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Gendered Bodies and Power Dynamics: The Relation between Toxic Masculinity and Sexual Harassment

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A b s t r a c t

This Although most men do not sexually harass, most sexual harassment is performed by men. This has for a long time has been considered an excusable part of their nature in our society. They are just 'boys being boys'. This paper presents arguments for how toxic masculinity is causing and reinforcing sexual harassment. It references research that demonstrates that this behaviour is a reaction to non-normative expressions of gender, which feels threatening to these men. Ultimately the paper concludes that if we begin to move away from toxic masculinity and towards a healthier view of masculinity, this will in turn lead to less societal acceptance of sexual harassment and less need for using sexual harassment as a coping mechanism.

[K e y w o r d s]: Gender, Sexual harassment, Toxic masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

What motivates some men to wolf-whistle as a woman walks down the street or to pinch their behinds in the workplace? If we were to believe what is often repeated in conservative discussions of the topic in the media, it is just ‘boys being boys’. Growing up, girls are told that boys who are mean to them in the playground are only indirectly trying to tell the girls that they like them. Boys are not taught to discontinue their problematic behaviour and girls are told to take it as a compliment. That behaviour is part of the vicious cycle of toxic masculinity and its effect on society. This paper will present arguments for a redefinition of masculinity, to fight sexual harassment which stems from toxic masculinity.

Gender Role Expectations of Men and Toxic Masculinity

The traditional gender expectation of men is that they should be tough, strong (physically and mentally) and not exhibit any signs of weakness and emotion, by for example crying in public. Men are expected to be physically bigger than women, both in relation to height and muscle mass. Since the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ exist as polar opposites on a scale, one is threatened if the other starts changing its position. When the clear lines between the genders are blurred or challenged ‘fears of physical and social feminization become more prevalent’ (Dworkin & Wachs 2009, p.91). The ultimate fear is ‘that boys won’t become men if they are “overly” exposed to “non”-masculinizing influences’ (Dworkin & Wachs 2009, p.97). Rather than considering this toxic view of masculinity as the only option, we should allow for alternative definitions of what masculinity is and how boys should be raised. Terry A. Kupers describes toxic masculinity as a ‘constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence’ (Kupers 2005, p.714). These traits are harmful to all genders, as those who consciously or subconsciously challenge these traits can be faced with harassment or violence.

Gender and Sexual Harassment

Although individuals of all genders are at risk of sexual harassment – including the most privileged group of straight, able bodied, white, cisgender men – there are certain marginalised groups that are statistically shown to be at a greater risk. According to Joyce Baptist and Katelyn Coburn, ‘[s]treet

harassment, a serious form of sexual harassment, is a daily occurrence for many marginalized groups (e.g., women, girls, LGBTQ people, people of color) across the globe' (2019, p.114). There are various problematic behaviours that fall under the definition of sexual harassment, but

Regardless of the level of severity, catcalls, sexual comments, ogling, wolfwhistling and groping in public spaces by strangers debilitate the survivor's liberty to freely enter public spaces without fear' (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.115).

Because of the way 'cisgender men are socialized in Western society', they are encouraged 'to acknowledge and recognize that in a way that encourages men to carry out stranger intrusion in order to uphold masculinity and patriarchy' (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.116).

Through street harassment men objectify 'femininity and any non-normative expression of gender or sexuality' (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.115). Society rationalises their behaviour as an aspect of their 'masculine entitlement'. From an early age these intrusions are 'dismissed as "boys" behavior,' and is not 'seen as a valid form of harm'. By '[v]alidating stranger intrusion [we confirm] the idea that it is an essential facet of men's nature versus a learned behavior that can be unlearned' (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.116). This relieves men of the responsibility for and consequences of their actions – they are just boys being boys. Through society accepting this 'performance of gender' men remain 'on top of the gender hierarchy', which 'perpetuates oppression of marginalized groups.' (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.116).

Sexual harassment is not only prominent on the streets but also in the workplace: 'Sexual harassment in the workplace, and in particular unsolicited and unwelcome sexual behavior by men towards women, is a widespread and serious social problem' (Mellon 2013, p.2287). Robert C. Mellon suggests that men are not harassing women *despite* the emotional effect it has on the victims but rather *because* of it:

[S]tudies indicate that, for many men, sexual harassment may in fact be reinforced by the indications of suffering that it produces in its victims, particularly in women said to threaten men's "masculine identity" by directly challenging the legitimacy of extant gender discrimination, by behaving in manners normatively characterized as masculine, or simply by working in traditionally male-dominated fields or capacities (2013, p.2288).

In other words, the men feel intimidated by the women and harass them to re-establish the dominance they feel entitled to have.

Research shows that it is the women who describe ‘themselves as having traditionally “masculine” characteristics’ who report ‘experiencing more sexual harassment’, rather ‘than those who described themselves in accord with characteristics typically judged to be desirable in women’ (Mellon 2013, p.2288). These women are violating their gender ideals and are seen as threats by men desperately clinging to their masculinity, who need a counterpart seen as ‘weaker’ to compare themselves to. The women threaten the perception of whether men meet their body ideals, which is a threat ‘that might be neutralized by “manly” displays of heterosexual aggression’ (Mellon 2013, p.2289). Studies indicate positive correlations ‘between self-reported levels of sexual harassment proclivity and masculine gender role stress’. This ‘suggests that fear of failure to live up to male gender role expectations, rather than confidence in one’s masculinity’ is what motivates sexual harassment in the workplace (Mellon 2013, p.2289).

How We are Re-Enforcing Negative Behaviour

If we believe, as mentioned in the previous section, that sexual harassment and stranger intrusion are learned behaviours rather than an innate part of men’s nature, we need to break the cycle where we are reinforcing this negative behaviour. Already ‘[b]y the age of eight, boys and girls already have complex body ideals which are clearly shaped by their peer culture and gender ideals’. At this age girls are focused on ‘appearance culture’, whereas boys are focused on ‘sporting culture’ (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli 2013, p.597). Based on their own observations of society and through the influence of their peers, girls value thinness and do ‘not want too much muscularity’. Boys, however, value muscularity and do not want to be ‘too thin’ (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli 2013, p.596).

When some individuals do not meet the internalised ideals of their gender, they are dissatisfied with their bodies (Grogan 2010, p.760). Men who experience dissatisfaction with their bodies feel insecure about their masculinity, which in turn may trigger sexual harassment of others to gain a feeling of superiority. Sarah Grogan argues that ‘higher self-esteem, less internalization of thin/muscular ideals, and fewer social comparisons all predict greater positive body image in men and women’ (2010, p.763). If men did not have these strict ideals for their bodies, they may feel less

insecure about their masculinity and would not feel the need to seek comfort in harassing individuals they feel threatened by.

Moving away from Toxic Masculinity

By promoting toxic masculinity, the sexual harassment and stranger intrusion are ‘allowed to continue’. In order ‘to keep the dignity of all people intact’ we need social change (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.126). To change society, we need to work with both the victims of harassment and intrusion, as well as those who harass and intrude, so that we can fully understand what causes this behaviour and the effect it has on those involved. This information can be used to educate ‘current and future generations’ (Baptist & Coburn 2019, p.121).

It is also important to make society at large reflect on the issue, whether they have experience with sexual harassment or not. An American Professor by the name Jeremy Posadas teaches his student about how toxic masculinity is the cause of rape culture. He believes that in order ‘to eradicate rape culture, we must transform how we collectively raise “our boys.”’ (2017, p.179). He wants his students to understand that if we wish ‘to eradicate sexual violence, we must transform the apparatuses by which boys are subjectified into toxically masculine men’ (Posadas 2017, p.178). Considering the insecurities and fragility of the individuals who perpetuate this behaviour, it is crucial, for the benefit of everyone involved, that we do not vilify and alienate these men. We should try to use our current knowledge as a way of decreasing stigma and getting to the root of the issue, rather than continuing to focus solely on the symptoms or results of their behaviour.

J. Hope Corbin realised that working closely with men who are sexual abuse offenders can give an insight into the root of toxic masculinity: ‘By listening and engaging in discussion, I learned about the socialization of men and the limits of emotion they felt permitted to express’ (Corbin 2018, p.922). If we are open to consider what is causing the problematic behaviour in these men and we can support them to change their deep-rooted issues, we can fight the prevalence of sexual abuse in our contemporary society. If men feel threatened by independent and strong women, the solution is not to hide the women’s strength but rather give these men support to understand and change their behaviour before they harass, intrude, or commit acts of violence.

Many of the men will meet this effort with defensiveness and denial. No matter how problematic their behaviour is, it will not benefit anyone if we remove their coping strategy, as they will then find another (potentially even more problematic) outlet for their problems. If an individual is confronted with how ‘terrible their behavior is’ they will defend their position, which ‘in turn provokes defensiveness and denial’. If they, on the other hand, are enabled ‘to reflect on past behaviors and the experiences that shaped them—the individual contemplating change is able to more holistically explore their options for future action’ (Corbin 2018, p.923).

This is not to say that we will not hold individuals responsible ‘for the violence they perpetrate’, or to ignore ‘that there are brave people of all genders working to fight against patriarchy and violence in our society’ (Corbin 2018, p.924). Rather, it is important that we do not oversimplify the extremely complex issue and assume that perpetrators are irremediable. It is important for both our contemporary society and future generations that we have these difficult conversations and work on redefining masculinity, in order to lead as good role models. Corbin encourages us to ‘invite ourselves to think about empowering men at the edges of action to come into the fold’ – all those men who are not perpetrators and who may also be victims of the very same harassment. We need to nurture ‘a willingness to hold space for them and to honor that the hostile environment of male violence is oppressive for us all—across the spectrum of gender expression and performance’ (Corbin 2018, p.924). These men on the sidelines who do not subscribe to the definition of toxic masculinity, could help define more positive and inclusive elements of masculinity.

Conclusion

We currently live in a society which reinforces and normalises toxic masculinity and its effects. The current gender role expectations of men of being tough, strong and unemotional – as seen in opposition to that of weak and emotional women – is highly problematic for all genders and groups of people. Men who do not meet these unrealistic standards or who feel threatened by women become insecure and vulnerable, which may lead to problematic behaviour such as sexual harassment, intrusion, or even sexual assault. In order to improve the situation for everyone involved, we need to fight toxic masculinity. If these men are taught to process and express their emotions, they will be less likely to resort to harassment as a coping mechanism. In order to

achieve this, we must educate current and future generations of boys and men on positive body images and a redefined view of masculinity.

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