Sexual Harassment on the Internet

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Sexual harassment offline is a well-known, highly prevalent, extensively investigated, and intensively treated social problem. An accepted model classifies sexual harassment behaviors into the categories of gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Theory and research show that sexual harassment behavior occurs as a product of person × situation characteristics and has substantial personal and organizational costs. This article reviews the available information on sexual harassment in cyberspace, equates this phenomenon with what has been learned about sexual harassment offline, points to specific characteristics of online culture and technology that reinforce the behavior, and proposes ways of promoting prevention.

Sexual harassment (SH) is a well-known social problem that affects people at work, school, military installations, and social gatherings (for a comprehensive review, see Paludi & Paludi, 2003; Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000). A worldwide phenomenon (Barak, 1997), it has been thoroughly investigated in recent decades in terms of prevalence, correlates, individual and organizational outcomes, and prevention; the range of studies provides an interdisciplinary perspective covering psychological, sociological, medical, legal, and educational aspects of the phenomenon. SH potentially relates to any human being; however, in fact, most victims are women (Gruber, 1997; Paludi & Paludi, 2003); other target populations—men, homosexuals, and children—are sexually harassed, too, although to a lesser degree. Similarly, most victims of SH on the Internet are women, though other populations have been targeted as well (Barnes, 2001). The purpose of the current article is to review the limited existing professional literature that refers to SH in cyberspace, to propose a typology—equivalent to that offline—of types of SH on the Internet, to analyze the dynamics of online SH, to review what is known about the effects of SH on the Internet, and to propose a comprehensive approach for preventing SH on the Internet.

The Internet provides an environment in which healthy and pathological behaviors may be pursued (Suler, 1999). Indeed, the Internet is known to possess the two contradictory aspects, as it is exploited for good or for evil purposes (Barak & King, 2000). Joinson (2003), in a thoughtful review, explored how new technological tools have constructive, positive aspects for people's advancement and joy, as well as destructive, negative aspects that humiliate, terrorize, and block social progress. Similarly, specifically in the context of women using the Internet, Morahan-Martin (2000) noted the "promise and perils" facing female Net users. SH and offense on the Internet is considered a major obstacle to the free, legitimate, functional, and joyful use of the Net, as these acts drive away Net users as well as cause sig-

nificant emotional harm and actual damage to those who remain users, whether by choice or by duty. The objective of this article is to act as a catalyst for needed research and absent theoretical analysis (cf. Adam, 2002) in this important area and to provide a framework for prevention so that, eventually, the positive face of the Internet will prevail.

Offline Sexual Harassment

SH is a prevalent phenomenon in face-to-face, social environments (Gutek & Done, 2001; Paludi & Paludi, 2003; Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000). It is widespread at work (e.g., Petrocelli & Repa, 1998; Richman et al., 1999), schools of all levels (Matchen & DeSouza, 2000; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Timmerman, 2003), and the military (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, & Magley, 1999; Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999). SH is not a local phenomenon but exists in all countries and cultures, although its perceptions and judgment, and consequently definitions, significantly differ from one culture to another (Barak, 1997). Originally, Till (1980) classified SH behaviors into five categories, which were used for intensive assessment and research attempts to describe the behaviors and understand their causes, correlates, impact on victims, personal coping with occurrences, and more. Later, following a series of studies, suggestion was made to change the classification of types of SH into three distinct categories: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995).

Gender harassment involves unwelcome verbal and visual comments and remarks that insult individuals because of their gender or that use stimuli known or intended to provoke negative emotions. These include behaviors such as posting pornographic pictures in public or in places where they deliberately insult, telling chauvinistic jokes, and making gender-related degrading remarks. *Unwanted sexual attention* refers to uninvited behaviors that explicitly communicate sexual desires or intensions toward another individual. This category includes overt behaviors and comments, such as staring at a woman's breasts or making verbal statements that explicitly or implicitly propose or insinuate sexual activities. *Sexual coercion* involves putting physical or psychological pressure on a person to elicit sexual cooperation. This category includes actual, undesired physical touching, offers of a bribe for sexual favors, or making threats to receive sexual cooperation. Empirical research has found the three types of sexually harassing behaviors to be distinctive from one another, to be reliably and validly measurable in terms of perceptions and ratings of actual behaviors, and to correlate with various relevant personal, situational, and social factors (cf. Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Paludi & Paludi, 2003).

Sexual Harassment in Cyberspace

All three types of SH that exist offline also exist on the Internet. However, because of the virtual nature of cyberspace, most expressions of SH that prevail on the Net appear in the form of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. Nevertheless, as sexual coercion is the type that occurs the least often offline, too, it is impossible to conclude whether its relatively low prevalence in cyberspace is a result of the medium or its very nature. In terms of virtual imposition and assault, sexual coercion does exist nonetheless on the Net, though without, of course, the physical contact.

Gender harassment in cyberspace is very common. It is portrayed in several typical forms that Internet users encounter very often, whether communicated in verbal or in graphical formats and through either active or passive manners of online delivery. *Active verbal SH* mainly appears in the form of offensive sexual messages, actively initiated by a harasser

toward a victim. These include gender-humiliating comments (e.g., "Leave the forum! Go to your natural place, the kitchen"), sexual remarks (e.g., "Nipples make this chat room more interesting"), so-called dirty jokes, and the like. All these are considered harassing and offending when they are neither invited or consented to nor welcomed by the recipient. This type of gender harassment is usually practiced in chat rooms and forums; however, it may also appear in private online communication channels, such as the commercial distribution through e-mail (a kind of spamming) of pornographic sites, sex-shop accessories, sex-related medical matters (such as drugs such as Viagra and operations similar to penis enlargement). Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2003) reported that 62% of the adolescents in their survey received unwanted sex-related e-mails to their personal address, 92% from unknown senders. Of the 73% of respondents who unintentionally entered sex sites, most did so as a result of automatic linking, pop-up windows, and unintended results while using a search engine.

Passive verbal SH, on the other hand, is less intrusive, as it does not refer to one user communicating messages to another. In this category, the harasser does not target harassing messages directly to a particular person or persons but, rather, to potential receivers. For instance, this type of harassment refers to nicknames and terms attached to a user's online identification or to personal details that are clearly considered offensive (e.g., CockSucker, WetPussy, XLargeTool, or GreatFuck for nicknames; "want a fuck?" in Internet relay chat (IRC) user's details, for offensive message). This category also includes explicit sex messages attached to one's personal details in communication software (e.g., "The best clit licker in Germany" in a personal info section of an ICQ User Details) or on a personal web page. Scott, Semmens, and Willoughby (2001) pointed out how flaming—a common, online, aggressive verbal behavior that typically and frequently appears in online communities—particularly creates a hostile environment for women. Although flaming is not necessarily aimed at women, it is considered, in many instances, to be a form of gender harassment because flaming is frequently, typically, and almost exclusively initiated by men. The common result of flaming in online communities is that women depart from that environment or depart the Internet in general—what has been termed *flamed out*. "Flamed out highlights the fact that the use of male violence to victimize women and children, to control women's behaviour, or to exclude women from public spaces entirely, can be extended into the new public spaces of the Internet" (Scott et al., 2001, p. 11). A constructive solution has been the design of women-only sanctuaries that offer communities where flaming is rare and obviously not identified with men.

Similar to verbal gender harassment, graphic-based harassment can be active and passive, too. *Active graphic gender harassment* mainly involves the intentional sending of erotic and pornographic still pictures or digital videos through individual online communication channels, such as e-mail, or posting them in an online environment. Pictures (and videos) might be judged as less or more offensive as a result of personal sensitivities, on one hand, and the explicitness and nature of their content, on the other. For instance, it could be expected that the picture of an innocent nude will be perceived as less offensive than the close-up picture of a vagina or the animation of a penis when ejaculating. *Passive graphic gender harassment* mainly includes pictures and movies published on web sites (Carnes, 2003; Gossett & Byrne, 2002). Contrary to materials published in designated pornography sites or online sex shops, where surfers usually deliberately choose to enter and know what materials to expect, SH comes into effect when web users do not know in advance and have no prior clue concerning what might later prove offensive to them. The massive use of forced pop-up windows and redirected links to porno sites makes this type of gender harassment highly prevalent.

The degree to which each of the four possibilities of gender harassment actually becomes subjectively experienced personal harassment is dependent on two major factors, one objective and one subjective: (a) the nature of the verbal or graphic stimulus in terms of explicitness, blatancy, or clamorousness, in addition to its continuity and repetition and (b) the personal attitudes, sensitivities, and preferences of the recipient. The combination of these factors determines the degree of subjective experience of offense.

Unwanted sexual attention in cyberspace usually necessitates direct personal verbal communication between a harasser and a victim. This may appear in personal communication, with messages directly relating to sex and sexuality. In this category are messages that refer to or ask about a victim's sex organs ("how large are your boobs?"), sex life ("when did you fuck last time?"), or intimate subjects ("do you have your period now?"); invite, insinuate, or offer sex-related activities ("I'd like to show you my super tool"); or impose sex-related sounds or images on a message. In contrast to gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention is specifically intended to solicit sexual cooperation of some sort, either virtual or in face-to-face contact. Obviously, for sexual attention or invitation to become harassing, it must be uninvited and unwelcome on the part of the victim. Therefore, a person who deliberately enters a chat room that clearly exists for the sake of finding partners, all the more so sex partners, is implicitly consenting, even inviting, sexual suggestions; hence, a message of sexual attention cannot be regularly considered harassing in this context. Unwanted sexual attention on the Internet may take place in public forums or chat rooms as well as in private communications. It may be communicated through synchronous or asynchronous channels. It may be verbal or nonverbal (i.e., via images and/or sounds) in nature. It may be explicit and direct or implicit and indirect. It may be as aggressive as suggesting sexual acts or more moderate in offering a massage or in asking a sex-related intruding question. Perpetrators of these types of behavior look for sex contact; however, their basic motive might be to cause emotional harm and to abuse victims, not necessarily to gain sexual cooperation.

Sexual coercion on the Internet is essentially different from gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. Online sexual coercion entails the use of various means, available or possible online, to elicit sexual cooperation by putting some kind of pressure on a victim. Although the use of physical force is impossible online, victims might perceive threats to use physical force realistic on the Internet as in face-to-face situations. Likewise, explicit threats of some kind of harm to an Internet user or to his or her relatives or friends or threats of damage to a users' property might be a source of great anxiety. Even following a person's virtual tracks—by trailing his or her visits in chat rooms and forums—might cause panic. Thus, online stalking (also termed *cyberstalking*), if it involves sexual insinuations and hints, should be considered a form of psychological pressure to achieve sexual gains—that is, a form of sexual coercion (Adam, 2001; Deirmenjian, 1999; Griffith, Rogers, & Sparrow, 1998; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

However, online sexual coercion might be manifested by activities that more closely parallel offline situations. Experienced perpetrators, for example, might use their technical knowledge to break into a victim's personal computer and cause damage or threaten to do so. Sending frightening e-mails, sending viruses, and flooding an e-mail inbox are just a few examples of actual—as opposed to virtual—online sexual coercion (e.g., Dibbell, 1998).

Online sexual coercion might also be expressed in the form of bribes and seductions to achieve sexual gains. The online environment is an easy and convenient way to not only convey these types of messages, and perhaps especially effective for those perpetrators who have high writing skills, but also readily allows impersonation and cheating of innocent people. Thus, the use of incentives—baits—to encourage sexual cooperation is rather common. In this regard, one should note the well-documented phenomenon of pedophiles that operate

online and seduce young children through the effective use of luring correspondence and the offer of various attractive baits (Durkin, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Fontana-Rosa, 2001; Fulda, 2002; Quayle, Holland, Linehan, & Taylor, 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2002, 2003). Likewise, the illegal practice of child pornography—in exploiting nude pictures of innocent children—makes use of baits and pressures to achieve children's cooperation to satisfy the needs of Internet-based pedophiles (Jenkins, 2001).

Cases and Prevalence of SH on the Internet

Various authors refer to SH in cyberspace and describe it as prevalent and risky. Unfortunately, no empirical survey on the extent and prevalence of SH in cyberspace has been carried out to date; thus, writers refer to general impressions and sporadic reports. For instance, Cooper, McLoughlin, Reich, and Kent-Ferraro (2002) referred to SH by e-mail as a common abuse of women in workplaces. Leiblum and Döring (2002) argued that the Internet provides a convenient vehicle, commonly used, to force sexuality on women through nonsocial (logging into web pages) and social (interpersonal communication) uses of the Net. McCormick and Leonard (1996) contended that because of the Net's so-called boys club atmosphere (apparently more relevant up to the mid-1990s than today), this environment is typically characterized by antiwomen attitudes and behaviors, including SH. Employing the same conception, Döring (2000) stated that men's created sexualized online atmosphere, mainly through pornographic materials, make unwanted sexual advances more likely. Adam (2001) argued that the phenomenon of SH on the Internet downplays the positive process of empowerment that women gain from egalitarian use of the Internet. McGarth and Casey (2002) saw cyberspace as an ideal environment for sex offenders to commit SH and imposition because of its unique characteristics (see below). Cooper, Golden, and Kent-Ferraro (2002) described the case of a man with a paraphilia-related disorder who obsessively used chat and e-mails to communicate his sexual thoughts to women. Cunneen and Stubbs (2000) reported a phenomenon in which Australian men solicited sex among Filipino women through the Internet in return for economic privileges. Barak and Fisher (2002) even predicted—in regard to the Internet's special characteristics—that the scope of sex offenses on the Internet would grow in the future. Several specific and restricted research studies provide some indication of the scope of SH behavior on the Internet. Griffiths (2000) reported the finding of a British survey that 41% of regular Internet female users had been sent unsolicited pornographic materials or been harassed or stalked on the Internet. Mitchell et al. (2001), in a survey of American teenagers, found that 19% of these youths—mostly older girls—had experienced at least one sexual solicitation while online in the past year (3% had received so-called aggressive solicitations). Goodson, McCormick, and Evans (2001) found that 24% of the female and 8% of the male college students who accessed online sexually explicit materials had experienced SH.

The Dynamics of SH on the Internet

A leading model pertaining to the causes and dynamics of SH was conceptualized by Pryor and colleagues (Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993; Pryor & Whalen, 1997); it argues that SH behavior is determined by the interaction of a person's and a situation's characteristics. Consistent evidence supports this general equation (e.g., O'Hare & O'Donohue, 1998). There is no reason to believe that this process is different in the online environment: quite the contrary, because of the special characteristics informing online communication and online behavior. Specifically, it may be argued that the online

disinhibition effect (Joinson, 1998, 1999, 2001; Suler, 2004) that promotes exposure of the so-called true self (McKenna & Seidman, in press), on one hand, and the special features of computer-mediated communication, on the other, produce human behaviors that more closely reflect authentic inner personal needs and desires. In reference to the personal factor in the equation, it has been well established that SH is not about sex, but about power (Barak, Pitterman, & Yitzhaki, 1995; Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Hoffspiegel, 2002; Wayne, 2000; Zurbriggen, 2000); that is, contrary to what seems to be an obvious reason for imposed sexual or sexually related activities—satisfaction of a perpetrator's sex drive—it has repeatedly been argued, and empirically supported, that sex is only a means of satisfying the perpetrator's need for power and domination. In cyberspace, the online disinhibition effect causes Internet users to behave less defensively and more naturally; that is, powerful factors that exist in and are typical of cyberspace, such as anonymity, invisibility, lack of eye contact, easy escape, and neutralizing of status, influence people to remove facade and masks when online to employ much fewer games and tricks and to reduce the use of existing social (or specific environmental) norms and behavioral standards in determining their behavior. Rather, when affected by the online disinhibition effect, users behave more consistently with their basic personality characteristics. At the same time, Internet communication, in general is heavily affected by what has been termed "the Penta-A Engine" (Barak & Fisher, 2002), composed of anonymity, availability, affordability, acceptability, and aloneness. This engine is powerful enough to influence surfers' behaviors in a way that they become more daring, open, and ready to take risks in getting involved with sex-related activities than would otherwise be the case, or certainly to a much lesser extent, in the offline environment (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997).

Associating these factors—online disinhibition, together with elevated openness, venture, and bravado—with an atmosphere characterized by typical masculine attitudes (e.g., Kendall, 2000; Scott et al., 2001) produces a high probability of SH behaviors, especially by men against women. In masculine-dominated environments, the users' personal needs, values, desires, habits, and expectations become more transparent and blatant. Moreover, these personal proclivities apparently are accelerated by the effects of increased salience of social identities in online environments (e.g., Douglas & McGarty, 2001, 2002; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). According to this viewpoint (commonly referred to as SIDE, or Social Identity explanation of Deindividuation Effects), people in cyberspace may incline under certain circumstances to follow group standards of behavior rather than using their own standards; in other words, a social or a group identity (and expressed norms of behavior) may replace an individual identity (Reicher, 1987). These two explanatory models of the nature of online behavior, which imply that it is affected by disinhibition, by SIDE, or their combination, lay the grounds for the dynamic of online SH. The effects of online disinhibition might reinforce exposure of a person's true self or inner self (Barak, 2004; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna & Seidman, in press); thus, people who possess personality traits engendering a proclivity to sexually harass (Barak & Kaplan, 1996; Pryor et al., 1993; Pryor & Stoller, 1994; Sheskin & Barak, 1997) might tend to behave according to their inner urge while online. Similarly, people who are affected by the SIDE process while in cyberspace might follow typical male-dominating, power-based, masculine attitudes and behaviors toward women.

The situational component of the equation is highly significant in cyberspace. Several of the unique characteristics of this environment not only encourage and reinforce harassment behaviors but also actually elicit them by providing an atmosphere in which harassers receive reinforcement to behave consistently with their SH proclivities. First, there are tech-

nical and practical features of the Internet that make antisocial behaviors more common. Thus, a harasser can take advantage of being unidentifiable, anonymous, and invisible, in addition to having immediate, easy-to-execute, almost untraceable escape route mechanisms (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & De Groot, 2001; Sassenberg & Kreutz, 2002; Suler & Phillips, 2000). In addition, the highly interactive nature of cyberspace allows reinforcement contingency, which apparently contributes to the maintenance and escalation of behaviors (cf. Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). By the same token, one should keep in mind that the virtual environment enables people to provide themselves with relative protection from SH and other aggressions. Ben-Ze'ev (2003, 2004) has thoroughly discussed and analyzed the effects of emotional closeness and openness in cyberspace as a function of the relative privacy and the individually selective exposure experienced in this environment. Because surfers can increase their privacy (for instance, by using nicknames), in his view the potential harm from SH in cyberspace is reduced relative to offline encounters.

Second, the problematic legal status of the Internet, in addition to serious difficulties in enforcing laws and regulations pertaining to it, creates an environment in which breaking a law is common (e.g., Hiller & Cohen, 2002; Lessig, 1999). The (near) lack of clear legal boundaries, the absence of visible authorities and enforcement vehicles, and the absence of significant sanctions encourage people with criminal intentions to do what they would have been restrained from doing in offline situations. Related to this is the fact that the Internet has provided availability and easy access to public records, which include a great amount of private information that can be (and are) abused by cyberharassers and cyberstalkers (Tavani & Grodzinsky, 2002). The third and perhaps most critical ingredient that causes the online environment to be risky, particularly in regard to being victimized by SH, pertains to its culture and social norms. Cyberspace is a culture that is characterized by dominant masculine values and aggressive communications, one that perhaps also delivers a message that antiminority behaviors are welcome and even praised. Specifically in regard to women, quite a few online environments—practiced in chat rooms or in forums—are characterized by an antiwomen spirit, the attitude communicated by verbal messages, by providing links to selective sites, and by displaying obscene pictures. Research of offline environments have consistently shown the relationship between social norms and the phenomenon of SH, so that the degree of tolerance positively correlates with the extent and severity of harassment (e.g., Ellis, Barak, & Pinto, 1991; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; Pryor et al., 1995; Williams, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1999).

The interaction between a proclivity to sexually harass by people who possess problematic attitudes and are searching for an opportunity to execute behaviors to satisfy their needs and desires, which are magnified in cyberspace, and an environment that enables and often reinforces such behaviors clearly produces the dynamics of SH on the Internet; that is, a person who tends to sexually harass would not have behaved this way without the situational opportunities provided by the Net; SH would not be taking place in cyberspace without people whose needs and intentions are to sexually offend. The combination of an environment in which SH is invited by virtue of its special characteristics and people who possess a particular pattern of personality characteristics makes online SH almost inevitable. For this reason, as argued by Finn and Banach (2000), women who innocently use the Net for legitimate causes, such as seeking health information, may encounter dangerous situations. Similarly, women who seek online friendly connections often encounter harassment and "virtual rape" (Döring, 2000). Power-driven men express their attitudes on the Internet—even when gender differences are supposedly minimized (Sussman & Tyson, 2000). Women find it difficult to hide—their writings can be validly identified in most cases, despite invisibility, anonymity, and even the lack of personal handwriting (Koppel, Argamon, & Shimoni, 2002). Fur-

thermore, gender inequality, as expressed by gender-stereotypic behaviors, has been found not to be reduced by online anonymity (Postmes & Spears, 2002). Apparently, different populations behave differently online, according to their culture and indigenous social norms—toward children (Calvert, 1999; Griffiths, 1997), women (Boneva & Kraut, 2002; Morahan-Martin, 1998) or ethnic groups (Back, 2002; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2002)—a fact that might trigger stereotypic, sometimes hostile, behaviors by other groups. In analyzing web pages and the self-expressions of men and women on the Net through their web presence, Miller and Arnold (2001) came to the conclusion that

> Internet provides new ways of being in the World, but not in a way which is intrinsically mysterious or different from other aspects of being. . . . The frames for action in cyberspace are not necessarily less (or more) problematical than in real life—because they are part of real life. (p. 92)

It is important to note, however, that perceptions of SH behaviors might be reinforced or, in contrast, lessened online. This was found by Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, and Ritter (2002), who compared in-person and online communication discourse media. They revealed that misogynist comments, nicknames, and comments about dress (all considered gender harassment) were rated more harassing when they appeared online than offline. Ben-Ze'ev (2003) explained the difference in judgmental standards by the difference between text-based and face-to-face communication. Requests for company, considered unwanted sexual attention, however, was rated more harassing offline than online. For this reason—perhaps consistent with the online disinhibition effect—it might be advisable to refer to hard evidence and professional judgment (though not perfect, too) in regard to evidence of SH in cases in which a law suit is threatened (McGarth & Casey, 2002).

Effects of SH on the Internet

Offline SH has a severe impact on its victims. Dansky and Kilpatrick (1997) reviewed a variety of empirical studies on the effects of SH and pointed to severe work-related and school-related effects (reduced performance and satisfaction, decreased motivation and morale, lower productivity, and the like), as well as psychological effects, reflected in psychological disorders, negative emotions, and related behavioral consequences. Similarly, O'Donohue, Downs, and Yeater (1998), in a broad review of the literature, found consistent negative psychological, occupational, and economic consequences for victims. In the same vein, Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald (1997) and Glomb et al. (1997) found a series of psychological and job-related negative effects of SH of working women in several different types of organizations. Munson, Hulin, and Drasgow (2000) found that experiences of SH by university employees yielded severe outcomes, independent of dispositional influences or response biases. van Roosmalen and McDaniel (1998) found that SH had direct effects on women's physical (e.g., nausea, sleeplessness) and mental health (e.g., loss of self-esteem, feelings of helplessness and isolation, depression). Furthermore, Harned and Fitzgerald (2002) found a link in three independent samples between SH and eating disorders, psychological distress, self-esteem, and self-blame—for women but not for men. Wonderlich et al. (2001), too, found a significant link between sexual assault and severe eating behaviors, sometimes many years after the abuse had taken place. Krakow et al. (2000) found sleeping disorders that consequently affected depression and suicidal proclivities. Pathe and Mullen (1997) reported that severe emotional (e.g., increased anxiety) and behavioral (nightmares, appetite disturbances) effects characterized most female victims of stalking. Stein and

Barrett-Connor (2000) found significant effects of sexual assault on victims' health. Redfearn and Laner (2000) showed that women who were victims of sexual abuse had problematic effects in regard to their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Avina and O'Donohue (2002) reviewed the relevant literature and showed that the effects of SH on victims consistently met the criteria of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Davis, Coker, and Sanderson (2002) and McGuire and Wraith (2000), who reviewed the effects of stalking on victims, described the immense disruption to their lives, as well as increased physical injuries, health problems, PTSD, substance abuse, and contemplation of suicide.

In contrast to the above review, little is as yet empirically known about the effects of SH that is experienced on the Internet. In 1998, Morahan-Martin noted the domination of the Internet by male users, its aggressive language, and limited attention to ethics and netiquette, on one hand, and the avoidance by women of the free use of the Internet, on the other. Although much has changed in terms of women's presence on the Internet (Pew Internet Project, 2003; UCLA Center for Communication Policy, 2003), it seems that the social norms in relation to the status of women versus men, as well as of other minority groups (e.g., homosexuals, children), have a spillover effect, and they penetrate the Internet. Therefore, it is common to find reports, usually based on impressions and informal complaints, about the negative impact of SH of women on the Net (e.g., Döring, 2000; Finn & Banach, 2000). More specifically, Gáti, Tényi, Túry, and Wildmann (2002) reported a case describing a causal connection between the online SH of a 16-year-old girl and her developing of anorexia nervosa. Although a clear-cut, causal connection between traumatic life events and the development of eating disorders has not been established, this case clearly resembles descriptions reported by Harned and Fitzgerald (2002) in regard to offline SH effects.

Prevention of SH on the Internet

Generally, three parallel ways of preventing offline SH have been advised and executed: legislation and law enforcement, changing of the organizational-social culture, and education and training of potential victims as well as of potential harassers (cf. Paludi & Paludi, 2003; Sbraga & O'Donohue, 2000).

Legislation seems to be necessary to erect strict, well-defined boundaries for interpersonal sex-related behaviors and to define the sanctions attached to unlawful conduct (Gutek, 1997; Riger, 1991). Legislation also plays an important social role in communicating the social context of what is accepted and what is not in a given society and, thus, serves as a clear sign of values and morals. Law enforcement is necessary for implementing laws, so that they do not just remain theoretical declarations. Although legislation and law enforcement are of top priority offline and take place in all societies, their usefulness in cyberspace is only partial for a number of well-known reasons. For example, the owner of a computer server, the owner of a web site, and different web surfers might be located in different locations, including different countries, and therefore subject to different legal systems. In addition, there is the physical location of the server itself. Thus, a server may physically be located in Aruba and owned by a Brazilian who happens to reside in Morocco; a web site accessed by that server offers a chat room hosted by an Israeli who resides in France; in the chat room, an Australian man sexually harasses, by means of unwanted verbal sexual attention, a Danish female surfer who entered the site. In addition, because of anonymity, high-level privacy, invisibility, and the often lack of individual traces that characterize the Internet environment, the efficiency of enforcing the law is at best very partial.

As noted above, legal guidelines and procedures are desirable and highly important, but only secondary in combating SH. As Barak (1992) argued and as has been consistently

found in places where prevention attempts were implemented and followed up (e.g., Bell, Quick, & Cycyota, 2002; O'Hare-Grundmann, O'Donohue, & Peterson, 1997), effective means of combating SH should include two major aspects: changing the culture and norms in which SH might take place, and educating potential victims and harassers. By focusing on these two independent factors—referring as they do to the situation and to the person components of the SH equation reviewed above—the behavioral product, it is believed, will be changed (Pryor et al., 1993, 1995). In a way, this approach parallels Joinson's (2003), which employs the strategic and motivated user and expected and emergent effects (SMEE); he argued that a surfer's behavioral and psychological outcomes are a function of the effects of the media (i.e., situation) and of user aspects (i.e., person).

Attempts at changing the culture in regard to SH should include the delivery of clear, consistent messages of zero tolerance for SH and the rejection of any leniency, in addition to stances that are antimisogyny, proegalitarian, advocating interpersonal sensitivity and acceptance, respecting minorities, and the like (Bell et al., 2002; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, et al., 1999; Glomb et al., 1997). Educational interventions may include awareness and training workshops for potential victims (e.g., Barak, 1994; Paludi & Barickman, 1998) as well as for potential harassers (e.g., Paludi & Barickman, 1998; Robb & Doverspike, 2001).

Although the targeting of specific populations offline, especially in local organizations, is doable and desirable, it is impractical in cyberspace; that is, it is practically impossible to change the culture of the Internet because of its limitless space and multicultural users. However, much can be done in local online communities through the exercise of responsible, dedicated leadership endorsing a firm anti-SH policy. Such an approach can be implemented through continuous messages, verbal messages and attractive banners, as well as by transparent sanctioning against any deviation from these standards. Obviously, this step will not prevent SH on the Internet as a whole; however, it will create safe havens for surfers who want to take advantage of online communities while avoiding ridicule and emotional harm. In Ben-Ze'ev's (2003) terms, this means that two unique personal values of online communication—privacy and openness—should be overtly and explicitly negotiated and settled between users to avoid unwanted, unwelcome behaviors.

In regard to educating potential victims and harassers, this can be carried out in various forms. For instance, the subject of SH on the Internet can be taught in schools in the framework of programs devoted to smart and safe Internet use (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004; Oravec, 2000; Teicher, 1999). Such an educational intervention—offered to children, as well as to any vulnerable population—may review standards of netiquette behavior, together with tips on identifying hostile and malicious communications and impingement of privacy and boundaries (Plaut, 1997). Furthermore, online guides that contain explanations, recommendations, tips, and instructions can be posted on numerous sites to complement previous training and to highlight important issues. It is apparent that educational attempts will not prevent people with high proclivities to sexually harass resulting from their personal needs and dispositions; however, these will perhaps make them aware of possible negative outcomes, to themselves and to victims. It is hoped that for some of these people, educational intervention might change perceptions, attitudes, and values. At the very least, make them aware of considerations new to them and, thus, contribute to changing their potential problematic behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has a great potential to empower minorities and people who feel oppressed, weak, disadvantaged, or discriminated against. The empowerment process refers to a variety

of groups, among them women (e.g., Döring, 2000; Harcourt, 1999, 2000), children (e.g., D'Alessandro & Dosa, 2001), the old (e.g., McMellon & Schiffman, 2002), ethnic minorities (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2002), and people who are disabled (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002). At the same time, however, cyberspace might be a dangerous, even degrading environment for these very same populations, thus functioning in an opposite direction from empowerment; namely, further weakening, humiliation, and alienation. SH exists on the Internet as much as it exists off the Internet; indeed, SH behaviors parallel those offline. The special characteristics of the Internet, such as anonymity, make this medium more prone to provide the means needed for unlawful and unethical behaviors, despite the ability of surfers to mask their identifying features as well as their ability to abruptly disconnect contact at will.

Although implementation of legal procedures and their enforcement on the Internet are practically impossible, steps could be taken to reduce the prevalence of SH on the Net. Attempts should be made at changing the violent, threatening, dominant, domineering, hostile, and malicious facets of the Internet culture by a consistent, comprehensive, and determined delivery of messages, as well as by setting leadership examples, using every means of communication available in cyberspace. Changing social norms and behavioral standards regarding the acceptance of and lenient attitudes toward SH will eventually influence many users and, consequently, affect the scope of SH.

Concomitant with attempts at modifying Internet culture, at least in indigenous communities, and notwithstanding the expected difficulties in executing this change, much effort should be made in designing and implementing educational interventions. These programs should focus on developing awareness and influencing values and attitude sets toward specific populations and on modifying specific, relevant target behaviors. The initiative to develop and operate such programs could be by governmental or public offices and interested associations. The social benefit and, consequently, the free effective use of the Net make such initiatives worthwhile, to say the least.

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