Sexual Violence and On-line Environments

The issue of sexual violence against women and girls in online environments is emerging as a growing concern in Canada and elsewhere. To date the focus of research, surveillance, and intervention has been in the area of child pornography, given the obvious egregious harms. The online sexual assault of adolescent girls and young women through social media has also received front-page attention in the media, due to a number of recent high-profile cases. Yet there are no national statistics on the prevalence of this problem. The data that is available relates to cyberbullying, which is a closely related phenomenon that involves harming or harassing people in a deliberate or hostile manner through online forums. However, the term can obscure the sexual nature of the violence and the gravity of events (e.g., in those cases where online sexual victimization follows an in-person sexual assault). Regardless, recent data available on cyberbullying does give some idea of the scope of the problem: 7% of adults who use the Internet in Canada have reported being cyberbullied at some point in their life (Perrault, 2011).

One of the primary concerns about online environments and sexual violence is that technology may result in new opportunities for abusive behaviour to occur (Baker et al., 2013). The research brief, Understanding Technology-Related Violence Against Women describes some of the current most common forms of online victimization (Baker, Campbell, & Barreto, 2013). They focus on how new technologies allow for hacking, surveillance, impersonation, harassment/spamming, recruitment, and malicious distribution. Such activities might include a perpetrator logging into a person's social media account or accessing their phone to monitor their activities and communications. Another common strategy is to impersonate a person and post embarrassing, defamatory, or threatening information or images, often of a sexual nature. Perpetrators can also use technology to continuously contact, annoy, or threaten someone, or lure potential victims into a sexually violent situation in person (Baker et al., 2013).

Because of rapid advancements in technology, and problems around surveillance, tracking, and legal jurisdiction, some researchers believe it is difficult to address this kind of sexual violence in a systematic way (Baker et al., 2013; Visano, 2002). Others are more optimistic, highlighting how the Internet can make sexual violence that might otherwise occur in a hidden environment, more "visible" (Boyd, 2014). In this sense, online environments, as much as they demand new investigative techniques, also provide new opportunities for understanding and intervening in sexual violence (Boyd, 2014). There are similar polarizing opinions on whether online environments threaten women's sense of safety and security in new ways (i.e., concepts of "safe distance" and "safe place") (Baker et al., 2013). Contrary to the opinion that online environments have the potential to insert the fear, apprehension, and anxiety associated with sexual violence into expanding areas of women's lives (Baker et al., 2013), others suggest that sexual violence originates with people rather than technologies and the existence of Internet-based social interactions does not change this in any meaningful way (Boyd, 2014).

Despite cyberbullying statistics that indicate men and women are just as likely to report this problem, some suggest that sexual violence is just as gendered online as it is in the physical world, although more empirical research is needed to confirm these assertions (Baker et al., 2013). Similarly, while there has been concern that exposure to online pornography affects men's attitudes towards women, and may increase the likelihood of men sexually victimizing women; existing studies have not confirmed a relationship (Barak & Fisher, 1997; Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 2008). The research on this subject appears to suggest that tendencies toward sexual aggression may precede both consumption of sexually violent online images and actual sexual aggression (Seto, Maric, & Howard, 2001). The debate surrounding these issues is a clear signal that more research is needed on this subject.

From: Issue Brief: Sexual Violence Against Women in Canada
 Available at http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/svawc-vcsfc/index-en.html

See also Cyberbullying Legislation