



Public Sexual Harassment & other forms of Gender-based Violence

This review looks at a body of evidence to explore: what is the relationship between public sexual harassment (PSH) and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV)?

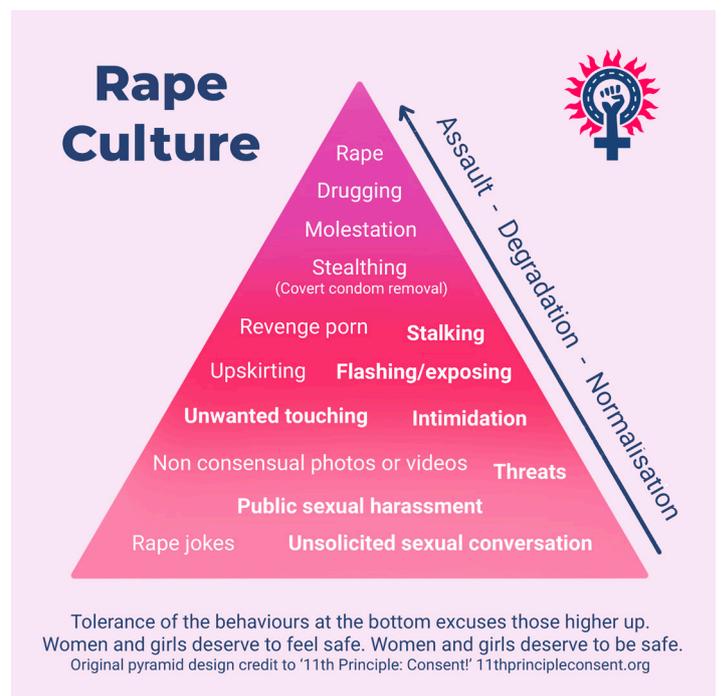
This question speculates that different types of GBV (ranging from catcalls to rape) might be related - a proposition that Liz Kelly (1988) conceptualised as the 'continuum of sexual violence'. She established this concept to highlight two key ideas:

Lived experiences of GBV often are not easily distinguishable as different types of offence. Rather, a series of different behaviours and experiences continuously pass into one another, so that they can blur together.

A wide range of different forms of GBV are all driven by a common underlying factor: she argues, the maintenance of men's social power and control over women.

Since the 1980s, several scholars have critiqued and built upon Kelly's ideas. Importantly, they have argued that there are many continuums, experienced in different ways by different individuals, and language should be inclusive of a range of marginalised genders (Boyle, 2019). Moreover, they have drawn attention to the ways women were presented as passive, and instead highlight their agency (Phoenix, 2011). Nonetheless, the continuum remains a prominent idea as it is useful for showing that different forms of GBV are connected because of structural relations of power.

A related concept - 'rape culture' - emphasises the ways in which these mechanisms of power are reproduced and maintained through social norms and attitudes. Rape culture is understood as "a pervasive ideology that effectively supports or excuses sexual assault" (Burt, 1980: 218). Theorists outline how traditional gender roles, sexism, adversarial sexual beliefs, hostility toward women, and acceptance of violence contribute to a culture in which the continuum of GBV becomes normalised, accepted, and is enabled by society (Johnson & Johnson, 2021).



EXPLORING THE EVIDENCE: NORMS, POWER AND PSH

Whilst there have been few attempts to measure or quantify these theories on the continuum of GBV (Johnson & Johnson, 2021), a couple of statistical studies have analysed people's attitudes in relation to PSH. These suggest that social norms and shared beliefs, about what is typical and appropriate behaviour in a given context, may act as an underlying cause of PSH (Plan International UK, 2021):

- ~ Polling of over 1,600 adults in Great Britain found that whilst most people think that PSH is unacceptable, there is a significant relationship between belief in traditional masculine gender norms (like, 'men should be responsible for providing for their family' or 'a man deserves to know where his wife or girlfriend is all the time') and acceptability of PSH (Mott & Vera-Gray, 2018). Those who find it acceptable for men to pay for sex or to use legal pornography also tend to find PSH more acceptable (ibid.).
- ~ In a study of more than 3,000 young men across the UK, US and Mexico, those who most strongly believed in toxic ideas of manhood (attitudes such as 'guys should act strong even when they feel scared or nervous inside' or "a real man would never say no sex'), were the most likely to report having perpetrated sexual harassment (Helilman & Barker, 2018). This association was significant when controlling for a range of demographic factors, suggesting that young men who harass come from all income levels, all educational backgrounds, and all age groups (ibid.).

Various qualitative research studies have examined lived experiences of PSH. These stories often describe how the normalisation and acceptance of a rape culture are embodied by victims-survivors. For example, this is reflected in Fiona Elsgrey's (2014) poetic representation of her research findings, bringing together women's stories of their responses to PSH - including, "I try not to sit next to a man", "I'll wear jeans just because it's safer", "I always walk with purpose" and "it's easier to pretend I don't hear anything". She describes how "many [participants] were unable to remember specific reactions and spoke about a habitual embodied response to the possibility of intrusion".

Stories of 'safety work' highlight the gendered impact of PSH on lives and liberties: "Just because I don't follow gender conformity, that's a big reason why I don't stay out till too late"; "I do feel like boys have more freedom than girls when it comes to like being able to walk out alone. Like my mum won't let me out past a certain time. I get a curfew and my brother didn't so..." (Plan International UK, 2021). Analyses link such testimonies to gendered oppression (Ahmad et al., 2020) as women and people of marginalised genders (attempt to) become smaller and less visible in the world (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). This provides insight into how the mechanisms of power which underpin the continuum of GBV's function to maintain unequal gender relations.



CONCLUSION

Academic theories suggest that the relationship between PSH and other forms of GBV is driven by unequal power relations and common attitudes which normalise GBV. They suggest that different forms of GBV, including PSH, are experienced as a related phenomenon which evokes a similar set of responses. Existing research goes some way to evidence this, through attitudinal surveys and qualitative testimonies of lived experiences. Yet, despite being one of the most frequently experienced forms of GBV, PSH remains under researched (Vera-Gray, 2016), with few attempts to measure or quantify its relationship with GBV (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). In fact, it could be argued that this lack of research itself normalises PSH, contributing to the mechanisms that mean GBV and 'rape culture' remain unchallenged by society at large.





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