

**Forum:** United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

**Issue:** Measures to improve public safety and transport options for women

**Name:** Victoria Kurakata

**Position:** Deputy Chair - UN Women

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## **Introduction:**

On March 3rd, 2021, in South London, Sarah Everard, a 33-year old woman, was kidnapped by a police officer while walking home at night. Over the course of the evening, she was brutally raped and strangled to death. Everard's tragic story is one of many; globally, instances of abduction disproportionately affect women, with approximately 78% of abductees being women. This phenomenon is not limited to a particular country or region, but is almost ubiquitous around the world. Threats to women's safety are not limited to extreme occasions such as abduction and murder, but can also include things such as sexual assault, catcalling, and other forms of harassment. Notably, women are frequently subject to instances of sexual harassment in public places - for example, with 75% of women in the UK claiming to be victims of street harassment. Fears from facing harassment or violence also impact women, with four out of five UK women feeling unsafe walking alone in public spaces at night. Sexual harassment and violence can also arise within public transport systems, such as buses or trains. Instances of nonconsensual sexual assault in these situations is especially common, and the crowded nature of such locations makes it easy for perpetrators to commit acts of unwanted sexual contact without facing repercussions. Given the physical, emotional, and psychological harms that can arise from facing violence or harassment in public spaces, the threats posed to women's safety in public spaces is an issue that ought to be addressed.

## Definition of Key Terms:

1. **Public transport:** Buses, trains, and other forms of transport that are available to the public
2. **Public safety:** The welfare and protection of the general public.
3. **Sexual harassment:** Offensive, unwanted and unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature.
4. **Catcalling:** An act of sexual harassment: the act of shouting harassing and often sexually suggestive, threatening, or derisive comments at someone publicly.
5. **Sexual assault:** An act in which one intentionally sexually touches another person without that person's consent, or coerces or physically forces a person to engage in a sexual act against their will. Examples include groping, rape, and other forms of unwanted sexual contact.
6. **Bystander effect:** a social psychological theory that states that individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when there are other people present.

## Background Information

### Overview of gendered violence

The phenomena of gendered violence and harassment are ubiquitous: globally, 97% of women are surveyed to have experienced some form of sexual assault or harassment in their lifetime. Sexual violence and harassment can manifest in a variety of ways, but the trait commonly shared is that the actions are unwanted by the receiver and hence do not involve consent. There are also severe harms that accrue as a result of gendered violence - physical harms may be caused by unwanted physical contact, and mental and emotional harms can occur even when an act does not involve anything physical. This can be in the form of conditions such as depression and anxiety, as well as a general feeling of helplessness and emotional distress. 75% of all harassment victims are estimated to face at least one physical or emotional harm as a result of facing harassment.

## **Barriers to preventing and combating gendered violence**

### ***Legal barriers***

Perhaps the most significant barrier to preventing and combating sexual harassment and violence is the legal system. Firstly, instances of sexual harassment are not explicitly recognized as crimes in many places: for example, in the United States, sexual harassment is an act which can only hold individuals liable if it takes place in a workplace. Given that a significant portion of harassment takes place in public locations, such legislation is ineffective at combating the full scope of harassment. Moreover, in instances where certain acts are criminal, such as acts of outright violence or sexual contact, the burdens of proof required for convictions are often too high for prosecutors to fulfill. In the United States, the burden required for conviction is proof that a crime occurred “beyond a reasonable doubt,” which places the onus on the prosecution to provide evidence. Although this burden has traditionally been used to effectively prevent innocent individuals from being convicted, it has negative consequences for convicting the guilty in instances of gendered violence. Unfortunately, due to lack of witness testimony or footage as evidence, accusations of assault often lead to “he said, she said” situations, in which accused individuals simply deny that any wrongdoing has occurred. Resolving this barrier is not as simple as lowering the burdens of proof - doing so may increase the likelihood of innocent individuals being deemed guilty. Rather, the legal system must develop more effective ways of obtaining evidence to increase the likelihood of guilty individuals being punished. Finally, even in the instances where sufficient evidence has been provided, judges are reluctant to hand out long sentences, even for serious crimes. For example, in Singapore, 23-year-old Terence Siow Kai Yuan was only handed probation for molesting a woman on public transport, as the judge believed that due to his good grades and academic potential, a harsher sentence would inhibit his future successes. The consideration of such factors in determining punishments is another barrier that inhibits the administration of justice for victims of harassment or violence.

### ***Social barriers***

Social barriers can prevent victims from having their voices heard or believed. In many parts of the world, particularly in regions where there exists a significant socioeconomic disparity between men and women, there is a tendency to pass blame on victims of harassment - for

example, by criticizing them for their decisions to wear low-cut clothing or to not walk with a friend or partner. Placing the burden on women to correct their behaviors in order to prevent assault, rather than taking actions to hold perpetrators accountable, is a flaw which prevents gendered violence from being reduced to the largest extent possible. Moreover, social stigma against speaking out exists in many parts of the world, and many women who do share their stories are often shunned and silenced. This perpetuates a cycle where fewer and fewer women feel comfortable speaking out due to the way in which women who do choose to speak up are treated. In some parts of the world, particularly with the #MeToo movement, the prevalence of this stigma has diminished, but it is still present in many parts of the world. A final social barrier is the tendency of some societies to tolerate acts of harassment and dismiss it as an instance of “boys being boys,” which further enables such acts to continue.

### ***Bystanders***

The inaction taken by bystanders is also a significant barrier towards combating gendered violence. Given that the main issue at hand is harassment and violence in public spaces, the actions taken by fellow bystanders is critical. Although bystanders will almost always be present to some extent, most are reluctant to take action. This reluctance may occur for various reasons - being unsure of which course of action to take, fear of retaliation, or simply not viewing instances of harassment as something serious. This is a perfect example of the phenomenon of the bystander effect. When there are large numbers of people in an area, paradoxically, there is a lower chance that someone will take action. This is because people feel less compelled to act due to the assumption that someone else will take action. When bystanders fail to take action, they inadvertently allow such behavior to continue uncorrected, as there is no longer any potential of facing retaliation or being stopped.

## **Current Situation**

### **Prevalence of gendered violence in various parts of the world**

Gendered violence exists, to some extent, in every part of the world. However, there exists a general correlation between the prevalence of gendered violence in a country and the socioeconomic standing of women in that country. In countries where women are able to enjoy equality under the law and have a similar or equal socioeconomic status to that of men, gendered violence still exists, albeit to a lower extent. Meanwhile, in countries with less

progressive views on women's rights and significant socioeconomic disparities between men and women, gendered violence is much more frequent. In the UK, 64% of women have faced sexual harassment in public, while this number is much higher in Pakistan (96%).

### **Progress towards combating gendered violence**

Gendered violence remains a pervasive issue today, but recent decades have seen significant progress in combating this issue. There are primarily two reasons for this trend: social changes and technological changes. Social changes, such as the #MeToo movement, a movement which involved victims of sexual assault sharing their stories, has destigmatised the act of speaking out. As gendered violence becomes less socially acceptable and speaking out becomes more socially acceptable, women can both face less violence and feel more comfortable speaking up. Technological changes, such as cameras that can record instances of violence and apps that can be used to track down women who are abducted, can be used as a means to fight gendered violence. These two factors have contributed to substantial progress in fighting the issue of gendered violence.

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

### **UN Women**

UN Women, the main UN entity responsible for advocating for the welfare and equality of women, is opposed to all forms of violence, assault, and harassment against women. However, most of its work is centered on other aspects of women's rights, such as economic empowerment and placing women in higher positions of power. Hence, its actions to stop public harassment and violence have been quite limited.

### **Colombia**

Bogota, Colombia, one of the most affected cities of gender based violence has become the focus of numerous reports concerning women's safety. According to a survey conducted by Lina Marcela Quinones, a postgraduate from the London School of Economics and Political Science, 85% out of 1000 women reported to have suffered sexual harassment while traveling in the city across all transport modes, of which only 10% were able to report it to authorities. Even with developments by the Colombian congress and Supreme Court of Justice, the legal system of the country still has a long way to go,

unfortunately for now there is no clear definition for what behaviour constitutes sexual harassment. But Colombia is one of many developing nations who face such an issue. Such countries face challenges with investing into bringing down the level of gender based inequality as administrations and constitutions in themselves have to go through drastic developments.

## UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

While the UN has affirmed its support for gender equality, women's rights, and ending violence against women, it has taken little concrete action to stopping sexual violence in public locations. Most of the UN's work towards combating sexual violence primarily involves the context of war or conflict, not streets and public areas. Additionally, the nature of gendered violence makes it difficult for the UN, as an international body, to take substantial action, since gendered violence involves interactions on the individual scale rather than on the scale of states or regional bodies.

- Sustainable Development Goals, #5 - Gender Equality - 1 January 2016
- Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls : sexual harassment, December 17 2018 (A/RES/73/148)
  - This resolution, the first to target sexual harassment, urges member states to take action against harassment and “strongly condemns all forms of violence against all women and girls, including sexual harassment” and “urges States to take effective action to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment against women”
- Strengthening crime prevention and criminal justice responses to violence against women, 21 December 2010, (A/RES/65/228)
  - This resolution “urges Member States to end impunity for violence against women by investigating, prosecuting with due process and punishing all perpetrators” and “calls upon Member States to advance effective crime prevention and criminal justice strategies that address violence against women”

## Possible Solutions

The issue of public safety for women is one that is quite nuanced and involves several different groups: women, perpetrators, bystanders, and law enforcement. Hence, an effective

solution is one which seeks to tackle all aspects of the problem and approaches the issue from multiple angles.

Firstly, changes in urban planning and city design can be a starting point for making cities safer for women. Installing CCTV cameras in public locations can be used to help identify perpetrators when crimes occur, and moreover, the mere presence of a security camera may serve as a useful deterrent for discouraging perpetrators from committing acts of violence or harassment in the first place. However, the widespread use of CCTV cameras also raises concerns about privacy, and hence, it is important to strike a balance between strengthening safety and respecting privacy. Adding street lamps and other forms of lighting, especially in poorly lit areas, can make one's surroundings more visible and allow onlookers from buildings and cars to observe any instances of violence or harassment. Finally, arranging buildings in ways that minimize the presence of dark, empty alleys, where harassment is more likely to occur, can minimize the risk of harassment or violence occurring.

A second angle to approach the issue is through increasing the efficacy of law enforcement. By increasing the presence of police on patrol in high-crime areas, perpetrators may feel less urge to harass or act violently towards women due to the deterrence created by the presence of police. Increased police presence in areas of high crime may also make it easier for women who feel unsafe or who have faced harassment to approach officers for safety or to report a crime. Introducing greater accountability mechanisms within systems of law enforcement can be crucial. In many cases, such as the case of Sarah Everard, law enforcement officers may perpetuate or be complicit in violence or harassment, and holding such officers accountable is essential. Law enforcement agencies can make it easier for victims to report crimes by creating accessible legal avenues through which victims can file complaints and report cases of harassment or violence. Finally, law enforcement agencies can strengthen their ability to gather evidence for prosecution by using better methods to obtain evidence of crimes, such as identifying witnesses or using security footage.

It is worth noting, however, that law enforcement and the legal system have limited control over their ability to eradicate street violence against women. Combating the issue of street violence requires action taken on the individual level - namely towards perpetrators, bystanders, and potential victims.

Firstly, early access to education on harassment and violence against women can mitigate the frequency of such crimes being committed. This can include changes in school curriculums to educate students about the significant harms faced by victims of harassment and violence as well as educating students about the legal avenues available to them for seeking redress and justice. Moreover, creating policies that prohibit sexual harassment and violence in schools and the workplace can teach individuals early on to not tolerate acts of harassment or violence. Schools and workplaces can also conduct seminars or workshops on dealing with harassment or violence as a bystander and make bystanders feel more comfortable with intervening in an unsafe situation. Given that harassment and violence often occur in public, with bystanders to observe the situation, an increased tendency for bystanders to intervene could help defuse violent situations and mitigate severe harm.

The issue of effectively fighting sexual harassment and violence is one that ought to target the root cause: perpetrators and other individuals that are complicit in or condone such behaviour. However, given that harassment and violence are issues embedded deeply within society, it is likely an issue that will not be resolved quickly. Given this, providing women with various means of protecting themselves from harassment can provide a short-term solution, although it does not directly address the main causes of harassment and violence. To begin with, advising women to take various precautions whilst in public can reduce their chances of becoming victims. Walking in well-lit areas, walking with another individual, taking cabs, carrying pepper spray, informing others of one's whereabouts, or learning self-defense skills may all minimize the risks and harms that women may face as a result of harassment or violence. Technology to fight against harassment and violence also exists today and has the potential of being widely adapted: for example, the app Noonlight allows users to input information regarding their planned whereabouts and journey home, and if the user is found to have deviated from their expected route or not reached their planned destination, friends and family members are informed. Other apps such as Night Light guide users on routes that travel through well-lit areas, so that individuals can avoid having to walk in extremely dark settings.

Measures to improve the safety of women on public transport systems (trains, buses) are similar but vary slightly. In line with having more law enforcement officers on duty, stationing officers near stations or perhaps in trains/buses themselves may create deterrence and give

victims greater opportunity to speak up. Furthermore, in countries such as Japan, many rail companies designate specific sections of a train exclusively for women. Given that the majority of harassment against women is committed by men, having train cars with only women would significantly mitigate the risk of facing harassment.

## **Bibliography**

### **Useful Links**

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