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EXPERIENCING THE STREETS: HARASSMENT AND PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AMONG WOMEN

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Although research consistently shows that women feel unsafe in a variety of situations, the social sources of these perceptions have not been clearly identified. This article examines, theoretically and empirically, the influence of sexual harassment on perceptions of safety among women. Because perceptions of safety among women are largely related to fears of sexual victimization, sexual harassment, particularly when it involves strangers, should indicate sexual vulnerability and typify particular contexts as dangerous and threatening. Using data from a national sample of Canadian women, the authors first examine the prevalence of stranger and nonstranger sexual harassment and then examine their influence on perceptions of safety. The findings indicate that stranger harassment is more prevalent and more extensive than nonstranger harassment and that stranger harassment more strongly influences fear of victimization. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Although fear of crime and its consequences are regarded as a social problem that affects everyone, such fears are not evenly distributed across social groups. In particular, research consistently shows that women feel unsafe in a variety of social contexts (Gordon and Riger 1989; Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978; Skogan and Maxfield 1981). Data from a recent Canadian study, for example, indicate that almost half of all women feel unsafe walking alone in their neighborhoods after dark (Statistics Canada 1994). Yet, after more than three decades of research, the social sources of such feelings have not been clearly identified.

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Although largely speculative, contemporary explanations of women's fears emphasize either gender socialization or victimization from intimates and other known men (see Sacco 1990). Because these perspectives pay little attention to the psychological and situational dimensions of perceived safety, they present an incomplete and somewhat limited explanation of the gendered nature of fear. In this article, we extend previous work by examining the influence of sexual harassment on perceptions of safety among women. Because perceptions of safety among women are largely shaped by fears of sexual victimization (Ferraro 1996; Gordon and Riger 1989; Warr 1985), sexual harassment should be a unique and important determinant. Yet, while sexual harassment occurs in a variety of social contexts, involving both strangers and men known to the victim, we expect that sexual harassment involving strangers will be more influential in shaping perceptions of safety. In investigating both the prevalence of stranger and nonstranger sexual harassment and its consequences, our work links feelings of safety among women to interactions with strangers, their behavior, and public spaces.

THE NATURE AND PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

While there is considerable debate about what behaviors constitute sexual harassment (Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley 1997), it is typically characterized in one of two forms. The most common conceptualization is harassment associated with workplaces or academic settings. This may involve a range of behaviors including sexual comments, unsolicited and unwanted touching, and attempts to coerce an individual into complying with sexual demands. Given the context in which this behavior occurs, perpetrators of this form of harassment are typically known to the victim (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, teachers).

More recently, attention has focused on harassment from strangers. Including behaviors such as unwanted physical contact, verbal comments, ogling, and stalking, stranger harassment is typical of public places such as streets. Stranger harassment also occurs in the form of obscene phone calls (Smith and Morra 1994). Whether in the form of street harassment or obscene phone calls, the fact that the perpetrator is not known to the victim makes such experiences particularly difficult to anticipate and therefore avoid.

While it is well established that women are the primary victims of sexual harassment and that men are the primary initiators (Canadian Human Rights Commission 1983; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1981), a clear and consistent picture of the nature and prevalence of sexual harassment has yet to emerge. Rates of sexual harassment from sample surveys vary from as high as 90 percent to as low as 16 percent (Nierobisz 1994). National surveys

suggest that 40 percent to 50 percent of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment at work or in academic contexts (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1981; Canadian Human Rights Commission 1983). With regard to non-work-related harassment, Smith and Morra (1994) found that 8 of 10 women have experienced obscene, threatening, or silent phone calls. Further qualitative evidence suggests that women frequently encounter street harassment (Gardner 1995; Packer 1986), although actual prevalence is largely unknown.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AMONG WOMEN

Gender differences in the nature of perceived safety are an important starting point for understanding the consequences of harassment for perceptions of safety. In contrast to men, perceptions of safety among women are intimately connected to fears of sexual assault. Fear of rape casts a shadow over a wide variety of circumstances and interactions that might appear innocuous to men (Ferraro 1996; Warr 1985). Gordon and Riger (1989) argue,

While rape is not often uppermost in the minds of most women, it is ever present. Most women experience fear of rape as a nagging, gnawing sense that something awful could happen, an angst that keeps them from doing things they want or need to do, or from doing them at the time or in the way they might otherwise do. Women's fear of rape is a sense that one must always be on guard, vigilant and alert. (P. 2)

The recognition that perceptions of safety among women are largely related to feelings of sexual vulnerability leads to important questions of what factors produce such perceptions. Yet, it is here that the literature becomes much more speculative.

Although little empirical work exists, most contemporary explanations of women's fear focus on gender differences in socialization. Some argue that women are socialized to be more passive and dependent (Garofalo 1979). Others maintain that warnings about the potential for sexual victimization are a central feature of women's socialization (Burt and Estep 1981; Warr 1985). While we do not explicitly challenge such arguments, we do suggest that they present an incomplete and rather limited explanation. Specifically, they ignore the influence of perceptions of and experiences with others that are central to general explanations of fear of crime.

In general, the presence, appearance, and actions of others have a strong influence on perceptions of safety. While being alone in public spaces, particularly at night, exacerbates fear (since others are not available to render aid),

other people can also exacerbate fear if they are thought to hold criminal intentions (Warr 1990). Research on "social incivilities" indicates the importance of others for determining perceptions of safety (LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supanic 1992; Skogan 1990). Because criminal activity is typically associated with particular persons (i.e., unsupervised teenagers) and particular activities (i.e., drinking and drug use), the presence of such people and such activities symbolizes others as potential offenders rather than potential guardians (Taylor and Hale 1986).

The relevance of this work for understanding the link between sexual harassment and perceptions of safety among women is relatively straightforward. Sexual harassment can be seen as a social incivility, albeit one intimately connected to gender, that symbolizes the presence of potential offenders rather than potential guardians in particular social contexts. Furthermore, due to the uniquely sexual nature of such interactions, sexual harassment should invoke feelings of sexual vulnerability and ultimately symbolize particular environments as dangerous and threatening.

Although others have suggested an influence of sexual harassment on fear (Griffin 1971; Junger 1987; Stanko 1995), the relationship may be more complicated and varied than previously anticipated. While sexual harassment can involve both strangers and nonstrangers, many argue that perceptions of safety are in a real and direct way a fear of strangers (Fischer 1981; Merry 1981; Silberman 1978). Consequently, relational distance may contextualize the effects of harassment on fear. The potential of sexual harassment to evoke fears of sexual attack may be much greater in contexts and interactions where the perpetrator is an unknown entity. Stranger sexual harassment should thus be uniquely detrimental to feelings of safety among women.

Still, there is little empirical work that examines the effects of sexual harassment on fear. Arguably, the most comprehensive study is Junger's (1987:364) study of 279 women in the Netherlands. Defining sexual harassment as "a violation of the physical integrity and/or autonomy which is related to the primary and secondary sexual characteristics of a person," harassment increased perceived risks and the use of precautionary behaviors but had no effect on either avoidance or feelings of insecurity. The latter finding is particularly significant since this measure is conceptually similar to traditional measures of perceived safety, measures that consistently show large gender differences (e.g., see Box, Hale, and Andrews 1988; Skogan and Maxfield 1981). Effects further varied depending on the victim's relationship to the offender; harassment from family members produced considerably more fear than harassment from others (i.e., authorities, other known men, and strangers). With such equivocal findings and an absence of other research, the influence of harassment on perceptions of safety among women is largely speculative.

To more fully examine the effects of sexual harassment on perceptions of safety among women, our research proceeds in two stages. Using data from a national sample of Canadian women, we begin by examining the prevalence of both stranger and nonstranger sexual harassment. We then examine the effects of these experiences on perceptions of safety among women in a number of social contexts.

DATA

The data used in this research come from a national sample of Canadian women. The 1993 Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) was designed to address many of the shortcomings of previous victimization research and provide detailed national data on all forms of sexual and nonsexual violence (Johnson and Sacco 1995).¹ Advice and recommendations on all aspects of the survey were sought from academics, government employees, a police advisory group, shelter workers, crisis counselors, and victims of violence. Methodological aspects of question wording and questionnaire content were rigorously evaluated through focus group testing, one-on-one interviews, and two large field tests. The sample ($N = 12,300$) is a representative stratified probability sample of Canadian women 18 years of age and older living in the 10 provinces. Interviews were conducted over the telephone, with a final response rate of 63.7 percent.²

MEASURING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Eight items in the VAWS measure both stranger and nonstranger sexual harassment. In keeping with arguments about the significance of strangers and their behavior for understanding perceptions of safety, our analysis explicitly differentiates stranger from nonstranger sexual harassment. The four stranger harassment items include whether respondents had ever received an obscene phone call, received unwanted attention (i.e., anything that does not involve touching, such as catcalls, whistling, leering, or blowing kisses), been followed in a manner that frightened them, or experienced an indecent exposure. The latter three types of harassment indicate activities generally associated with public spaces, whereas obscene phone calls are generally a private space experience. Furthermore, the latter two items measure more confrontational forms of harassment.

The four measures of nonstranger sexual harassment include whether the respondent had ever received inappropriate comments about her body or sex

life; had someone lean over unnecessarily, get too close, or corner her; had someone repeatedly ask for a date and would not take no for an answer; or had someone hint that her job situation might be hurt if she did not have a sexual relationship with him. The latter item taps MacKinnon's (1979) definition of quid pro quo harassment, whereas the former three items reflect various aspects of poisoned or hostile environments. For both stranger and nonstranger harassment, each item is coded zero if the respondent did not report an experience and one if the respondent did.

The fact that these items measure lifetime prevalence of sexual harassment has implications for our analyses. First, these items should produce prevalence rates of victimization that are considerably higher than traditional one-year prevalence rates. At the same time, since some might argue that more recent events should have greater effects on fear, our use of these items constitutes a relatively conservative test of the effects of sexual harassment on fear.

Table 1 shows the prevalence of stranger and nonstranger sexual harassment. In our data, sexual harassment is widely experienced. In all, 85 percent of women experienced some form of stranger harassment, whereas 51 percent experienced some form of nonstranger harassment. Even so, harassment is not universal. For nonstranger harassment, having had someone stand too close is most common (35.7 percent), whereas having had one's job threatened is least common (4.7 percent). Furthermore, approximately one-quarter of respondents had experienced either inappropriate comments (26.3 percent) or been repeatedly asked for dates (26.0 percent). There is similar variation in stranger sexual harassment. Experiences with obscene phone calls (66.0 percent) and unwanted attention (60.0 percent) are quite common, whereas being followed (32.0 percent) and having someone indecently expose themselves (18.0 percent) occur less frequently.

Consistent with previous qualitative research (e.g., Gardner 1995; Stanko 1995), experiences of sexual harassment in the VAWS data are multifaceted. For all respondents reporting any form of nonstranger harassment, the average number of harassment types experienced is slightly less than two. Approximately 18.0 percent of the sample experienced two types of harassment, whereas 13.4 percent experienced three types. Similarly, respondents reporting any stranger sexual harassment, on average, experienced slightly more than two types. Almost 30 percent experienced two types of harassment, whereas more than 20 percent experienced three types. Slightly more than 7 percent of respondents experienced all four types of stranger harassment. Importantly, stranger harassment is considerably more prevalent and more extensive than nonstranger harassment. In the following section, we pursue the implications of these experiences for understanding women's perceptions of safety.

TABLE 1: Inventory of Variables, 1993 Violence against Women Survey

		1993 Violence Against Women Survey	
Variable	Description	Mean or Percentage	SD
Perceptions of safety while walking alone	"How worried are you when walking alone in your area after dark?" (1 = very worried, 3 = not at all worried)	2.27	0.66
Perceptions of safety while using public transportation	"How worried are you while waiting for or using public transportation alone at night?" (1 = very worried, 3 = not at all worried)	2.00	0.70
Perceptions of safety while walking in a parking garage	"How worried are you while walking alone in a parking garage?" (1 = very worried, 3 = not at all worried)	1.92	0.67
Perceptions of safety while home alone	"How worried are you while home alone at night?" (1 = very worried, 3 = not at all worried)		
Age	Respondent's age group (1 = 15 to 17, 15 = 80 and older)	2.56	0.60
Employed	Respondent's main activity (1 = employed, 0 = other)	5.11	3.12
In school	Respondent's main activity (1 = in school, 0 = other)	65.0%	
Married	Respondent's marital status (1 = married, 0 = other)	20.0%	
Divorced/separated	Respondent's marital status (1 = divorced/separated, 0 = other)	69.0%	
Widowed	Respondent's marital status (1 = widowed, 0 = other)	9.0%	
Lives alone	Respondent's household condition (1 = lives alone, 0 = other)	7.0%	
Education	Respondent's highest level of education (1 = no schooling, 4 = university graduate)	14.0%	
Personal income	Respondent's total personal income (1 = no income, 11 = \$80,000 or more)	2.37	1.03
Household income	Respondent's total household income (1 = no income, 11 = \$80,000 or more)	3.64	2.22
Health	"Compared to other people your age, how would you describe your state of health?" (1 = poor, 5 = excellent)	5.26	2.19
Disability	Respondent limited by a long-term physical condition or health problem (1 = yes, 0 = no)	3.79	1.00
Urban	Respondent lives in an urban area (1 = urban, 0 = other)	17.0%	
		70.0%	

Region		
Quebec	Province of residence (1 = Quebec, 0 = other)	16.0%
Ontario	Province of residence (1 = Ontario, 0 = other)	20.0%
Prairie provinces	Province of residence (1 = Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, 0 = other)	27.0%
British Columbia	Province of residence (1 = British Columbia, 0 = other)	14.0%
Total violence	Total number of different incidents experienced	1.12
Sexual harassment		1.47
Inappropriate comments	"Has a man you knew ever made you uncomfortable by making inappropriate comments about your body or sex life?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	26.3%
Stood too close	"Has a man you knew ever leaned over you unnecessarily, got too close, or cornered you?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	35.7%
Asked for date	"Has a man you knew ever made you uncomfortable by repeatedly asking you for a date and would not take no for an answer?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	26.0%
Threatened job	"Has a man you knew ever hinted that you could lose your job, or that your job situation might be hurt, if you did not have a sexual relationship with him?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	4.7%
Total nonstranger sexual harassment	Summary of previous four items (from 0 to 4)	1.04
Obscene call	"Have you ever received an obscene phone call?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	66.0%
Followed	"Have you ever been followed by a man in a way that frightened you?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	32.0%
Unwanted attention	"Sometimes women receive unwanted attention. In this case, I mean anything that does not include touching such as catcalls, whistling, leering, or blowing kisses. Have you ever received unwanted attention from a male stranger?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	60.0%
Indecent exposure	"Has a man ever indecently exposed himself to you?" (1 = yes, 0 = no)	18.0%
Total stranger sexual harassment	Summary of previous four items (from 1 to 4)	1.77
		1.17

HARASSMENT AND PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

The second aspect of our research examines the effects of sexual harassment on perceptions of safety. Because situational variation in feelings of safety is well established (Gordon and Riger 1989; Nasar and Jones 1997; Skogan and Maxfield 1981), our measures of feelings of safety reference a number of social contexts. Respondents were asked how worried they were while walking alone in their area after dark, using public transportation after dark, walking alone to a car in a parking garage, and home alone at night.³ Response categories for all four variables include "not at all worried," "somewhat worried," and "very worried." These items are similar to those found in other national surveys (i.e., the British Crime Survey and the Canadian General Social Survey). Responses were coded such that higher values indicate higher perceived safety. Importantly, questions about feelings of safety were asked *prior* to questions about sexual harassment to prevent bias associated with question ordering.⁴

While we are aware of the considerable amount of methodological arguments against such measures (Garofalo 1979; Ferraro and LaGrange 1987; Warr 1984), we consider them adequate for our purposes. Although contemporary work has focused on the distinction between perceived risk and fear of specific types of victimization (Ferraro 1995; Warr 1984), our concern is the more general issue of feelings of safety in specific social environments rather than the more specific issue of the emotional reaction of fear.⁵

Because previous work demonstrates the influence of basic demographic and ecological characteristics on fear of crime, our analyses include a number of control variables. These include main activity, marital status, age, education, and personal and household income. We also include ecological measures indicating urban residence and the regions of the country in which respondents live. Because rates of crime and violence vary by region and metropolitan location, these variables help control for differences in objective risk of victimization.

Because some research indicates that perceptions of safety are influenced by the degree to which one feels able to fend off an attacker, we further include self-perceived health and a variable indicating whether the respondent is limited by some physical disability. We also include a measure of the total number of different physical and sexual victimization incidents experienced by the respondent.⁶ Most important, we include measures indicating the total number of different types of stranger and nonstranger harassment experienced by the respondent. Descriptions and descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1.

ESTIMATION PROCEDURE

Because each of the perception of safety measures is an ordered polytomy that ranges from one to three, we estimate the effects of our predictor variables using cumulative logistic regression. For an outcome variable that has c categories, logits of the cumulative probabilities can be formed by treating the response as a binary by combining the first j categories and the remaining $(c - j)$ categories. A model that simultaneously describes all cumulative logits is

$$\text{logit}[P(Y \leq j)] = \alpha_j + \beta X, j = 1, \dots, c - 1.$$

As j increases (i.e., the categories increase), the alpha parameters increase to reflect the increase in the logits as additional probabilities are added to the numerator, whereas the beta parameter describes the effect of the given predictor X (Long 1997).⁷

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the unstandardized logit coefficients and fully standardized coefficients for all determinants of perceptions of safety. Consistent with our argument, sexual harassment does not have a generic effect on perceptions of safety. Of the four possible effects for nonstranger harassment, only one is statistically significant: Respondents who had been sexually harassed by men known to them felt less safe while walking alone in parking garages. The absence of more consistent effects for nonstranger sexual harassment are contrary to much speculation (Griffin 1971; Junger 1987; Stanko 1995) and cast doubt on the argument that perceptions of safety among women are generically influenced by sexual harassment.

In contrast, stranger harassment has strong negative effects across all four contexts. For women who experienced sexual harassment from strangers, each additional type of harassment experienced decreased the odds of feeling safe by between 17 percent ($e^{-.184} = .83$) and 23 percent ($e^{-.264} = .77$). In general, the more extensive and varied the respondent's experiences with stranger harassment, the less safe she feels in a variety of social contexts.

Comparatively, the effects of stranger sexual harassment are large. Stranger harassment consistently exhibits the strongest effects on perceptions of safety of any variable in our models. Fully standardized coefficients show the effects of stranger harassment to be typically four to five times as

TABLE 2: Unstandardized and Fully Standardized Logit Coefficients for Harassment and Other Determinants Regressed on Perceptions of Safety, 1993
Violence against Women Survey

Variable	Perceptions of Safety Measures					
	Walking Alone at Night		Using Public Transportation at Night		Walking Alone in a Parking Garage	
	β	β^s	β	β^s	β	β^s
Demographic						
Age	.028 (.009)	.043**	.025 (.013)	.039	.009 (.011)	.113**
Employed	.080 (.053)	.020	.043 (.072)	.011	.017 (.064)	.008
In school	-.041 (.051)	-.010	-.052 (.067)	-.013	-.013 (.058)	-.007
Married	-.046 (.066)	-.009	-.179 (.080)	-.048	-.140 (.079)	-.063**
Divorced/separated	-.069 (.086)	-.010	-.241 (.110)	-.041*	-.097 (.104)	-.023
Widowed	-.275 (.124)	-.030*	-.154 (.168)	-.017	.258 (.155)	-.058**
Lives alone	.104 (.079)	.018	.107 (.099)	.021	.242 (.096)	.091**
Education	.084 (.022)	.047**	.008 (.031)	.005	-.018 (.026)	.058**
Personal income	.002 (.012)	.003	.017 (.018)	.021	.001 (.014)	.012
Household income	.045 (.012)	.061**	-.064 (.016)	-.080**	-.026 (.015)	.012

Health	.057 (.023)	.031*	.023 (.031)	.013	-.001 (.027)	-.001	-.001	.139 (.022)	.077**
Disability	-.222 (.062)	-.043**	-.315 (.084)	-.062**	-.188 (.073)	-.035*	-.035*	-.126 (.059)	-.026*
Total victimization	-.008 (.017)	-.006	-.013 (.022)	-.011	-.043 (.019)	-.036*	-.036*	-.054 (.016)	-.044**
Urban	-.787 (.047)	-.200**	-.211 (.072)	-.048**	-.267 (.054)	-.066**	-.066**	-.055 (.046)	-.014
Quebec	-.118 (.066)	-.024	-.495 (.092)	-.103**	-.156 (.080)	-.031	-.031	-.262 (.066)	-.052**
Ontario	-.161 (.063)	-.035**	-.501 (.089)	-.110**	-.308 (.075)	-.069**	-.069**	-.005 (.062)	-.001
Prairie provinces	.276 (.057)	.067**	-.325 (.080)	-.079**	.092 (.068)	.023	.023	.026 (.057)	-.006
British Columbia	-.118 (.068)	-.022	-.427 (.095)	-.083**	-.147 (.080)	-.029	-.029	-.034 (.067)	-.006
Harassment									
Nonstranger	-.023 (.020)	-.015	-.042 (.028)	-.028	-.104 (.024)	-.070**	-.070**	-.043 (.020)	-.029
Stranger	-.230 (.021)	-.146**	-.264 (.029)	-.166**	-.242 (.025)	-.149**	-.149**	-.184 (.021)	-.118**
Intercept 1	-.301 (.125)		.110 (.164)		-.388 (.155)			-.080 (.123)	
Intercept 2	2.363 (.127)		2.499 (.169)		2.270 (.158)			2.436 (.128)	
Model L ²	823.803**		342.839**		473.061**			543.848**	

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses. β is the unstandardized coefficient, whereas β^s is the fully standardized coefficient.
 * $p < .01$ (one-tailed). ** $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

great as the effects of nonstranger harassment. These effects are also large in comparison to the other variables in the models. Furthermore, the stranger harassment variable effects are two to three times as large as the next largest effects in each model, with the only real exception being the effect of urban residence on fear while walking alone at night. These results suggest that stranger sexual harassment is a key determinant of perceived safety among women.

Several of the control variables also influence perceptions of safety. Urban residents and those with a disability feel less safe regardless of social context. Although less consistent, previous victimization, lower education, lower household income, and region of residence also appear to decrease feelings of safety. The remaining variables were not consistently related to perceptions of safety. While generally consistent with previous research, the variability of effects also suggests that perceptions of safety are often context specific.

DISCUSSION

While it is well established that women feel unsafe in a variety of social contexts, the social sources of such perceptions are not clearly established. This article makes two contributions to the understanding of perceptions of safety among women. First, our research documents the extensive experiences of sexual harassment among women. While the majority of women had experienced some form of harassment, stranger harassment was particularly prevalent and extensively experienced. More than 80 percent experienced some form of stranger harassment, and almost 30 percent experienced explicitly confrontational forms of harassment. Furthermore, almost 30 percent experienced three or more forms of stranger harassment. Experiences of nonstranger harassment were considerably less prevalent. In light of the abundance of research on harassment in workplaces and academic settings, stranger harassment deserves similar attention.

The greater prevalence of stranger harassment may further illuminate the causes and contexts that facilitate harassment. Traditional research on sexual harassment, which usually fails to include stranger harassment, identifies three conditions that facilitate harassment: sociocultural, organizational, and traditional sex role socialization (Gutek and Morasch 1982; Tangri, Burt, and Johnson 1982). That stranger harassment is both more common and more extensive suggests that criminological concerns, such as opportunity and guardianship, may be equally important. With the exception of obscene phone calls, stranger harassment most likely occurs in public or semipublic environments. As Gardner (1995) argues, this form of harassment is uniquely

facilitated by methods of communication in public. Even in the case of obscene phone calls, telephones link the private world with the public sphere. Because public spaces have less guardianship than private spaces and, thus, provide more opportunities for deviance (Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hindelang et al. 1978), the fact that stranger harassment is more prevalent and more extensive suggests the importance of opportunity factors.

Second, our research examined the effects of harassment on perceptions of safety. While others have suggested the influence of harassment on perceptions of safety (Griffin 1971; Junger 1987; Stanko 1995), relatively little empirical work exists. Our research examined the effects of stranger and nonstranger sexual harassment on feelings of safety in a number of social contexts. Consistent with our expectations, stranger harassment has strong effects on perceptions of safety, regardless of social context. Stranger harassment reduces feelings of safety while walking alone at night, using public transportation, walking alone in a parking garage, and while home alone at night. The magnitude of these effects indicates that stranger harassment is a key determinant of perceptions of safety among women. In contrast, nonstranger sexual harassment has much weaker and more inconsistent effects. These findings have a number of implications.

In light of women's apparently low risk of victimization relative to men, particularly for serious, stranger victimization, explanations for women's lower perceptions of safety have emphasized the role of childhood and adolescent socialization (Burt and Estep 1981; Ferraro 1996; Garofalo 1979; Sacco 1990). While we do not discount an impact of socialization in childhood and adolescence, our research demonstrates the equal importance of environmental and experiential factors. Experiences with stranger harassment are highly prevalent among women and have a large and detrimental impact on women's perceived safety. We argue that this effect stems from the unique combination of sexualized interactions with people who are substantively "unknown." Considering the influence of such experiences in explanations of women's perceptions of safety extend explanations beyond socialization arguments that dominate contemporary discussions.

Our findings also build on prior ethnographic and qualitative work on the consequences of women's experiences in public spaces. Gardner (1995), for example, extensively documents the gendered nature of social interactions involving strangers and their consequences. In particular, she demonstrates the sexualized nature of public spaces and how perceptions of gender are heightened while individual characteristics are muted. Our research augments such work by showing the wide prevalence of sexually threatening activities that are "normalized" in society and how these experiences are a key source of women's fear in public and private environments.

Our research further suggests that definitions of incivilities could be broadened beyond that currently accepted in the literature. Social incivilities are usually conceptualized in gender-neutral terms, focusing on such experiences as bad neighbors, loud noises, unsupervised teenagers, and drinking and drug use in public. Not surprisingly, women are no more likely than men to experience such problems (LaGrange et al. 1992), nor do women appear more susceptible to their effects (Box et al. 1988). Our research suggests that future research could benefit from including *gender-specific* incivilities such as stranger sexual harassment.

Our results may help to explain gender differences in fear, an issue that has been the focus of numerous discussions (Ortega and Myles 1987; Sacco 1990; Stanko 1995; Warr 1984, 1985). The argument that experiences with harassment could account for gender differences in fear seems logical considering the high prevalence of stranger harassment and its strong effects on perceptions of safety, as well as the fact that sexual and stranger harassment are essentially female experiences (Canadian Human Rights Commission 1983; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1981). Although the nature of our sample precludes us from addressing this issue, future research could include harassment items in general studies of fear of victimization.

Finally, our research has implications for contemporary public policy. While there is increased attention devoted to the potential of police to improve quality of life by policing "disorders" (Kelling and Cole 1996), it is important to recognize gender-specific and more ephemeral disorders, such as sexual harassment. Our work reveals the wide prevalence of harassment associated with strangers and public places and demonstrates the profound effect these experiences have on feelings of safety. Preventing street harassment through community policing has the potential to dramatically improve women's quality of life.

NOTES

1. The data file for the Violence Against Women Survey is Statistics Canada (1994).
2. Comparison of the sample characteristics with the 1991 census data for the 10 Canadian provinces showed only one minor difference: the Violence Against Women Survey sample has a slightly larger proportion of urban residents (70 percent vs. 63 percent). This should not bias the parameter estimates to any significant degree.
3. An examination of the correlations between the different fear items also indicates the situational character of perceived safety. The strongest correlation was a moderate .48 between perceived safety while walking alone at night and perceived safety while waiting for or using public transportation. None of the other correlations exceeded .35, and most were less than .25.
4. The frequency distributions of these items show the importance of social context in determining perceptions of safety. Respondents clearly felt safest in their homes: more than 60 percent of respondents were not at all worried while home alone at night, 34 percent felt somewhat

worried, and just more than 5 percent felt very worried in this context. While walking alone at night, slightly more than 38 percent of respondents were not at all worried, 50 percent felt somewhat worried, and 11 percent were very worried. Interestingly, perceptions of safety were lowest in the contexts of public transportation and using parking garages. In the former context, only 24 percent of respondents were not at all worried whereas 51 percent felt somewhat worried. For perceptions of safety in a parking garage, 18 percent of the sample reported feeling very worried whereas 55 percent felt somewhat worried. In both of these latter contexts, more than one-quarter of respondents typically felt very worried.

5. Respondents who reported that they never engaged in the activity described in each of the perception of safety items were not included in the analyses. A number of sensitivity checks examined the degree to which our results were influenced by excluding these respondents. In all cases, the results were substantively similar and are available upon request from the first author.

6. The sexual victimization included in this measure conforms to legal categories of sexual assault in the Canadian Criminal Code and explicitly excludes sexual harassment.

7. A test of the proportional odds assumption showed that the slopes were substantively parallel (cf. Long 1997).

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