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Girls View Sexual Violence as Normal

(April 2014) – New evidence from the journal *Gender & Society* helps explain what women’s advocates have argued for years – that women report abuse at much lower rates than it actually occurs. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network ([RAINN](http://www.rainn.org)), 44% of victims are under the age of 18, and 60% of sexual assaults are not reported to police.

The study, “[Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse](#),” will appear in the June 2014 issue of *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology. The findings reveal that girls and young women rarely reported incidents of abuse because they regarded sexual violence against them as normal.

Sociologist [Heather Hlavka](#) at Marquette University analyzed forensic interviews conducted by Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) with 100 youths between the ages of three and 17 who may have been sexually assaulted. Hlavka found that the young women experienced forms of sexual violence in their everyday lives including: objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse. Often times they rationalized these incidents as normal.

During one interview, referring to boys at school, a 13 year-old girl states:

“They grab you, touch your butt and try to, like, touch you in the front, and run away, but it’s okay, I mean... I never think it’s a big thing because they do it to everyone.”

The researcher’s analysis led her to identify several reasons why young women do not report sexual violence.

- Girls believe the myth that men can’t help it. The girls interviewed described men as unable to control their sexual desires, often framing men as the sexual aggressors and women as the gatekeepers of sexual activity. They perceived everyday harassment and abuse as normal male behavior, and as something to endure, ignore, or maneuver around.
- Many of the girls said that they didn’t report the incident because they didn’t want to make a “big deal” of their experiences. They doubted if anything outside of forcible heterosexual intercourse counted as an offense or rape.

- Lack of reporting may be linked to trust in authority figures. According to Hlavka, the girls seem to have internalized their position in a male-dominated, sexual context and likely assumed authority figures would also view them as “bad girls” who prompted the assault.
- Hlavka found that girls don’t support other girls when they report sexual violence. The young women expressed fear that they would be labeled as a “whore” or “slut,” or accused of exaggeration or lying by *both* authority figures and their peers, decreasing their likelihood of reporting sexual abuse.

The young women in the study provided insight into how some youth perceived their experiences of sexual violence and harassment during sexual encounters with men. In particular, the study pointed to how the law and popular media may lead to girls’ interpreting their abuse as normal. According to the author, policymakers, educators, and lawmakers need to address how sexual violence is actually experienced by youth beginning at very young ages in order to increase reporting practices, and to protect children from the everyday violence and harassment all too common in their lives.

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Source: Hlavka, Heather. 2014. “[Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse](#)” forthcoming in June *Gender & Society*.

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Related Experts

Interviews available upon request

Deborah Tolman, Professor of Social Welfare and Psychology, The Hunter College School of Social Work and The Graduate Center, CUNY, Author of [Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality](#), dtolman@hunter.cuny.edu, [@DrDebNYC](#)

Lynn Phillips, Lecturer in Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Author of [Flirting with Danger: Young Women's Reflections on Sexuality and Domination](#), phillips@comm.umass.edu

Further information

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. Gender & Society, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on twitter: [@Gend_Soc](#).

For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the

University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus primarily on inequality. She can be reached at misra@soc.umass.edu.

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS) currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at jsprague@ku.edu.