

Sexual harassment, gender stereotypes prevalent among youth

March 7 2018, by Corrie Wilder

Young women enrolled in high schools and colleges told Washington State University researchers that people routinely make sexual comments, both in-person and online, about them and their bodies.

Stacey J.T. Hust, associate professor in WSU's Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, and Kathleen Boyce Rodgers, associate professor in WSU's Department of Human Development, talked with more than 100 young people from across Washington state in focus groups about media and their romantic and sexual relationships. Hust and Rodgers also conducted in-depth interviews with 16 individuals.

Although Hust and Rodgers talked to adolescents before the start of the #MeToo campaign, the researchers noted that the young [women](#) they spoke with shared stories similar to those shared on social media as part of the grassroots campaign.

"Even most of our youngest female participants, who were freshmen in high school, had already experienced some form of sexual harassment," Hust said.

The young women viewed such sexual harassment as normative, Rodgers said.

Disengaging

"When these women experienced harassment," Hust added, "they typically disengaged from the situation, whether that meant deleting an online app or avoiding boys in the school hallway. They did not feel comfortable confronting or reporting the harassment because they didn't think they had the power to change the behavior."

Double standard, differing perspectives

"Our qualitative data suggest that adolescents and [young adults](#) identify a pervasive sexual double standard in which boys are rewarded for sexual aggression and girls are shamed for sexual agency," Rodgers said.

Some of the men Hust and Rodgers spoke with in their interviews rejected these gender stereotypes and said they wouldn't comment on a woman's body. "Others, however, didn't seem to understand that such comments could be unwanted," Rodgers said.

Such gender stereotypes affect how they interpret sexual media content and how they act in their romantic and sexual relationships, Hust said. "The information we gathered in our [focus groups](#) and in-depth interviews support what we have found in our surveys of young people," Hust said.

Hust's and Rodgers' previous studies of young people have consistently identified a [relationship](#) between young people's perceptions of media content and their intentions to have healthy sexual relationships. The authors' found women who believed in gender stereotypes and endorsed music that degraded women were significantly less likely to engage in healthy sexual consent negotiation.

In another study, Rodgers & Hust found women who accepted the sexual objectification of women and who found music videos as entertaining were more accepting of sexual comments about their bodies. Further,

[young women](#) who accepted female objectification and viewed music videos as realistic were more accepting of unwanted physical sexual harassment (i.e. being touched or grabbed).

Adolescents talk about romance

Hust and Rodgers report their findings in a book titled "Scripting Adolescent Romance: Adolescents Talk about Romantic Relationships and Media's Sexual Scripts," by Peter Lang Publishing Group. In addition to [sexual harassment](#), the authors share adolescents' and young adults' stories related to media, [gender stereotypes](#), virginity, [romantic relationships](#), sexual activity and dating violence.

"We wanted to share our participants' stories so that parents and practitioners can empower adolescents' and young adults' to participate in healthier romantic and [sexual relationships](#)" Hust said

Hust said she and Rodgers are hopeful that the book will provide a "resource for [young people](#) who may feel isolated by or uncomfortable with their experiences." It provides a "springboard" for conversations between parents and teens about "romantic relationships, setting boundaries, and how to have healthy relationships."

Hust and Rodgers will present an overview of their findings March 26-27 at WSU's annual [Murrow Symposium](#).

Provided by Washington State University

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