Fear, anger, and shame in the night-time economy: Women's responses to unwanted sexual intrusions.

Dr. Ruth Lewis and Dr. Amanda McBride, Northumbria University

This is a summary based on the full paper by Dr. Ruth Lewis and Dr. Amanda McBride which can be found here.

Summary

Unwanted sexual intrusions (USI) are commonplace in the night-time economy. Sometimes portrayed as an inevitable part of a sexualised environment, as 'bants' or 'just a laugh', they are a form of gender-based violence (GBV). Research about USI in the night-time economy has tended to focus on women's *behaviour* in response to it; very little has examined women's *emotional* responses. This research about how women experience USI from men shows they experience it as a frightening, shameful injustice.

Lewis and McBride conducted this study (see Lewis and McBride, 2024) in partnership with Shout-Up! a North East-based project advising and training night-time economy workers across England to identify and intervene safely in incidents of sexual harassment.

An online survey asked respondents to tell us about their experiences of sexual harassment during night's out. 215 responses were received.

Context/Background

1. Several terms describe 'unwanted sexual intrusions' – e.g. 'sexual harassment', 'unwanted sexual attention', 'hassle' or 'creepiness'. But these terms do not clearly express the intrusive, invasive nature of the behaviours, whether they involve physical contact, verbal intrusions or glaring and leering from men. We therefore use the term 'unwanted sexual intrusion' or USI.
2. Women's emotional responses to USI have rarely been researched but studying their responses can provide deeper understanding. Power and powerlessness – intrinsic to USI – are experienced not only as actions but also as emotions. People bring their own subjective understandings based on

their biographies, values and previous experiences. This means women's emotional responses to USI vary.

3. Although emotions vary between people and can feel intensely personal, they are also essentially social. They are social because they stem from social interactions and because they have meaning in the context of social relations. The four primary emotions – fear, anger, shame and pride – which are manifested and recognised across different cultures, play a fundamental role in social dynamics of power and status.

What is unwanted sexual intrusion?

It is difficult to list all the different behaviours that comprise unwanted sexual intrusions. A key feature is that the behaviour is *unwanted*. It can include physical contact that amounts to assault, as well as speech and ways of looking:

- Grabbing or groping any body part (typically, bottom, breasts, groin) over or under clothes
- Staring and leering
- Verbal comments, particularly persistent comments, which might be spoken or shouted
- Dancing or grinding against someone
- Putting hands up skirts and down blouses
- Pulling clothes, up, down and off
- Cat-calls, wolf whistles
- Forced kissing
- Following
- Barring someone's way to prevent them moving away

Key findings

1. In a survey of 84 women who expressed an emotional reaction, the most commonly expressed emotion was fear. Women used the following words to describe their fear in response to USI: scared, wary, unsafe, anxious, intimidated, on edge, petrified, threatened, terrified, uneasy, nervous, cautious, on high alert, insecure.
2. Of the primary emotions, women also reported anger (using the words: angry, annoyed, infuriated, hate it) and shame (embarrassed, mortified, guilty, ashamed, my fault, humiliated).

3. Women also described feeling ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘upset’. These are both ‘elastic’ terms that cover a range of emotions. While the terms are relatively mild, they were reported in response to incidents that included sexual assault and that induced fear.
4. Experiences of USI by men on nights out restrict women’s freedom. Some women stop engaging in the night-time economy; most engage in ‘safety work’ to make their nights out less threatening.

What is safety work?

‘Safety work’ refers to the work women do to stop men’s violence to them. It includes, for example, avoiding certain areas or venues, being ‘on guard’ in public, dressing to avoid attention, carrying self-protective items (such as keys, a rape alarm), planning how to travel, ignoring men who sexually intrude or ‘humouring’ them. It can become an automatic reflex, so that we do not notice we are doing it.

Introduction

USI is sometimes portrayed and experienced as an inevitable part of a sexualised environment or as ‘bants’ or ‘just a laugh’ but it is a form of gender-based violence (GBV). Most GBV – which includes domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking and harassment, and digital abuse - is perpetrated by men against women; about one in three women experience some form of GBV in their lifetime (WHO). Girls are socialised, from a young age, to be alert to and avoid the risk of men’s violence and to consider themselves ‘lucky’ if they manage to avoid it. This means that when they are sexually intruded upon, they are likely to interpret their experience in the context of widespread GBV.

Women's emotional responses to unwanted sexual intrusions in the night-time economy

The study (see Lewis and McBride, 2024) is based on an online survey which asked respondents to tell us about their experiences of sexual harassment in the night-time economy. 215 responses were received. Responses from men (5, only 3 of whom reported their own experiences of USI) and from non-binary people (4) and those who 'preferred not to say' (3) have been excluded as these numbers are too small to make meaningful comparisons. Of the remaining 203 women, 84 expressed at least one emotion; this research is based on those 84 qualitative responses.

Fear

The predominant emotion expressed was fear. For example:

> "We went to a night out and my friend was harassed by a drunk man. He followed us to the uber [taxi] and I was so scared. I even reported to the student campus." (aged 28)

> "Male forcing himself upon me and my female friends whilst being drunk. Felt threatening and his behaviour wasn't welcome. Felt like we had to leave the club but felt like he could follow us." (aged 33)

> "A lad about my age followed me home from a night out and wouldn't stop trying to talk to me, I told him I didn't want to talk and he started shouting at me and saying I was a cunt and thought I was too good for him. I was scared and angry." (aged 25)

These quotes show women's fear stems from anticipation of (further) negative actions. The anticipation is implicit rather than being named, perhaps because it is obvious or because it is 'unspeakable'. To avoid (further) negative experiences, women engage in 'safety work' (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020) such as leaving some venues, reporting incidents, avoiding some areas or not engaging in the night-time economy.

Anger

Women also said they feel anger in response to USI, sometimes in combination with other feelings. For example:

> "I was grabbed around the waist from behind and a male thrust his groin against my bottom. He had an erection at the time. My friend pushed him away, the barman confronted him and he became violent so he [barman] called the police. I'm very cautious when out now and prefer to stand where no-one can get behind me. I feel angry and upset that he thought that was ok." (aged 37)

> "A male approached me outside of a nightclub and tried to put his hand up my skirt. I was so shocked, angry and upset. He ran away from the scene." (aged 31)

Anger is felt in response to an injustice. Women's feelings of anger suggest that respondents were confident that the USI was wrong, unreasonable and indefensible. Recent changes in social norms and attitudes about GBV as a result of initiatives such as #MeToo might mean that women are more comfortable expressing anger than they used to be. After all, traditionally, it has been taboo for women to express anger; stereotypes such as the "angry feminist" or "angry Black woman" are used to discount them and their anger. However, women may still restrain their feelings of anger, not least due to fear of how the sexual intruder might react.

Shame

Traditionally, USI and other forms of GBV are clouded in shame. Women – rather than the men who perpetrate GBV – carry the shame and stigma of victimisation. For example:

> "I've been stood at a bar on a night out and had a man try to grab underneath my skirt, I was humiliated, embarrassed, disgusted and angry." (aged 31)

> “I’ve been harassed on multiple nights out by men, sometimes just cat calling or shouting/saying things, other times forcing themselves on me to kiss me or put their hands on me, nobody else has ever helped in these situations and it made me feel ashamed, upset and angry.”(aged 25)

Shame is a very painful emotion, felt when we sense that we have lost worth in other people’s eyes. In the night-time economy this is experienced as a sense of being alone and of not ‘belonging’ in that environment.

‘Uncomfortable’ and ‘upset’

Women expressed other emotions in response to USI. In particular, they used two terms – ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘upset’ – that we consider to be rather ‘elastic’. Both terms cover a range of emotions, so it is difficult to determine their precise meaning. However, despite being comparatively mild terms, they were used to describe reactions to intrusions that included sexual assault, for example:

> “Groped multiple times on nights out by men, top pulled down - not massive impact to me but was still an uncomfortable experience.” (aged 29)

> “On a night out with 3 girl friends, two males followed us everywhere, toilets, bar, outside. One put his hand up my skirt and grabbed my chest. Felt uncomfortable. Don’t go out anymore.” (aged 28)

> “I’m a female, a man had pulled my top down and exposed my breasts. Felt very upset and vulnerable. He made me feel insecure as there were hundreds of people in the club.” (aged 22)

Women might use these relatively mild terms to describe such intrusions partly because USI has become ‘normalised’ – an expected, inevitable feature of a night out, unremarkable in its ubiquity. This normalisation means effective interventions are unlikely and USI is rarely taken seriously by others.

As a result, in order to preserve their own identity as a fun-seeking participant in the night-time economy and to avoid their night out being spoiled by USI, women engage in ‘emotion work’ which downplays the behaviour and its impacts and dampens their reactive emotions. They also engage in ‘safety work’ which, for some, means not engaging in the night-time economy.

Discussion and Considerations

Women expressed fear, anger, and shame – as well as ‘discomfort’ and ‘upset’ – in response to USI in the night-time economy. These reactions are individual and personal, but they are also social. They are social because, as well as resulting from interactions with others, they are both products of and help to reproduce our social, cultural, and political worlds.

Women’s fear – the predominant emotion - indicates their sense that their personal safety was threatened, and they anticipated further harm. This fear might stem not only from the immediate circumstances, but also from previous experiences as well as the current heightened attention to GBV and collective awareness of its nature and extent. Women’s fear challenges the idea that the night-time economy is liberatory and hedonistic; this aspect of it is not equally available to all. Fear of men’s sexual intrusions is also significant because it leads women to modify their behaviour and engage in ‘safety work’ which restricts their freedom to engage equally.

The recent increased attention to GBV has been accompanied by a growing anger, if not rage, expressed by many women – and some men - around the globe. Anger expresses the injustice of GBV and powerfully asserts that the angry person is not responsible for the injustice. The anger reported by participants in our research might reflect that anger is now a more acceptable emotion – indeed, it may be the obvious, even required response to USI.

However, the majority of women in this study did *not* express anger and some expressed shame. Shame and stigma work to police women's behaviour and have been a fundamental aspect of the maintenance of men's violence. Traditionally, women have been held responsible for their own victimisation, but there is a contemporary shift towards re-framing USI as an injustice and towards holding to account those who sexually intrude. The combination of anger and shame found in this study may reflect the traditional and contemporary framings of USI, reflecting the current "emotional climate" (Bericat, 2016, p. 504) of social reactions to GBV.

Recommendations

This study shows that, to prevent USI and to improve social responses in the night-time economy:

1. Women should not be left to respond to USI alone because their ~~own~~ emotional reactions, and their assessment of the risk of exacerbated violence, mean they are not free to respond as they might wish.
2. Staff in the night-time economy (e.g. bar staff and security staff) should be trained to recognise and skilfully respond to USI. This training should include consideration of the impacts of USI, as well as the range and complexity of women's emotional responses to it..
3. Venues should provide clear messaging that USI is not tolerated in their premises and their responses to it should back up this messaging.

References

Bericat, E. (2016). The sociology of emotions: Four decades of progress. *Current Sociology*, 64(3), 491–513.

Lewis, R., & McBride, A. (2024). Fear, "Discomfort," Anger, and Shame in the Night-Time Economy: Women's Responses to Unwanted Sexual Intrusions. *Violence Against Women*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012241259719

Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020). "Contested gendered space: Public sexual harassment and women's safety work". In Ceccato, V. and Nalla, M.K. (eds.) *Crime*

and fear in public places: Towards safe, inclusive and sustainable cities. (pp 217-231). London: Routledge.

WHO, (2021) *Violence against women Prevalence Estimates, 2018. Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women*. WHO: Geneva

Data

Table 1: Participants' age, ethnicity and region

		Number	***As percentage of those who gave info.***
Age	18-25yrs	73	46%
	26-35	54	34%
	36-45	26	16%
	46+	7	4%
Ethnicity (1)	White	168	83%
	Asian/British Asian	15	7%
	Mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds	9	4%
	Black/African/ Caribbean/Black British	8	4%
	Other ethnic group	3	1%
Region	North East	78	38%
	North West	74	36%
	Scotland	31	15%
	Elsewhere in UK	15	7%
	Elsewhere in the world	5	2%

(1) The sample broadly reflects the ethnic profile of the UK population (Gov.uk, no date, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/#:~:text=Government%20data%20about%20the%20UK's,a%20variety%20of%20ethnic%20backgrounds..

Table 2: Women expressed a variety of emotions in response to USI

Emotion expressed by women	***Number of women expressing emotion***
Fear - scared, wary, unsafe, anxious, intimidated, on edge, petrified, threatened, terrified, uneasy, nervous, cautious, on high alert, insecure	37
Discomfort - uncomfortable	20
Anger - angry, annoyed, infuriated, hate it	19
Upset - upset, horrible, traumatic, awful, hurt, confused	14
Vulnerable – vulnerable, violated, objectified, small, insecure, invalid, powerless	11
Shame - embarrassed, mortified, guilty, ashamed, my fault, humiliated	10
Disgust - disgusted, sickening, horrible	7
Shock - shocked, startled, shaken	7
No emotion - desensitised	1

Biographies

Dr. Ruth Lewis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University. Her research over more than three decades has focused on diverse forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, homicide, sexual harassment, and digital forms of abuse and she has published widely on these topics. In addition, she been involved in various kinds of activism, including helping to run domestic violence organisations, to organise conferences and ‘gatherings’ for practitioners, activists, and scholars, and to provide training about GBV.

Dr. Amanda McBride is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Well-being, Northumbria University. Her research focuses on the role of gender in our social worlds, particularly in the night-time economy and in the lives of children and young people.

Shout-Up! is Shout-Up! UK has been operating in the UK since 2017, and started in Newcastle upon Tyne by Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland in partnership with Newcastle City Council. More than 2,000 bar and venue staff in the North East of England, Northamptonshire, and Torbay have received training and skills development to understand and intervene in sexual harassment in the night-time economy.