

Sociocultural Aspects of Sexualized Violence Against Women

Sociokulturní aspekty sexualizovaného násilí na ženách

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the issue of sexualized violence against women with regard to its selected social aspects. The paper works with the latest knowledge on the nature and perpetrators of the crime of rape and approaches sexualized violence against women as a consequence of gender inequality in society. The starting point for this paper is the theoretical concept of rape culture, which summarizes and specifies the social conditions contributing to the presence of all types of gender-based violence. Special emphasis is placed on subtle manifestations of rape culture, such as various types of sexist behaviour (clinging to traditional gender roles, sexist remarks, etc.).

Keywords:

Sexualized violence; gender-based violence; rape; rape culture

Abstrakt:


Příspěvek se zaměřuje na problematiku sexualizovaného násilí na ženách s ohledem na jeho vybrané společenské aspekty. Text pracuje s nejnovějšími poznatky o povaze a pachatelích trestného činu znásilnění a přistupuje k sexualizovanému násilí na ženách jako k důsledku genderové nerovnosti ve společnosti. Teoretickým východiskem je koncept kultury znásilnění, který shrnuje a blíže specifikuje společenské podmínky přispívající k výskytu všech typů genderově podmíněného násilí. Zvláštní důraz je kladen na subtilní projevy kultury znásilnění, jako především různé typy sexistického chování (lpění na tradičních genderových rolích, sexistické komentáře apod.).

Klíčová slova:

Sexualizované násilí; genderově podmíněné násilí; znásilnění; kultura znásilnění

Introduction

The topic of sexualised violence against women has recently been given more and more space in the Czech public debate. The term *sexualised violence* refers to “any violation of an individual's right to self-determination in the area of sexual expression.” (Čírtková, 2023, p. 311) The term *sexualized violence* is now slowly replacing the previously exclusively used expression *sexual violence*, because the new term – according to experts

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– better captures the true nature of this type of violence: i.e. the fact that the primary motivation of perpetrators of sexualized violence is not sexual desire, but the desire for a sense of power, and sexual intercourse is abused as a means to satisfy the desire. (Kutálková & Kobová, 2014)

Depending on the presence of physical contact, sexualized violence includes contact forms (primarily rape, unwanted touching, kissing or forced sexual practices) and non-contact forms (public exposure, non-consensual taking and dissemination of intimate photographs, etc.). (Pokorná & Ježková, 2021)

Social aspects of rape

Rape is the most frequently mentioned and most researched form of sexualised violence. This article works exclusively with the conception of rape as any sexual intercourse without the consent of the victim. (e.g. Konsent, 2021)

According to police statistics, women are the most frequent victims of rape (taking into account the high latency rate of this type of crime, which may distort not only the quantity but also the most frequent form of reported rape cases), while men are the most frequent perpetrators. For example, in 2021, 460 cases of rape were officially registered, of which 454 were perpetrated by men. (Policie ČR, 2022) Sexualized violence can therefore be seen as the most significant example of gender-based violence - i.e. violence that is based on the gender of the victim. (Úřad vlády ČR, 2023)

Rape is associated with a number of misinformation and myths that are influencing the Czech public's perception of this type of violence, leading to distrust of victims and advocacy for perpetrators. From the most common misconception, i.e. that rape is primarily motivated by an uncontrollable sexual drive and lust (see below), and the related misconception that women can somehow “ask” for rape (by their appearance, lifestyle, clothing or age), to the mistaken assumption that the perpetrator of rape is usually a stranger with some sexual deviation, to the opinion that most rapes are fabricated and that reporting them to the police is intended to harm the perpetrator. (Benedict, 2003; Ciprová, 2010; Pokorná & Ježková, 2021)

Recently, however, the issue of sexualized violence against women has been quite significantly publicized and thanks particularly to the courage of survivors to share their experiences in the public sphere (and also the work of various initiatives), real information about what rape most often looks like and who are the perpetrators of such acts is gradually becoming available to ordinary members of Czech society.

Thanks to this, the definition of the crime of rape in the Czech Penal Code was changed in June this year, redefining rape as non-consensual sexual intercourse instead of prior “forced sexual intercourse”. This redefinition is for several reasons a very important step in improving the situation of rape victims.

Real forms of rape

In most cases, rape does not occur as it is generally presented in popular films and TV shows. In practice, according to Čírtková (2019), a distinction can be made between two types of rape: *stranger rape* (rape by an unknown perpetrator; also referred to as “true rape”) and *acquaintance rape* (relationship rape). The second type is much more common, and the most common perception of rape as a stranger assault out on the street is

therefore highly distorted. “Most rapes take place between people who know each other. The perpetrators tend to be otherwise normal men who do not suffer from sexual deviance or can be diagnosed as psychopaths, i.e. they do not show signs of specific personality and behavioral disorders. In various studies, up to 90% of victims report that they knew their perpetrator.” (Čírtková, 2019, p. 11)

The perpetrator is not usually a stranger, suffering from an uncontrollable desire for sexual intercourse and who “waits” for a careless, scantily clad victim in the park at night to satisfy his urgent physiological need. In the vast majority of cases, rape perpetrators also do not suffer from sexual deviation, which is another common misconception. (Blatníková a kol., 2014) Again, victims are not exclusively young, pretty women who have “asked for it” by their appearance or clothing. This is because – as already mentioned – the perpetrator is not primarily motivated by sexual desire and therefore cannot be “provoked” by appearance. (Ciprová, 2010) According to surveys, the perpetrator of rape is most often a person known to the victim – it is a partner, family member, colleague, neighbour or acquaintance. (e.g. RAINN, 2024, online) In most cases, the act is premeditated and planned in advance, and if it is a relationship rape, it is also repeated and long-term. The perpetrator's goal is to attack the victim's most sensitive areas and uses sexual intercourse as a means to achieve his goal (Benedict, 2003; Ciprová, 2010; Pokorná & Ježková, 2021). Moreover, a large number of victims are unable – or incapable – of defending themselves against rape, either because they are frozen, but often also because they know that defending themselves would not help them or it might provoke the perpetrator to even more dangerous actions. Therefore, according to Čírtková (2019), they may not even have visible physical marks or injuries left on their bodies after the act, which are often sought as “confirmation” of the act by doctors and forensic experts. (Čírtková, 2019)

Having summarised all the above-mentioned findings on rape, it is evident that the existing definition of the crime of rape was far from reflecting the reality of most rapes and therefore did not provide sufficient protection for victims, which is expected to change with the new definition.

Prevalence of rape in the Czech Republic and its conditions

What the new definition of the crime of rape itself cannot change is the fact that such acts occur in Czech society at all. As many as 12 000 rapes are committed in the Czech Republic each year, while only 5% of such acts are reported to the police. (Šimáčková et al., 2020) According to a survey accomplished for Czech organisation Persefona, 9% of respondents have experienced some serious form of sexual violence (especially various types of forced sexual intercourse) at some point in their lives. (Persefona, 2016) The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights reports that up to 22% of women over the age of 15 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner, and one in three has been a victim of physical or sexual violence. (FRA, 2014)

Several questions arise, perhaps the most pressing of which is: how is it possible that in a modern, civilized country one in ten women will experience rape in her lifetime? Why is it so little known and talked about? Why is the gender of rape victims and perpetrators so clearly unbalanced? And perhaps the most controversial question – is anyone who commits sexualized violence against another person always just an evil, twisted, and deplorable person, or could they be just trying to meet societal expectations with their behavior?

Is it possible to talk about rape as a result of inequality between men and women in society? From the above information it is evident that the answers to these questions can no longer be sought only in terms of individuals, their faults or pathologies: it is also necessary to measure the socio-cultural settings of Czech society.

Rape culture

The ability to effectively prevent a specific problematic phenomenon requires a thorough knowledge of its causes. According to the available information, sexualised violence can be considered primarily a social problem, not an individual one. However, a similar conception of rape is still significantly lacking in Czech society.

Efforts to sort out the knowledge and seek explanations for the alarming situation regarding women's widespread experience of sexualised violence emerged as early as the 1970s in the USA. (Jakalová & Valkovičová, 2020) Out of these efforts grew the concept – and at the same time the theoretical concept – of “rape culture”.

The term *rape culture* refers to the societal conditions (or sociocultural environment) in which a variety of circumstances promote the occurrence of sexualized violence against women. (Buršová, 2024) The term can therefore be used to refer to the sociocultural aspects of rape. In such a society sexualised violence is trivialized, normalised and justified, and there is also a heightened tolerance of its various manifestations, which encourages its occurrence. (Buršová, 2024) Members of the culture tend to defend and excuse the perpetrator and to justify the act of rape by the inappropriate behavior of the victims. At the same time, this society is characterized by a high incidence of sexist expressions and gender stereotyping regarding desirable characteristics, roles and behaviours of women and men.

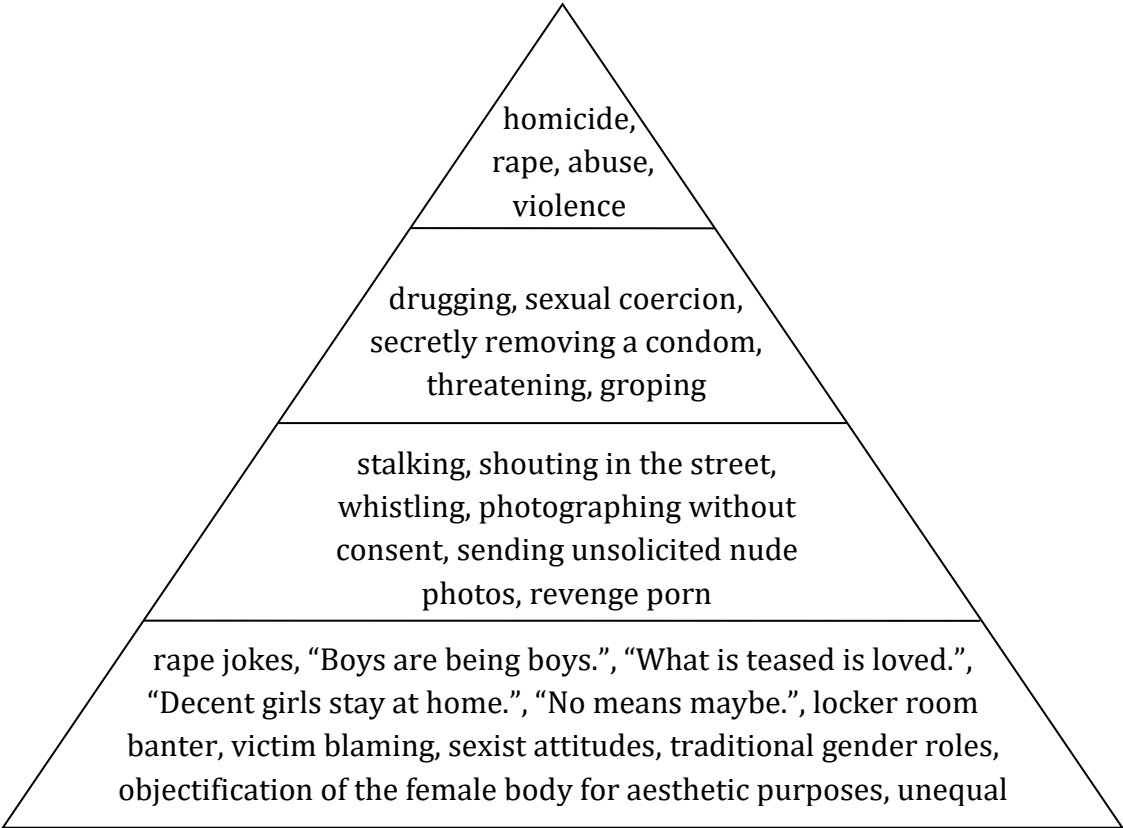
Sometimes the term *rape culture* can be used in connection with the expression “fertile ground” or the term “subsoil”. It is a system made up of many different elements that interact and build on each other. As Laura Bates, author of *Everyday Sexism* book, says: everything is connected. Inequality is a continuum in which every attitude and every idea is related, and one influences the other. All the small, seemingly innocuous discriminatory acts, comments, sexist jokes, or consistent demands for gender-stereotyped roles create a solid foundation for everything else to grow. As Bates says: everything is part of the same problem. (Bates, 2015)

Manifestations of rape culture

Rape culture manifests itself in society in a variety of ways. Buršová (2024) places victim blaming (i.e. blaming the victim for having been raped) at the top of the list and mentions also downplaying of the seriousness of rape and denial of its prevalence (e.g., rape jokes or labeling the act as “rough” or just “bad” sex). The author also mentions the objectification of the female body, which is related to the use of naked female bodies for advertising purposes. (Buršová, 2024) Sexist jokes are also problematic, because they usually reinforce traditional gender roles in society. (Jakalová & Valkovičová, 2020) Different standards for male and female sexuality (dominance versus submissiveness, activity versus passivity, emphasis on the “chastity” and “purity” of women, etc.) are also a crucial part of rape culture. (Buršová, 2024) Important and no less problematic elements of rape culture are also the products of popular culture (films, TV shows, music, but also literary works), which again reinforce the traditional gender roles and gender

stereotypical assumptions about the characteristics, behaviours and opinions of women and men. Jakalová and Valkovičová (2020) are even more specific in their publication and among the direct manifestations they mention, for example, teaching girls and young women how to avoid sexual violence without teaching boys respect and consent in sexual encounters. (Jakalová & Valkovičová, 2020)

For a better idea, a pyramid scheme is often used to illustrate what rape culture encompasses. It is a simple tool for understanding how it works in practice and for sorting out all the elements that make it up. The lower tiers form the base, the “fertile ground” for the higher tiers, which often include very serious crimes that significantly disrupt the social order.



Picture 1 *Pyramid scheme of rape culture*

Source: Jakalová & Valkovičová, 2020 (modified)

Conclusion

These days we already have much more information about rape than before, and thanks to all the available knowledge it is almost clear that it is no longer possible to look at the act and its causes through the same lens as before. Exploring the concept of rape culture and the problematic phenomena it encompasses seems to be a crucial step towards improving the lives of all women (not only) in Czech society. As separate elements, the manifestations of rape culture may look like harmless trifles, but together they create a system of socio-cultural inequalities and cause numerous experiences of Czech women with gender-based violence, that considerably affect quality of their lives.

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