

The Role of Gender Equality on Sexual Assault

Isabella Robles, Sofia Flaten, Jordan Rice, Grace Miller, Phoebe Maxwell, & Claire R. Gravelin, Ph.D.
State University of New York at Geneseo

Introduction

- Rape is a highly gendered crime; nearly 1 in every 5 women, compared to 1 in 38 men, will experience completed or attempted rape (Smith et al., 2018).
- Recent data suggests troubling increases in victimization, with the number of victims of rape or sexual assault nearly doubling from 2016 to 2018 (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019).

The Functions of Power:

- Theoretically, sexual assault is understood to be driven by power, with violence against women a function of gendered sex roles that supports male domination and female exploitation (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975).
- Masculinity is viewed as a marker of male power and dominance. When masculinity is threatened, men aggress in order to reassert their dominance and demonstrate masculinity.
- In the context of sexual assault, prior work has established that when primed to feel powerful, women engage in less victim blaming due to increased perspective taking. Conversely, men primed to feel low in power blame victims less due to increased perspective taking (Gravelin et al., 2019).

Current Work:

- Our study expands on a previous study that examined rape culture at the state-level through secondary data sets. We explore the impact of power dynamics within rape culture to assess whether the increase of victimization rates are due to greater sexual aggression or greater safety in reporting assaults.

Previous Work

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to examine rape culture at a statewide level.

Hypothesis: In accordance with rape culture, states that are homogeneously male and less egalitarian will exhibit the greatest number of sexual assaults.

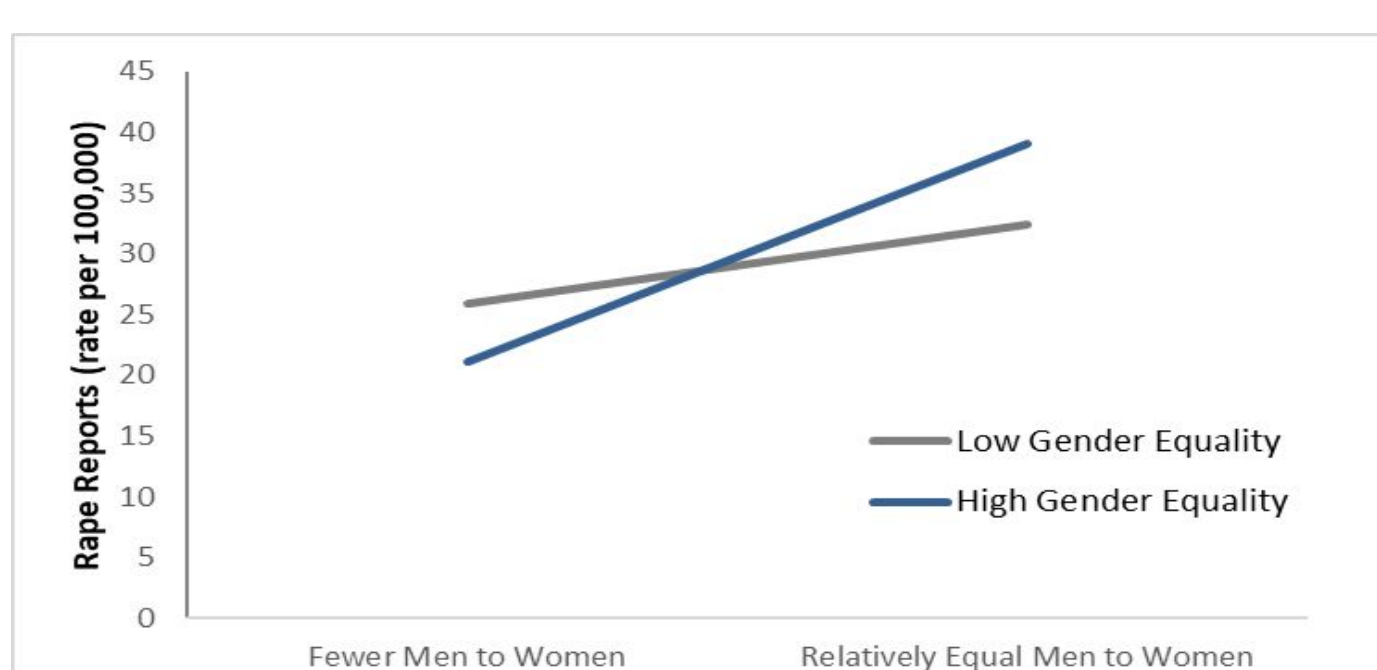


Figure 1: Rape Culture Index (interaction of sex ratio and gender equality) on rape prevalence.

Greater assaults were reported in states where the sex ratio was relatively equal, compared to female-dominated states. Due to the lack of homogeneously male states, it was not feasible to fully examine the homogeneity component of the rape culture hypothesis.

Results and Discussion:

These findings are not in line with the theoretical perspective of rape culture which asserts that in environments where there are more men (more homogeneously male) and men possess more power (low gender equality, less egalitarian), more sexual assault will occur. However, in support of the theory of precarious manhood (Vandello et al., 2008), this study found that in environments where men hold less power there is more sexual assault. Additionally, higher gender equality, meaning greater economic, political, and legal power, may make women feel as though if they are to report their sexual assault, it will be taken seriously (Gravelin et al., unpublished).

Current Work

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to manipulate the perception of equality among men and women to assess rape proclivity among men and feelings of safety in reporting among women.

Hypotheses: The current work explores two potential competing hypotheses regarding the influence of power in acceptance of sexual violence and safety in reporting:

- We explore if exposure to information of women gaining power over men leads to an increase in male acceptance of sexual violence and an increase in women's feeling of safety in reporting sexual violence.
- It is expected that men maintaining power will not lead to differing levels of acceptance on sexual violence, and women's lack of trust in filing reports of sexual violence.

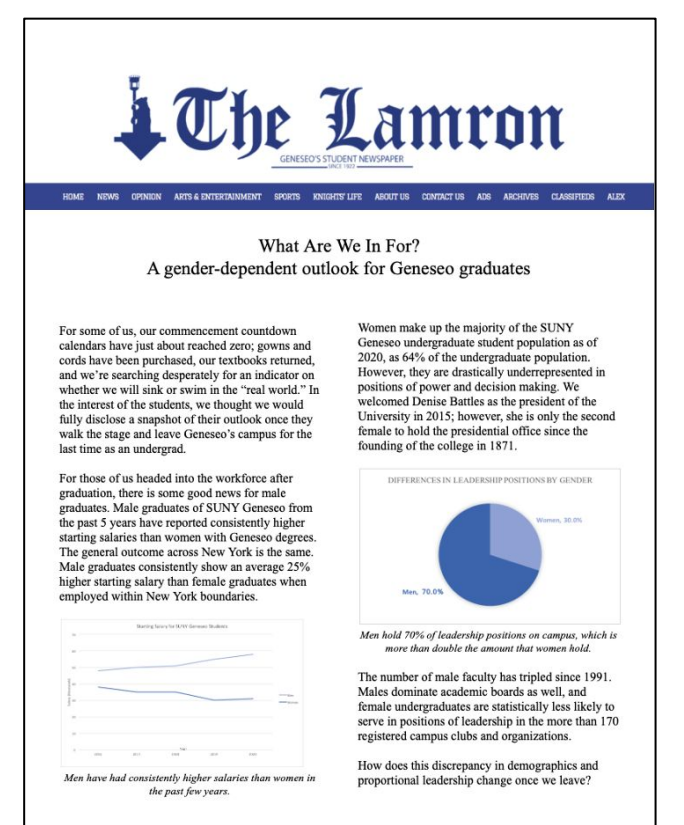
Method:

- Participants are 40 (90% F) undergraduates, predominantly white (87.5%), majority identifying as independent and liberal (Mdn = 3), and ranging in age from 18-21 (M = 19.13; SD = 1.02).
- Participants were recruited from a psychology subject pool for undergraduate students at SUNY Geneseo and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions:

- 1) Men in Power (n = 16)
- 2) Women in Power (n = 15)
- 3) Control (Power and Gender Neutral) (n = 9)

Assessments:

- Acceptance of Sexual Violence:** 23-item questionnaire ($\alpha = .91$) measures acceptance of sexually violent behaviors in sexual encounters on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., "Having sex with someone while they are drunk" and "Physically detaining someone to have sex")
- Feelings of Safety in Reporting:** 10-item questionnaire ($\alpha = .84$) that measures agreement with statements of authority and reports of sexual assault on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., "The authorities would take the report seriously" and "The authorities would support the person making the report").



Current Trends and Future Directions:

Given the small sample size, caution should be given to the interpretation of both significant and nonsignificant effects. We are continuing to collect data to explore our hypotheses.

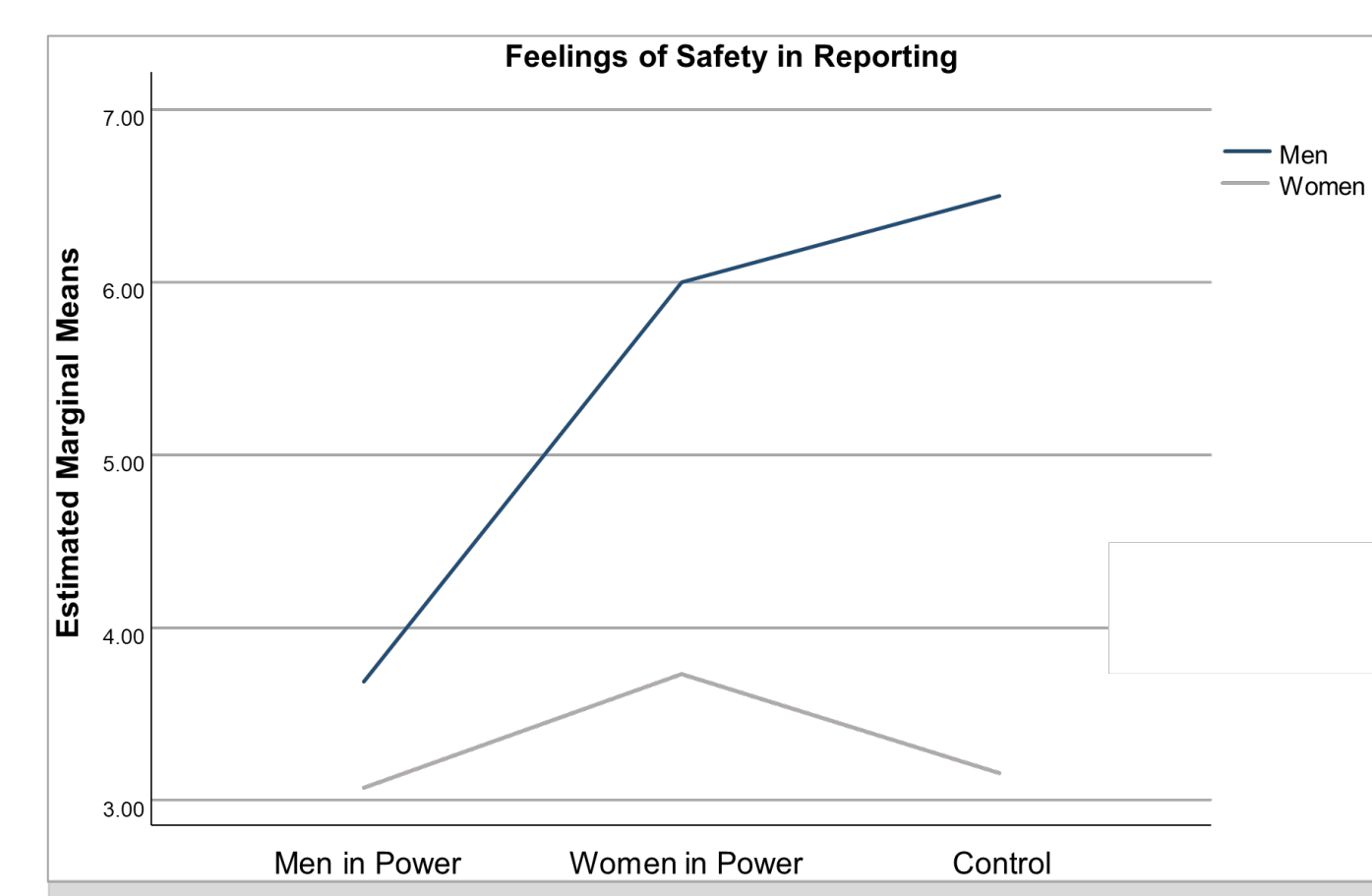


Figure 2: Feelings of safety in reporting between conditions.

Results revealed a significant main effect of condition on perceptions of safety and/or seriousness of how authorities would handle reports of sexual assault, $F(2, 34) = 3.64, p = .04, \eta^2 = .18$. Specifically, participants who believed men were in power were significantly less likely to believe authorities are properly handling cases of assault ($M = 3.15, SD = .77$) than participants who believed women were in greater power ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.25, p = .06$). No differences emerged in the evaluations of authorities between the men in power and control condition, or the women in power and control condition (both p 's $> .38$). This is expected for the men in power condition because men in power is the societal norm, unexpectedly, however, for the women in power condition our sample size over-represents women and is too small accurately measure this. We also found a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 34) = 13.26, p = .001, \eta^2 = .28$. Specifically, men ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.49$) were significantly more likely to believe authorities are properly handling cases of assault compared to women ($M = 3.35, SD = 1.06$). There was no significant interaction, $F(2, 34) = 2.25, p = .12, \eta^2 = .12$.

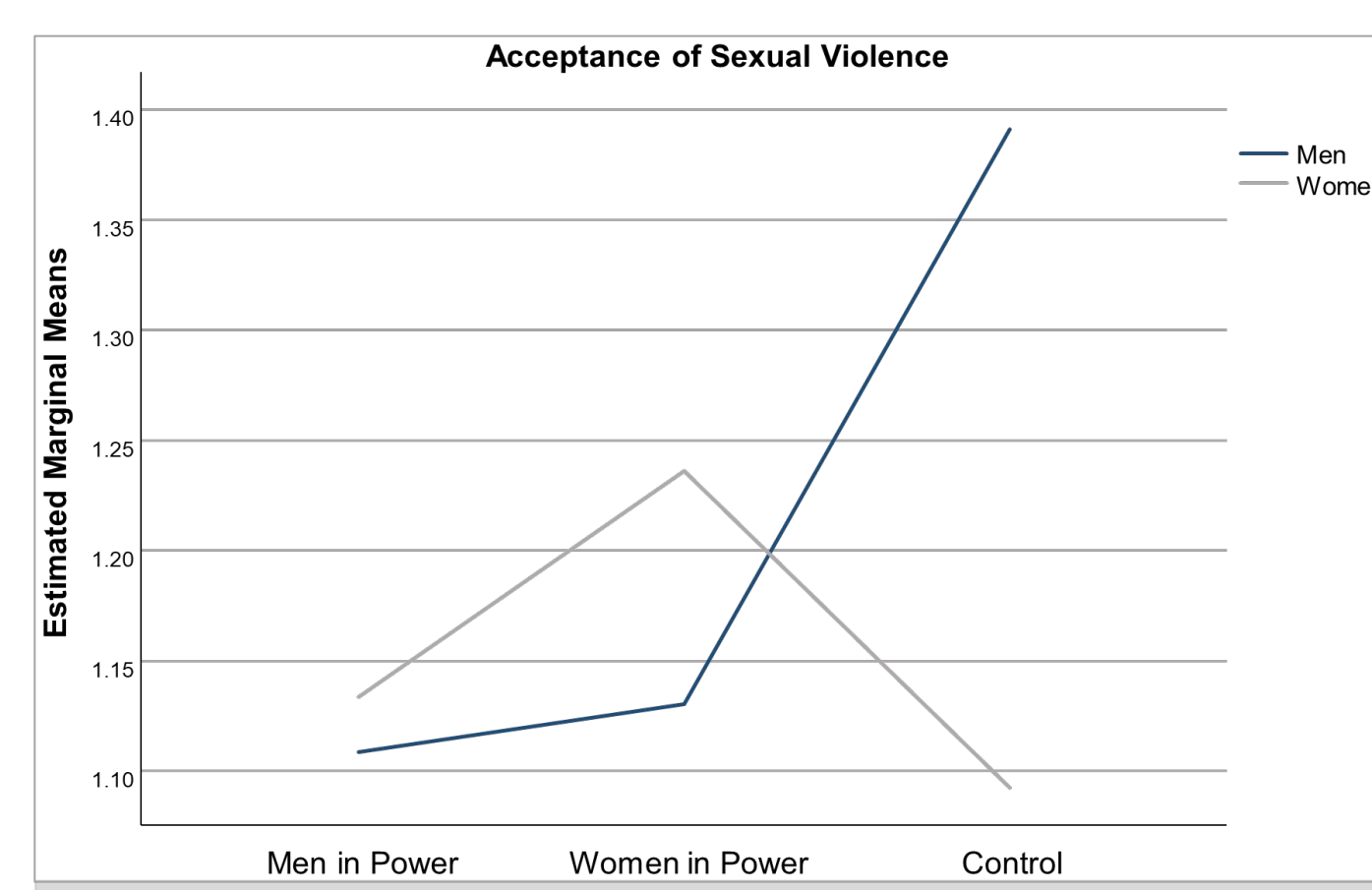


Figure 3: Acceptance of sexual violence between conditions.

There were no significant main effects or interaction (all p 's $> .10$). Current results suggest a potential floor effect among the sexual violence measure, as participants are not responding beyond the lower end of the scale ($M = 1.17, SD = .14$). Data collection is ongoing, but suggests a potential reconsideration of the acceptance of sexual violence scale in order to include more ambiguous and acceptable sexual behaviors.

References:

Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, Women, and Rape*. Penguin.

Gravelin, C.R., Biernat, M., & Baldwin, M.W. (2019). The impact of power and powerlessness on blaming the victim of sexual assault. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, 22*(1), 98-115. doi: 10.1177/1368430217706741

Morgan, R., & Oudekerk, B. (2019). *Criminal victimization, 2018* (NCJ 253043). U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv18.pdf>

Smith, S. G., Zhang, X., Basile, K. C., Merrick, M. T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., & Chen, J. (2018). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2015 data brief – updated release*. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/2015data-brief508.pdf>

Vandello, J. A., Bosson, J. K., Cohen, D., Burnaford, R. M., & Weaver, J. R. (2008). Precarious manhood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*(6), 1325-1339. doi: 10.1037/a0012453