A local radio station received calls demanding that all Portuguese be shipped back to Europe, and two of the defendants actually did face possible deportation. The station aired the opinions of those who thought the rapists should be castrated or given the death penalty (*The New York Times* 1984a).

Members of the Portuguese community reacted defensively. In a brief period of time, a potential for identification between the defendants and the community was forged because of their common vulnerability to these recurrences of anti-Portuguese discrimination in New Bedford. In time, defense of the Portuguese rapists became inseparable from defense of the Portuguese community.

The anti-Portuguese slurs that appeared after the rape led to the formation of two defense committees, the Committee for Justice and the Portuguese-American Defense League. Spokespersons and founders of the Committee for Justice included two women, Emily Sedgwick and Alda Melo, while the Portuguese-American Defense League was started by, among others, Raymond and Katherine Castro, publishers of the Portuguese newspaper *O Jornal* (*New York Times* 1984d, i; *New Bedford Standard Times* 1984k). Both groups sought to ensure the defendants a fair trial and voiced their objections to anti-Portuguese statements. One of the Committee for Justice's first acts was raising about \$20,000 in bail, which helped to procure the release of four of the defendants.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the committees, sympathy for and identification with the defendants did not yet extend beyond a vocal fraction of the Portuguese population of New Bedford and Fall River. As time elapsed, however, these feelings became more general and more entrenched. In addition to the surfacing of ethnic prejudice, the economic price of the bad publicity exacerbated hostilities. Big Dan's closed down and was replaced by a discount bakery. At a bar across the street, the owner complained that he had had to sacrifice thousands of dollars in business from customers too frightened to come to his establishment. Similar fears about financial losses and hurt job prospects due to bad publicity were echoed by other residents, contrasting painfully with the pride the Portuguese community took in its recent economic achievements.

Empathy for the defendants grew, too, in a perverse dialectical

relationship with the main architect of bad publicity—the media. Journalists and cable television crews prepared to descend on New Bedford for the trial—the first criminal case in American history to be nationally televised (*New York Times* 1984e, i). At the M & C restaurant, near Big Dan's, a sign was posted urging, "Please—no reporters in for interviews" (*New York Times* 1984d; *New Bedford Standard Times* 1984h).

### Community Reaction to the Trial

The barrage of exposure peaked with the opening of the trial on February 24, 1984. From that point on, virtually every newspaper on the East Coast carried developments in the case on an almost daily basis. The trial was covered on network news stations as well as on the local cable program that was broadcasting it live. During the 4 weeks of the trial, most publications printed details of each witness's lengthy testimony. The victim was on the stand for 15 hours. Myriad stories centered around the packed-to-capacity courtroom or the various groups monitoring the proceedings for fairness. Women's groups attended the trial to insure against sexist treatment of the rape victim, while representatives from the Committee for Justice watched for signs of anti-Portuguese bias (*New York Times* 1984h, i).

Photos showed four of the defendants wearing headphones to hear the trial translated from English to Portuguese. Other articles concentrated on the Portuguese neighborhood in which the rape had occurred. New Bedford residents were reminded again and again of anti-Portuguese discrimination.

The bars and restaurants of the town were crowded with people gathered to watch "the spectacle" of their neighbors on TV (*New York Times* 1984i). One person in the area around Big Dan's remarked disgustedly, "It stinks," as he watched the trial; another walked away from the screen complaining that the trial cost too much in tax dollars (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984e). One letter to the editor of the *Standard Times* begged the press to cease their coverage, stating that it reflected badly on New Bedford (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984b); another bemoaned the paper devoting so much space to "garbage" like the rape case (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984f).

By the time the trial drew to a close, collective hurt and defensiveness turned into anger at the press, and then at the rape victim without whom the problem would never have arisen. The Portuguese community began to feel that it, not the woman, had been raped, and

as if the woman, not the Portuguese, were the rapist. One of the defense lawyers, Judith Lindahl, stated in court that the girl had been "willing," that she had encouraged the men's advances (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984g). She argued that even if they had raped the young woman, rape was a common crime in America, so why had the Portuguese men been singled out as the focus of a nationally publicized trial?

The closeness of much of New Bedford's Portuguese community also fostered minimization of the rape and defense of the rapists. Many people had been neighbors for years. It was difficult for them to believe that six boys they had known from childhood had committed a serious crime. One resident, Mrs. Carreiro, said that she might have felt differently about the rape if it had happened in California. As it was, she knew the men and was convinced that they must have been provoked (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984e, g). Carol Maciel and Victor Raposo had been dating since she was 14, and she continued to stand by him. Danny Silva's heart condition evoked sympathy. As one man put it, "Hey, what hurts me is that Danny Silva was in here last night and he said, 'I don't know when I'm going to see you again'" (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984h, o). Collective indignation emerged, suggesting that in close-knit communities, it may be the attributer's rather than the victim's past acquaintance with the rapists that contributes to the shifting of responsibility.

On March 17, 1984, two of the defendants, Daniel Silva and Jose Vieira, were found guilty. Outside the courtroom after the verdict, several of the defendants' supporters shouted and cursed; others cried. A few threatened news reporters with violence, and Vieira's father swung with a cane at a free-lance television camerawoman (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984h). As Silva and Vieira were led to a van, a waiting crowd cheered, and someone yelled, "Why wasn't she home with her kids?" Another shouted, "Why don't they bring that girl out in handcuffs? Get her, too!" (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984h).

Responses in local Portuguese neighborhoods included, "I hope the Portuguese get together and do a number on this city." The decision was called a "bum deal." One man suggested that "Portuguese Power" buttons, which hadn't sold several years earlier, should now be marketed. Outrage even reverberated beyond New Bedford's borders, in Portugal itself. The story of Silva and Vieira's convictions received front-page coverage in the *Diario de Noticias*, a state-funded but independent daily; it was mentioned in most other major Lisbon

papers as well. A follow-up editorial in *Diario de Noticias* reiterated charges of anti-Portuguese prejudice in the "hardworking Portuguese colony of Massachusetts," stating that "in a country where indecent assaults occur every 20 minutes . . . would there have been such a wave of indignation if the people involved had not belonged to an ethnic minority?" (as reported in the *New Bedford Standard Times* 1984k).

Decisions on the other four defendants were not handed down until five days later. In the time between the two decisions, District Attorney Pina and several jurors received threats against their lives and were given increased police protection. The sister and nephew of the rape victim felt they had no choice but to leave New Bedford permanently (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984 h, k). On a local radio station, a caller referred to the rape victim by name, calling her "dead meat" (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984 h, i). The New Bedford case had come full circle. Portuguese residents, originally the objects of publicly broadcast calls of hate, were now placing similar calls themselves.

On March 23, 1984, the *Standard Times* reported: "Split Verdict: 2 Guilty, 2 Freed." Two of the remaining defendants, Victor Raposo and John Cordeiro, had been convicted the previous day of aggravated rape, while the jury had concluded that the evidence against Jose Medeiros and Virgilio Medeiros was insufficient to merit punishment. As Raposo walked to the sheriff's van, he shouted, "You call this justice? This ain't no justice. We're Portuguese. That's why we're found guilty" (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984i, e). Virgilio Medeiros ran from the courthouse into a throng of cheering supporters. When asked if a rape had occurred in Big Dan's a year earlier, he said, "No . . . never . . . no" (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984l).

The Committee for Justice and the Portuguese-American Defense League organized a candle-lit protest. The victim was no longer the raped woman; the victims were the defendants and the Portuguese community. The police estimated the crowd in attendance to be about 6,000; Antonio Cabral, President of Portuguese Americans United, believed it was closer to 8,000 (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984l). At the rally, Medeiros was hoisted into the air by marchers, some of whom carried "Justice Crucified" signs. The defendants were said to have been convicted on flimsy evidence; there were comments about the jury taking only five hours to reach a verdict on Silva and Vieira. Many women attended the March 22 vigil. A poster carried by a group of women read, "Boston Women Say Railroad Portuguese Men

Won't Fight Rape." The *Standard Times* wrote of "grandmothers and babes in arms," and noted that women who rarely went to demonstrations were present to show pride in their Portuguese heritage. Delores Medeiros (not necessarily related to either Virgilio or Jose, since Medeiros is a common Portuguese name) spoke of the unfairness of the convictions, and Carol Maciel, Raposo's fiancée, walked at the front of the crowd so that Victor could see her. "An injustice was done," she said (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984m).

On Friday afternoon, March 23, a larger crowd gathered outside the Fall River Superior Courthouse. The police and *Standard Times* reporter Arthur Hirsch put attendance at about 10,000-15,000—the Portuguese defense groups claimed a larger number. The procession was led by Jose Medeiros and Virgilio Medeiros who received, according to Hirsch, "a hero's welcome" (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984m). Once again, women were well represented, and some bitterly and coldly criticized the young woman who had been raped. Catherine Gabe, interviewing women marchers, quoted Virginia Faria of New Bedford expounding a variation of the "just world" theme: "I am Portuguese and proud of it. I'm also a woman, but you don't see me getting raped. If you throw a dog a bone, he's gonna take it—if you walk around naked, men are just going to go for you" (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984m). Another woman commented, "Rape is a crime but not when a girl walks in and puts her arms around Victor, and starts kissing him." Another woman, Alda Machado of Fall River, said, "They did nothing to her. Her rights are to be home with her two kids and to be a good mother. A Portuguese woman should be with her kids and that's it" (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984m). Ann Botelho said, "She should get punished, too. If they raped her, she was the aggravator. I'm sorry to say it but I think it was her." Two hundred of Botelho's coworkers had been allowed to walk off their jobs at Rondo Sportswear in Fall River to attend the rally. "The only ones who stayed," said Botelho, "were just the ones on that girl's side and that wasn't many."

On Monday, March 26, 1984, the four convicted rapists were sent to prison. That morning, Chief Court Officer Peter Cordeiro said that Judge William Young had received petitions signed by 16,000 people asking for leniency for the men (New Bedford *Standard Times* 1984h). The sentences, from 9 to 12 years each, with probation available to two of the defendants in 4 years, were considered harsh by supporters. After serving their sentences, Vieira and Raposo would face possible,

albeit unlikely, deportation (*New Bedford Standard Times* 1984n, p). About 600 people watched as the men were taken away.

As her sister and nephew had done before her, the young woman who had been raped in Big Dan's moved to Miami from New Bedford shortly after the second set of verdicts. Her lawyer noted that her testimony had resulted not in four but in five verdicts. She, too, had been convicted—her sentence, exile.

### **The Role of the Media**

The Portuguese heritage of the rape victim was seldom, or only casually, mentioned in media accounts of the New Bedford rape. The media's omission resulted from playing up events without analysis of their context (Altheide 1976; Epstein 1975; Gitlin 1980). In this case, newspaper and television reports first featured feminist demonstrations and ignored the ethnic issue that was eventually used against the victim. Later, the media reported on the demonstrations by the Portuguese community without reference to the victim's Portuguese heritage, mirroring the community's own disinterest. Had the victim's ethnic background been part of the media's story, the community would have been hard pressed to focus on ethnic discrimination to defend the rapists, and Portuguese women might not have had to choose between identification with the victim as a woman and identification with the rapists as Portuguese.

The media also played a role in arousing people's sensitivities simply by their saturation of the case. People in the community often responded defensively as much to media reports as to actual events. The media spotlight contributed both to the sexual and ethnic conflict and to the creation of still another motivation for blaming the victim; it was much easier to attack her than the amorphous "media." Yet, while the media played a significant part in inflaming negative feelings toward the rape victim, antagonism would probably have emerged in any event because of the symbolic sexual threat the young woman posed to the community's traditional values.

### **SEXUALITY AND ETHNICITY**

Men and women in the community became angry at the young woman not only because of the consequences of her rape, which included anti-Portuguese feeling and unwelcome media coverage, but also because of the rape itself. They were incensed at the young

woman for having “let herself” be raped—for having been in a bar, a sexual object of “temptation” to the male customers that night, and for drinking and smoking in men’s territory instead of remaining properly at home with her children. The Portuguese community’s defense of the Portuguese rapists rather than the Portuguese rape victim is partly explicable in terms of this sexual ideology.

For any young woman to have gone into a bar one night and emerge several hours later to walk home safely by herself may have implied that it was appropriate for a woman to leave her children at home for a few hours to go and have a drink, that being a single woman in a bar was no more unusual than being a single man in a bar, that there was nothing objectionable about casual flirting. In short, such a scenario presumes the existence of sexual freedom and equality for women, and a cultural community that accepts such independence.

Although sexual freedom was theoretically possible within the Portuguese community, since most women who enter bars in Portuguese neighborhoods are not raped, it was hardly encouraged. Portuguese families in New Bedford are typically organized along traditional lines with conventionally asymmetric roles for men and women. While both women and men are commonly wage earners, women work to bolster the family’s income and still bear primary responsibility for child care and housework. Though sexual mores may be changing in younger people, women are still generally expected to confine sexual activity to the legitimate channels of marriage (Rosen 1985).

A *Standard Times* letter to the editor depicted the New Bedford rape as the product of a clash between cultures. The author, offering an example of Thorsten Sellin’s cultural conflict theory of deviance, stated that “had the men stayed in the Azores, a woman would most probably not have gone amongst them in a bar,” and the rape would never have occurred. It is dangerous, the man continued, to isolate oneself from the reality of “living in another and very different land” (Letter to the Editor, *New Bedford Standard Times* 1984j). The young woman who walked into Big Dan’s that night was not “Portuguese” insofar as she was deviating from the approved values of the community. Since she was not a “good” woman who followed legitimized rules but a “whore,” the Portuguese community symbolically excommunicated her by acting as though her common heritage with them did not exist. She was seen as deserving of punishment for

having transgressed sexual standards. The New Bedford case, therefore, confirms Williams and Holmes's expectation that a second assault upon rape victims will be particularly harsh if the community of which they are a part insists upon traditional notions of sexuality and gender roles (Williams and Holmes 1981).

However, while Williams and Holmes found victim blaming to be most severe in the traditional, Mexican American community, it nevertheless characterized the black and white Anglo communities as well. Similarly, while the Portuguese community was traditional, its notions about rape are not at odds with American culture—in this sense, the community was quite correct in wondering why it was being singled out. To deny the generality of sexist ideology surrounding rape, as if it were confined to the Portuguese, is indeed, ironically enough, to discriminate on the basis of ethnicity. In fact, a few months prior to the New Bedford rape, *Hustler* magazine ran an article in which a waitress in a bar was gang-raped on a pool table and exploded in multiple orgasms (*Hustler* 1983a). Whether or not the men in New Bedford actually read the article, it is clear that the same violent culture produced both events.

But this does not explain the community's defense of the rapists, since protesting ethnic discrimination and applauding the defendants were separable issues. That the two were conflated can only be explained with reference to *sexual* rather than *ethnic* prejudice—here, the sexist treatment that uniquely surrounds the criminal prosecution of rape. Had the New Bedford case involved a murder, for example, the brutal slaying of a man in a bar by six Portuguese men, it might have been much more difficult for the community to neutralize the defendants' crime by focusing on anti-Portuguese discrimination. People might not have believed that the victim provoked his or her own murder, robbery, or mugging. Only with assaults associated with sex does a widespread blame-the-victim mentality facilitate defense of the perpetrators in male-dominated societies. In the case of Robert Chambers, charged with slaying 18-year-old Jennifer Levin in Central Park following "violent sex," Levin's diary is being subpoenaed by Chambers' attorney, Jack Litman, in order to demonstrate that she had previously been sexually active (*New York Times*, 1986). Litman also defended Richard Herrin, the Yale graduate who murdered his college girlfriend, Bonnie Garland, and employed the similar strategy of showing "provocative" behavior, that is, the old arguments of "victim precipitation."

Transgression of sexual values was a critical factor in the angry responses evoked by the New Bedford rape; however, responses were different for men and women. For traditional Portuguese men, the young woman, by living some vague approximation of sexual liberation, represented a threat to their remaining stronghold of power, the family. Feelings of devaluation or inferiority stemming from ethnic prejudice, as the Schwendingers (1983) and Williams and Holmes (1981) point out, amount to one form of powerlessness; greater freedom for women could conceivably create another. Community antagonism toward the rape victim and support of the rapists symbolizes a kind of social control similar to dominant men punishing transgressing women by deliberate rape (Brownmiller 1975).

Alignment with the rapists also cast the women of the community into the role of social control agents, despite the fact that, for them, the rape was simultaneously an act committed by a member of a subordinate group that has experienced prejudice—the Portuguese—and an act committed against a member of an even more subordinate group—women. Women who were active in the pro-defendants movement, might have responded to the ethnic but not the sexual subordination of the two groups to which they simultaneously belonged. Anti-Portuguese prejudice was commonly recognized and accepted by the community as a whole, but sexual oppression was not. For the women as well as the men in the community, ethnic loyalty was legitimate and built into the fabric of daily understanding. Feminist loyalties, based on a sense of sexual oppression, were not.

Many of the women may have had marriages and relationships they found satisfying and apparently equal, if separate, divisions of labor; some women shared in running the civic and economic affairs of the community. For these women, the rape victim also posed a symbolic threat, since she called into question a particular life-style—the roles adopted and the rules followed by the average woman in her daily life. For those women who may have perceived themselves as oppressed, the rape victim's symbolic import was to call that very life-style into question without offering any practical alternative.

Women could at least feel secure in their Portuguese community, where they had homes and jobs. For Carol Maciel, Victor Raposo's girlfriend, to support the rape victim would have meant recognizing that a man she knew since she was 14 could conceivably turn against *her*. For Mrs. Carreiro, acquainted with "these boys" and maybe with other men who had been in the bar, to start thinking of her male

neighbors as adversaries might imply that there really were no rewards for adhering to the "good woman" role of wife and mother. If their roles were demeaned, or the rules supporting them loosened, women who had followed them would feel obsolete, as if they, too, had been demeaned and the significance of their existence called into question. Their belief in a "just world" was at stake. Finally, to defend the rape victim would have pit them against the men in the community, on whose love and economic and social support the women depended.

Given the anxiety the rape victim may have provoked, both literally and figuratively, the anger of the Portuguese women may have been even greater than that felt by the men. Whereas both had parallel sources of anger—ethnic prejudice and aspersions cast upon a way of life in which each had vested interests—only the women could have reacted on the basis of a third motivation. Unlike the men, the women had to repress any sense that they, too, might be in danger of being raped by men whom they knew; that they, too, might potentially, or maybe even had been, victimized by other forms of sexual violence such as battering; that they, too, were constrained in their assertions of independence; or simply that they may have had silent, gnawing discontents about some part of their own lives as mothers, daughters, and wives. The women would have had to repress any such doubts or face the uncomfortable realities that may have been exposed had they identified with the raped woman. If the rape victim had not represented something the women in the community sensed they had to fight, their response against her may not have been so vehement. By virtue of this reaction formation, it may not have been enough for the Portuguese women to remain neutral. They had to prove that they were at least as much as, if not more, anti-rape victim, than the men, by aligning themselves with their dominant group. Thus they not only participated in, but were in the forefront of, the pro-defendant movement.<sup>3</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The events in New Bedford suggest a need for feminist community organizations to be consciously oriented toward a multiple- rather than a one-issue vision. The crisis center formed in the immediate aftermath of the rape served a crucial function but could not assuage broader fears about feminism exacerbated by the catalyzing incident.

Had a prior feminist presence reached deeply into the everyday life of the community, reaction to the rape might have been more sympathetic toward the victim. A community feminist center and outreach program formed before the crisis event might have been able to defuse the antifeminist, proethnic demonstrations. Women who were trusted in the Portuguese community, and who had some familiarity with the feminist perspective on rape, might have been able to prevent a second assault upon the raped woman. They also might have been able to rally the community in such a way that it would have been possible for ethnic prejudice to be protested without in any way condoning the act of rape.

That instead a sizable number of New Bedford's Portuguese population came, in the short space of a year, to support the perpetrators rather than the victim of a gang rape suggests that subordinate groups that have suffered from an invidious legacy of prejudice may tend to deny wrongdoings committed by their members. This tendency is produced by a structural dilemma in which discriminated-against groups rightly perceive themselves to be caught. If a subordinate group admits that one of its members has done something both it and the dominant culture agrees to be wrong and criminal, there is a fear that negative stereotypes will be reinforced. To the Portuguese community of New Bedford, to proclaim the culpability of the rapists was to indict the entire group and prove that prejudices about immigrants were justified. Thus, returning to the theoretical position taken by the Schwendingers with regard to rape, New Bedford does exemplify the way in which ethnic (or, by extension, racial) oppression can exacerbate, not so much rape itself, but hostile community reaction to it. This analysis suggests that a community's reaction might not be as extreme if a past history of ethnic tension, and media magnification of that tension, did not exist.

The attribution theory literature suggests that victim blaming would have occurred in any event, even if to a lesser degree, because of commonly held sexist attitudes toward the circumstances under which the rape occurred. The New Bedford case is a particularly poignant rebuttal to the Schwendingers' theory of rape as a function of capitalism, racism, or ethnicity. Their position cannot theoretically explain why the community responded to the Portuguese heritage of the rapists but *not* the Portuguese heritage of the rape victim. In New Bedford, ethnicity can be canceled out on both sides of the equation,

leaving little doubt that sexual politics played a fundamental role in the unfolding of the case as well as in the community's response. One is left to surmise that Brownmiller's theory of rape as exercise of sexual power is, at the very least, a necessary if not sufficient explanation of the New Bedford case.

Given the complexities of the ethnic and sexual resentments her rape had generated, the woman who was raped in New Bedford deserves great admiration for having had the courage to prosecute her assailants. In doing so, she shifted responsibility and blame back to the rapists, where they properly belong.

### CODA

After having researched and written this article, I was greatly saddened to read in the *New York Times*, December 18, 1986, that Cheryl Araujo, 25, died in a car accident south of Miami, Florida. Ms. Araujo was the "young woman" who was raped in New Bedford.

### NOTES

1. The account of developments in New Bedford between 1983 and 1984 is based upon all *New York Times* articles written on the case in 1983 and 1984, all *New Bedford Standard Times* pieces in February, March, and April of 1984, articles in *Time* and *Newsweek*, and a well-researched article by Ellen Rosen (1985).

2. The exact amount of bail raised and the number of defendants released were inconsistently reported by the *New York Times* (1983a, b).

3. This psychological analysis may also explain why the Mexican American women studied by Williams and Holmes (1981) were sometimes even more blaming of the rape victim than Mexican American men.

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- . 1984d. "I've Seen Devils, Bartender Admits." March 6.
- . 1984e. "Woman Was Outraged." March 7.
- . 1984f. "Defendant Threatened Bartender." March 9.
- . 1984g. "Defendant: She Was Willing." March 15.
- . 1984h. "Verdict; 2 Guilty of Rape." March 18.
- . 1984i. "Jury Security Tightened." March 19.
- . 1984j. "Portuguese Plan Marches." March 20.
- . 1984k. "Candlelight Vigil to Dramatize Immigrants Inner Struggles." March 22.
- . 1984l. "Split Verdict; 2 Guilty, 2 Innocent." March 23.
- . 1984m. "10,000 Fill the Streets, Press Blasted for Publicity." March 24.
- . 1984n. "Four Sent to Prison." March 26.
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