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Published online: 16 Apr 2023.

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The missing and imagined perpetrator in rape prevention efforts

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ABSTRACT

In response to unceasing rates of sexual assault, and the failure of statutory interventions to reduce the prevalence of sexual violence, several prevention strategies have emerged. Over the past fifty years, initiatives have included awareness raising campaigns, provision of self-defence training, promotion of rape alarms, and education-based efforts in the form of bystander intervention and consent training workshops aimed at encouraging prosocial action to reduce sexual violence. More recently, a striking array of technologies has emerged claiming the capacity to prevent or mitigate the risk of sexual violence including apps that harness the communication functions of smart technology and a variety of 'wearables' designed to protect the body from assault or repel a would-be assailant. In this paper we analyse these prevention initiatives in the modern period, demonstrating that what is striking about the majority is the relative absence of the perpetrator in both design and endorsement. Where an assailant is alluded to, this 'imagined perpetrator' tends to reflect stereotypical constructions of how sexual violence occurs and who commits it. The consequence of such representations is that many prevention efforts place responsibility onto potential victims to protect themselves, contributing further to widespread misunderstandings about the realities of rape and rapists.

Introduction

Over the last five decades, and following the advent of the second wave feminist movement, there has been increasing attention paid to the pervasive and persistent global issue of rape and sexual assault experienced predominately (though not exclusively) by women, at the hands of men.[1] Around one in three women (35 per cent) globally will experience sexual or physical violence from an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-intimate such as a friend, relative, acquaintance or a stranger in their lifetime.[2] The impact of sexual violence on women's lives can be significant, with survivors

experiencing physical, mental, social and interpersonal harms in the shorter and longer term.[3] Decades of feminist efforts through the provision of non-statutory welfare services, campaigning and awareness raising and holding states to account,[4] have led to significant legal and procedural reforms.[5] While these reforms have been generally welcomed, prevalence nonetheless remains high, disclosure and reporting low,[6] and criminal justice outcomes poor.[7]

In order to address the enduring problem of sexual assault and rape in the lives of women, an array of prevention interventions has emerged over time. Taking a number of forms, these initiatives have sought to reduce sexual violence prevalence and incidence, and to mitigate harms when violence occurs. Efforts have broadly fallen into feminist-informed approaches, more neo-liberal individualised crime prevention initiatives, and public health strategies that differentiate between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention is an attempt to stop violence happening in the first place, secondary prevention is early intervention with at risk groups and seeks to mitigate the harms caused by sexual violence in its immediate aftermath, and tertiary prevention is intended to ameliorate the longer-term impacts of sexual violence. It is primary prevention with which we are concerned in this paper.

Drawing upon Carol Bacchi's approach to policy analysis, *What is the Problem Represented to Be?*,[8] and extending its use to sexual violence prevention efforts, we critically assess how perpetrators have been represented within four distinct areas of sexual violence primary prevention: self-defence strategies; bystander training; anti-rape technologies; and public safety campaigns. Bacchi argues that particular representations of social problems 'often obscure or distort what the problem actually is'. She gives the example of 'violence against women' being the predominant term over 'violence by men'.[9] Although developed for policy analysis, it can be extended to other programmes and products.[10] The approach encourages identification of both the explicit and implicit diagnosis of the problem within any initiative. Bacchi encourages six interrelated questions to be asked when considering the framing of social problems, not all of which must be addressed in every analysis: what is the problem (e.g. 'sexual violence') represented to be in any particular context?; what presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation?; how has this representation come about?; what is left unproblematic in this problem representation?; what effects are produced by this representation of the problem?; and how/where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended, and how has or could it be disrupted/replaced?[11]

Analysing the four areas of prevention activity over time, what is most striking about the majority is the relative absence of the perpetrator in both their design and promotion. Almost all prevention initiatives have been targeted at (potential) women victims, with a few aimed at others who might intervene to prevent those women from a sexual violation. Moreover, when potential perpetrators *are* referred to in such initiatives, they are often presented in particular ways, and addressed indirectly rather than directly, as the 'imagined perpetrator'. Through our presentation of four case studies of prevention activities in the modern era, we delineate what has historically been missing in most sexual violence prevention interventions – perpetrators. We critically assess how, when they are alluded to, they have been constructed and presented. This includes not only who they are but, where they are, what they are doing, to whom and how? We argue that the social construction of rape and sexual assault as a particular type of

problem with a particular type of perpetrator, often results in neoliberal individualised prevention efforts that place responsibility on victims to protect themselves or to rely on others to protect them and contributes to widespread misunderstandings about the realities of sexual violence.

Self-defence

In the 1960s there began a sustained social involvement with self-defence practices assumed to eliminate, or at least mitigate, attempts at rape and sexual assault.[12] Arising primarily from grass roots feminist groups, this move to promote greater collective action led to the growth of countless training programmes through which women were encouraged to learn how to physically and verbally resist sexual aggressions. Over the years since, many have vigorously promoted, in scholarly literature and in public discourse, the perceived value of these prevention strategies.[13] And the countless private sector and public institutional self-defence programmes that exist worldwide - such as the American based internationally-delivered 'Rape Aggression Defence' (R.A.D.) system which began in 1989 and continues today, or the online SEPS (Situation Effective Protective System for Women's Self-Defence) course first indexed by Google in 2013 - are testament to the widespread belief in the potential for such activities to keep a woman safe from sexual violence.[14] As claimed by one UK centred organisation that advises public servants globally in 2018: 'Want to end sexual violence? Feminist self-defence is the only proven solution.'[15] At the same time, there emerged, particularly beginning in the early 2000s, numerous critiques of self-defence training, including the potential for victim-blaming, disregard of assaults by known assailants, risks for unanticipated injuries to women engaging in these techniques, physical limitations that might preclude many from such activities, and the limits of this intervention for ending sexual violence at a collective level.[16] While some self-defence training supporters have been very responsive and reflexive in considering such limitations, positing possible ways progressive protective programming that encompasses male responsibility could be developed and implemented, opinions regarding the viability and value of self-defence training continue to vary.[17]

Across the debates, and in much of the public and state-sponsored promotion of such approaches, what is most striking is that women (as potential victims) have been the sole focus of this prevention strategy. The tactics to be learned are addressed to them. The seemingly intractable historic problem of sexual violence is theirs to deal with. It is women who are to invest time and effort in learning skills not only for physical resistance, but in some training plans, to develop assertiveness and adopt de-escalation techniques. The onus is on women to make the required changes to established patterns of how they act and think. Interestingly, what has been offered or promised in return for acquiring this array of competences is more than just the prevention of rape and sexual assault, it is also enhanced empowerment, assertiveness, self-esteem and self-efficacy, along with reduced anxiety and fear, the development of healthier physical and emotional boundaries, sexuality and relationships and, a more positive body image.[18] According to two proponents in 2014, Drs. Jill Cermele and Martha McCaughey: 'Self-defence is empowering and can change women's beliefs about what they are capable of and what they are entitled to.'[19] The assumption is that women require not only self-protective physical capabilities, but entire psychological, emotional and social transformations.

Throughout the discourse on self-defence solutions, behaviour modifications and therapeutic benefits, has been the notably minimal role male perpetrators of sexual assault and rape have played in imagining such interventions. It is women who have been targeted to take on the physical, cognitive and emotional labour of being trained to prevent or resist sexual violence. Beyond the primary focus on their mind-sets and actions, this has been evident in the largely gender-neutral discourse of self-defence, where commonly the male purveyors of these crimes are described as 'attackers', 'perpetrators', 'assailants', and on one site promoting self-defence techniques, as 'bigger and stronger opponents.'[20] At times the literature simply refers generically to 'the individual' or 'the person doing this to you'. There is a gender-vacuum in the way that men who rape are portrayed, as in this statement made as part of a self-defence training programme in 2013: 'Most sexual predators are skilled sales people who know how to get you to trust them and hand over control of a situation to them.'[21] Correspondingly, the language describing prevention of sexual assault or rape has suggested that what is to be thwarted is something such as: 'an attack', 'unwanted advances', 'a harmful situation' or 'unwanted sexual contact', and that women in these situations would be trained to 'repel an attacker', 'fight violence with violence', 'stop coercive behaviour', 'de-escalate a situation', 'avoid physical confrontation', 'evade danger', 'spot a predator' or 'engage in risk reduction'. As one business offering training stated: 'Learn to spot danger signs and learn how to defend yourself when no danger signs are given.'[22]

Across these descriptions, the actual real-life protagonist, he whose behaviour is ultimately at the centre of such extensive prevention efforts, is customarily absent. While some of the more recent progressive work conducted on improving self-defence programming has recognised that rapists are in fact most commonly known to victims, the agency of those responsible has been missing from this approach. Instead, there is an 'imagined perpetrator' who remains largely implicit. The framing of self-defence suggests that he will most likely be a stranger, attack in public, and use physical force. This imagined perpetrator is far from the norm, however, as most women are assaulted by someone they know,[23] including friends, partners, colleagues and relatives, and are often subject to non-physical forms of coercive control or exploitation. While it is not beyond the realm of possibility that individual women in particular circumstances might be able to deploy self-defence skills with a known assailant, the perpetrator implied in most self-defence scenarios is the 'real rapist'[24], the stranger who lurks in the dark alleyway.

Bystander prevention

More recent than the emergence of collective efforts to train women to prevent sexual assaults themselves has been a growing interest in shifting greater responsibility to 'communities' for intervening to stop sexual violence. Beginning in the 1990s, 'practitioners and scholars in the field of sexual assault [ ] turned their attention to bystanders as potential allies in the prevention of sexual and relationship violence.'[25] This shift, it has been claimed, 'reduces the burden of sole responsibility for rape avoidance often placed on the potential victim.'[26] The most common approach taken to harness the potential of third parties, particularly in North America and increasingly in the UK and other jurisdictions, has been 'bystander prevention' programmes, many of them government sponsored.

Since the early 2000s, these have included: 'Green Dot', 'Bringing in the Bystander', 'Step Up!', the Joe Biden and Lady Gaga endorsed 'It's On Us', and the 'Know Your Power' social marketing campaign, among others. While such initiatives, many of which have become widely institutionalised primary prevention models, often talk of preparing community members for intervention, most are aimed at training college and university students to take prosocial action.[27] 'The bystander programmes seek to sensitise young people to warning signs of sexual assault, create attitudinal change that fosters bystander responsibility for intervening (e.g. creating empathy for victims), and build requisite skills/tactics for taking action.'[28] Varying in the length of time involved and specific models and content, they generally offer training materials that can include focus groups, scenario-presentations, and role-playing exercises intended to encourage particular behaviours and a commitment to active involvement.

Such initiatives have received a great deal of promotion and extensive implementation across private and public sector organisations, especially in educational settings. There has also emerged a considerable body of scholarly research on these training programmes, much evaluating programme effectiveness and barriers, as well as that focused on a range of topics including techniques for changing bystander mind-sets so that they are more likely to intervene, and factors that may influence bystander intervention (e.g. parental warmth, previous sexual victimisation, alcohol consumption).[29] Certain findings have suggested that bystander intervention training has been successful in terms of a reduction in the acceptance of rape myths, an increased ability to identify situations that would warrant intervention, and increased likelihood of prosocial bystander action.[30] The bystander prevention framework has also been critiqued. Some research has indicated that the seemingly positive effects of bystander training could be short-lived and,[31] as one observer noted, that it is problematic to rely only on bystander intervention 'to prevent sexual assaults, especially since the majority of assaults happen in situations where there are no bystanders.'[32]

As with self-defence strategies, across both bystander programmes and much of the research conducted on them, the perpetrator, once again, appears to be largely absent. What differs between these prevention interventions, however, is that in this case, so too is the victim. The bystander framework is focused on the behaviours of everyone but the perpetrator and victim, without whom sexual violence would not exist. The US-based 'Bringing in the Bystander' programme developed in the early 2000s, for instance, is '[b]ased on the premise that everyone in the community has a role to play in ending sexual and intimate partner violence on campus, the programme does not approach men as potential perpetrators or women as potential victims.'[33] The Washington, D.C. 'It's On Us' programme, in operation since 2014 with chapters on campuses in fifty states, refers to this approach as a cultural movement, 'a rallying cry, inviting everyone to step up and realise that the solution begins with us.'[34] Likewise, it has been asserted in the scholarly research that the 'bystander model gives all community members a specific role, which they can identify with and adopt in preventing the community problem of sexual violence,'[35] and that the appeal of these programmes is, in part, that the 'focus creates less defensiveness because people are approached as potential allies rather than as potential victims or potential perpetrators.'[36]

Similarly, the language commonly used to describe the context in which bystanders are anticipated to act also tends to be gender neutral. The American 'Know Your

Power' social marketing campaign first indexed in Google in 2009, teaches participants to 'be able to identify a range of unacceptable sexual behaviours.'[37] According to a 2013 American government publication regarding this form of primary prevention, 'bystanders are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviour when they are aware that there is a problem and they see themselves as a responsible party in solving the problem.'[38] One promotional article on bystander programmes in 2021 read, 'it means that if we see harmful behaviour we do something to address it and don't assume that someone else will,'[39] and another: 'It teaches bystanders how to safely intervene in situations where an incident may be occurring or where there may be risk'.[40] Participants are trained to recognise and take action in 'situations' that are indicative of 'unacceptable sexual behaviours' and 'harmful incidents', discursively void of real-life men who may rape and sexually assault.

While the focus within such programmes may suggest a more collective response, again, it is one directed to individual situations. Moreover, there appears to be an inherent assumption that those bystanders who intervene will always have good intentions. There are undertones of paternalism in some bystander models, that imply women are vulnerable and in need of protection, and that such protection is always benevolent. It is assumed the bystander could not also be a perpetrator, operating under the guise of providing safety and protection, but ultimately posing a threat themselves. At the same time, in addition to the imagined 'passive woman', it is dismissive of the possibility that she may reasonably prefer to exert her own agency regarding who she may choose to have consensual sexual relations with without having to account or defer to an intervener. Further, rather than address the issue directly with perpetrators (which may of course involve a safety risk for the bystander), problematic actions may not be named or challenged for what they are, but bystanders encouraged to 'divert' potential perpetrators instead. As such perpetrators and perpetration are not addressed directly; it does not say 'do not rape' but rather 'please stop others from raping'.

Anti-Rape technology

As with many social problems, technology is often posed as the solution. Such has been the case with sexual violence, wherein a relatively new phenomenon has been the explosive arrival of a vast range of what can broadly be labelled 'anti-rape technologies'. These have typically come with the promise of preventing or mitigating an act of sexual assault or rape, and have been categorised as corporeal, communications and both corporeal/ communications devices,[41] some of which have come to the market, others that remain in the prototype stage and, most of which are promoted through the internet. Corporeal technologies refer to those items worn on or in the body. These would include: 'Safe Shorts', originating from Germany in 2017, that can only be removed via a special lock or scissors; an 'anti-molestation jacket' developed in 2013 by students at the National Institute of Fashion Technology in New Delhi, India that releases an electrical charge should someone attempt to grope the person wearing it; the 'True Love Tester' bra introduced in 2014 by a Japanese lingerie firm that unclasps only when its wearer secretes certain chemicals associated with love; the 'Invi' bracelet created by a Dutch start-up in 2016 that can be opened to emit a pungent odour to repel a would-be attacker and; the Swedish 'FemDefence', a tampon prototype presented in 2005 to

be worn internally with a spiked tip intended to damage an unwelcome penis.[42] Communications technologies have primarily taken the form of apps for mobile phones. There exist a wide variety of such apps which were designed to allow the owner of the phone to contact friends or family should they be concerned about the circumstances they are in such as '*bSafe*' (a U.S./Norwegian product) or the American 'Circle of 6' app that Wired Magazine called 'the twenty-first century rape whistle.'[43] Some have tracking functions for those contacts, and others still have recording capabilities intended to produce evidence of a sexual assault.[44] Apps such as the Danish-developed 'I Consent' and the U.S.-based 'Yes to Sex' record both parties consenting to sexual relations in advance of those activities.[45] Finally, several tools have been created to be both worn on the body and digitally communicate with others. This category would include 'Athena Safety Wearable' jewellery that can send emergency messages via a mobile phone and the 'Smart Jewellery Bracelet' designed to detect and communicate changes in the vital signs of the person wearing it, both originating in the U.S. 'The Personal Guardian', created by a university student in Scotland, is a small device to be attached to the owner's clothing and connected to a mobile phone in order to record a sexual assault should it occur.[46]

These are only samples of items from the typology, and while the use of devices is not new — for example the chastity belt dates back centuries and rape alarms and whistles became popular in the 1970s and 80s —[47] over the last few years, such technologies have garnered a notable amount of both public and scholarly attention and have generated discussion as to their merits, limitations and potential dangers.[48] Although many of these tools have been developed and promoted by those with earnest and good intentions to prevent sexual violence, some have perceived anti-rape technologies as ultimately problematic on several levels. In addition to the possibility that some of these devices could fail and in fact injure the person wearing them rather than the attacker, it has been suggested that those with whom one is communicating and being tracked by may not have one's best interests at heart; that audio and video recordings made through the wearables and apps could be not only ineffective in the criminal justice system, but lead to unanticipated outcomes for a victim; that the promotion of these tools could foster fear-mongering and the normalisation of sexual violence and; that the nature of many of these technologies reflects myths about how sexual assaults most frequently occur and thus, through their misrepresentations, may at best be ineffective and at worst compound the negative impacts of sexual violence.[49]

An additional critique offered regarding anti-rape technologies, and one which is at the heart of our analysis of prevention initiatives, concerns responsibilisation – where those who may be victimised are made responsible for preventing it.[50] Every one of these technologies is designed for and targeted at women. As the potential victims of sexual violence, it is up to women to take responsibility to wear, insert or carry some device to hopefully stop or mitigate a rape. Throughout the discourse on safety, the perpetrator has been, once again, largely missing. Only women have been the subject of these efforts. To our knowledge, there are no anti-rape tools aimed at men. There is no assumption that they should purchase, tote around, put on or attach to their bodies some product to ensure that they do not sexually assault a woman. Many have 'seized the opportunity to profit from women's fears by commodifying safety in the form of gadgets, alarms and workshops that socialize women to be every more fearful,'[51] but

none have opted to market any devices to men to prevent them perpetrating sexual violence. The only related apparatus we could identify specifically aimed at men was the Cellmate, a digitally controlled device developed in 2019 that locks up the penis and can only be opened by someone else.[52] However, this tool is not designed and marketed to prevent men from committing sexually violent acts, but rather as a sex toy to protect men's chastity, allowing a partner to be dominant in making the decision of whether and when it is to be released. To some degree this plays on the trope of men's seemingly unstoppable sexual desires that cannot be controlled without technological intervention, seeking to protect men from themselves rather than the women they may rape. In any case, even if such a device were to be suggested for prevention purposes, it would be wholly impractical, subject to misuse (in 2021 Cellmate were hacked with a ransom demanded to release them),[53] disregarding of the fact that sexual violence can involve digital penetration, or the use of objects, or not involve a penetrative offence at all, and further suggests men are incapable of exerting a modicum of self-control over sexually violent behaviour.

What is of note for our purposes, however, is the nature of the assumed perpetrator as embodied in the design of many of the anti-rape technologies. For the most part, they have addressed a woman responding to an imagined perpetrator, from whom she would need to flee, or whom she would need to attack or alert others about with the aid of some tool. In these imaginaries, he is most likely a stranger who will use force and will take her by surprise while she is alone in a public place. He has not been constructed as her partner, her friend or her relative, with whom she would presumably be unlikely to be carrying or deploying such a device, suggesting further that the design of these technologies reifies the public-private divide so frequently found in gender-based violence discourse.[54] Nor is there recognition that many of these tools, especially those that allow for contemporaneous tracking and 'checking-in', could in fact be used by perpetrators for cyber-stalking,[55] or in the context of coercively controlling relationships.[56]

Public Safety Campaigns

Campaigning has been a key part of the anti-rape movement since the 1960s, with feminist-informed consciousness raising groups, 'reclaim the night' marches, efforts to shatter the silence that often surrounds sexual assault and rape,[57] and attempts to establish sexual violence as a public issue key to the work of the state.[58] Campaigns have sought to raise public awareness about the realities of sexual violence in women's lives and to highlight the feminist-informed support available to them in the form of refuges and crisis centres.[59] While the impact of such campaigns is often unknown, generally due to a lack of evaluation, historically public awareness raising was appropriate, given the denial of both society and the state regarding the scale and realities of sexual violence in women's lives.[60] However, from the 1980s and 1990s onward, in the context of a UK and North American government and social policy ethos characterised by an individualised, neo-liberal approach to risk,[61] prevention work began to take a different form, underpinned by the idea of the 'at risk individual' and focussed primarily on women taking action to avoid victimisation.[62]

Since this era, we have seen a proliferation of safety campaigns designed for primary prevention of sexual violence. Rolled out through a variety of media using social

marketing strategies, and run by a range of agencies, an analysis of these campaigns shows a striking pattern; they are almost entirely focussed on women's behaviour and the actions they are expected to take to avoid or prevent sexual violence against them. This advice includes not walking home alone or leaving friends behind, not using unlicensed or un-booked taxis, avoiding the consumption of too much alcohol, watching drinks when in bars and clubs, and refusing a lift to, or free drinks at, a house party. There are countless examples. For instance, a 2015 campaign from Sussex Police showed two young women on a night out taking a 'selfie' with a mobile phone.[63] The poster also included the words, 'Which one of your mates is most vulnerable on a night out? The one you leave behind. Many sexual assaults could be prevented. Stick together and don't let your friend leave with a stranger or go off on their own'. Another from South Wales Police in 2013 featured a young woman in a dress walking on the pavement with no shoes on, alone, with the message, 'Don't Go It Alone', depicted in blood spattered text akin to a horror movie, followed by the phrase, 'Stay Safe - Stay With Your Friends' in English and Welsh.[64] Both clearly suggest women who walk or travel home alone are putting themselves at risk of sexual violence. A further example from Singapore in 2011 depicted the image of a man about to grope a woman's bottom with the statement, 'Don't Get Rubbed Up the Wrong Way. Protect Yourself.'[65] No indication of precisely how one was to do so was provided.

A common theme within these safety campaigns has centred on alcohol consumption, urging women not to consume too much as it might make them vulnerable to sexual violence.[66] By way of example, in 2011, Pennsylvania's Liquor Control Board issued a rape prevention campaign with an image depicting a woman's legs on a bathroom floor, her underwear around her ankles, accompanied by the slogan, 'She Didn't Want To Do It, But She Couldn't Say No.'[67] In 2005-7, the Home Office and Department of Health in England ran a campaign including a poster showing a woman lying on the floor, holding herself between her legs, a pained expression on her face, with the slogan, 'One in Three Rapes Happens When the Victim Has Been Drinking.'[68] A campaign by Calderdale Council in England in 2013 presented a young woman with 'zombie-like' features accompanied by the words, 'Night of the Reckless Drunk. When You Drink Too Much You Lose Control and Put Yourself at Risk. Don't Let Your Night Out Become a Nightmare!'[69] While it did not mention sexual violence directly, the depiction of the woman with her dress hanging off one arm, and carrying her shoes, and the associated messaging, implied sexual risk. Another from West Mercia Police in 2012 sought to combine alcohol messaging and the need to travel home safely. It presented a young woman enjoying a night out in a bar on the upper part of the poster, and on the lower part, the same young woman lying unconscious, with no shoes, accompanied by the message 'Don't Let a Night Full of Promise … Turn into a Morning Full of Regret.' And 'Don't Leave Yourself More Vulnerable to Regretful Sex or Even Rape. Drink Sensibly and Get Home Safely.'[70]

One group of campaigns attempted to discourage women from using unlicensed taxis or minicabs. In 2013, the West Yorkshire Police used the Christmas carol 'Twelve Days of Christmas' with an image showing a young woman dancing on a night out and the message: '9 ladies dancing, 8 males a winking, 7 shots a swimming, 6 girls are swaying, 5 drunken flings, 4 rising skirts, 3 taken home, too drunk alone … and a rapist in a bogus taxi.'[71] This campaign drew upon several rape myths, referring to

clothing, alcohol, and women's behaviour seemingly provoking sexual violence. Another rolled out by Transport for London included several images intended to deter women from taking unlicensed cabs. One showed a woman's face, inside a car, crying and with a look of severe distress, as if she were being raped. The poster read: 'STOP, NO. STOP PLEASE, NO, PLEASE. PLEASE STOP TAKING UNBOOKED MINCABS', followed by the text, 'Whether you approach the driver, or they approach you, there's no record of the journey and you're putting yourself in danger.' An additional image presented from the same campaign involved text only saying, 'The door's locked. Your knickers are round your ankles. Now imagine you're in an un-booked minicab.'[72]

This is only a selection from the myriad safety campaigns that have been implemented, some of which had to be withdrawn, or their promoters apologise, following legitimate criticism for victim-blaming messaging. What is striking among these mostly state-sponsored campaigns is the total absence of the perpetrator in any of the messaging; responsibility to avoid sexual victimisation is placed firmly and squarely on the shoulders of women, through images and words that might well be triggering for those who have experienced sexual violence. While many harness enduring rape myths about women's vulnerability, sexual agency, and reinforce the 'ever-present' threat (and fear) of rape, almost all these campaigns are based on the 'imagined perpetrator': typically, a stranger, who will assault in a public place, prey on vulnerable young women in bars and clubs, or hide in plain sight masquerading as a licensed taxi driver. He is imagined to be a constant threat, especially in alcohol-consuming socio-sexual situations, but one who can somehow be avoided if one is sober enough to resist. He is never imagined to be the friend who walks you home, the person you return home to, or the licenced taxi driver in the cab you have booked.

While a range of prevention campaigns more broadly do seek to alter the behaviour of men,[73] and we can find a small number of these directed at men, few (if any) provide direct safety advice to prevent perpetration, but appeal instead to male paternalism by encouraging bystander intervention to prevent other men from raping'. Others harness alternative masculinities (e.g. 'My Strength is Not For Hurting') to create notions of 'good men' (non-rapists) and 'bad men' (rapists) rather than addressing perpetrators directly,[74] or aim to frighten men about a possible prison sentence for rape.[75] However, conviction rates and attrition data suggest conviction and custodial sentences are rare which is likely to reduce any deterrence effect.[76]

While there are notable examples of public awareness-raising campaigns that do not place the blame and responsibility on victims, in that they direct messages at the whole community and seek to challenge prevailing myths,[77] or focus specifically on the behaviour of men and promote greater responsibility taking,[78] for those promoting actions to improve women's safety specifically, the perpetrator is entirely absent. What we do not see are campaigns encouraging young men to stay home instead of going out, in order to reduce the chances of sexually assaulting someone. To our knowledge, no campaigns suggest men stick to brightly lit areas to avoid the opportunity of secluded places where they may sexually assault someone, nor are they advised to tell friends and family exactly where they are going to be and with whom so that should a sexual assault happen, someone can intervene, nor to make sure they walk home with a friend to avoid sexually assaulting someone. Such anti-rape tips have been circulating online and were presented

'tongue in cheek' on a blog post in 2011 to highlight how farcical such advice would be if it were presented realistically to men as a group. [79]

Consequences and implications

Based on our analysis of these four discreet examples of primary prevention approaches to sexual violence, we contend that throughout, the perpetrator is mostly missing in both their framing and promotion. Our findings reinforce previous criticisms that one of the major problems in addressing sexual violence has been the failure to explicitly name men as perpetrators.[80] At the same time, while not directly stated, we see the construction of an imagined perpetrator; one who likely does not represent the realities of sexual violence in women's lives. For example, in self-defence training, anti-rape technologies, and public safety campaigns he is most often a stranger who uses physical force; someone who is encountered by surprise, and for whom women need to take steps to avoid through limiting their social and public lives, being trained to respond defensively, and wearing devices to repel or injure. The perpetrator is rarely, if ever, imagined to be a friend, intimate, colleague or relative. Within bystander prevention, again, perpetrators are constructed as those who occupy public spaces, preying on the vulnerable. They are rarely, if ever, imagined to be partners. Crucially, perpetrators are never imagined to be the bystander – it is assumed that those who choose to intervene to escort someone home are safe, and unlikely to commit a sexual assault. Within such programmes we see aspects of paternalism towards those who are presumed to be vulnerable young women, a trope evident historically in women's safety discourses.[81] This paternalism is assumed to be benign rather than controlling, threatening or aggressive. Men are not asked directly to take responsibility for their own conduct, but to take responsibility to prevent others from being sexually violent.

We posit several implications of the missing and imagined perpetrator. Firstly, it is women and bystanders who are responsibilised to prevent sexual violence, with no accountability placed on perpetrators themselves.[82] Within these prevention examples liability for risk reduction and the associated avoidance and protection behaviours falls entirely to women and their friends.[83] It is she who is to carry a device, engage in training, and heed safety messages. It is her friends who must be alert at all social gatherings for the threat of sexual assault against her, intervene when needed, and who must respond to pings from apps or safety devices. The flip-side of this responsibilisation is blame (and self-blame) for women and their friends if something goes wrong.[84]

Further, through the representations we identified, a false picture of the realities of sexual violence is presented. Women are encouraged to fear strangers in public places, who may assault in the street, spike their drinks, or take them away from bars and clubs, or in an unlicensed taxi. While evidence suggests women fear stranger rape more than acquaintance rape, it is not where they face greatest risk.[85] There is also the potential to reinforce fear, and for women to feel at universal risk in their daily lives.[86] For example, both public safety campaigns and anti-rape technologies, promote the sort of safety work women already do. Over decades, the well-worn practices women have engaged in to keep themselves safe - referred to as 'safety talk'[87] and 'safety work'[88] – have been well documented,[89] highlighting the effect of limiting their social and public lives. Further, those prevention activities that use fear and risk as a

communication tool, reinforce a fear of sexual violence that is already ubiquitous among women,[90] and evidence suggests that some safety products may in fact increase anxiety and hypervigilance.[91] Rather than directly addressing those who perpetrate sexual violence, prevention work aimed at altering the behaviour of potential victims has the effect of atomising women, by 'encouraging each listener or reader to feel isolated and rather helpless in her fear, as well as personally threatened by the dangers suggested.'[92]

Historically, most rape-prevention efforts have been directed at female college populations, primarily teaching avoidance and self-defence skills, and this narrow demographic remains the primary focus of the prevention work we have considered.[93] While it is the case that young people are most at risk from sexual violence,[94] they are not the *only* victims, as sexual violence does not discriminate throughout the lifecourse. Perpetrators are also imagined to be assaulting only women; men are rarely considered as potential victims in these prevention measures. Women form the audience to whom technological devices are marketed, they appear in the safety campaigns, and it is women who are invited to attend self-defence classes. While men form a smaller proportion of those who are victimised - estimates suggest one in ten rape survivors is a man,[95] most often assaulted by a male perpetrator –[96] men's perpetration against other men is mostly not recognised within these prevention initiatives, which does little to challenge public attitudes around men's sexual victimisation,[97] and may compound challenges men experience in naming sexual violence against them, reporting and seeking support.[98] Similarly, sexual violence towards trans and gender non-conforming people is also not recognised.

Within the rape prevention efforts we examined, there is also a risk of presenting men as a polarity – 'bad men' (rapists) and 'good men' (non-rapists who protect women from the bad men). Not only does this demonise those who commit sexual violence - 'othering' them - but when the binary breaks down and the supposedly 'good men' are found to be sexually violent, their behaviour may be excused. When perpetrators are thought to be only certain 'types' of men, women can be vilified for their alleged role in the assault, for putting themselves at risk, or for their failure to adequately protect themselves, while 'good men' are vindicated as just 'nice young lads' who have somehow either been misunderstood or have been treated harshly when (or if) they are held to account.[99]

Additionally, as with all attempts at situational crime prevention, by focusing on potential victims and failing to address the actions of those who commit sexual violence, there may be both a displacement and a reassurance effect.[100] For the former, it is possible that rather than prevent victimisation *per se*, many of these measures simply displace it, to a more conducive context where bystanders or 'capable guardians' are not present, or on to a more vulnerable target; those who are not trained in self-defence, or who are not carrying apparently protective safety devices. These individualised approaches potentially prevent harm to one person, but displace the harm to another. In the end, we suggest, rather than being sexual violence prevention per se, or perpetration prevention, they are, in the main, efforts at individualised victimisation prevention. Relatedly, there may also be a reassurance effect for those who heed the safety advice, carry the technologies, attend the self-defence training, and have faith in bystanders to be able to identify risk and be able to intervene successfully. Elsewhere, in the context of anti-rape technologies, we have argued that this may be false reassurance, and that such technologies may comprise 'safety theatre,' whereby they give the sense and performance of safety but not

the reality of it.[101] Extending this argument to the wider range of prevention activities we considered here and complementing the notion of the 'imagined perpetrator', we propose that some prevention work may engender 'imagined safety' – a sense of safety that ultimately is a false promise given the many sites for sexual violence in women's lives.

Conclusion

Beyond those campaigns that clearly victim-blame and have been withdrawn, and the devices described that offer no safety potential whatsoever, we would not advocate removal of all the prevention efforts described. If reframed, there is a place for these in a mixed economy, especially those that raise awareness at a public level and encourage greater responsibility for rape and sexual assault among communities. However, unless prevention directly challenges the behaviour of perpetrators and demands men take responsibility for their sexually violent actions, little is likely to change. If sexual violence is addressed with perpetrators absent, it risks 'emptying rape of action and agents so that it becomes purely phenomenal.'[102]

Ultimately, women are not the appropriate target for interventions to prevent rape.[103] None of the initiatives we described demand that men give up their power - in fact some demand they use their power paternalistically to protect 'vulnerable women' from 'bad men'; a distinction that reinforces deeply ingrained gender stereotypes about women's capacity and agency. The prevention efforts we analysed are not challenging the social norms, conditions and unequal power relations that create conditions for sexual violence to prevail.[104] At present, most perpetrator-focussed prevention only occurs once men have offended and are subsequently criminalised, and we know this is the minority. To address sexual violence, we must shift the site of intervention to potential perpetrators and address its systemic causes.[105]

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Disclosure statement

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