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Abstract

Transmen and Sexual Assault: A Meta-Theoretical Analysis of Feminist Frameworks

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Quantitative research consistently reveals alarmingly high rates of sexual assault among transmen. U.S. national surveys report lifetime prevalence rates of 50–55% (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016), a pattern confirmed in recent cohort studies (Abern et al., 2023) and echoed in Canadian and international data (Trans PULSE Canada; Wirtz, 2020; Saxena, 2023). Yet, despite this robust evidence of disproportionate victimization, qualitative inquiry into how transmen experience and interpret sexual violence remains strikingly underdeveloped. This silence reflects, in part, the epistemological dilemmas these assaults expose: how should we conceptualize sexual violence against transmen when sex and gender identity are conflated in ways that resist analytic separation? Few have dared to address this problem, and until it is taken up, this violence will remain both conceptually unexpressed and politically unaddressed.

This study, a meta-theoretical analysis, asks: Which theoretical model(s) best capture the sexual assaults of transmen? In particular, I interrogate whether feminist frameworks of male violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon, 1989; Dworkin, 1987; Marcus, 1992) can adequately theorize these assaults, or whether models of male rape (Alyagon-Darr & Lowenstein Lazar, 2023) are more appropriate. My objective is twofold: first, to map the limits of existing feminist and socio-legal theories of rape in relation to transmen's lived realities; and second, to consider how these frameworks might be expanded, adapted, or rethought through an intersectional feminist lens.

The theoretical grounding of this inquiry draws on feminist debates about rape as a political act, a sexual act, a cultural script, and a form of language. Brownmiller (1975) positions rape as a mechanism of patriarchal control; MacKinnon (1989) emphasizes the structural embedding of sexuality within male dominance; and Dworkin (1987) foregrounds the sexualization of women's subordination. Yet these models, developed primarily with a universal "women" in mind, as a monolithic category, overlooking race, class, sexuality, and gender variance (Cahill, 2001; Mardorossian, 2002). Marcus' theorization of rape as a plurality of languages, rather than a singular structure, offers more interpretive flexibility and opens a pathway for understanding assaults on transmen as both continuous with and distinct from female rape.

Qualitative evidence suggests that the assaults of transmen may resemble the "corrective rape" of lesbians—violence that enforces heteronormativity and punishes gender nonconformity (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Shultz, 2023). At the same time, studies of male rape underscore structural differences in how violence against men is enacted and interpreted (Alyagon-Darr, 2023). Placing transmen's experiences in dialogue with both traditions reveals that neither framework is fully adequate: while patterns of targeting align more closely with female rape, the social positioning of transmen troubles simple applications of sex-based theory.

I propose that feminist models remain most relevant for theorizing the sexual assaults of transmen, but only if expanded through intersectional, trans-inclusive analysis. By drawing on Marcus' plural "languages of rape" and Mardorossian's call for new feminist theories, this study argues that assaults on transmen illuminate the inadequacy of

current frameworks and the necessity of theorizing rape as a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon. In doing so, it contributes both to feminist scholarship on sexual violence and to the urgent project of addressing transmen's disproportionate vulnerability.

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