

Where shall the woman go?

During her work with female survivors of sexual violence, Dr. Fiona Vera-Gray (Durham university) realized that progress made during counseling got diminished as soon as the session was over and the woman left the facility. On the street, men once again represented a risk and for those who have experienced sexual violence, victimization of sexual harassment can be devastating. Since then, Vera-Gray has worked to enhance the knowledge regarding women's victimization in public space.

Contrary to what we previously thought, I met with dr. Fiona Vera-Gray via an online-meeting instead of face-to-face. Due to COVID-19, the conferences she would attend to in Sweden had been cancelled, so I was happy that this interview could take place anyway. Initially, she's telling me that she is worried over the impact that the new coronavirus might have for vulnerable groups in society, but also offer a glimpse of hope. Perhaps the crisis will teach us to not only put our own needs first, but instead look at the consequences that our actions might bring for others. On the same note, she's telling me about the consequences that sexual harassment in public might have for women.

“What's troublesome is that the kind of sexual harassment that occur in public space are often dismissed by the public. “It's not as bad as being raped”, they say. But for someone who has experienced sexual violence, actions like catcalling and so on can be devastating. In particular, for those who experience domestic violence, the public space could be the only space not connected to violence. Therefore, it's highly problematic when it's not. Where, then, shall the woman go?”

She's also telling me of when she conducted qualitative interviews with women to deepen the knowledge of the consequences that sexual harassment in public might bring. The interviewees were also given notebooks where they noted occasions when they were subjected to any of the following - *being looked at* in a discomforting way, *space invasion* (manspreading, blocking of street) and *catcalling*. She was astonished when she compiled the result. During the initial interviews, the subjects described the frequency as almost a daily event. However, it wasn't. Vera-Grays interpretation of this is that victimization entails strategies. For women, one strategy regarding sexual harassment in public is simply to avoid public space. Therefore, they don't realize that harassment is not a daily event.

“That's not the only strategy though. The overall strategy that women often share is trying to be smaller. Be smaller, be less. If women are sitting on a bus they are sitting in their seat, crossing their legs, having their purse in their knees, being small. If they are working out, they aren't trying to

build muscles and gain weight. They are trying to be smaller. It's very different from men. Women are also constantly scanning and calculating different situations. If a man approaches a woman on the bus, asking her how her day has been, the woman would think "Should I engage in this conversation or not? What happens if I do, and if I don't? Should I get off the bus at an earlier stop? If I do, will he follow me?" All of that is about making contextual decisions."

At this point I remember what social anthropologist Katrina Johnston-Zimmerman (THINK.urban) [said in a previous interview](#), namely that it's easy to spot the lone woman in a public space and that she conducts herself entirely different than the lone man. I ask Vera-Gray what she thinks about this, and she agrees. She states that women very seldom participate in public space without any plan, in order to *just be*. A woman in a public park, for example, doesn't just sit and watch what happens. Instead she brings a book, or wears headphones, or occupies herself with something else that makes her look busy. Vera-Gray appreciates initiatives taken in India, where women go to public spaces in groups to loiter (for more input on women's safety in India, [read this interview with the organization Safecity](#)). When asked about the fear of crime paradox, she's shifting the focus.

"There's something about this idea of safety that we miss. We're saying that men are at higher risk of being victimized, but we're not asking why women aren't victimized in the same extent. If the roles were reversed, we would probably ask what men are doing to avoid victimization, and then tell women to act as men. We never think about these highly developed strategies that women have learnt since a very young age. Maybe it's time for men to adopt feminine thoughts and experiences?"

Vera-Gray is giving a nuanced description of women, primarily as active, with a lot of individual agency, though affected by context. Therefore, I get curious of her opinions regarding the division within feminism, where some feminists state that women need to get better at claiming the public space whilst some feminists say that men need to share the space. Wisely, but perhaps unsatisfying for those who want simplicity, her answer is "both".

"Looking at solutions, we need to start moving away from the individual and see how we change gender norms on a deeper level. We should teach young girls to be loud and big and to take up space. And women need to unlearn previous messages about their bodies as visually pleasing objects that are detached from their own selves. For example, women who get subjected to sexual violence often leave their bodies, thinking "this is not

happening”. They have learnt to alienate their bodies. Whereas we also need to unpick masculinity, teaching men and boys that masculinity is about taking care of and enabling others, rather than taking up space. This is an area where I feel that the Nordic countries has come far in the process.”

Within the same theme of gender roles, a relevant question is if there are studies regarding men’s victimization of sexual harassment in public. Some studies indicate that men experience domestic violence in the same extent, but different shape, as women. Therefore, it’s important to know how extensive men’s victimization of sexual harassment in public really is, and if society might just be bad at noticing. Vera-Gray hasn’t come across such research. However, she emphasizes the importance of looking at the consequences of victimization, rather than the extent. She states that a woman following a man probably wouldn’t be as intrusive as a man following a woman, since women are constantly told that they are at risk of rape and that victimization might be their own fault.

As a final question, I ask about Vera-Gray’s opinions of organizations that tells women to act against a perpetrator, for example by taking pictures and posting them online.

“That’s individual activism and shouldn’t be organizational activism. Stop telling women what to do, basically, and trust that women are doing a really good job handling these kinds of situations. If a woman wants to take a picture of a perpetrator, she can. If she instead wants to feel complimented by catcalling, she can. If she wants to ignore the situation, she can. Women are told that they are handling situations wrong all the time, instead tell a woman “you are doing quite well”. To solve the situation, we need to aim higher than at individual behavior.”

We finish the interview by stating that it worked quite well even though at a distance. The main theme we can learn from the interview is the importance of continuing to problematize and restructure gender roles. It’s through looking at systems and structures that differences can be made, rather than blaming individuals for their (in)actions. Also, the urban planning process may have a key role in offering women public spaces that offers withdrawal without avoidance. The theory of *Prospect, refuge and escape* is good guidance. Additionally, it’s interesting to explore sexual harassment in public as a potential mediating factor between gender roles and avoidance of public space. The risk of, or actual, victimization probably enhance behaviors that we’ve already learnt from a young age.

Read more:

Vera-Gray (2019) [The Whole Place Self: Reflecting on the original working practices of Rape Crisis](#), *Journal of Gender Based Violence*.

Vera-Gray (2018) [The Right Amount of Panic: How women trade freedom for safety](#). Bristol: Policy Press.