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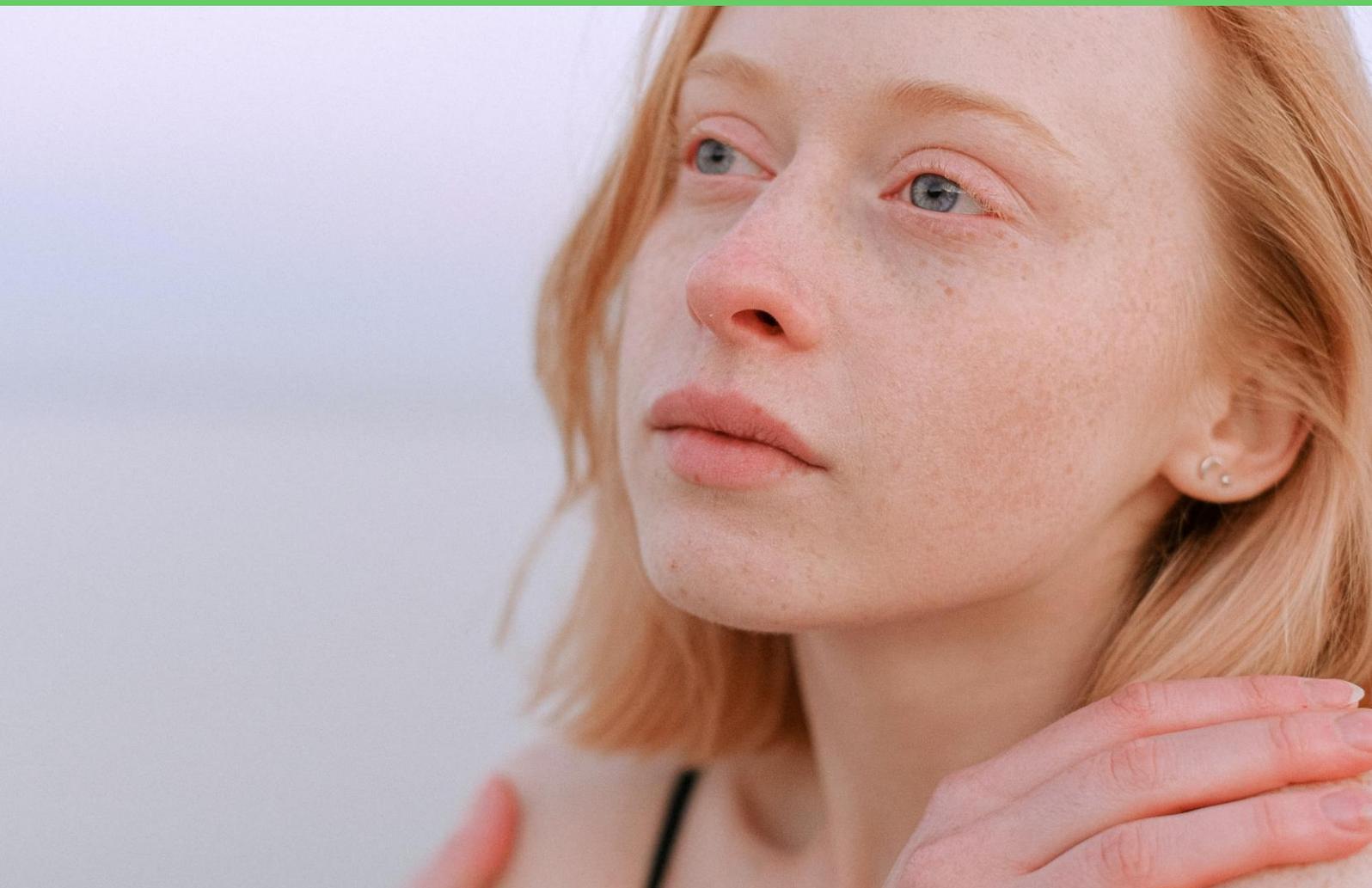
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# Phenomena of sexual violence in the Netherlands

Secondary analyses on data of the Prevalence Monitor  
Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence 2020 (Summary)

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# Summary

## Study motive

In 2020, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) conducted the Prevalence Monitor Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence (PHGSG) commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC). The objective was to gain insight into the nature and prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence. The study showed that 11 percent of the population, aged 16 and older (roughly 1.6 million persons) were victims of sexual harassment or violence in the past 12 months.

The PHGSG report includes annual prevalence rates for different forms of sexual violence, namely non-physical sexual harassment, physical sexual violence and online sexual harassment. However, these rates were incomplete, as they lacked more substantive analyses of different forms of sexual victimization, in which variables are meaningfully related to each other. Therefore, additional secondary analyses were conducted with the aim of distinguishing important phenomena related to sexual victimization and better mapping victim-perpetrator relationships.

The study was guided by a committee of experts from the WODC, the Ministry of Justice and Security, and Ghent University.

## Method

The first step was a desk research of recent literature to identify important phenomena, their definitions and contextual factors. In the second phase, in-depth interviews with five experts were executed, in order for them to add extra phenomena and to highlight their perspective on the different phenomena. Finally, using this input, secondary analyses were conducted on the available data from the PHGSG 2020.

The analyses were performed in the CBS Remote Access environment on 12 phenomena related to sexual victimization. The phenomena are divided into online and offline (non-)verbal sexual harassment; physical sexual violence with and without penetration; sexual victimization in dating, by a (romantic) partner and within power relationships (#MeToo); and sexual victimization by someone in a specific setting, such as nightlife, work, or school.

For the purpose of the PHGSG2020, a random sample of 100,000 persons was drawn from the population aged 16 years and older living in the Netherlands. The current results are based on responses from 30,459 persons (response rate of 30.5 percent) aged 16 years and older, of which 15,125 men and 15,334 women.

## Outcomes literature study and interviews with experts

Various phenomena emerge from the literature. Two important concepts are sexual victimization and sexual violence, sometimes mixed up in the literature. We use the definition of **sexual violence** as what is defined in the law as sexual assault and rape. This can be with or without penetration. **Sexual victimization** is an umbrella term for all forms of sexual contact crossing the line. Hereby, we further distinct between online versus offline forms of sexual victimization, or verbal versus non-verbal.

According to the experts, the three categories of sexual violence were fairly complete in the PHGSG, but they had doubts about whether the terms used were clear enough for readers. In addition, the experts emphasized that it is important to consider the context in which victimization occurs and what the relationship is between victim and perpetrator(s). Thus, the phenomena cannot be stripped of the context of power and dependency. For example, they advocate to better portray the profile and background of the perpetrator in research. In many cases, the victim may be dependent on the perpetrator, for example in work or in education. The experts also stress that power abuse (almost) always plays a role in sexual victimization, for example through multiple perpetrators, age or masculinity. Finally, according to the experts, the group of victims but also perpetrators is very diverse. It is important to map out this diversity, because this can help victims to get recognition for what has happened to them, even if this falls outside the stereotypical image of "the man with the knife in the bushes".

## Results and conclusions

### High prevalence of sexual victimization amongst women

For every phenomenon in this study, we found that women are much more likely to be victims of sexual victimization than men. For example, 7.4% of women have experienced offline nonverbal sexual harassment and 7.3% experienced offline verbal sexual harassment. For men, these percentages are 1.3% and 2.5%, respectively. In addition, women are also relatively often victims of online verbal sexual harassment (5.6%) and physical sexual violence without penetration (4.8%).

### Young women and bisexual men and women more often victims

In almost all phenomena, young women aged 16 to 24 and bisexual men and women, are primarily affected by sexual victimization. For example, nearly a quarter (24.9%) of young women aged 18 to 24 have experienced offline nonverbal sexual harassment, while a fifth of young women (21.5%) aged 16 to 18 have experienced online verbal sexual harassment. In addition, just over a quarter (26.2%) of bisexual women and an eighth (12.5%) of bisexual men have experienced offline verbal sexual harassment in the past 12 months. Bisexual men and women do not conform to heteronormative norms, which prompts some perpetrators to harass them.

### **Relatively high incidence of online sexual harassment among gay and bisexual men**

Men who deviate from the hetero norm - gay and bisexual men - are also vulnerable to online sexual victimization. For example, 14.7% of gay men and 14.2% of bisexual men are victims of online verbal sexual harassment. For online nonverbal sexual harassment, this is respectively 11.2% and 6.2%.

### **Youth living at home and people with lower-income more at risk**

In this study, young women living at home are much more likely to be victims of, for example, sexual victimization at school (5.7%) or physical sexual violence without penetration (14.5%), compared to adults living independently. This is most likely due to the young age of this group. A low level of wealth is also a risk factor in terms of sexual victimization, according to results of this study. For example, sexual victimization in dating (2.8%) and by a (former) partner (2.9%) is more common among women from the lowest income quintile, compared to women from higher income quintiles. The level of wealth is related to power and dependence but also to younger age. Both could explain the greater vulnerability of people with lower levels of wealth.

### **Ethnic background and education level are no risk factors**

In this study, we also looked at people with a Dutch, other western and non-western background regarding experiences of sexual victimization. The results show that there are no major differences between these three groups: in each of these groups it occurs about equally often. Also with regard to educational level (low, middle, high) there are no major differences. However, higher educated women are slightly more likely to be victims of sexual victimization. It is possible that these women have more power to question and report sexually transgressive behavior, due to the shifting power balance between men and women in favor of women in this group.

### **The consequences of sexual victimization are primarily physical and/or psychological**

Victims primarily experience physical and/or psychological consequences of sexual victimization. For example, 17.6% of bisexual men and 18.6% of bisexual women experienced physical and/or psychological consequences due to experiences with sexual victimization. For medium educated men and women, these percentages are respectively 15.0% and 17.7%, while for single men and women 11.8% and 14.4%, respectively. Other consequences that occur to a lesser extent include sexual and/or relationship problems and problems in the work environment, with family or elsewhere.

### **Friends important source of support for young victims**

Young victims mainly reach out to a friend to talk about their experiences with sexual victimization. For example, just under half (42.6%) of male victims and two-thirds (67.7%) of female victims aged 18 to 24 talked to a friend. Similarly, nearly half of men (40.2%) and women (50.5%) in highly urban areas talked to a friend or acquaintance when discussing their experiences of sexual victimization. In addition, partner and/or family members are also important conversation partners, especially among men (39.2%) and women (38.7%) over 65, and also among men (42.1%) and women (48.4%) living in non-urban areas. These results confirm the importance of the immediate environment as an (informal) source of help for victims.

### **Perpetrators of sexual victimization are most often acquaintances**

For most phenomena in this study, the perpetrator is usually an acquaintance. This can be a colleague or teammate, but also a doctor, religious leader or an online contact. For example, for male victims, in about three-quarters (77.6%) of the cases, the perpetrator is an acquaintance in offline verbal and nonverbal sexual harassment. Among female victims of online verbal sexual harassment, that perpetrator is an acquaintance in almost three-quarters (72.0%) of the cases. Similarly, physical sexual violence with and without penetration is primarily (70.0%) perpetrated by an acquaintance among female victims. However, there are a few exceptions. The perpetrator is most often a stranger for male victims of online verbal sexual harassment (54.1%) and female victims of offline nonverbal sexual harassment (72.1%).

### **Recommendations for future research.**

The recommendations for follow-up research are based on findings from the current study, suggestions from experts, and additional insights from the supervisory committee.

The experts recommend using "sexual victimization" as an umbrella term, for all kinds of sexual experiences crossing the line. This was also the reason why we consistently used this term in the current study. Furthermore, they emphasize to better map the victim-perpetrator relationship, for example by looking at age and gender differences. Within this relationship, power and dependence play a major role. Therefore, it is necessary to ask about the relationship between perpetrator and victim, for example, a manager-employee, teacher-pupil or social worker-client relationship, or a victim who lives in the house with the perpetrator and cannot leave. Finally, it is also advised to ask about victims' substance use and range of motion.

The importance of the context, or the setting in which sexual victimization takes place, is emphasized by several experts. This may include the location of the incident, but also what happened prior to the incident, what the cultural context is (e.g. sports culture) and whether there was mutual consent.

### **Suggestions for the PHGSG questionnaire**

Finally, a number of specific suggestions are aimed at the PHGSG questionnaire. The focus on vulnerable groups is currently limited to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons. It is therefore important to better include transgender and gender diverse persons in follow-up research. It is further recommended that the item on forced prostitution is removed, as it falls under human trafficking. It is advised to conduct the questionnaire from a younger age (e.g. 12 years), as sexual victimization occurs at an earlier age. For future reports, we recommend always making a gender distinction within each phenomenon. We also suggest to distinguish between verbal and nonverbal forms of sexual harassment, physical sexual violence with and without penetration, and online versus offline sexual victimization.

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