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Special Issue

Family Cultural Norms Sustaining Violence against Women

Edited by

Dr. Michaela Rogers and Dr. Vera Lomazzi



<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020101>



Article

# An Analysis of Responses to Sexual Assault against Women in Public Space: Practical Gender Needs or Strategic Gender Interests?

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on sexual violence and the learned fear of rape experienced by women in their use of public space, understood as social constructions of a system of domination. We analyze a series of data, drawn from secondary sources, on the prevalence and perception of sexual assault in public space. This data confirms that sexual assault in public spaces is a real risk and that, as such, it is perceived and experienced by the majority of women. We have also selected and presented a series of institutional initiatives aimed at preventing sexual assaults on women in public spaces at night-time. Finally, we have constructed an index to study whether the selected institutional responses respond to practical gender needs or to strategic gender interests. The article concludes that all of these initiatives have a greater impact in the area of gender needs, but they are not able to reverse the structural causes of sexual assault or to contribute to true social change.

**Keywords:** sexual violence; rape culture; learned fear; sexual assault; public space; practical gender needs and strategic gender interests



**Citation:** Silvestre Cabrera, María, Iratxe Aristegui Fradua, and Raquel Royo Prieto. 2023. An Analysis of Responses to Sexual Assault against Women in Public Space: Practical Gender Needs or Strategic Gender Interests? *Social Sciences* 12: 101. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020101>

Academic Editors: Michaela Rogers and Vera Lomazzi

Received: 30 December 2022

Revised: 4 February 2023

Accepted: 7 February 2023

Published: 14 February 2023



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## 1. Introduction

This work analyses in detail an issue we consider to be both relevant and necessary: the sexual violence experienced by most women when they use public space. Our starting point is a definition of sexual violence and learned fear as social constructions of a system of domination. We provide a series of data from secondary sources that demonstrate the prevalence of sexual assault experienced by women, and women's own perception and assessment of this situation. This reinforces our concept of learned fear as a process of socialization and as a value that is strongly internalized in the construction of gender identity. The question we want to pose in this article is whether public initiatives are able to mitigate this learned fear. To this end, we have employed the conceptual distinction between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests, using this distinction to construct an index which we have then applied to a series of institutional initiatives for the prevention of sexual assaults on women in public space. The main conclusion of our research is that the initiatives analyzed respond more to needs than to interests. Therefore, they do not challenge existing reality or disrupt gender constructs and mandates.

## 2. The Social Construction of Sexual Violence and the Fear of Rape

Gender-based violence is a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors (Heise 1998). This article focuses on sexual violence, which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (World Health Organization 2002, p. 149). To speak of sexual violence and fear of rape as social constructions means to understand them as part of a system

of domination (Brownmiller 1975; Connell 1995) in which the discourses and practices that construct gender situate women, both symbolically and materially, in positions of subordination, intersected by other axes of inequality (Amigot 2022). This “differentiation in the prestige and power of the positions of women and men” (Segato 2017, p. 118) is considered, from a feminist perspective, to be the ultimate cause of sexual violence, to the extent that it initiates and legitimizes male control—symbolically or in practice—over women (Sortzen 2011). Consequently, this violence, which is “as old as patriarchy” (Gimeno 2020, p. 9) “has become a normalized aspect of humanity activity” (Tardón 2022, p. 2).

The social patterns of devaluation and lack of recognition of the feminine and of women (Fraser 2013) translate into women’s historical construction as “bodies-of-others” and “for-others” (Basaglia 1983; Lagarde 2012, p. 244), “rapeable beings” (Lagarde 2011, p. 295), in a culture that expropriates, controls and violates women’s bodies and sexuality (Lagarde 2011, p. 279). In contrast, rape has often been considered “a sign of manliness and masculinity” (Gimeno 2020, p. 9), a naturalized component of heterosexual relationships: the submission and conquest of the sexual object (Giddens 1992). From this perspective, rape can be understood as one extreme on a continuum of “normality” that exacerbates traditional cultural models: the binary masculinity-aggression-activity and femininity-sweetness-passivity, with men conquering women—and boasting about it as a “pact” among males—while women resist (Osborne 2009, pp. 64–65). Studies such as Alkan and Tekmanlı (2021) state that there are situations that make it more likely to suffer sexual violence, such as living in rural areas, having less education and information, as well as the age of the victims. This study also mentions the profile of the victim’s partner or spouse, “it was determined that the level of education, employment status, drug use, infidelity and other variables related to the husband/partner of the women who participated in the survey affected the women’s exposure to sexual violence” (Alkan and Tekmanlı 2021, p. 1). However, when the sexual assault is committed by a stranger, these considerations lose explanatory weight.

Brownmiller (1975, p. 5) was a pioneer in signaling that rape is not an isolated act on the part of a maladjusted individual, but rather a form of “patriarchal control” that perpetuates domination by maintaining “all women in a state of fear”. Rape constitutes “a curfew for the entire collective of women” (Puleo 2005, p. 44) since, as Zabala (2008) has pointed out, many women “limit our freedom to act and restrict our movements and goings out of our own accord, in order to avoid danger, in response to attacks and the fear inculcated in us”. In this way, violence has an instrumental function: to control women’s bodies, freedom and sexual autonomy (Tardón 2022) and expression, because men receive messages about how to behave towards those women who transgress the rules (Sortzen 2011)<sup>1</sup>.

For Ahmed (2017, p. 24), violence becomes a lesson when a story or an explanation is generated. A particularly illustrative example in the Spanish context is the narrative of sexual danger in Alcácer—the forced disappearance, sexual assault and murder of three adolescent girls in the early 1990s—which was recounted as an exemplary “punishment” for an entire generation of women and as a control mechanism to stop the feminist movement’s progress in redefining women’s rights and bodies (Barjola 2018, pp. 67, 273). To this end, the story channeled the enormous impact of the crime in order to focus attention on the aspect of terror, obscuring its causes and highlighting the transgressive conduct of the teenage girls—going out at night or hitchhiking—as a possible explanation for what had happened to them, making them responsible for it and removing the guilt of their attackers. The story of sexual danger that follows sexual assaults on women constitutes a warning to them, reinforcing the role of the male protector and of male power by making visible the privilege society grants to men over “the public body of women, to which anyone, from any position, has access” (Barjola 2018, pp. 273–4).

The myths and beliefs that encourage male sexual violence are part of “rape culture”, a form of “symbolic violence” which is often made invisible (Bourdieu 2000, pp. 49, 51) and which justifies and normalizes rape and other kinds of sexual assault. Blaming the rape victim is, for Tardón (2022, p. 3), the most persistent myth about sexual violence, a

breeding ground for “patriarchal doubt” that springs to the defense of the attackers. The very “myth of rape” prescribes that sexual assaults occur at night in faraway public places and is committed by male strangers who are poor, perverse or crazy (Lagarde 2012, p. 294). Feminist critique, in contrast, highlights that rape is often perpetrated in domestic and everyday contexts, “by men who are known to the women, family members and partners, and can take place in broad daylight” (Sortzen 2011, p. 40).

“One way or another, all women, from the time we are conscious, have grown up with the latent fear of being raped” (Tardón 2022). This is part of gender socialization (Monroy 2017) and patriarchal domination, which is not based fundamentally on power, but uses violence as an instrument of constant intimidation (Millett 1995). As Ahmed explains:

When you sense the world out there as a danger, it is your relation to your own body that changes: you become more cautious, timid (. . .) You are taught or told to be careful: to become full of care as to become anxious about the potential to become broken (. . .) To become a girl is to expect such advances, to modify your behavior in accordance; to become a girl as being wary of being in public space; becoming wary of being at all (Ahmed 2017, pp. 24–26).

“Never the same as them, with our women’s bodies. Never safe, never equal. We belong to the gender of fear, of humiliation” (Despentes 2010, p. 32). As women, we are educated in and live in fear of men, and in the belief that they are all physically stronger than we are (Lagarde 2012, p. 287). In the collective imagination, rape is presented as a terrifying idea and “the message of defencelessness generates a fear that is paralyzing because of the impossibility of harming the attacker” (Sortzen 2011, p. 39; Despentes 2010). The story of fear is transmitted across generations and gives young women “a vulnerability at odds with the discourse that recognizes and emphasizes their right to be equal with young men” (Sortzen 2011, p. 56). In other words, it constitutes a representation of the making of women as inferior and as objects, women’s inferiorization, objectualization and lack of representation (Osborne 2009, p. 59), at the same time that it makes them responsible for the mechanisms of control, detection and rape prevention (Sortzen 2011, p. 69).

Barjola (2018, p. 276) understands representations of sexual danger as systemic strategies, designed not only to control women’s bodies and attitudes, but also to reproduce and sustain sexual violence. In this scenario, from a feminist perspective, there have been proposals stressing different forms of women’s *agency* (Esteban 2004) and the *reappropriation* of their bodies (Lagarde 2012, p. 244): from feminist self-defense as a political tool of empowerment—aimed at making women active agents, generating new attitudes towards fear and reducing the feeling of powerlessness that turns them into victims (Sortzen 2011)—to the redistribution of violence and fear proposed by queer theory in order to destabilize the rape script<sup>2</sup> (Marcus 1992), passing through the creation of *counter-representations of sexual danger* which can change behavior “by proposing other meanings from which to understand and locate oneself in the face of sexual violence<sup>3</sup>” (Barjola 2018, p. 276).

### 3. The Prevalence and Perception of Sexual Violence

It is important to note that we cannot know the exact magnitude of acts of sexual violence. Given the difficulty of defining and recording all of them, we only have access to estimates. Together with data from official police and court statistics (which are based on reported offenses, trials and sentences for sexual crimes) and surveys of victims, there is a large amount of statistical data from reports to academic publications from sociological, criminological, psychological and clinical studies, from social work and many other areas of study. Furthermore, there are more qualitative accounts, taken from self-declarations in family, clinical and school contexts or from friendships based on trust. All these sources complement the data and existing gaps in knowledge, painting as realistic a picture as possible of how and how much sexual violence exists in our society (Andrés et al. 2020).

In this section, we present some of the results on sexual violence both at an international level and as related to Spain. The data revolves around citizens’ social perception of

sexual violence, focusing principally on sexual assault against women in public spaces by people unknown to the women. These people are, in the vast majority, men.

### 3.1. The Fear of Being Victims of Sexual Assault

As many studies have shown (FRA 2014; Delegación del Gobierno para la Violencia de Género 2020; Lipinsky et al. 2022), the vast majority of women have experienced some kind of attack during their lives. Walking alone down the street, especially at night, involves a great risk for many women. Verbal or physical assaults, threats, intimidations and so on are acts of sexual violence that occur constantly and continuously all around us. In April 2019, as part of a market study, the company Wave Location Technologies put out an online survey that went viral and was completed by more than 35,000 women. Among them, 83% confirmed that “they are afraid to go home alone at night after going out for dinner or to a party with friends or family member” (Wave Location Technologies 2019).

In a study on violence against women published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in 2014, many women voiced their fear of being victims of some kind of sexual assault, both in public and in private space. The report was based on interviews with 42,000 women in the 28 member states of the European Union. Some of the results of the report demonstrated that one in five of the women interviewed (21%) had, on more than one occasion in the 12 months prior to the interview, felt worried about the possibility of being attacked physically or sexually in certain public spaces, especially by male strangers. Because of this fear, many of the women, especially young women, indicated that they tried to avoid particular places or situations, at least on occasion.

In this sense, we can see in the Table 1 that four out of ten women confirmed that they avoided going to places where there were no other people (40%); 37% indicated that they avoided walking down certain streets or through certain areas; and 14% confirmed that they tried not to go out alone. Furthermore, in the group of 28 EU member states, 8% of women confirmed that during the 12 months prior to the interview they had, at least on some occasion, carried an object with which to defend themselves.

**Table 1.** Public places or situations that women avoid, at least sometimes, out of fear of being victims of physical or sexual assault.

	Percentage (%)
Making sure they do not go out alone	14
Avoiding certain streets or areas	37
Making sure they do not go to places where there are no other people	40

Source: survey conducted by the FRA, 2014.

This table therefore reflects the high percentage of women that demonstrates some kind of fear of being attacked in public space. In contrast, as surveys of the general population regarding crime and victimization demonstrate, men’s fears of being victims of crime and the repercussions this would have on their lives tend to be lower than those of women (FRA 2014, p. 17).

### 3.2. Spaces Where Assaults Occur

In the case of Spain, a study on sexual violence conducted in 2017 by the Centre for Sociological Studies (CIS), with a sample of 2465 people over 18, obtained quite similar results in terms of the perception of the possibility of experiencing some kind of sexual assault in public space (Table 2).

**Table 2.** From your perspective, where do sexual assaults occur most frequently? (%).

	Men		Women		Total	
	First Place	Second Place	First Place	Second Place	First Place	Second Place
Home	21.1	8.5	21.1	10.6	21.6	9.6
Workplace	7.7	13.0	8.2	12.8	8.0	12.9
Schools and universities	1.2	3.6	1.0	4.4	1.1	4.0
Public spaces (streets, parks)	15.3	27.7	18.5	27.1	17.0	27.4
Public transportation	1.2	2.4	1.4	2.0	1.3	2.2
Festivals and public holiday festivities	45.5	25.2	48.1	27.7	45.5	26.5
Other places	0.9	6.7	0.9	4.2	0.9	5.4
Do not know	4.6	5.8	4.3	5.4	4.5	5.6
No response	0.2	7.2	0.5	5.9	0.3	6.5

Source: prepared by authors based on data from the CIS (2017) (study 3182).

As the data demonstrates, almost one in two women (48.1%) signaled that sexual assaults occur first and foremost during *fiestas* and public holiday festivities; in second place, more than a quarter (27%) stressed public spaces such as streets and parks. This data corresponds with the perception of men and with the surveyed population as a whole. In addition to the fear produced by assault, we can see the fear of reporting it when women do experience violence (Table 3)

**Table 3.** What do you think is the main reason that women who experience sexual assault do not denounce their attacker? What about the second most important reason?

	Men		Women		Total	
	First Place	Second Place	First Place	Second Place	First Place	Second Place
Fear of the perpetrator	61.1	14.3	58.8	13.7	59.9	14.0
Fear of not being believed	5.4	17.5	8.1	21.4	6.8	19.5
Shame	23.3	36.6	22.5	33.6	22.9	35.1
The trial process is very expensive	1.0	2.7	0.8	3.5	0.9	3.1
The trial process is very emotionally draining	1.8	6.9	2.3	6.3	2.1	6.6
Fear of being considered responsible for the attack	2.8	10.7	4.7	12.1	3.8	11.4
Not considering the assault to be something serious	1.2	2.8	1.0	2.7	1.1	2.8
Another reason	1.1	1.0	0.9	1.7	1.0	1.4
Do not know	2.3	3.9	0.9	2.0	1.5	3.0
No response	-	3.6	-	2.8	-	3.2

Source: prepared by authors based on data from the CIS (2017) (study 3182).

Thus, the data also shows that the people surveyed believe that women who have been victims of sexual assault do not denounce their perpetrators first and foremost because they are afraid of them, they feel shame or they fear they will not be believed. This perception is common among both the women and the men surveyed.

In this same study, the people surveyed replied that educational centers (in first place, 54%) and the family (in second place 22%) are the institutions that should teach people

which situations are considered to constitute sexual violence, and the procedures to follow in the case of experiencing sexual assault. Similarly, three quarters of the people surveyed (77%) were of the opinion that in order to prevent sexual violence the most important thing to do would be to educate men not to commit sexual assault, while 14.3% indicated that women need to be taught to avoid risky situations. In both these views, the women surveyed were 1 percentage point above the men (CIS 2017).

As for prevalence, according to the macro survey conducted by the Spanish Ministry of Equality in 2019, it is estimated that 1,322,052 women 16 years of age and older (6.5%) who live in Spain have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives, committed by someone with whom they do not have and have never had a couple relationship. In 99.6% of these cases, the perpetrator was a man. According to the Macro-survey on Violence against Women, 13.7% of women resident in Spain aged 16 or over have suffered sexual violence by partners, ex-partners or third parties in their lifetime. The 6.5% refers to cases of sexual violence outside the couple and that have been reported.

As shown in Table 4, these assaults occur mainly in people's homes—that of the woman, the perpetrator himself or a third person—(44%), in open spaces or public spaces such as streets, parks (32%) or in night-time leisure spaces such as clubs or bars (17.8%).

**Table 4.** Place in which sexual violence occurs, according to women who have experienced this kind of violence outside a couple relationship (%).

	Percentage (%)
A home	44.2
Open spaces (streets, parks)	32
Clubs, bars, pubs	17.8
Public transportation	8
Workplace	6.6
Education center	5.2
Other places	10.6

Source: Ministry of Equality, Spanish Government, 2019.

In the collective social imagination, places of leisure are considered an important source of male sexual violence against women, especially young women. The advice to adolescent girls and young women to be especially vigilant and to protect themselves in places of leisure (clubs, bars, public holiday celebrations, concerts, etc.) always raises this issue (Andrés et al. 2020). However, there have been few rigorous studies on this question.

Here once again (Table 5) we see that these assaults are not reported—because the attack happened when the woman was underage, out of shame or fear of not being believed or, simply, out of lack of awareness that the attack was a reportable offense.

**Table 5.** Motives for not reporting sexual violence, according to women who have experienced this kind of violence outside a couple relationship (%).

	Percentage (%)
Shame	25.9
Victim was underage	35.4
Fear of not being believed	20.8
Attack happened in the past	22.1
Fear of the perpetrator	11.8
Lack of awareness	16.4
Victim's belief that it was her fault	8.4

Source: Ministry of Equality, Spanish Government, 2019.

In the surveys described above, we observe as well mention of schools and universities as possible spaces of sexual assault against women. In a study published by [Lipinsky et al. \(2022\)](#), there was a survey between January and May of that same year, in 46 universities in 15 European countries, including three Spanish universities.

The data show that 62% of the survey respondents have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence since they started working or studying at their institution. The most prevalent form of gender-based violence was psychological violence (57%), followed by sexual harassment (31%). Similarly, as mentioned previously, violence was not reported because women were unsure whether the behavior was serious enough to report (47%); because they did not recognize the behavior as violence (31%) or because they did not think anything would happen even if they reported it (26%) ([Lipinsky et al. 2022](#)).

Finally, the data once again demonstrates the difficulty of understanding the actual prevalence of sexual violence given that, as we have demonstrated, many of the cases are not reported and never even come to light, whether out of fear of the perpetrator, shame, lack of awareness or fear of not being believed, among other reasons.

Faced with this reality, we ask ourselves whether women themselves need simply to be protected, or whether they themselves can act as active agents of change.

#### 4. Practical Gender Needs and Strategic Gender Interests

The majority of glossaries on gender include the definition and distinction between women's practical needs and strategic gender interests. The European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) presents two concise definitions in its online glossary:

Practical gender needs of women (PGNs): the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society ([EIGE 2023](#)). For example: access to basic health services, food, education, a dignified home, job, wages, etc. ([SEGIB and ENRED 2021](#), p. 18).

Strategic gender interests (SGIs): the interests identified by women as a result of their subordinate social status, and tend to challenge gender divisions of labor, power and control, and traditionally defined norms and roles. SGIs vary according to specific contexts and can include themes such as legal rights, gender violence, equal pay and women's control over their own bodies ([EIGE 2023](#)). Strategic interests can only be understood in the long term, given that they are linked to the improvement of conditions among those who are least advantaged, including women. For this reason, this requires changes both in relation to the roles assigned to women and men, and to women's and men's access to and control of resources and benefits ([AC SUR 2006](#), p. 46). Examples include: social awareness of the joint responsibility for care work or the promotion of women's economic, physical and political self-sufficiency, and so on ([SEGIB and ENRED 2021](#), p. 19); equal pay; equal roles in decision making; and the equal distribution of responsibility for housework and family care.

This concept is originally attributable to Maxine [Molyneux \(1985\)](#), who defined gender interests as those "interests that women (or men for that matter) may develop by virtue of their social positioning by gender attributes. Gender interests can be either strategic or practical, each being derived in a different way and each involving different implications for women's subjectivity. . . Practical gender interests . . . arise from the concrete positioning of women within the gender division of labor" ([Molyneux 1985](#), pp. 232–3). Practical interests derive from women's socially predetermined roles, first and foremost in the family and the local community. In contrast, strategic interests come not from women's efforts to fulfil their traditional roles but through their rising consciousness about structures of masculine domination and privileges—and an awareness that these forms of domination are social and, therefore, can be changed ([Molyneux 1985](#)). Logically, therefore, responses to practical needs tend to perpetuate gender inequalities, while a response to strategic interests challenge gender roles and, therefore, generate social change.

These categories and the distinction between them have been adopted by cooperation and development programs because they make it possible to differentiate those programs that generate social change from those that perpetuate situations of inequality. According

to Murgialday, Molyneux's conceptualization "gave rise to a new paradigm in the area of social analysis that has been shown to be a useful instrument for integrating, within a common framework, both the variety of interests that have to do with different groups of women and the interests that are common to each gender" (Murgialday 2000). The adoption of this new paradigm and its application in the area of development planning has been developed by authors such as Caroline Moser (1989) and Kate Young (1988).

Caroline Moser (1989, p. 1802) argues that, from the perspective of planning, interests can be defined as "prioritized concerns" and needs as "the means by which their concerns may be satisfied". Practical needs are defined as those that derive from women's interest in fulfilling the roles assigned to them by the gender division of labor; policies designed to satisfy these needs aim to improve the material conditions of women and their families, satisfying their requirements for housing, water, food, children's health and education, income generation and access to basic services in the context of community (Murgialday 2000). Thus, for example, the research conducted by María Cinthia Silvero Borja and Clotilde-Haidée Benítez Ruiz Díaz (Silvero Borja and Benítez Ruiz Díaz 2010) on the practical needs and strategic interests of women in a rural company in the district of Caazapá (Paraguay) consider women's access to drinking water to be a practical need and their access to socioeconomic resources on the estate a strategic interest.

Using the categories of practical needs and strategic interests, Kate Young (1988) develops two new concepts for planning from a gender perspective (Murgialday 2000): the distinction between women's condition and women's position. Condition is related to practical needs, because it refers to the material state in which women find themselves, while position is related to strategic interests, since it attends to their social and economic situation in relation to men. Young locates violence against women in the position category, thus establishing the relationship between strategic interests and male violence.

Murgialday (2000) considers the difference between condition and position to be valuable because it allows us to comprehend that, despite the improvement in women's material conditions throughout the world, this does not necessarily imply that women's social position has improved. Thus, "the Human Development Report (UNDP 2005) demonstrates that women's human capacities have developed over the past twenty years (in the areas of education and health) at the same time that the inequality between women and men in terms of economic and political opportunities persists, and has even worsened" (Murgialday 2000).

A key question in all the definitions analyzed above is the claim that only the fulfillment of strategic interests reverses situations of inequality. However, it is also important to consider that these concepts do not contradict one another but rather are complementary. For this reason, progress in the resolution of practical needs can lead to making visible and acting upon strategic interests: "practical needs and strategic interests are not contradictory issues; rather, they are complementary. The resolution of practical needs is often indispensable in the process towards the achievement of strategic interests. For this reason, responding to practical needs should not be an end in itself, but rather a change of view that leads to an evolution in women's social position" (SEGIB and ENRED 2021, p. 19). This argument legitimizes, to some extent, institutional responses and policies that address practical needs, because they could be considered a step towards the resolution of strategic interests. At the same time, they help us to understand the following classification of equality policies according to the level of impact they have on social change and the questioning of gender roles and mandates. Thus, neutral gender policies will be understood as those that aim not to question gender inequalities but rather to benefit women and men in terms of practical necessities. Specific gender policies are those that consider women as an objective group that benefits from these measures, but do not disrupt unequal gender relations. Finally, we consider redistributive gender policies to be those that try to change existing gender relations in order to make them more egalitarian, just and supportive, redistributing resources, responsibilities and power between women and men while attending, of course, to strategic interests.

#### 4.1. Violence against Women and Sexual Assault in Public Space: Practical Need or Strategic Interest?

The demand for support or protection in cases of violence against women are clear examples of practical needs, given that violence is committed against women who suffer specifically in their condition as women. Violence against women is not unconnected to the sexual division of labor or the definition of gender roles. The demand for protection can be interpreted as a material need and, therefore, as a practical gender need. Having said that, we must be aware that protection as an institutional response or policy does not tackle the root of the problem. We cannot say that it perpetuates it, but we can say that it does not have an impact on its causes.

Clara Murgialday (2000) argues that while strategic interests vary according to the cultural and socio-political context in which women and men are raised, “feminists maintain that women can come together around certain aspects associated with their gender subordination in order to find ways to change their situation”. Among the common aspects she identifies are male violence and the control of women’s sexuality. The others are male control of women’s labor and women’s restricted access to valuable economic and social resources, and to political power, as a result of the very unequal distribution of resources between genders.

In the area of violence against women and, specifically, sexual assaults against women using public space, a strategic interest should attack the root causes that explain such violence, understood as a cruel manifestation of the inequality between women and men. Strategic interest goes beyond the protection of women and should be aimed at supporting women’s empowerment and questioning learned fear, as well as the upbringing and behavior of the perpetrators of that violence. In what follows, we present a series of political and institutional responses to sexual assault against women using public space that have been applied in different countries around the world. The aim is to evaluate whether these respond to practical needs or strategic interests. To this end, we will apply the criteria gathered in Table 6. as analytical categories of identification.

**Table 6.** Analytical categories to identify practical gender needs and strategic gender interests.

Practical Necessities	Strategic Interests
Can be covered in the short term.	Can only be achieved in the long term.
Aimed at specific women.	Common to almost all women.
Women are the beneficiaries of this coverage, not the active participants.	Allow women to intervene as agents, or to become agents.
Related to the conditions of daily life: food, housing, income, medical attention, social welfare, etc.	Related to women’s disadvantaged position in society, their subordination, their lack of resources and education, their vulnerability, their poverty and the violence they experience.
Easily identifiable by women	Not easily identifiable by women.
Can be satisfied by specific material inputs: food, health services, training, etc.	Can be satisfied through awareness in relation to gender issues, as well as through consciousness of things that increase women’s self-confidence and self-esteem, through education, training, political mobilization and strengthening women’s power.
In general, can be fulfilled without implying a change in gender roles and traditional gender relations.	Can give women power to change gender relations.

Source: prepared by authors based on (ACSUR 2006) Gender questions on gen-der 01 Basic concepts, Le Monde selon les femmes, pp. 48–49. [https://www.unirioja.es/igualdad/archivos/Cuestiones\\_de\\_Genero.pdf](https://www.unirioja.es/igualdad/archivos/Cuestiones_de_Genero.pdf), (accessed on 30 December 2022).

We have also taken Kate Young's (1988) distinction between condition and position, observing whether the initiatives modify women's material conditions and whether they disrupt their social position.

Similarly, we are interested in proving whether basic needs can be a facilitating element towards the resolution of strategic interests, given that practical needs and strategic interests are not contradictory questions, but instead are complementary: "the resolution of practical needs is often necessary, in order to work from there towards the achievement of strategic interests. For this reason, responding to practical needs should not be an end in itself, but instead a change in viewpoint that leads to an evolution of the situation of women in society" (AC SUR 2006, p. 47). Just as the difference between them is not necessarily a problem, we should keep in mind that while practical needs do not challenge the root causes of gender inequality or change gender roles, "once they are covered or satisfied, they improve the situation both of women and their families in a given society" (Bengoetxea Sorozabal, Edurne n.d.). This is no small point and should be considered. Before presenting the initiatives under analysis, we want to make clear that we take on board Jeanine Anderson's (1992) critique of this way of analyzing women's issues and needs; we will attempt not to fall into a rationalist bias, to make women's non-legitimated needs invisible or to forget women's rights. Our aim is to try to analyze some of the initiatives put in place to prevent sexual assaults against women using public space. In what follows, we present the initiatives we have analyzed.

#### 4.2. Institutional Initiatives to Prevent Sexual Assaults against Women in Public Space

This article analyses some of the initiatives put in place by various cities in Europe—and other parts of the world—especially over the past decade. The following selection criteria were used: initiatives to prevent sexual assaults against women that focus on guaranteeing women's safety, in Spain and/or in nearby European countries, implemented from 2005 onwards:

(A) So-called "request", "intermediate", "anti-harassment" or "safe" stops are the different names for an initiative that allows women passengers—and other people with reduced mobility, older people, etc.—to request to get off at any point on the official route of a night bus, without waiting for a regular bus stop.

This is an institutional measure, in collaboration with bus companies, aimed at increasing the safety of women travelling at night. In Spain, Terrasa, Bilbao and Vigo have been pioneering cities in implementing this measure, which has now been extended to other cities, including Castelló, Granada, Barcelona, Sevilla, Madrid, Coruña, Pamplona and Zamora. This initiative also exists in countries around Europe, such as France and Germany, in which Nantes and Bordeaux have been pioneering.

(B) Campaign against "intrusive staring" on the London Underground. The social reaction to the kidnapping and murder of a young woman in London is the context for a controversial government campaign in the United Kingdom. This campaign, which can be seen in the London Underground, warns that "'intrusive staring' is a form of sexual harassment with commuters urged to report it to police". This is "part of a national effort to stop different types of bullying and undesirable behavior in the British capital's transport network, affecting mainly—but not exclusively—women". Transport for London, the local body that runs public transportation in London, claims that the objective is to challenge the normalization of this kind of behavior. One man has been found guilty of intentional harassment and sentenced to 22 weeks in prison.

(C) "Pink ladies cabs" or "Women's taxis". In London, a number of women have been sexually assaulted by fake taxi drivers. Pink taxis arose in London as a measure initiated by the company Pink Ladies. These taxis are easily recognizable and locatable by GPS, offering a service for and by women. The female drivers have been trained in personal defense; passengers must be members and pay a subscription. Users receive a call a few minutes before the arrival of the taxi so they do not have to wait in the street, and when the taxi arrives at its destination the driver waits until the passenger has entered the place she

is going to. “Women’s taxis” have been extended to cities such as Paris (although there is legislation forbidding them to refuse male passengers), Cairo, Mexico City, Puebla (Mexico), Bogotá, New Delhi, Dubai and Myabyel (Lebanon). In Valencia in Spain, the Confitaxi fleet includes a Taxi dona (Lady Taxi) service, driven by and for women.

(D) Volunteers or public safety units accompanying women home *United Kingdom*  
Strut Safe (founded in Edinburgh). In the vigil for Sara Everard in Edinburgh in 2021, Alice Jackson and Raquel Chung promised themselves that no woman in the city would walk home alone that night. Thus was born Strut Safe, an independent non-profit platform that offers free walking accompaniment in Edinburgh and an accompaniment phone service throughout the United Kingdom. The service is funded by private donations. It provides training to those who volunteer for the telephone service and performs a background check on those who accompany women home. Volunteers include men, though the bulk of the organization is made up of women.

Vizcaya: Erandio y Santurtzi

“Don’t go home alone” *nigh-time accompaniment initiative in Erandio to prevent assaults.* This service offers night-time accompaniment on Fridays, Saturdays and Bank Holidays between midnight and 6 a.m., provided by a group emergency service volunteers who previously helped during emergency situations such as floods, fires or medical assistance, and has now taken on this service as well. The initiative began during the public holiday festivities before the COVID pandemic and has now been taken up again. The majority of people who use the service are teenagers and people who leave work during the night. The aim is to prevent male violence against women, theft and fights. In 2022, the night-time accompaniment service was put in place during the Erandio Goikoa local festivities. The case of Erandio is significant because this locality has the second highest crime rate among towns in the Basque region with a population between 20,000 and 50,000.

*Santurtzi. Accompaniment for women.* Santurtzi put this pioneering initiative into place in 2018: a service to accompany women going home alone. The service began during the El Carmen holiday festivities, between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. The municipal police coordinated an operation in which four public safety auxiliaries, contracted by the local council, provided the accompaniment. The press coverage indicates that there is a large demand for the service, similarly to the case of Erandio.

In order to conduct the analysis of the selected institutional initiatives, we have used the seven binary analytical identification categories as well as Young’s distinction between condition and position. Based on their application to the selected cases, we have created an index to measure whether the initiatives respond to practical needs or strategic interests (I-GNI). To this end, we have considered the following (Table 7):

**Table 7.** Construction of Gender Needs/Interests Index (I-GNI).

**Construction of Gender Needs/Interests Index (I-GNI):**

Base on identified categories (Table 6):

“Need”=0; “Interest”=1; Not possible to dichotomize: 0.5

Each initiative obtains a score based on the summation. The minimum value is 0 (= responds to need) and the maximum value is 8 (= responds to interests)

Source: prepared by authors.

Analysis of institutional initiatives (Table 8): we use the categories in the table as well as Young’s distinction between condition and position.

The six initiatives analyzed obtain low scores in the index, indicating that they respond more to practical gender needs. The most obvious are D.2 and D.3, given their score of 0.5. The Basque initiatives in Erandio and Santurtzi, which organize accompaniment for women, are the ones that respond most closely to practical needs. They only obtain 0.5 for being considered an issue for women in general (though not all women, given that the service is primarily directed at young women going out at night).

**Table 8.** Analysis of institutional initiatives against sexual violence in public space, according to the categorization of practical gender needs/strategic gender interests.

	(A) So-Called "Request", "Intermediate", "Anti-Harassment" or "Safe" Stops	(B) Campaign against "Intrusive Staring" on the London Underground	(C) "Pink Ladies Cabs" or "Women's taxis"	(D) Volunteers or Public Safety Units Accompanying Women Home		
				D.1. Strut Safe (Edinburgh)	D.2. "Don't Go Home alone" Initiative (Erandio)	D.3. Accompaniment for Women (Santurtzi)
Short/Long Term	0	0	0	0	0	0
Specific women/Women in general	0.5	1	1	1	0.5	0.5
Women are beneficiaries/ Agents	0	0	0.5	0.5	0	0
Life conditions/Structural inequalities	0	0.5	0	0	0	0
Identifiable/Not identifiable	0	0	0	0	0	0
Material gain/ Sensitization/Consciousness	0.5	1	0.5	0.5	0	0
No change in gender roles/Change in gender roles	0	0	0	0	0	0
Condition/Position	0	0	0	0	0	0
Index (I-GNI)	1	2.5	2	2	0.5	0.5

Source: prepared by authors.

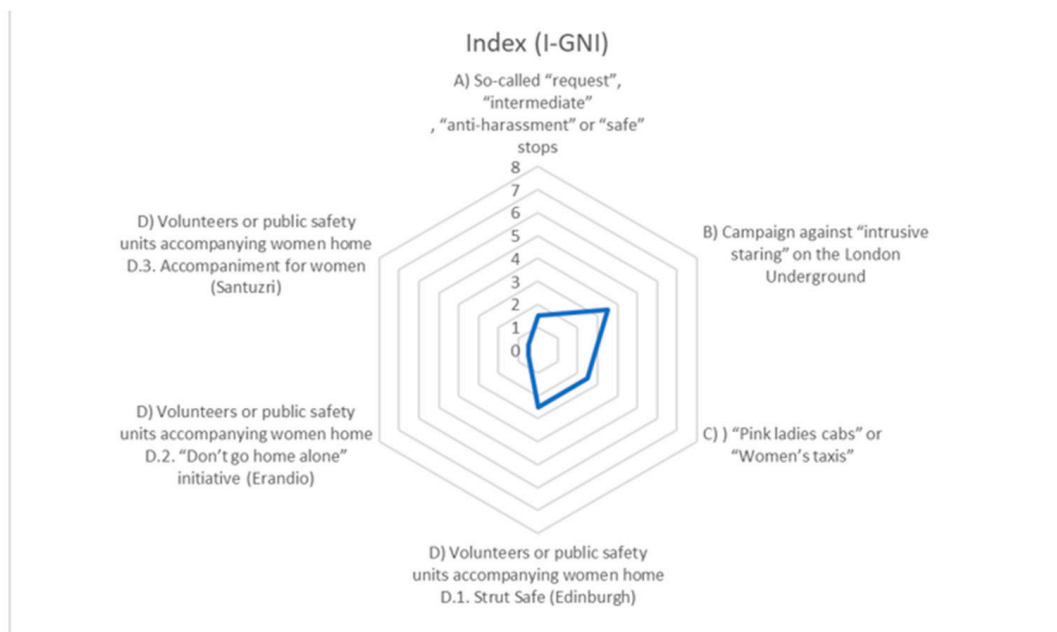
The initiative with demand bus stops receives a score of only 1: this recognizes that the initiative can be directed to almost all women—but not all, given that it is a public service linked to the weekend or holidays (0.5). We also give it 0.5 for the impact this measure can have on sensitizing the public at large.

Initiatives C. London's Pink Lady Cabs and D.1 Edinburgh's Strut Safe program receive the same score: 2. In both cases, the distribution of points is the same: they receive 1 point for addressing an issue common to all women, the measures involve some degree of consciousness raising and sensitization (because of the training involved), and above all because women are not only the beneficiaries, but also the agents (because they are involved in financing the service).

The initiative that receives the highest score is B, the campaign against "intrusive staring" on the London Underground. Although it is still a measure that responds to a practical need, the fact that it is directed at all women and has the impact of sensitizing the general public means that it fulfils some of the requirements of strategic interests.

The Figure 1 demonstrates that the initiatives analyzed cover a very limited area. This is because these measures respond, above all, to practical gender needs, and for this reason their scores do not go above 2.5. A measure centered on strategic interests would obtain a maximum score of 8 points.

The point is not to underestimate the value of these measures, but rather to demonstrate what type of needs they meet and, therefore, to be aware of the real impact they have on structural change and the modification of gender roles in order to achieve a more equal society. In these measures, there is no change in women's social position, and they are hardly active themselves, as agents, in these initiatives. There is no questioning of women's learned fear, nor a direct challenge to the causes of sexual assault in public spaces. However, as we have said already, these measures can be considered complementary initiatives that open the way to other actions directed at providing a response to strategic gender interests.



Source: Authors' construction.

#### Index I-GNI

- A) So-called "request", "intermediate", "anti-harassment" or "safe" stops
- B) Campaign against "intrusive staring" on the London Underground
- C) "Pink ladies cabs" or "Women's taxis"
- D) Volunteers or public safety units accompanying women home
- D.1. Strut Safe (Edinburgh)
- D) Volunteers or public safety units accompanying women home
- D.2. "Don't go home alone" initiative (Erando)
- D) Volunteers or public safety units accompanying women home
- D.3. Accompaniment for women (Santuzri)

**Figure 1.** Application of I-GNI to initiatives against sexual violence in sexual space. Index from 0 (need) to 8 (interest).

#### 5. Conclusions

One of the main consequences of sexual violence in public is the limitations that women themselves put on their use of public space, for example, avoiding the use of areas they consider to be dangerous or adopting preventative behaviors to respond to fear that is learned and highly socialized, as the data reflects. Women's learned fear conditions their limited use of public space in certain contexts, such as night-time leisure places and public holiday festivities. It is also important to support women's empowerment and to give them tools for self-defense and self-protection that deconstruct the learned fear that often paralyzes or limits them.

Rape and other forms of sexual assault—"the political synthesis of women's oppression" (Lagarde 2011, p. 279)—as well as tales of sexual terror that construct women's bodies as public bodies, constitute general practices and discourses that are socially constructed and form part of a system of domination, at the same time that they contribute to the reproduction of this system. Violence exists because the objective conditions that make its existence possible are socially produced (Barjola 2018). For this reason, the elimination of this violence requires a profound transformation and resignification of bodies, spaces, representations, and individual and collective practices.

A number of these campaigns have appeared in response to the anger and social crisis prompted by the sexual assault and murder of women. Although these actions can

contribute to fulfilling a practical need, a focus based on safety is insufficient and can have the negative effect of reinforcing women's learned fear and dependence. The dynamic of some services can contribute to reproducing a system in which women depend on the protection of men (drivers, police, volunteers). Women's resignification and agency constitute two central aspects of social transformation that are not attended to or are limited in these initiatives. The messages in the media regarding these campaigns can translate to the message that the priority for ending violence is the promotion of safety. In reality, a society without violence against women requires a profound transformation in all areas of life, including, as an urgent priority, the area of education. "Violence against women is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon" (Fulu and Miedema 2015, p. 1431), so to achieve long-term change, we must "implement and evaluate overlapping strategies" (Heise 2011, p. xiii) that intervene at multiple levels and risk factors.

In the case of regulations, we believe that the law has a role in signaling what is not socially acceptable, as well as a punitive dimension. However, a focus on the criminal dimension is also limited in the face of a structural phenomenon that requires profound social change. The assumption of violence against women (VAG) as a social problem implies the need for a comprehensive intervention in which the different actors involved can join forces. In this sense, programs that also involve adult men and boys in gender transformative interventions can support the reduction of intimate partner violence as well as prevent violent relationships against women and girls (Prevention Essentials 2022). Additionally, parenting programs that integrate specific content on gender relations can be effective in reducing both violence against children and VAG, as well as improving other parenting and health outcomes. Parenting programs work with parents and serve to generate healthy family relationships, non-violent forms of conflict resolution, positive approaches to parenting, and healthy and safe home environments (Kerr-Wilson et al. 2020)

Women experience sexual violence in public and they learn to fear this violence. Learned fear is one of the values that is transmitted through processes of socialization and in the construction of gender identities, and is difficult to subvert. This research has shown that the initiatives selected and analyzed here respond first and foremost to gender needs, but not to strategic interests. For this reason, they do not provide an in-depth response to the structural causes of sexual violence; nor do they promote true social change.

We consider that this article contributes to the existing literature in several ways: on the one hand, it analyses a series of recent initiatives that aim to respond to sexual violence suffered by women from an original perspective, such as the degree of impact on the deconstruction of fear learned in the process of women's socialization. On the other hand, it provides the construction of a simple index that can favor comparative studies on the real impact that actions against VAG have in terms of gender needs and interests. Our work highlights the importance of centering women's voices in program development and emphasizes the danger of gender-neutral policies that may respond to specific needs but do not guarantee social change. We reinforce the argument that social and individual transformation and addressing root causes are essential to ensure sustainable change.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, R.R.P. and M.S.C.; methodology, I.A.F. and M.S.C.; data validation, I.A.F.; formal analysis, I.A.F. and M.S.C.; resources, R.R.P. and I.A.F.; data curation, I.A.F.; writing—original draft preparation, M.S.C., I.A.F. and R.R.P.; writing—review and editing, M.S.C., R.R.P. and I.A.F.; supervision, M.S.C.; project administration M.S.C.; funding acquisition, M.S.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Basque Government's call for recognition of research teams, grant number [IT1596-22].

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for working with secondary sources.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bosch-Fiol and Ferrer-Pérez (2019) propose an explanatory model for the different forms of violence against women called Pyramidal model, which includes five elements or stages: patriarchal substrate, differential socialization, expectation of control, triggers and, finally, outbreak of violence. In summary, this model suggests that those men who assume the mandate of traditional masculine gender, faced with a triggering event that frustrates their expectations of maintaining control over women and/or who perceive that it reinforces their position, would consider it legitimate to act and resort to violence to recover, maintain or increase that power (Bosch-Fiol and Ferrer-Pérez 2019, p. 8).
- <sup>2</sup> For Marcus (1992, p. 397), women must “develop our capacities for violence in order to disrupt the rape script”, in which one person tries to play the role of the rapist, attempting to manipulate another person into taking on the role of victim.
- <sup>3</sup> For Esteban (2004, p. 46), the body is a site of subordination, but also resistance. Feminist actions against sexual and sexist attacks have turned *fiestas* (public holiday festivities) into a space of political demand, reclaiming collective pleasure as part of women’s wellbeing (Guilló 2016). From another perspective, Esteban (2016, p. 99) describes the moment of getting ready to go out with members of a feminist group as a *ritual of socialiability and integration as equals*, a space for communication, enjoyment, and affirmation of their diverse and alternative identity.

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