

## **Rape culture, lad culture and everyday sexism: researching, conceptualizing and politicizing new mediations of gender and sexual violence**

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In 2012, UK activist Laura Bates set up the Everyday Sexism Project to raise awareness of the banality of sexist practices facing girls and women, from schools and streets to universities and workplaces. Beginning with a website on which women were invited to post their experiences, this has become a viral international movement (Bates 2014). 2012 also saw a wave of media interest in sexism amongst UK students, with a variety of articles on the phenomenon of 'lad culture' citing activities such as sports initiations, sexist themed parties, the sexual pursuit of women freshers (termed 'seal clubbing' in one institution) and a culture of casual verbal and physical sexual harassment in the nighttime economy and student social space (Bates 2012, Kingsley 2012, Sherriff 2012). Following this, NUS commissioned the first national study of 'lad culture', which became the basis of a major campaign of lobbying and initiatives (Phipps and Young 2013). Since the 1970s, critical gender and sexuality education scholars had been studying white heterosexual 'laddism' as a problematic form of masculinity (Willis 1977, Francis 1999, Jackson 2003, Jackson and Dempster 2009). However, the NUS intervention and subsequent media coverage lifted 'lad culture' to the status of a national media debate in the UK.

The NUS report *That's What She Said* defined 'lad culture' as a group mentality articulated through activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption, and characterised by sexist and homophobic 'banter' (Phipps and Young 2013, p28). Subsequent discussions in political and media arenas linked it to broader terms such as 'sex object culture' (popularised by the campaign *Object!*) and 'rape culture' (developed by US feminists in the 1970s). The latter refers to a set of general cultural beliefs supporting men's violence against women, including the idea that this violence is a fact of life, that there is an association between violence and sexuality, that men are active while women are passive, and that men have a right to sexual intercourse. These also produce prevalent 'rape myths' such as that women enjoy being raped, and give credence to the idea that there are 'blurred' lines around consent, which has generated widespread disbelief of rape victims and low conviction rates of perpetrators (New York Radical Feminists 1974, Lazarus and Wunderlich 1975, Herman 1989, Buchwald et al 1993). 'Rape culture' as a concept has recently seen a resurgence in feminist politics and the media, with activists from countries such as India, Australia, South Africa and the US calling out the normalisation of sexual violence and familiar victim-blaming tropes in high-profile

cases involving politicians, sportspeople and celebrities, as well as on university campuses (Curry 2015, Frank 2016, Monchgesang 2015, Le Roux 2016).

This special issue set out to showcase debates around the relative utility of concepts such as *everyday sexism*, *lad culture* and *rape culture*, to shift thinking and enable change in how sexual violence in all its complexity is experienced, researched and communicated. The contributions engage with the populist energy of these concepts, but also consider them critically, taking them beyond the everyday and mining them for their usefulness and limitations in context-specific ways. The papers also illuminate how these notions interact with policy and practice discourses such as violence against women and girls (VAWG)<sup>1</sup> and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)<sup>2</sup>, and when populist language can be at cross-purposes with policy. As editors of the special issue, what interests us is the ways in which the papers, both individually and collectively, show how researching gender and sexual violence demands new conceptual and methodological tools. They enable discussion across a wide range of contexts to explore, problematize, and transform new mediations of gendered and sexual violence.

By *new mediations* we gesture towards the affordances of mobile technologies and particularly social media, widely recognized as enabling new forms of communication in relation to gender and sexual violence (Rentschler, 2015). Digital mediation has been discussed by media studies scholars as a complex, multilayered set of processes through which life is reorganized and made meaningful in new ways (Kember and Zylinksa, 2012). Mediation captures “both the technological means or forms of expression, and the interpersonal processes of moderation, negotiation, and intervention” (Lievrouw, 2009: 317). It denotes an intermediate agent acting between things but also refers to resolving, settling or negotiating differences. All these ideas can be brought together to understand the complex layers of human and more-than-human mediations and affective force relations that form genders and sexualities (Renold and Ringrose, 2016, see Renold 2016). We are also particularly keen to illustrate how discourses of activism surface in multiple ways across the collection. These include the micro resistances of participants inside research encounters and the ‘politics of affect’ (Massumi 2015), and engagements with change-making organisations

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<sup>1</sup> In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the UN defined this as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’

<sup>2</sup> Gender-based violence refers to any harmful act directed against individuals or groups on the basis of their gender (United Nations 2014).

and direct action within and beyond research projects, which trouble what might even count as research.

The papers in this special issue are all situated at various points in a continuum of feminist research methodologies. Whether implicitly or explicitly, at a macro or micro-political level, feminist research aims to take and create responsibility for how our practices and findings can make a difference in the world. Some of the articles seek to document the experience of hidden injustices, while others map out and/or theorise the process of what it means to work with participants to co-produce change, locating themselves in the space between activism and research.

Lida Ahmad and Priscyll Anctil Avoine's article on misogyny in post-war Afghanistan explores how macro political structures work to frame understandings of violence against women in country-specific ways. In a context of extreme everyday conflict and violence, they explore how wider public attention is focused on peace agreements, and women's issues are deemed less significant in a hierarchy of needs. They suggest sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in this context is relegated to banality and depicted as 'everyday' news. Through interviewing methodology, they relate life stories of forty women from Kabul who experienced SGBV in the civil war and postwar period. The argument is focused on demonstrating how the social relations of war and aftermath in these contexts have solidified misogyny. The authors usefully extract the concept of misogyny from its too-often individualized usage in the West, and place it into a specific political, institutional and cultural frame. They argue that misogyny is not simply hatred or aversion of women, but a complex ideological (and state-sponsored) system that generates power inequalities through violence. The paper powerfully evidences and calls out the changing face and *intensification* of misogyny in a context that lacks legal structures to sanction violence, and illustrates how women's bodies become a battleground in which rape is used as a tool of domination. It reviews UN law and geo-political forces that have proven largely inept in intervening into local contexts, and suggests that global support is needed for grassroots initiatives such as women's safe houses and shelters.

An institution-focused analysis is also provided by Lesley McMillan's article on police perceptions of false allegations of rape, which draws attention to the ongoing prevalence of *rape myths* in the criminal justice system. Her qualitative study of 40 in-depth interviews with police officers demonstrates how they continue to invest in and hold onto gender stereotypes about women as deceitful, vengeful and ultimately regretful of sexual encounters. These findings offer insight into how rape and sexual assault continues to be embedded in and

justified through entrenched institutional attitudes, and how these discourses construct ‘the truth’ of an incident, predominantly through relations of belief or disbelief. The article seeks to explain in a systematic way how officers relate to the victims of rape as they do the *perpetrators* of other crimes, who they have been trained to doubt, question and disbelieve. McMillan suggests therefore that ‘rape work’ is made more difficult within a policing culture of hegemonic masculinity where sexual double standards and sexual distrust of women abide. She also explains how this grounding of disbelief is based in wider cultural myths, in this case rape myths, which are “imaginative patterns and networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world”. However, this leads to a chicken-and-egg dilemma around how to develop training to rethink rape within entrenched institutional norms and processes. This paradox of how to start making feminist change at micro and macro levels is an age-old question that is at the forefront of this special issue and many of the other contributions.

For instance, Shweta Majumdar and Shreyasi Jha’s article on sexual harassment in Delhi is primarily occupied with how to change local everyday cultures and uses of public space that legitimize sexual aggression and gender-based violence. The article also connects to and critically explores how populist notions of *rape culture* mobilized in social media are helping to raise the profile and change attitudes around street harassment. Its starting point is the violent gang rape on a Delhi bus and the subsequent fall out and activism. The authors draw on an intersectional framework to show how sexual harassment in India is organized around a hierarchy of femininity, where lower caste women are read as ‘indecent’ and therefore viewed as easier prey. The way that victim blaming logic works around discourses of honor and responsabilization – where it is women who are ‘leaving themselves’ open to harassment - is also discussed. The authors locate their own deeply personal investment in the issue, the context and solutions as activist-scholars themselves. They think about the making of social change through a review of the UN ‘Safe Cities Initiative’ in Delhi. This initiative marks a paradigm shift from understanding street harassment only as a crime to situating it as an issue of social justice and human rights. The authors illustrate how ‘Safe Cities’ operates to disturb gender binaries around public (male) and private (female) space, promoting everyone’s ‘right to the city’, and positions street violence as interfering with the fulfillment of this right. However, they also critique the conceptual and methodological flaws in the initiative, for instance in setting up a gender binary which neglects the role of masculinity in violence against LGBTQ people. They conclude by pointing to the wide range of local activisms that have risen up to challenge rape culture: they argue mapping these and the inroads they may be making would be an important next step in this context.

A strong thread and focus for this special issue was seeking to understand how feminist activists (particularly young adults) are engaging critically in a variety of different spaces. In their piece on student activism, Ruth Lewis, Susan Marine and Kathryn Kenney offer a welcome antidote to recent emphases on the dangers of university campuses, arguing that they in fact can offer a 'safe space' for feminist activity. Their article focuses on feminist *resistance* to sexism on university campuses and draws upon a rich wealth of interview data with 18 women in the UK and 15 in the US. The authors offer a poignant look at the activist cultures women forged through involvement in university women's centres, feminist clubs (US) and feminist societies (UK). These provided fertile spaces for "debate, dissent and critical thinking" about sexism and also gendered and sexual violence. Participants explicitly discussed their desire to challenge contemporary manifestations of 'lad' and 'rape culture' on campuses, and their resistances took a variety of forms, from a zine called 'Speak' to performances of The Vagina Monologues, creating feminist groups on and off -line, holding discussion groups, book and film clubs, and joining local Reclaim/Take Back the Night marches and SlutWalks. Importantly, the participants noted how vital having physical community space together in university was compared to having only online connections. They also highlighted the importance of grappling with diversity amongst the groupings, signaling the importance of intersectionality which is becoming a key principle in contemporary feminist spaces. In many ways this article is reminiscent of discussions of second wave feminist consciousness raising groups, illustrating the radical potential of campus culture: although unsurprisingly, the women also faced outrage and censure.

Censure of feminist activism is also the focus of Alyssa Nicollini's article documenting the media coverage of a student news critique of rape culture in a US high school. Nicollini mobilises the concept of *affectivisms*, a hybrid blending of affect and activism derived from Brian Holmes' (2008) 'Affectivist Manifesto' on art based activism. 'Affectivisms' as a concept helps us to think about how intensities and feelings around activist issues become political and can have the power to challenge mainstream cultures. Nicollini considers the processes which occur when micro events undergo mass mediation, which can happen when activism hits the news. Exploring a student newspaper report on rape culture in a school that was picked up by national media, Nicollini explains how this gained "an affective political force", noting that the activism exceeded the rational intentions of a single political actor and offered feeling "in excess of, or in addition to, speech as a political tool." She describes how the event led to 'disturbing' affects such as outrage, indignation, and disgust, that challenged the claims of the school's 'positive climate'. She argues that the student author of the article was able to mobilise the very affect *embedded in* the term 'rape culture' to raise questions about the school environment as hostile to girls and women. This is a fascinating discussion

of the political terms we invoke in our attempts to change cultures condoning gender and sexual violence. Following Zizi Papacharassi (2015), Nicollini argues that the affective force of mediated events and the “connection between online and offline events is better understood as *hyper-empirical* rather than casual.” The hyper-empirical moves the event beyond the local facts to map outwards to the connectivities enabled through the sharing, commenting upon and circulation of activism through social media. Indeed what worried the school was the uptake of the article how it tapped into global flows of intensity around a movement challenging the normalization of rape and sexual violence.

Digital media is also identified as a generative activist space in Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessalyn Keller and Jessica Ringrose’s article: they explore what they term the ‘affective solidarities’ which emerge between girls and women on such platforms. They map out forms of mediated feminist activism expressed through websites and social media posts protesting ‘rape culture’. The paper uses a mix of the hyper-empirical discussed by Nicollini, including analyzing *how* women use social media such as the anti-street harassment website *Hollaback!* to narrate and reveal their experiences of sexual harassment and rape cultures. The posts are explored for affective commonalities including fear, anger and disgust at a textual level. However, the paper also then attempts to map back from the digital content to investigate the affective politics around an anti-rape hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported. The authors research the lived experiences of using the hashtag to narrate experiences of abuse and violence through interviews with Twitter posters. The interview data explores how using the hashtag to talk about rape made participants feel, and also goes beyond this level of personal affect to illuminate the degrees of affective connectivity that Twitter enables with a community of posters. The authors argue that the connection and response here is a form of digital speaking and listening that helps in addressing trauma. Similar to Nicollini’s, the paper also documents how high school students mobilize social media to challenge institutionalized sexism at school, particularly dress codes that unfairly target and sexually shame girls. The authors show how social media has enabled girls to identify disciplinary school practices as part of rape culture, noting this as a discursive shift from using ‘rape culture’ to explore university campuses to now also using the concept to understand institutionalized sexism facing youth at school. They offer examples of how teen girls used Twitter as a backchannel to communicate their protests to school policy, showing the inventive and creative force of teen feminist humor.

In “Feel what I feel”, Emma Renold further mobilises and matter-realises (Braidotti 2013) the enduring and painful affects of girls’ talk about ‘getting used’ to ‘being used’ as sexual objects in routinized sexism in school, online and in their communities. Her paper

experiments with the potential of speculative arts-based methodologies in co-producing research-activist projects with teen girls to both feel, communicate and create change on the normalized experience of sexual violence. Renold introduces the concepts ‘da(r)ta’ and ‘dartaphact’ to theorise the micro-practices of how research-activisms can literally come to matter. She describes how interview data from a fairly conventional research project on safe and unsafe places entangled with simple yet powerful and affectively charged arts-informed practices. Over a series of regular lunchtime workshops, Renold and the girls created four dartaphacts (objects crafted from and carrying experience), which each creatively addressed the normalisation of sexual violence. The paper traces the unplanned and unpredictable journey of how these dartaphacts (the *runway of disrespect*, the *shame chain*, the *ruler-skirt* and the *tagged heart*) travelled into local peer cultures, school assemblies and national policy and media landscapes. In an era where academic research struggles to matter in contemporary policy-making, research-creation assemblages like this are perhaps the ‘minor gestures’ (Manning 2016) needed to call out and end oppressive sexual cultures and practices. This paper considers how in an era that capitalises on confessional survivor or victim stories, and possibly worn-out, over-coded, or slippery terms, the im/personal vitality of objects might offer new ways to think about social change, and enable an increasing number of young people to communicate the experiences that matter to them more safely.

The papers in the Special Issue make clear, then, that concepts like ‘rape culture’ and everyday sexism have the potential to do a great deal of political work: however, we as editors also wanted to consider the work that they do not, or are unable to, do. The papers presented, as well as some of the absences from this collection, give various insights. For instance, Nichols’ piece on ‘mischievous masculinities’ is a refreshing exploration of some of the complexities of ‘laddish’ relations which reminds us that the concept of ‘lad culture’ lacks nuance. Through a discussion that attempts to unpack the monolithic category of the ‘lad’, the article suggests that the micro qualities of laddishness that express humour and mischief need to be explored. Indeed, both ‘lad culture’ and ‘rape culture’ have often been used in totalizing ways to demonize working class communities in the UK, and are too easily linked to panics around issues such as alcohol and pornography (Phipps 2016a). In performative social media spaces a dynamic often emerges in which outrage at sexism and ‘misogyny’ can displace analysis of masculinity in all its facets. However, tricky issues remain around how to create cultural change. How do we know when mischievous masculinities might slip into something more harmful that links back to the very banter used to legitimize sexual violence? Nichols’ article provides a useful discussion for those who are considering these questions.

Outrage around ‘lad culture’ and ‘rape culture’ can also be fairly silent on how intersectional relationships between gender, class privilege and whiteness produce contemporary ‘laddish’ behaviours (Phipps 2016a), and the ways in which problematic forms of masculinity are framed and legitimized by the structures and rationalities of the neoliberal university, school and/or workplace (Phipps and Young 2015). The failure of the notion of ‘rape culture’ to attend to intersectionality and difference was highlighted recently in the controversy over the video for US singer/songwriter Rihanna's track 'Bitch Better Have My Money', which was accused by some feminists of perpetuating 'rape culture' because of its depiction of Rihanna perpetrating sexualised violence on a white woman (Moore 2015). The outcry exposed the inherent whiteness of ‘rape culture’ as a concept, as critics failed to comprehend the video’s clear narrative around the complicity of white women in racist oppression, which has often been performed through accusations of violence (McKenzie 2015, Singh 2015). Rihanna’s reworking of the trope of the innocent/injured white woman, historically used to incite and justify racist violence against men and women of colour (Wells-Barnett 1892, Davis 1981, McGuire 2010), was unintelligible within ‘rape culture’ frameworks in which ‘woman’ is always the victim, resulting in an erasure of black women’s experience.

Similarly, the notion of ‘everyday sexism’ remains somewhat opaque. The catalogue of experiential data around banal and micro-sexisms has not yet generated a clear theory of the processes and mechanisms by which these work, or any further analysis around the continuum between ‘everyday’ and more extreme forms (Kelly 1988). Because the everyday is context and locally specific, we also need precision in our uses of this term: the very type of precision that is visible through the spread of articles in this special issue. For example, the discussion of everyday sexism in Delhi gives us pause to think about how this might harmonize and differ from that operating in schools in the UK. Similarly, the analyses of institutionalized sexism(s) in Afghanistan and the UK criminal justice system can be seen as both companions and foils to one another simultaneously. In our feminist work on sexism and violence we need to be able to both honour this complexity, and work towards solidarity and coalition wherever we find it.

As part of this process it is advisable to avoid over-generalising from our concepts, which can lead to simplification within academic, media and policy frameworks. This both inhibits the potential for developing specific local initiatives to tackle culturally distinct gender and sexual violence, and can perform other intersectional exclusions. For example, although we received a large number of excellent submissions for this volume, we did not receive any focused on violence against transgender people and/or sex workers. This is more than likely due to the conceptual framings we engage with here. Within populist discourses such as ‘lad



culture' and 'rape culture' there is a tendency to essentialise the male body *as violence*. When this interacts with societal transphobia it can produce a refusal to validate trans women *as women* and a construction of them instead as a threat. If they are not seen as helpless victims, sex workers are similarly viewed as threatening, positioned as agents of the patriarchy who endanger other women due to their participation in an industry which is often analysed as a cause of male violence and abuse (Phipps 2016b). These exclusions mean that violence against both trans women and sex workers frequently goes unrecognized within contemporary feminist thinking and politics around violence, which has material *effects and affects*. In terms of this special issue, these exclusions and specificities mean that it should be seen as partial in its coverage. Nonetheless, this specificity forms a jumping off point for critically engaging with concepts such as 'lad culture', 'rape culture' and 'everyday sexism', and for developing useful methodologies which blend research and activism in tackling new mediations of gendered and sexual violence.

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