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When safe words are ignored

Women in the bondage and kink scene are speaking out about sexual assaults in the community, and calling for change

BY [TRACY CLARK-FLORY](#)



(Credit: iStockphoto/Juanmonino)

Maggie Mayhem is dressed like a kinky dictator. Standing onstage at San Francisco's Center for Sex and Culture, her olive-green military cap and knee-high-heeled boots belie the vulnerable subject at hand.

"The first time I was ever raped," she starts, her throat tightening around her words, "it was actually on a date with somebody from my local S/M community."

The 27-year-old sex educator and fetish model has never before publicly shared the story of her sexual assault, but the purpose of this evening's event, a "consent culture" fundraiser, is so that she can start telling it, again and again. Her mission, along with fellow activist and sex worker

Kitty Stryker, is to raise awareness about what they say is widespread abuse within the BDSM community and a tendency for players to either turn a blind eye or actively cover it up. They've developed a workshop meant to combat the problem and want to take it on the road.

We're talking about real abuse here, not the "consensual non-consent" that the scene is built around, as Mayhem's story of her first assault makes clear. As an 18-year-old member of a kinky student club at the University of California, Berkeley, Mayhem helped raise money to bring a prominent BDSM educator to campus for a workshop. Afterward, he singled her out for a private "play date" and she was flattered. "I thought this was the best person I could start to learn from," she says.

The scene that they negotiated was "fantastic," Mayhem says, but then things took a turn. "I found myself tied up and unable to get away when that individual decided that he was going to have sex with me," she says, tears welling in her eyes, "even though we'd specifically negotiated against it, even though I was saying that it needed to stop, and even though he was not wearing a condom at the time."

For the most part, she kept the experience to herself, but on the rare occasions when she did tell people in the community about it, she says, "I got one response ... which was people saying [things like], 'I don't do drama. This is a respected person in the community. I'm very sorry that you had a miscommunication during your scene that made it not very fun for you, but I don't want to hear about it.'"

As she pushed deeper into the scene, trying to put this experience behind her, she had countless more encounters where her boundaries were blatantly ignored. As she gained experience, she started to talk more confidently and openly about these experiences – but, again, she got the “I don’t do drama” line. At the same time, she realized that such abuse was prevalent: “It started to look more like a systemic issue,” she says. As Stryker wrote last year in an essay for Good Vibrations magazine, “I have yet to meet a female submissive who hasn’t had some sort of sexual assault happen to her.”

BDSM has long been a target of criticism from outsiders, but these two are devoted members of the scene. Stryker argued in her essay, “I Never Called It Rape,” that the community is so “focused on saying how BDSM isn’t a cover for abuse that we willingly blind ourselves to the times that it can be,” she wrote. “How on earth can we possibly say to society at large that BDSM is not abuse when we so carefully hide our abusers and shame our abused into silence?”

At one point during the event, Carol Queen, an infamous sex educator and co-founder of the Center for Sex and Culture, takes the stage and tells a story about how her partner, Robert, had been alerted a few years back by various insiders that someone was drugging girls and raping them at local play spaces. “Robert actually acted to try to stop that guy and the pillars of the community, some of them, did not feel very good about that,” she says. (The scene, which not only faces outside criticism but also serious legal threats, is “really invested” in not talking about this, Stryker explains.)

Queen, a guru of progressive Bay Area sexuality, also reveals that despite still being a submissive woman, she “doesn’t play anymore” or “go out to community dungeon spaces,” in large part “because of issues we’re talking about here.”

The problem spans from unwanted overtures to rape, say Mayhem and Stryker. “When I start to think of the number of times I have been cajoled, pressured, or forced into sex that I did not want when I came into ‘the BDSM community’, *I can’t actually count them*,” Stryker wrote in Good Vibrations’ magazine. “As I reflected on the number of times I’ve ... been pressured into a situation where saying ‘no’ was either not respected or not an option, or said that I did not want a certain kind of toy used on me which was then used, I’m kind of horrified.”

Beyond black-and-white cases of rape, there is a cultural disdain for safe words, they say. “When I was a submissive,” says Stryker, now a dominant in both her personal and professional life, “I felt the pressure to not safeword because I felt like that made you a bad submissive.” That’s because she witnessed submissives who used their safe word being criticized as “difficult.” At the “consent culture” event, Stryker asks the audience, “Is it the fault of the submissive who didn’t safeword when they should have or is it the fault of the dominant who didn’t notice that their submissive didn’t safeword [when they should have] or is it the fault, as I think it is, of the community that makes it complicated?”

Complicating things further, there are the times when a scene doesn’t have a clear start, so a safe word is never negotiated (although there are universal safe words, like “red” or the exceedingly obvious “safe word” that any experienced dom should recognize).

Mayhem and Stryker don’t expect much sympathy from the outside world about the problem of pushed boundaries within a scene that eroticizes pushing boundaries, but they did hope for a better reception from the people within their own community who are throwing these play parties. It’s their discussion of the pressure to not safeword that has courted the most controversy within the scene. One critic, Janet Hardy, author of several popular BDSM books, including “The New Bottoming Book,” tells me, “My general thoughts are that it is tremendously important to build a safe word culture but that bottoms have to hold up their share of that responsibility,” she says. “A bottom who refuses to safeword when he or she has actually withdrawn consent has just turned me into a rapist or assailant without my consent, and that is not OK.”

Hardy, co-author of the bible on polyamory, “The Ethical Slut,” doesn’t deny that sexual assault is a problem in the

community, but she takes issue with arguments about the social pressure to not safeword. It has “some of the flavor of the kind of victimhood that we see from some second wave feminists,” she says, “and I don’t want to get too deep into this because I’m going to get myself into trouble, but you know where I’m going with this.”

Another detractor wrote in response to a [recent interview](#) Stryker did in the San Francisco Bay Guardian:

A bottom/sub MUST investigate who they are seeking to play with. They MUST insist that their safe words are honored. They should, when playing with someone new or unfamiliar, have someone they trust be present to look out for their safety. A bottom/sub should never play with someone the first time in a private location (someone’s home, hotel, etc.). If public play spaces are not available, try to set an arrangement where there will be someone to look after their best interests.

Stryker considers such criticisms “very victim blame-y.” She explains, “[There’s] this belief that if I make sure I get references, have a safe call [a scheduled check-in with a friend to make sure things haven’t gone awry] and negotiate using a checklist, I’ll be safe,” Stryker tells me. “But then you find out that you can do those three things and not be safe anyway, and that’s terrifying. You realize how vulnerable you are.”

Despite it being a marginal sexual community, these debates clearly echo conversations about consent that routinely happen in the world at large. Hardy says, “These things tend to happen by their nature in places where there are only two witnesses. To what degree can the community line up behind a problem when it’s one person’s word against another’s?” (Ah, the old “he said, she said” quandary.) Just as so often happens with assaults on college campuses, alcohol and other intoxicants are frequently blamed. “Standard BDSM gospel has it that you don’t play when impaired, but a lot of people do,” says Hardy.

No matter the context, victims of assault tend to engage in the same second-guessing of themselves. “It can be really confusing,” Mayhem says during her speech. “Was that a scene, what was that? Should I have expected that? Was it my business to go that far and then stop? Is this just how it works?” That sounds a whole lot like the more familiar, “Was I dressed too provocatively? Should I have been out that late at night? Did I lead him on?”

In many ways, the kink scene seems light-years ahead of other sexual communities when it comes to issues of consent. They have checklists that tirelessly detail personal limits and safe words meant to bring things to a screeching halt if ever someone’s boundaries are crossed. That’s theory — just like “no” means “no” for non-kinksters — but it’s not always so in practice.



Tracy Clark-Flory is a staff writer at Salon. Follow [@tracyclarkflory](#) on Twitter. [More Tracy Clark-Flory](#)

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