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Why do men harass women?

On the phenomenon of sex differences between victims and perpetrators of stalking and other forms of emotional abuse

Abstract

Persistent harassment, including stalking, bullying and sexual harassment, which are classified as so called emotional abuse, have a lot in common. All of them involve harassing or tormenting other people. In the following article I will concentrate primarily on the problem of stalking, although sometimes the mechanism behind sexual harassment is similar and rooted in the same cultural foundations.

Keywords: stalking, abuse, sex differences, victim, women

Stalking – characteristics and sex differences between perpetrators and victims

Persistent harassment, including stalking, bullying and sexual harassment, which are classified as so called emotional abuse, have a lot in common. All of them involve harassing or tormenting other people. In a more extreme version, they take the form of persecution. All these behaviours stem from and are motivated by power. Through their behaviours, perpetrators wish to retain their power over another person (be it a partner, an employee or a colleague) or gain it (fighting for love, a position in the group or, sometimes, sexual gratification). Power is also realised through hierarchy at work or at school, i.e. establishing one's position in order to profit from it afterwards. The profits may take various forms, most frequently not motivated by financial grounds. Often, these are psychological gains (or apparent gains), e.g. belonging to a group and the position within it, obedience of

subordinates or boosting one's self-esteem. It is not uncommon that emotional abuse inflicted by the perpetrator is motivated by vengeance and is a form of revenge for any injustice (real or imagined) suffered.

In the following article I will concentrate primarily on the problem of stalking, although sometimes the mechanism behind sexual harassment is similar and rooted in the same cultural foundations.

There are many psychological definitions of stalking. Based on these definitions, as well as numerous scientific research, I believe stalking can be defined in the following way: it's a persistent, repetitive behaviour (or behaviours) directed towards a specific individual, which is an unjustified and gross violation of privacy of that specific person or constitutes a threat to their personal effects. As a result of the perpetrator's activity, the harassed individual, their loved ones or those responsible for their safety will most often experience justified anxiety and fear. By 'gross violation of privacy' I understand various unwanted behaviours, typical of stalking, such as: attempts at making contact (direct or through a third party), sending electronic or traditional mail, relentless calling, asking for the person in their social circle, following and controlling them in other ways (e.g. by means of electronic applications), standing outside their house, workplace or school, staying in places where the victim is or is likely to be, sending flowers or presents, breaking into the house or the car of the victim and theft of their property. 'A threat to the personal effects' of the victim of stalking are: spiteful or downright dangerous activities aimed at them or their loved ones, such as: making orders on their behalf (e.g. postal orders), slander (spreading untrue information and gossip, both verbally and via digital technology), harassing the family and friends of the victim and assault (verbal, physical and sexual) both of the victim and their family or friends.

One of the notable features of stalking is the gender disparity in the characteristics of both victims and perpetrators. In the case of all the aforementioned behaviours, the majority of perpetrators are men. Most research confirms the thesis. Paul Mullen, Michele Pathé and Rosemary Purcell report that in the research covering whole societies, the percentage of female perpetrators stands at 11 to 19% (Mullen et al., 2009, p. 136). In other research, roughly every fifth stalker is a woman (Mullen et al., 2009, p. 137; Bjerregaard, 2000, p. 396; Maran et al., p. 6074; Kulik, p. 137). The American National Crime Victimization Survey revealed that every fourth woman and every second man who had been victims of stalking

were harassed by a woman (Baum et al., 2009, p. 4). In some studies the participation of women is slightly higher: every third suspected person investigated by the anti-stalking unit in Los Angeles was a woman (Zona et al., cited in Mullen, 2009, p. 136). The higher proportion of stalking women is also reflected in the studies on stalking of minors and juveniles: every third stalker was a girl or a woman (Purcell, 2009, p. 3; Woźniakowska-Fajst, 2016, p. 50). In the cases I studied, there were 246 male perpetrators (82.2%) and 36 female perpetrators (12.8%).

Emotional abuse claims more female victims. Additionally, women more often express fear of stalking (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2007, p. 64). This likens stalking to practices like domestic violence or sexually-motivated crimes. The observation is borne out by practically all research: between 72 and 83% of victims have been women (Woźniak et al., 2010, p.10; Hall, 1998, p. 117; Skarżyńska-Sernaglia, 2009, p. 77, Kulik, p. 155). Similarly, in the cases that I studied, women constituted the majority of victims, standing at 278, which represented 82% of the research sample.

Doris M. Hall has interesting observations with regard to this disproportion (quite substantial in most studies) between female and male victims, reminding there is a well known pattern in victimology, namely that men report being crime victims less frequently than women (Hall D.M., 1998, p. 120). The lower reportability is particularly common in the case of crimes of delicate and intimate nature or when they challenge the stereotypical image of a man and masculinity: sexual violence, including rape, violence in close relationships or indeed stalking. What's more, men feel intimidated less often if the perpetrator is a woman. They perceive the behaviour as annoying or uncomfortable rather than threatening (Hall D.M., 1998, p.120).

Emotional abuse – its history and cultural background

From among all the forms of emotional abuse, it is stalking that has received the most thorough scientific analysis. The oldest legends featuring the motif of stalking date back to a Mesopotamian myth of Lilith (who also makes later appearance in the Talmudic tradition and Jewish folklore) and the biblical story of Zulaikha (Cupach and Spitzberg, 2004, p. 4), the wife of the Egyptian official Potiphar, who made advances to Joseph, giving him unwanted attention and trying to seduce him. When the man resisted, she accused him falsely before

her husband of trying to seduce her. Potiphar's wife is a recurrent theme in many cultures: the name Zulaikha features in the Bible, Arab legends and is reproduced in Greek myths (Phaedra and Hippolytus, Bellerophon and Anteia, Peleus and Astydameia) (Kopaliński, 2003, p. 1058). Orit Kamir had been searching for historical references to stalking in ancient mythology, medieval folklore, 19th century literature and contemporary films and managed to identify them in each of the sources (Kamir). The motif of stalking can be recognised in *The Art of Love* by Ovid, the works of Dante and Petrarch, as well as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (Cupach and Spitzberg, 2004, p. 4).

The fact that the interest in stalking was not ignited until about 40 years ago and has been penalised for only a quarter of century does not mean that the said behaviour did not occur earlier than that. In 1938, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, a French psychiatrist credited with coining the term 'erotomania', while describing a case of the very condition, identified elements of stalking. An average looking thirty-six-year-old with a proneness to depression fell passionately in love with an actress. He undertook numerous attempts to get closer to her, followed the woman, stood outside her house and the theatre where she performed. He refused to stop despite the actress's firm declaration that she did not wish to be harassed in that manner, the warnings issued by the woman's husband and her colleagues, and finally despite being beaten by men who tried to protect her. The perpetrator followed his victim in every public place and even followed her when she left Paris to go to the countryside. He interpreted every look and every gesture of the victim as an encouragement and was ultimately convinced of her love for him (Mullen et al., 2009, p. 94).

In 1886, an Austrian-Hungarian psychiatrist by the name of Richard von Krafft-Ebing published a book entitled *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which was a collection of paraphilia cases. In it he wrote that women, regardless of age, may exhibit fascination with successful actors, singers or athletes to the extent of inundating them with love letters. He referred (Hoffmann, 2009, p. 296) to a more sinister form of such a pathological fixation on public figures as cases of paranoia. In 1921, Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault, himself a French psychiatrist as well, described in detail cases of erotomania. In his work he analysed the case of a French woman who harassed the British king George V, prompted by a delusional conviction that the sovereign was in love with her. For several years she made regular journeys to England and stood outside the Buckingham Palace. On one occasion, she interpreted a movement of the

curtain in one of the windows as a secret signal from the king himself (Hoffmann, 2009, p. 297).

The term 'stalking' in its current meaning first appeared in the mid-seventies of the previous century (Cupach and Spitzberg, 2004, p. 5). The media and popular culture picked up on the idea in the 1980s. Before that, stalking had marred the lives of celebrities and ordinary citizens, yet it never figured in the public awareness, nor was it regulated by law in most countries. As it often happens, the changes in the perception of certain phenomena, and along with them legal solutions, are a result of high-profile stories. As far as stalking is concerned, the first impulse to publicising the phenomenon was the death of John Lennon. The most famous of the Beatles was shot dead in 1980 by Mark Chapman, a mentally ill man who suffered with paranoia and was obsessed by the artist. Only then did the discussion about how the celebrity status comes with inherent danger filter through to the public debate, and it was acknowledged that when a fan's awe of an artist turns into an obsession, the line between adoration and hatred becomes dangerously thin (Harvey, 2002, p. 31).

Since the 1980s, stalking has been a fixture in films, radio and TV programmes, the press, magazines, books and, finally, websites. In the media hype surrounding stalking, stories would sometimes surface of victims who, before they died at the hand of a stalker, expressed concern at feeling helpless faced with their harassment. The subject which until then had not garnered much interest became more and more publicised. In 1989, actress Rebecca Schaeffer was murdered by a 19-year-old, who'd been obsessed by her. The case paved the way for a debate on penalisation of stalking, initially in California, and then in the whole United States (Morewitz, 2004, p. 57).

Kathleen S. Lowney and Joel Best conducted an analysis of the media discourse with regard to stalking. They monitored how the perception of the phenomenon had changed over time in the United States. Between 1980 and 1988 the news about stalking were presented in the context of sexual harassment, obsession and psychological violation. In the years 1989-1991, possibly due to Rebecca Schaeffer's death, in 96% cases of media reports the subject of stalking was raised in the context of public figures, who would be victims of stalking. After 1992, the problem of stalking gained yet another perspective: stalking was presented in the media as a form of abuse between people who are close to each other, where the victim was

the woman and the perpetrators her ex-husbands and lovers (Lowney 1995, cited in Cupach and Spitzberg, 2004, p. 7).

It was not only stalking, however, that had been known long before it penetrated the public conscience. Czesław Szmidt (2012, p. 15) writes that ‘source analysis, both scientific and popular science, demonstrates that workplace bullying has always been there, in ancient China, Egypt, Greece and Rome.’ A similar tone is used when writing about sexual harassment. The manifestations of the latter were known in the medieval times as the ‘right of the first night’ (*ius primae noctis*), i.e. the right of feudal lords to have sexual intercourse with the wife of the subordinate on their wedding night. Before any legal regulations were put in place with regard to this practice, in France *droit de cuissage* had been quoted, which is indeed the right of the first night, in India references had been made to the Biblical motif of the temptation of Eve, while in Malaysia the words *gatal* or *miang* had been used, which are synonymous with ‘itchy hands’ (Otto, 2007, p. 10). In Poland, *The Morality of Mrs. Dulaska*, a play by Gabriela Zapolska, may serve as a perfect case in point, where the son of the main protagonist, a respected bourgeois woman from Kraków, romances with his family’s consent (encouragement even) a maid, and when she becomes pregnant, the only problem is disposing of her, while the blame and the consequences of the predicament are shouldered entirely by the girl herself.

Emotional abuse of women – cultural background

What links all the abusive behaviours described in the book is how deeply they are rooted in our culture, which serves to perpetuate the practices. Stalking, bullying in the workplace and sexual harassment are similar in that their victims are mainly women, while the perpetrators are mainly men. This fact is not a coincidence at all. A lot of emotionally abusive behaviours are based on gender stereotypes and pertain to traditional roles of women and men in the society. To list just a few: the culturally reinforced ritual of courting women, the perception of women’s sexuality or the role they should or can play at work, in the family or other areas within the society.

In our cultural territory, referred to now as the Global North, the myth of seduction and pursuit of women is very strongly entrenched. The role of the man is to be pro-active, to fight and to win over. The woman is supposed to wait. More than wait, even – instead of waiting

she is to actively resist advances, like Penelope did in the well-known parable. The ‘real man’, however, should know how to break such resistance. The Greek myth of the abduction of Europa or the legend of the abduction of the Sabine women exploited the motif quite early. Even contemporary culture and popular culture reinforce the message that the man has to get the woman and his persistence shall be rewarded. Mary Brewster (2003, p. 8-9, cited in Lippman 2018, p. 396) writes that, ‘movies, soap operas, and other media often demonstrate to viewers that stalking equals love and affection, and that persistence pays off; the stalker wins (or wins back) the desired object of their “affection”.’ Among the critically acclaimed films with a prominent stalking plot are *Indecent Proposal* (Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, 1993), *The Piano* (Jane Campion, Jan Chapman Productions CiBy 2000, 1993) or *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, Mike Nichols/Lawrence Turman Productions, 1967). It’s present in *The Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, 1987) or *A Short Film about Love* by Krzysztof Kieślowski (‘Tor’ Film Studio, 1988). In all these films the woman is not in the least interested in starting a romantic relationship with the man, and yet his persistence and relentless pursuit result in him winning over her heart. This cultural message has at least three potent consequences. The first is the dismissal of how the person experiencing stalking feels. Julia Lippman (2018, p. 395) writes that the most common complaint of female victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse and stalking is that they are not treated seriously. The second consequence is the widespread and culturally reinforced faith in true love, which is measured by the effort it takes to get the woman. As a result, a lot of people feel appropriate to facilitate the suitor’s efforts, perceived as manifestations of commendable affection. In good faith, friends of the victim disclose her personal information: the telephone number, habits, hobbies, favourite sweets, the date of birth. The final consequence is the conviction that a woman saying ‘no’ means ‘perhaps’, while ‘perhaps’ means ‘yes’. As a result, the ‘no’ is often not treated as a genuine objection, but rather as an element of the courtship game: ‘she plays hard to get, but we all know she wants it’. The belief in this myth leads to blaming the victim of both stalking and sexual harassment. Tauriq Moosa (2017) writes that these days the cultural message should abandon the notion of feeling sorry for rejected men and supporting romantic relentless attempts to get the woman in exchange for teaching men how to respect women’s boundaries. Otherwise they are treated as property and not like partners.

The way in which sexuality of women is perceived in our culture creates an environment that encourages emotional abuse. Women, teenage and little girls are perceived through their physicality, attractiveness and figure to a greater extent than boys or men are. Just as girls are

complemented on being 'cute', so are adult women scrutinised and commented on in terms of their appearance or dress, regardless of the fact the person offering the complement is not a partner or a friend, but a boss, an acquaintance or a colleague. The woman, on the other hand, is expected to accept the dubious compliment with gratitude. If indignant, she will be branded as vain or arrogant. Her objection is considered rude. Such a perception of female sexuality enables men to take liberties with women's physicality, while women find it difficult to express their lack of consent. They themselves have been conditioned to accept compliments about their bodies with a smile and gratefulness. As a result many women do not protest straight away when confronted with such a comment, leading men to believe that their behaviour is acceptable and desirable, encouraging them to pursue it further. If women do protest eventually, for instance when their physical integrity is compromised, it is met with astonishment and disbelief, since the previous manifestations of attention were not rejected. Gavin de Becker (1998, p. 264) argues that our culture is faced with a challenge of teaching and convincing women that they can and have the right to say 'no'. If that was the case and women knew how to be more assertive at the beginning of the relationship, stalking would be much more rare. Likewise, boys and men need to be educated to understand that a woman's rejection is to be respected unconditionally. The process of socialisation in some cultures or environment will sometimes take the form of codes of honour, which define gender roles and impose an obligation to fulfil them. The codes come with the concept of honour that defines a person's position within the society. Men become honourable when they are pro-active (or simply violent), and lose the title when they adopt a passive attitude (e.g. identify as pacifists). Women, on the other hand, gain respect for being demure and submissive. 'Men and women stand in a markedly different relationship to the whole system of allotting honour in "cultures of honour." [...] Men are the only possible sources, or active generators (agents), of honour. The only active effect that women can have on honour [...] is to destroy it (e.g. by engaging in nonmarital sex)' (Gilligan, 2001, p. 47). As a result of thus shaped gender expectations, women and girls' promiscuity and prostitution are also perceived as deviations (Jones, 2006, p. 319), along with other sexual behaviours, real or simply those that a woman is suspected or capable of (Julios, 2015, p.7). The research indicates that the culture of honour is deeply rooted in Poland (Szmajke et al., 2004). In the case files research concerning stalking which I conducted, it is especially striking how intent perpetrators are on offending or humiliating their victims. In many cases men who refused to accept the fact that their partners decided to end the relationship experienced a range of conflicting emotions: they alternately declared their undying love, begged for a second chance, insisted on rebuilding the relationship and, in

the throes of rage, insulted the victims. Most of the insults and claims of the perpetrators referred specifically to sexuality of women, who would be referred to as 'prostitutes' with a variety of unrefined terms or accused of lechery with regard to a choice of partners. Gavin de Becker (1998, p.263) observes that stalking is the mechanism that some men will resort to if a woman refuses to do what they expect her to do. In other words, it is a crime of power, control and intimidation similar in its mechanism to date rapes.

As far as bullying at work is concerned, elements of corporate culture seem to be the facilitating factors. Irrespective of individual traits of the perpetrator, the environment has a role to play, too: the silent approval of management, rigid corporate cultures which lack competences necessary to address a conflict, foster authoritarian ambitions and disregard empathy in relationships (Chakowski, 2011, p. 21). Additionally, such cultures promote strong leadership, hierarchy, tight controls and lack of formalised rules. A corporate culture that meets these requirements is known as the culture of power, and its ground rules are not formalised as they are directly linked to the leader. It's the leader's decisions, thus, that are the driving force behind the activity of the employees (Rudzka, 2012, p. 47). Both men and women can fall victim to bullying, however in this particular organisational model men tend to be the leaders and women tend to be the victims. The leadership model assumes male domination per se. What is more, bullying at work and sexual harassment are further aided by the weaker position of women on the labour market – they are more likely than men to become unemployed. They fear dismissal and losing their jobs, therefore their ability to resist abuse is going to be low. One of the reasons why the discussion on emotional abuse and other forms of harassment has gathered pace and resulted in adoption of practical legal solutions (including its penalisation) in the last twenty five years is the constant changing culture and the position of women in societies, be it only in the Global North. The demand for authentic equality, the growing awareness of women, their growing independence allowing braver decisions, social campaigns that highlight the issues of abuse in close relationships (and types of such abuse), sexual harassment, bullying at work – all this has resulted in less and less tolerance for such abuse (which still affects mainly women). The above considerations do not invalidate the fact that men are also victims of stalking, bullying and sexual harassment, just as women happen to be perpetrators. Nevertheless, I have tried to illustrate in what way our culture favours the existence of gender disparity (sexual crimes and domestic violence included) with women constituting the majority of victims and men the majority of perpetrators of the discussed crimes.

Notes

1. In 2018, the national and representative case files research concerning stalking was conducted, covering crimes under Art. 190a § 1 and 3 from the years 2011-2016. 281 court records were analysed as part of the study. Since the sample contained perpetrators who had tormented more than one person, victims who'd been harassed by more than one perpetrator, as well as four perpetrators who had two separate cases 1-2 years apart (stalking the same or a different person), the number that constituted the basis for calculations stood at 352 records, comprising data on 282 perpetrators and 339 victims.

2. Apart from the European Union, the United States, Canada, Japan and South Korea, the Global North also includes Australia and New Zealand. It is true, however, that the majority of worse-off countries are located in the southern hemisphere (compare, for example, Popow M. (2015) 'Globalna Północ i Globalne Południe w dyskursie edukacyjnym. Krytyczna analiza treści podręczników szkolnych'. *Studia Edukacyjne* 35, p. 251-252).

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