Flash back to the summer of 1991.

Former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson had just been charged with raping an 18-year-old beauty queen he had invited to his hotel room at 1:30 in the morning.

I was vacationing with a group of girlfriends, having drinks on the beach when someone raised the question. Was it rape or was it a sexual tryst gone awry? What did she expect going to a man's room at that hour? How could anyone be that naive?

Tempers flared. One woman was in tears. Someone else stormed away. Another wondered what the fuss was about. It was clear that some of my friends just didn't get the concept that rape is rape, period.

Rape has always been a delicate topic, one that is controversial and misunderstood. It is politically charged, divisive and often shrouded in ignorance. We can thank Rep. Todd Akin of Missouri for ineloquently pointing that out with his recent comment that victims of "legitimate" rape don't get pregnant.

He reminded us there are people out there who believe that there are degrees of rape, suggesting that some victims may be responsible for their attack. He showed us that rape isn't always an easy concept to grasp, that some wrongly think of it as a crime of passion rather than an act of violence.

Advocates for rape victims have long had their hands full trying to dispel such misconceptions. But it isn't always the blatantly inaccurate messages that can be harmful. Sometimes it's the subtle ones too.

While the nation was tuned into the Akin debacle, Illinois was sealing a deal to funnel money from strip clubs that sell alcohol to help fund rape crisis centers. While strip-club owners aren't the easiest bunch to elicit sympathy for, they have raised an interesting question:

What do strip clubs have to do with rape?

Does the bill imply that women dancing topless around a pole could entice a man to go out and rape? Or is there a hidden message that men should not be held responsible for their actions, especially when they've had a few drinks?

Roger Canaff, president of End Violence Against Women International, said he thinks Illinois could be inadvertently sending a misleading message.

"Someone might look at that and say, 'Yeah, it makes sense because men go there, get all ginned up, their hormones raging and they go out looking for someone to rape,'" he said.

"That's not how it happens. If a man is going to commit a rape, he's going to do it whether he's coming home from church or work or a strip club. Rape has nothing to do with drinking alcohol or getting excited watching a stripper."

No one thinks advocates of the "pole tax" ever intended to send the message that it was the strippers' fault. But sometimes, even those with the best intentions can wander away from the message that rape is rape, and that there are no excuses.

The advocates probably didn't intend to send any kind of message. They were simply trying to keep the lights on at Illinois' 32 rape crisis centers, and they figured that strip clubs were sitting ducks for a new tax. Once a similar tax in Texas got an OK from that state's Supreme Court last year, other states started jumping at the idea.

Even the strip-club owners who will charge an extra $3 to patrons who want to sip a gin and tonic while watching nude dancers agree that the money is going to good use. Rape crisis centers have seen a 28 percent drop in their budget from the state in the last five years, while the number of clients they serve annually has grown to more than 18,000.

Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon, who pushed for the Illinois law, has said the surcharge is no different from using the gasoline tax to pay for road construction or levying a tax on gambling proceeds to pay for addiction counseling.

But some critics suggest that it's more akin to taxing a department store that sells Daisy Dukes.

When we misplace the blame for rape, we give a break to the real culprit — the attacker. And we push the victims further behind a wall of shame. Already, 54 percent of sexual assaults go unreported to the police, according to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network.

There are plenty of misconceptions about rapists too. In fact, 97 percent of rapists will never spend a day in jail. Most rapes are carefully planned attacks rather than random acts. Seventy percent of the time, the attacker is someone the victim knows. And a rapist will attack over and over again until he's caught.

Even some rape center advocates admit privately that by supporting the pole tax, they risk sending an inadvertent message that there are gray areas when it comes to rape. But Polly Poskin, executive director of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, says it's only fair for strip clubs that sexually exploit women to help pay for the counseling services that rape and sexual assault victims need.

But whether it's fair or not, or sends the right message or not, the new law is expected to do about $1 million in good each year. It means there will be money to counsel rape victims and to educate people about the issue — and the fact that rape is rape, and every victim is legitimate.

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