

Gender-Based Violence: Sextortion the Targeting of Women and Vulnerable Individuals

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There are many topics where one can explore the various ways sexual acts and explicit imagery are consumed or produced in a violent, coercive, or malicious manner. Some of which are more prevalent than others in today's modern and globalized society, which is most likely due to the widely adopted use of technology. Sextortion refers to the threat of nonconsensual distribution of sexually explicit images to coerce targets into agreeing with other demands (Wolak et al., 2018). This paper will focus on sextortion, the groups that are targeted by such malicious acts, and the devastating impacts it can have on survivors of such experiences. Perpetrators of acts such as sextortion often target vulnerable groups of people and can cause great amounts of distress for the individuals they victimize. For the targets this can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and in some cases even result in suicide. Thus, sextortion can be considered a form of sexual based violence which has greatly damaging impacts on the individuals who are targets and are often vulnerable to begin with. A review of research will highlight and provide insight into the common targets and gender of sexual-based violence such as sextortion and the impacts it can have on the well-being of the targets of such incidents.

Gender and Sexual Based Violence

Gender based violence is a recognized human rights problem by both the United Nations and Canada. It is known to impact both genders and has been a longstanding issue within Canada and across the world.

Gender Based Violence

The Canadian government defines gender-based violence as; violence committed against someone based on the individuals perceived gender, gender expression, or gender identity (Cotter & Savage, 2019). The Canadian Government distinguishes between five dimensions of gender-based violence and recognizes that gender-based violence can take on many forms. These five dimensions include unwanted sexual behaviour in public, unwanted sexual behaviour in the workplace, unwanted sexual behaviour online, sexual assault, and physical assault (Cotter & Savage,

2019). Some critics argue that such cases of violence are not being perpetuated based on gender because discrimination against men and boys also occurs. One article points out that other factors such as age, ethnicity, and sexuality also play an important role and reducing causes for experiencing violence to sex is misleading (Benatar, 2012). According to 2018 Canadian statistics, Gender-based violence disproportionately affects women. 33% of women experienced unwanted sexual behaviour in public spaces and only 13% of men comparatively experienced such unwanted behaviours (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Another example of how women are more often targets can be seen in statistics regarding criminal victimization where it has been found that women are nearly twice as likely to be violently targeted than men (Cotter, 2021). Cotter and Savage (2019) found age and sexual orientation to be two of the main predictors to experiencing unwanted behaviour in public for both men and women. They highlight how young women and bisexual women experienced the highest incidences of unwanted behaviour when compared to women overall at 61% and 76% respectively. For men they found that gay men and bisexual men experience unwanted sexual behaviour at three times the rate heterosexual men do (40% compared to 12%). Thus, critics are correct when they say that there are other factors at play regarding gender-based violence. However, when looking at statistics that account (and compare) for differences in sexuality, age, and ethnicity it is evident that women in all categories are disproportionately targeted compared to men within the same category (age, sexuality, etc.). It is evident that gender-based violence impacts and is a concern for both genders. However, it occurs much more frequently to women and dimensions of sexual orientation and age also greatly impact the likelihood of being a target thus, making it gender based. Vulnerable populations such as sexual minorities (LGBTQ2S+) and youth (aged 15-24) tend to be the preferred targets of the various forms of gender-based violence for both females and males.

Sexual Based Violence

In many developed countries such as Canada women have a basic reproductive and sexual right to a satisfactory sex life which includes being free of coercion, violence, risk of unwanted pregnancies, or sexually transmitted infections (Tavara, 2006). However, in recent years there have been various attempts to reduce the autonomy over women's reproductive rights such as the right to have an abortion. Anti-abortion movements have come back into the spotlight in recent years, largely in North America, and have resulted in restricted access to abortion services in some areas.

These anti abortion movements and, in some cases, restrictions regarding reproductive rights can be argued to be a form of sexual-based violence. Sexual-based violence is defined as an extreme form of gender-based violence and is often accompanied by other forms of violence, infringing on the basic sexual and reproductive rights of women. Of the forms of sexual violence against women some of the most severe (and more researched) forms are sexual abuse, rape, trafficking, forced prostitution, and sex-selective abortions. Perpetrators of such sexual-based violence may be spouses, friends, family members, neighbours, or men in powerful positions (Tavara, 2006). As sexual-based violence is seen as an extreme form of gender-based violence it is not surprising that women, especially young women and those of sexual minorities, are disproportionately impacted (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Some characteristics that were common among targets of sexual-based violence include being a female, being young, living alone (or with one parent or with a stepparent), drug/alcohol consumption, history of abuse (sexual, physical, or oppression), and socio-economic status (Tavara, 2006). The work also notes that data from police and health services tend to show perpetrators as someone unknown to the target. The article then provides conflicting evidence through population-based surveys which indicated perpetrators are more often someone known to the individual such as a member or friend of the family, or another person known to the target (Tavara, 2006). One glaring issue echoed through research in this area is that of underreporting.

Underreporting

Sexual based violence has become such a pervasive issue in our modern society that some have begun to call it a pandemic acknowledging the severe underreporting of such incidents. One study found that approximately only 6% of sexual assaults and as little as 1% of date rapes get reported to police and noted how other studies echo very close to the same results (8% of all sexual assault cases being reported within Canada) (Kelly & Stermac, 2008). The same study also highlighted reasons for such high incidences of underreporting including rape myth acceptance, criminal justice systems response to sexual assault, and community resources and responses to targets. Rape myth acceptance considers the general cultural and societal views surrounding sexual assault, specifically the acceptance of false beliefs about rape and targets of rape. Some examples of these myths include beliefs that only certain kinds of women get raped, that such women put themselves in dangerous situations, and that men cannot control their sexual urges (Kelly & Stermac, 2008).

With regards to the criminal justice systems' response to sexual assault it is acknowledged that underreporting often occurs due to additional trauma resulting from interaction with law enforcement. These interactions may include screening techniques used by police and discrimination against specific types of targets. Authorities are less likely to pursue an investigation depending on the target or targets group membership (prostitution, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) (Kelly & Stermac, 2008). Kelly and Stermac (2008) outline how people who are targets of rape are often hesitant to disclose such information in part due to the lack of available community resources and supports. It was also found that clinical service providers are susceptible to rape myth acceptance as well and may demonstrate bias in their treatments of rape targets. Finally, and possibly most concerning is how a qualitative study identified how many targets of rape experienced secondary targeting at the hands of both medical professionals and police (Kelly & Stermac, 2008). It is evident that there is an issue in Canadian society regarding gender and sexual-based violence in which women are disproportionately targeted and harmed. There is a glaring issue with underreporting which indicates that this issue is likely much more prevalent than we are led to believe for both men and women. With such rampant levels of sexual misconduct and with societal factors such as acceptance of rape myths intertwining with responses from the justice systems, it is hard to argue that women are not overly represented as targets of sexual-based violence.

Sextortion

With the growing adoption of technology and internet usage there also comes new concerns around which society and youth must navigate. One study found that 95% of youth in the United States have access to a smartphone and access is being acquired at younger ages (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). With youth gaining increased access to the internet and cell phones at younger ages there comes with it new and modern issues which require research and examination. Some of these modern issues are sexting, nonconsensual pornography, revenge porn, and sextortion (Wolak et al., 2018). Revenge porn includes the malicious nonconsensual distribution of sexually explicit media often with the intent of inducing feelings of pain, shame, or guilt on the target (may include sextortion). Finally, as defined earlier, sextortion (the combination of the terms sexual and extortion) involves the threat of nonconsensual distribution of sexually explicit material with an intent to coerce the target into agreeing to the perpetrators' demands. There are three important distinctions between cyber sextortion and similar problems, which are how the target and offender may

never share physical space, offender possessing images of the target, and the target being forced into acts (O'Malley & Holt, 2020). According to research done with high school students in the United States approximately 5% of students reported being a target of sextortion (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). The article also found that non-heterosexuals were significantly more likely to be a target and that males were significantly more likely to experience sextortion overall (compared to females) in the form of both a perpetrator and target. The prevalence of sextortion in youth is echoed in other research such as the work done by Kopecký (2017) regarding the online sextortion of Czech children. Within his research Kopecký found that 6-8% of children between 2013 and 2015 reported serious cases of blackmail (sextortion). However, this study provides conflicting evidence to that of Patchin and Hinduja's as it found that girls were more often the targets of sextortion. Regarding the prevalence of sextortion in genders, other studies found that girls and women were disproportionality targeted, such as the work of Feigenblatt (2020). Some studies found that some accounts of sextortion suggest cooccurrence with teen dating violence with prevalence rates as high as 21% for girls and 10% for boys (Wolak et al., 2018). According to Statistics Canada incidents of online sexual offences against children have increased and are on an upward trend and highlights how 73% of such offences targeted girls aged 12 to 17 (Ibrahim, 2022). It is evident that youth, females, and sexual minorities are disproportionately represented as targets of sexploitation. With youth having increased access to internet and media services issues such as sextortion continue to rise in prevalence as a form of sexual and youth-based violence. Some critics may argue that the youth are at fault for agreeing to produce or sending explicit media on the internet in the first place, or that the parents are at fault for not monitoring their children's internet usage or educating them on internet safety. Unfortunately, such critiques do not consider other factors such as socioeconomic status (ability / time to monitor), parental internet fluency levels, the fact that these are emerging and changing issues, and the level of internet safety related education in public schools. Research suggests that K-12 comprehensive sexuality education has the potential to prevent emergence of risk factors (such as acceptance of rape myths, victim blaming, and hostility towards women) associated with sexual-based violence. This further suggests that ideologies and notions that tend to put the blame on the target are considered risk factors for sexual-based violence and that community level education can be a preventive measure starting with reframing such ways of thinking.

Perpetrators

Though there is conflicting evidence and agreement on whether perpetrators are known or unknown to the targets of sextortion, some research gives insight into the common themes regarding perpetrators. O'Malley and Holt (2020) highlight how perpetrators differ regarding target preference, types of demands, possible motivations, and methods employed to commit offences. Four main themes emerged within their findings including minor-focused offenders, cybercrime offenders, intimacy violent offenders, and transnational offenders. Minor-focused offenders made up most cases (52%) with an average target age of 14 years (O'Malley & Holt, 2020). Demands among minor-focused offenders were commonly requesting production of more sexually explicit media and noted that 88% of perpetrators used some form of grooming to pressure minors. O'Malley and Holt (2020) also noted that the primary motivation appeared to be sexual interest in minors and the target preference was females (71%).

Impacts

Sextortion is considered an extreme form of cyber abuse. This is highlighted though evidence provided, which can also present the argument sextortion is an also an extreme form of gender-based violence. Unfortunately, sextortion is a growing concern that has real implications for the wellbeing of targets and is likely occurring much more frequently than believed due to issues surrounding underreporting. Minors who are targeted fear both punishment by their parents and the social consequences such as social ostracization which would follow the release of their explicit media (Hong et al., 2020). Some common themes of helplessness, fear, shame, humiliation, self-blame, depression and fear were identified in targets (Nilsson et al., 2019). In some of the most severe cases individuals resorted to suicide as was the case of a 15-year-old girl in Canada who had been experiencing sextortion since she was 12 (Kopecký, 2017) and a 17-year-old boy from Scotland (Nilsson et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Rapid advancements in technology have allowed the widespread adoption of internet use beginning at an earlier age and this has brought forth modernized issues and concerns such as sextortion. Sextortion, like many other forms of violence, seems to be rooted based on sex and gender as it disproportionately targets young females and other young sexual minorities who are

already vulnerable. Within gender and sexual-based violence (including sextortion) there is an issue regarding the vast underreporting of such instances which has been argued to be caused by the acceptance of rape myths and the resulting responses, resources, and supports that a target may receive from the criminal justice system, police, and society. The impacts on the targets of sextortion are profound and can include feelings of shame, humiliation, helplessness, anxiety, and depression and in some cases can result in suicide. However, there may be ways to combat and potentially reduce instances of such horrible and damaging acts of gender-based violence such as the implementation of more comprehensive and modern sexuality education to combat ways of thinking that result in putting blame on the target.

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