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## Prevalence and Correlates of Young People's Sexual Aggression

### Perpetration and Victimisation in 10 European Countries: A Multi-Level Analysis

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## Abstract

Data are presented on young people's sexual victimization and perpetration from 10 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain) using a shared measurement tool ( $N = 3,480$  participants aged between 18 and 27 years). Between 19.7 and 52.2% of female and between 10.1 and 55.8% of male respondents reported having experienced at least one incident of sexual victimization since the age of consent. In two countries, victimization rates were significantly higher for men than for women. Between 5.5 and 48.7% of male and 2.6 and 14.8% of female participants reported having engaged in a least one act of sexual aggression perpetration with higher rates for men than for women in all countries. Victimization rates correlated negatively with sexual assertiveness and positively with alcohol use in sexual encounters. Perpetration rates correlated positively with attitudes condoning physical dating violence and with alcohol use in men, and negatively with sexual assertiveness in women. At the country level, lower gender equality in economic power and the work domain was related to higher male perpetration rates. Lower gender equality in political power and higher sexual assertiveness in women relative to men were linked to higher male victimization rates.

*Key words:* sexual aggression, sexual victimization, youths, multi-level correlates, European Union

## Prevalence and Correlates of Sexual Aggression Perpetration and Victimization in Young People from 10 European Countries Contents: A Multi-Level Analysis

Learning to engage in fulfilling and responsible sexual relations is a key developmental task in adolescence and young adulthood. However, a large body of evidence suggests that being made to engage in, or coercing another person to engage in, unwanted sexual contacts is a reality for many young people.

In the countries of the European Union, a recent comprehensive review has shown that the rates of sexual victimization since the legal age of consent (i.e., the age at which a person is considered by law to be competent to consent to sexual activity) were as high as 83% for females and 66% for males, and perpetration rates were as high as 80% for males and 40% for females (Krahé et al. 2014). However, current knowledge about the scale of sexual aggression among young people suffers from a considerable heterogeneity not only between but also within countries, which may be attributed in large part to the diversity of measures, age groups, and time periods used in different studies.

Embedded within an EU-funded international project called *Youth Sexual Aggression and Victimization* (Y-SAV; <http://ysav.rutgerswpf.org/>), the present research developed a methodological approach toward harmonizing research on sexual aggression perpetration and victimization among young people in Europe, which was piloted in 10 European countries. In addition, it examined select correlates of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization at the individual level as well as the macro-level of the participating countries. For the purposes of this study, sexual aggression is defined as *behavior carried out with the intent or result of making another person engage in sexual activity despite his or her unwillingness to do so* (see also Krahé et al. 2014).

### **Individual-Level Correlates of Sexual Aggression and Victimization**

In the international literature on sexual aggression, three variables have been associated consistently with a higher likelihood of experiencing sexual victimization or engaging in sexual aggression. The first is *alcohol use*, which is involved in about 50% of rape cases (Abbey et al., 2004). Prospective studies revealed that drinking patterns, particularly the frequency of binge drinking, predicted women's risk of sexual victimization in the first year of college (Mouilso, Fischer, and Calhoun 2012), and found links between men's alcohol use and sexual aggression over time (Swartout and White 2010).

The second correlate of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization is the *acceptance of violence in interpersonal relationships*. Research by Price and Byers (1999) has shown that both men and women scored higher on a scale assessing the acceptability of women's use of violence toward a male partner than they did on a corresponding scale addressing the acceptability of men's use of physical violence toward a female partner. Regarding sexual victimization, it may be argued that individuals who see the use of violence between partners as acceptable under certain circumstances should be more tolerant of aggressive behavior by a partner and thereby be more likely to be victimized. Alternatively, they might be less inclined to consider a partner's behavior as coercive and therefore be less likely to see themselves as victims of sexual aggression, which should result in a negative correlation between acceptance of interpersonal violence and victimization reports. Both possibilities are examined in the present study.

The third correlate of sexual aggression is *sexual assertiveness*, which refers to strategies used to achieve sexual autonomy and has been conceptualized as a protective factor against sexual victimization (Morokoff et al. 1997; Walker, Messman-Moore, and Ward 2011). The facet of *refusal assertiveness* denotes to the ability to reject unwanted sexual interactions. It has been studied almost exclusively in women., who are assigned to the role of gate keepers of sexual

intimacy, according to both the social role model (Byers, 1996) and the evolutionary account of rape (Thornhill and Palmer 2000). Longitudinal studies have found that low refusal assertiveness predicted a higher risk of sexual victimization over time (Livingston, Testa, and VanZile-Tamsen 2007). It is less clear how sexual assertiveness relates to the perpetration of sexual aggression. Sexually aggressive men have been found to show a lack of basic interactional skills that undermines their socio-sexual competence (Vanwesenbeeck, et al. 1999), which would suggest that sexual assertiveness and perpetration of sexual aggression should also be negatively related.

### **Country-Level Correlates of Sexual Aggression and Victimization: Power and Work-Related Gender Equality**

Although socio-cultural and feminist explanations attribute men's sexual violence toward women to patriarchal power structures (see Krahe 2013), few studies have empirically assessed macro-level indicators of gender inequality in predicting differences in victimization and perpetration rates. In our study, country-level indicators of gender equality were taken from the European Index of Gender Equality (EGEI; <http://eige.europa.eu/content/gender-equality-index>). In line with the socio-cultural explanation of rape as resulting from men's power over women, we selected the two dimensions of power and work-related equality.

The dimension of *power* focuses on the representation of women and men in decision-making positions and is further differentiated into *political power* (e.g., women's share of members of government and members of parliament) and *economic power* (e.g., women's share of board memberships and directorships in large companies) The dimension of *work-related equality* reflects the extent to which women and men have equal access to employment and appropriate working conditions, such as flexibility of working time, training at work, and health and safety. Work-related equality, notably women's access to paid work and thus their relative economic independence of men, was expected to be linked to lower levels of women's

victimization. Based on the socio-cultural account of sexual violence, a more equitable distribution of power should be linked to lower sexual victimization rates of women and also lower perpetration rates reported by men.

The socio-cultural approach does not address male victimization by women. One possible extension of the power-based account of sexual violence to male victims and female perpetrators would be to argue that women are more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression toward men the more power they have in a society. Alternatively, it could be argued that higher gender equality promotes more equitable sexual relationships, which should make the use of sexual coercion less likely by both men and women. The present study provides a tentative empirical test of these alternative hypotheses.

### **The Current Study**

The first aim of this study was to pilot a common methodology for the comprehensive quantitative assessment of the prevalence of sexual aggression among young people in several European countries. Ten countries were selected on the basis of the review of the available evidence by Krahe et al. (2014) to represent, on the one hand, countries with an established research tradition on youth sexual aggression and, on the other hand, countries in which no or very few previous studies had been identified. Men and women were surveyed both about victimization experiences and about sexually coercive behavior since the age of legal consent in the respective country. The second aim of the study was to provide an example of how differences in prevalence rates may be linked to psychological variables that vary between individuals and socio-structural variables that vary between countries in a multi-level analytical framework.

*Hypotheses.* Based on past evidence from the international literature, we expected that victimization rates would be higher for women than for men, whereas perpetration rates would be

higher for men than for women. Regarding the correlates of sexual aggression, we predicted that for men as well as women both sexual aggression perpetration and victimization should be positively correlated with attitudes condoning dating violence and drinking alcohol, particularly in the context of sexual interactions. In addition, we expected sexual assertiveness to be negatively related to sexual victimization and aggression. With regard to the three country level facets of gender equality, we expected higher levels of gender equality to be linked to lower rates of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization among men and women.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of  $N = 3,480$  participants (2,308 women and 1,169 men, three did not indicate their sex). The average age was  $M = 21.5$  years ( $SD = 2.27$ ; range 18-27 years). Only male participants were included in the Austrian sample due to funding limitations. A break-down of the sample composition by age, gender, and proportion of students is presented in Table 1. Because only 2.4% of participants reporting exclusively same-sex contacts (range per country: 1-21), these cases were excluded from the analyses. Table 1 also presents the three macro level indicators from the European Index of Gender Equality for each country.

- Insert Table 1 about here -

### **Instruments**

#### **Sexual Aggression Perpetration and Victimization**

The Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S) by Krahe and Berger (2013) was used to assess the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization. The SAV-S draws on the “Sexual Experiences Survey” (SES; Koss et al. 2007) in the behaviorally specific phrasing of the items as well as in terms of the sexual acts and coercive strategies used. However, it goes beyond this instrument by eliciting reports for different victim-perpetrator relationships and using

gender-appropriate versions rather than gender-neutral language. Three coercive strategies are addressed in the SAV-S: (a) the use of threat of physical force, (b) the exploitation of the other person's inability to resist the unwanted sexual advances, and (c) the use of verbal pressure (e.g., threatening to end the relationship). While differing in severity, each strategy is directed at the goal of making the target person engage in sexual activity against his or her will, thus meeting our definition of sexual aggression. In parallel parts of the questionnaire, reports of victimization and perpetration are elicited. For each coercive strategy, participants are presented with three victim-perpetrator constellations (former/current partners, friends/acquaintances, and strangers) and are asked to indicate whether they have ever experienced (victimization) or made another person engage in (perpetration) different sexual acts: (a) sexual touch, (b) attempted sexual intercourse, (c) completed sexual intercourse, and (d) other sexual acts (e.g., oral sex). In addition, a separate item asked about victimization and perpetration through exploitation of a position of authority with respect to the same four categories of sexual acts. Participants indicated for each of the resulting combinations of coercive strategy and victim-perpetrator relationship whether they had experienced/committed respective the sexual act once (1) or more than once (2). For economy of presentation, an option "I did not engage in/experience any of these actions" was provided for each coercive strategy rather than providing a never (0) option for each item. Participants had to either endorse at least one of the specific items per page *or* click the "did not engage in /experience any of these" option to be able to proceed to the next page. The format of the Y-SAV is presented in a demonstration version available at <http://www.w-lab.de/sav-s.html>.

To ensure that victims of sexual aggression would be able to register their victimization experiences before being prompted to report perpetration behavior, a fixed order was imposed in which the victimization items were always presented first. The questions were ordered by coercive strategy, and the different sexual acts were listed under each strategy based on the



reasoning that the type of strategy used by the perpetrator would be most salient, and therefore leading with the questions about coercive strategy would facilitate recall (Abbey, Parkhill, and Koss 2005).

The items were preceded by a detailed introduction explaining and giving examples of the different coercive strategies. In addition, participants were instructed that the questions referred only to incidents experienced or committed since the legal age of consent (specified according to the law of the respective country). Because the focus of the study was on youth sexual aggression, this specification was important to exclude incidents of childhood sexual abuse.

### **Sexual Assertiveness**

Sexual assertiveness was measured by five items from the Refusal subscale of the Sexual Assertiveness Scale (SAS) by Morokoff et al. (1997; example item: “I refuse to let my partner touch my genitals if I don't want that, even if my partner insists”).<sup>1</sup> Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 0 (*never, 0% of the time*) to 4 (*always, 100% of the time*). With the exception of Austria ( $\alpha = .55$ ), internal consistencies were good in each country, with  $\alpha$ s ranging from .71 to .79. The  $\alpha$  for the combined sample was .76.

### **Attitudes toward Dating Violence**

To measure the extent to which participants found physical violence towards a dating partner acceptable, the gender-appropriate scales of the Attitudes toward Dating Violence Scales by Price and Byers (1999) were used. Male participants received the 12 items of the Attitudes toward Male Physical Dating Violence Scale (example item: “Sometimes a guy cannot help hitting his girlfriend when she makes him angry”), female participants received the 12 items of the Attitudes toward Female Dating Violence Scale (example item: “A girl must hit her boyfriend so that he will respect her”). Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistencies ranged between  $\alpha = .75$  and  $\alpha = .95$  for the male

version and between  $\alpha = .76$  and  $\alpha = .86$  for the female version. In the combined sample, the  $\alpha$  was .93 for the male and .85 for the female version.

### **Drinking Behavior**

To measure general drinking behavior, participants were presented with three items taken from the survey conducted by the Federal Centre for Health Education in Germany (Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung 2012). An example item reads: “When you think about a typical week, on how many days do you normally drink alcohol?” Response options ranged from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*every day*). Responses to the three items were z-standardized and aggregated into an overall score of general drinking habits. The internal consistencies ranged from .48 to .82 across the 10 countries, for the combined sample, the  $\alpha$  was .72. An additional item asked specifically about drinking habits in the context of sexual encounters and was used as a separate measure in the analyses: “How often do you drink alcohol in situations where you have sex?” Responses to this item were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*every time/always*).

### **Gender Equality**

The scores for gender equality in the domains of political and economic power and work equality for the ten countries were taken from the European Index of Gender Equality. In each of the three domains, the index can have a range from 1 (total inequality) to 100 (total equality). The scores for the ten countries are presented in Table 1.

### **Procedure**

Online versions of the questionnaire were created in each country using careful back-translation procedures. Three screening questions were used to assign participants to the version of the questionnaire depending on gender and sexual experience: (a) sex (male/female); (b) whether they ever had sexual contact (with or without full sexual intercourse) with a person of the opposite sex; and (c) whether they ever had sex with a person of the same sex. Participants

who reported neither heterosexual nor same-sex contact received two further questions in which they were asked to indicate whether they had ever experienced unwanted sexual contact with a man or a woman. Those who said yes to one or both of these follow-up questions then received the appropriate SAV-S items followed by the remaining measures. Those who said no were presented directly with the measures of the correlates. Since very few participants (2.4%) reported sexual experience exclusively with a member of the same sex, only heterosexual victim-perpetrator constellations were considered in the present analyses. In Greece, a second sample was recruited after the completion of the online survey prompted by the high rates of male sexual victimization that emerged from the online questionnaires (see Results section). This sample ( $N = 142$ ), which was of a similar size as the online sample ( $N = 149$ ) completed the measures in paper and pencil format in a class setting.

Participants were recruited using a variety of strategies (circular emails, classroom announcements, lab websites, student lists, social networks, youth organizations, and family planning associations). In the case of Austria, data were collected by a commercial survey company. Data collection was standardized as participants completed the same online questionnaire. They were informed on the first page of the questionnaire that the survey was about unwanted sexual interactions and had to indicate consent before being able to proceed to the items. On the final page, all participants were presented with a list of counseling agencies offering support to victims and perpetrators of sexual violence in their respective country. Approval from institutional reviews board was obtained in line with country regulations.

## **Results**

### **Prevalence Rates of Sexual Aggression and Victimization**

A preliminary analysis was conducted for the two Greek subsamples that completed the measures either online or in a paper-and-pencil format in class. The victimization and

perpetration rates for the two samples were highly similar, therefore, the two subsamples were merged for all further analyses.

### **Prevalence of sexual aggression: Perpetration reports**

The percentage of male and female participants who endorsed at least one form of sexual aggression perpetration is presented in the “Total” columns of Table 2. The table also presents the figures for each of the four coercive strategies, which contain multiple responses as participants may have reported more than one form of sexual aggression. Therefore, the added percentages for the four coercive strategies may be higher than the “Total” rate.

- Insert Table 2 about here -

The overall figures in the bottom row of Table 2 show a clear gender gap, with a total of 16.3% of men reporting at least one form of sexual aggression compared to 5.0% of women,  $\chi^2 = 83.75$ ,  $p < .001$ . The “Total” columns show that across the entire sample as well as in each individual country perpetration rates were higher for men than for women. However, the difference was significant in only four countries (Cyprus:  $\chi^2$ ,  $df = 1$ , = 6.52,  $p < .05$ ; Greece:  $\chi^2$ ,  $df = 1$ , = 39.20,  $p < .001$ ; Lithuania:  $\chi^2$ ,  $df = 1$ , = 11.30,  $p = .001$ ; Spain:  $\chi^2$ ,  $df = 1$ , = 11.37,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, there was a substantial variability between countries, with the lowest total rates found in Belgium (5.5% for men and 2.6% for women) and the highest total rates found in Greece (48.7% for men and 14.8% for women).

In terms of coercive strategy used by the aggressor, perpetration rates were highest in both gender groups for exploiting the other person’s inability to resist (10.3% for men, 2.5% for women), followed by physical force and verbal pressure, for which similar rates were found (7.6% and 7.5% for men; 2.2% and 2.3% for women). The rates were lowest for exploiting one’s position of authority (4.0% of men and 0.7% of women). Because multiple responses were possible across strategies, differences in the percentages between the three strategies could not be

tested for significance. Perpetration rates were significantly higher among men than among women for each of the coercive strategies,  $\chi^2$ s ( $df=1$ ) ranging from 30.13 to 82.84, all  $ps < .001$ .

Table 3 presents the prevalence rates for current or former partners, acquaintances, and strangers, collapsed across coercive strategies and sexual acts.

- Insert Table 3 about here -

The highest prevalence of sexual aggression was found toward a current or former sexual partner (across all countries, 12.2% of men and 4.6% of women responded “yes” to at least one of the perpetration items in this category). There were only three exceptions: In Austria and the Netherlands, men showed the highest rates for sexual aggression toward an acquaintance, and in Cyprus, men reported the highest rates for sexual aggression toward a stranger, although the rates across the three relationship categories were similar. Again, due to the multiple response format, the rates could not be tested for significant differences. Men had significantly higher prevalence rates of sexual aggression perpetration in each of the three relationship constellations presented in Table 3,  $\chi^2$ s ( $df=1$ ) ranging from 58.10 to 108.54, all  $ps < .001$ .

#### **Prevalence of sexual aggression: Victimization reports**

Table 4 presents the victimization rates for men and women. The “Total” columns display the rates of men and women who endorsed at least one form of sexual victimization for each country and overall across all countries. Table 4 also shows the rates broken down by coercive strategy used by the perpetrator, which contain multiple responses because participants may have experienced more than one form of sexual victimization.

- Insert Table 4 about here -

The gender difference in the victimization reports was much smaller than for perpetration, with an overall rate of 27.1% for men and 32.2% for women. The variability across countries was again substantial. The lowest rate of male victimization was found in Belgium at 10.1%, and the

highest rate was found in Greece with 55.8%. For female victimization, the figures ranged from 19.7% in Lithuania to 52.2% in the Netherlands. In five countries, men reported higher victimization rates than did women (Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, Poland, and Portugal), but the difference was significant only in Cyprus ( $\chi^2 (df=1) = 5.58, p < .05$ ) and Lithuania ( $\chi^2 (df=1) = 6.85, p < .05$ ). In two countries, Belgium ( $\chi^2 (df=1) = 6.21, p < .05$ ) and the Netherlands ( $\chi^2 (df=1) = 28.87, p < .001$ ), victimization rates were significantly higher for women than for men.

Table 4 also presents the victimization rates separately for each coercive strategy. The most prevalent coercive strategy reported by victims was physical force (15.8% of men, 19.5% of women), followed by the aggressor's exploitation of their inability to resist (14.6% of men, 17.2% of women), verbal pressure (11.2% of men and 13.3% of women), and the aggressor exploiting his/her position of authority (7.8% of men and 4.9% of women). Greece and Cyprus showed particularly high male victimization rates for the use or threat of force and exploitation of the inability to resist, and the Netherlands showed the highest female victimization rates on these strategies. Only the rates for misuse of authority differed significantly between men and women,  $\chi^2 (df=1) = 10.71, p < .001$ .

Finally, Table 5 presents the victimization rates for men and women by victim-perpetrator relationship.

- Insert Table 5 about here -

Mirroring the perpetration rates, the overall figures in Table 5 show that victimization was experienced most frequently from a current or former partner (23.6% of men and 20.3% of women). In some countries, however, victimization rates were highest for the acquaintance category (men: Belgium, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain; women: the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Spain). Across all countries, the rates for women were significantly lower than those for men in each relationship constellation,  $\chi^2$ s ( $df=1$ ) ranging from 4.27 to 9.35, all  $ps < .05$ .

### **Individual-Level and Country-Level Correlates of Sexual Aggression and Victimization**

An overall nonredundant score of sexual aggression and victimization for each participant was created in which each participant was counted only once. Participants who answered “no” to all victimization questions received a victim status score of “0”, those who answered “yes” to at least one item were assigned a victim status score of “1”. Scores for perpetrator status were created in a parallel fashion. To examine gender differences on each of the individual-level correlates (sexual assertiveness, attitudes toward dating aggression, general drinking behavior, drinking in sexual interactions, and age, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with gender as the independent variable. This analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect of gender,  $F(5, 2150) = 84.96, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .17$ , and all univariate effects except for age were significant. The means, standard deviations, and correlations for men and women are presented in Table 6. Women were more sexually assertive and more accepting of dating violence than were men, whereas men were scored higher than did women on the measures of general alcohol use and drinking alcohol in sexual interactions.

- Insert Table 6 about here -

The potential links of perpetration and victimization rates with the individual-level and macro-level correlates were examined through multi-level logistic regression analyses using the Mplus 7.1 software. Multi-level analysis was required by the hierarchical structure of our data set in which individuals (Level 1) are nested within countries (Level 2). In addition to accounting for the nested structure of the data, multi-level analysis is the method of choice for the joint consideration of individual differences and differences at the country level (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). To handle missing data, multiple imputation ( $n = 50$ ) was used (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2010). The logistic regression models were specified such that country was included as a cluster variable, sexual assertiveness, attitudes toward dating aggression, general drinking

behavior, drinking in sexual interactions, and age were included as individual-level variables, and the three measures of gender equality (economic, political, and work-related) were included as country-level variables. Sexual aggression and victimization were the respective criterion variables. Since Mplus does not facilitate multi-group comparisons within multi-level models, separate analyses were conducted for male and female participants. The findings are presented in Table 7. In addition to the unstandardized logistic regression coefficients, the corresponding odds ratios (OR) are presented, which indicate the extent to which the odds of being in the perpetrator or victim group increase ( $OR > 1$ ) or decrease ( $OR < 1$ ) with every scale point on the respective predictor variable.

- Insert Table 7 about here -

The acceptance of dating aggression was a significant predictor of sexual aggression perpetration in both gender groups. With every increase of one scale point in the acceptance of dating aggression, the odds of being in the perpetrator group doubled for men (OR of 2.07) and went up by 84% for women (OR of 1.84). In addition, some gender-specific effects were found. With every scale point of the frequency with which they drank alcohol when having sex, men's odds of being in the perpetrator group went up by 50% (OR of 1.52). For women, the odds of engaging in sexual aggression was increased by 11% per year of age (OR of 1.11) and reduced by about a third per scale point on the sexual assertiveness measure (OR of 0.68). Two country-level indicators of gender equality were significantly linked to the perpetration of sexual aggression in men. With every increase in a country's ranking on gender equality, the rate of sexual aggression reported by the present sample of men was reduced by 4% for the measure of economic equality (OR of 0.96) and by 6% for the measure of work-related quality (OR of 0.94). No significant country-level effects were found for women's perpetration of sexual aggression in the total sample. Because Greece was an outlier for male and female perpetration rates (see Table 2), the



analyses were repeated excluding this country. For male perpetration, the results remained unchanged. For women, two country-level effects for economic (OR = 1.05) and work-related equality (OR = 1.05) became significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that female perpetration rates were higher the more egalitarian a country was in these two domains.

Predicting victimization rates, the odds of being in the victim group were reduced for each scale-point increase in sexual assertiveness by about a third for women (OR of 0.68) and about a quarter for men (OR of 0.74). By contrast, an increase of one scale-point in the frequency of drinking alcohol in sexual interactions increased the odds of being in the victim group by 31% for women (OR = 1.31) and 43% for men (OR = 1.43). In addition, scoring one scale point higher on the acceptance of dating violence increased men's odds of sexual victimization by 40% (OR = 1.40). At the macro-level, with every increase in the rank of gender equality among the ten countries in the domain of political power, men's odds of being in the victim group were reduced by 3% (OR of 0.97). Women's victimization rates were unrelated to the gender equality measures.

A final analysis examined the possibility that male victimization rates may be higher the higher women's sexual assertiveness relative to men's. For each country, a difference score was calculated between the mean female and the mean male sexual assertiveness scores. All difference scores were in the positive direction, indicating that women reported higher refusal assertiveness than did men. The highest difference score ( $d = 1.174$ ) was found for Lithuania, followed by Slovakia ( $d = 1.079$ ), Poland ( $d = 0.998$ ) and Greece ( $d = 0.757$ ). The lowest difference score was found for the Netherlands ( $d = 0.176$ ). A multi-level analysis including the same individual-level predictors as before showed that the difference score in sexual assertiveness at the country level was a significant predictor of male victimization. The unstandardized regression coefficient was  $B = 0.785$ ,  $S.E. = 0.440$ , one-tailed  $p < .05$ ; OR =

2.19), indicating that male participants were more likely to be victimized the less sexually assertive men were relative to women in the respective country.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the prevalence of sexual aggression using a common methodology in ten EU countries and linked differences in perpetration and victimization rates to both individual-level and macro-level correlates. Self-reports of victimization and perpetration were obtained from both men and women.

#### **Prevalence of Sexual Aggression Perpetration and Victimization**

Consistent with previous research, perpetration rates were lower than victimization rates in the present sample (Krahé and Berger 2013). The prevalence rates of men's and women's sexual aggression showed a substantial variability across the ten countries. However, in all countries, male perpetration rates exceeded female rates, and across the entire set of countries, the rate was 16.3% for men compared with 5.0% for women. The finding that men substantially outnumbered women as perpetrators of sexual aggression is in line with a large body of literature using established instruments such as the SES (Anthony and Cook 2012) or the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Chan et al. 2008). The rates for Belgium and Greece, the two countries at the lower and upper end of the variability range in our study, are consistent with the rates reported by Chan et al. (2008). Regarding coercive strategies, exploiting the fact that the victim was unable to resist was the most frequently reported strategy by both men and women in most countries. Perpetration rates were highest toward a current or former partner among men in eight of the ten countries, and among women in all countries. This finding is consistent with the German study based on the SAV-S conducted by Krahé and Berger (2013).

The prevalence rates for sexual victimization also showed substantial variability across countries, particularly among men. The finding that the majority of incidents involved

perpetrators who were known to the victim is in line with research from other countries (e.g., Lehrer, Lehrer, and Koss 2013). In two countries (Cyprus and Lithuania), men had significantly higher victimization rates than did women. In Belgium and the Netherlands, victimization rates were significantly higher for women than for men. The bulk of existing research on sexual victimization has focused on female victims (see also Feltes et al. 2012 for data on female students' sexual victimization from five EU countries), so the basis for comparing the present male rates to earlier studies is limited. However, the high male victimization rates found in Greece and Portugal are consistent with findings by Chan et al. (2008), and it is worth noting that another study conducted in Greece by Papadakaki et al. (2013) found an even higher male victimization rate of 80.5%.

### **Correlates of Perpetration and Victimization at the Individual and the Country Level**

As predicted, individual differences in attitudes about physical dating violence were significantly related to perpetration rates in both men and women. The more participants felt that it was acceptable to be physically aggressive in a dating relationship, the more likely they were to report sexual aggression perpetration. The finding that women were more accepting than were men of the use of physical violence toward a dating partner is in line with the results by Price and Byer (1999), who found higher means for girls on the acceptance of female dating violence scale compared to boys' scores on the acceptance of male dating violence scale. Acceptance of aggression in dating relationships was also a significant positive predictor of sexual victimization in men, but not in women. It could be argued that individuals who are more tolerant of the use of aggression toward a partner are more likely to be in relationships with a higher potential for violence and therefore more likely to experience sexual victimization. However, why the link was found only for men and not for women needs to be explored in future research.

In line with a large body of past research (Abbey et al. 2004), the more regularly participants reported drinking alcohol in sexual interactions, the more likely they were to have experienced sexual victimization. Male perpetration rates were also higher the more regularly men drank alcohol in sexual interactions. For women, the link between alcohol use when having sex and sexual aggression perpetration was nonsignificant. General drinking habits did not explain additional variance in perpetration or victimization over and above the more specific measure of drinking in situations when having sex. This finding indicates that drinking habits in sexual interactions may be influenced by aspects other than drinking patterns in general. Here, alcohol-related expectancies may hold a vital cue. Several studies have shown that expectancies about the positive effects of alcohol in sexual interactions (e.g., that alcohol enhances sexual pleasure) are linked to both perpetration and victimization (e.g., Messman-Moore, Ward, and DeNardi 2013).

As expected, women scored higher on sexual assertiveness than did men, but sexual assertiveness was linked to a lower probability of reporting sexual victimization in both gender groups, confirming earlier research (e.g., Walker et al. 2011). Because of the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot determine whether low sexual assertiveness, in particular low skill to refuse unwanted sexual advances, is the cause or the consequence of sexual victimization. Longitudinal evidence points to a reciprocal relationship between the two variables (Livingston et al. 2007): Women with a history of sexual victimization scored lower in sexual assertiveness at the beginning of their study, and low sexual assertiveness was linked to an increased risk of re-victimization in the course of the study. In addition, it was found that, for women, lower sexual assertiveness was linked to an increased probability of perpetrating sexual aggression. Therefore, improving sexual assertiveness, in particular with respect to refusing unwanted sexual advances,

is an important element in interventions designed to empower women to resist sexual coercion and prevent them from becoming sexually aggressive toward men (Fuentes, et al. 2013).

Informed by socio-cultural models of sexual violence, the degree to which gender equality in power is realized in a country was examined as a macro-level covariate of sexual aggression. Although not altogether consistent, the results provide a starting point for future studies with a larger number of countries. The present findings partly support the link between gender equality and sexual aggression. As expected, men's perpetration rates were lower the higher a country's gender equality on the dimensions of economic power and work, although the latter association was only marginally significant. This finding is consistent with the socio-cultural model of rape that explains sexual violence against women as a reflection of male power and dominance. However, no corresponding reduction was found in female victimization rates. In addition, when Greece was excluded as an outlier, female perpetration rates went up the higher a country's score on economic power and work-related equality. This finding also tentatively supports the association of power and sexual aggression, indicating that women tend to show more sexual aggression toward men the more powerful their position is in society.

The finding that men's victimization rates were lower the higher a country's gender equality score on the dimension of political power cannot be explained conclusively within the feminist model and requires replication in future studies. It is at odds with the study by Hines (2007), who found that the rate of men who experienced forced sex by women was higher the greater the status of women in society. However, Hines did not find a parallel effect on rates of verbal coercion, nor did she find a significant link between women's status in society and rates of female victimization. There was tentative evidence from the current data that male victimization rates, negatively related to sexual assertiveness at the individual level, increased the less sexually assertive men were relative to women at the country level. This finding, if corroborated by future

studies, could open up avenues for a more detailed exploration of sexual assertiveness in male-female relations in different cultures.

### **Limitations and Outlook**

Several limitations have to be acknowledged about the present study. The first is that the findings, like in all other studies in this area, are based on *reports* of victimization and perpetration, assuming that the questions are interpreted in a similar way by participants from different national and gender groups and in the sense intended by the researchers. Although some progress has been made toward examining this assumption (White et al. 2013), more systematic qualitative research is needed to examine the validity of survey questions about sexual aggression. Second, we relied on convenience samples in each country that varied substantially in size and composition, a problem that our study shares with other recent multi-national projects, such as the *International Dating Violence Study* (IDVS; Straus 2009). Third, there was a considerable gender imbalance in this sample, with a substantial overrepresentation of women in all countries, which should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings for the male participants. Fourth, the time span for which participants reported perpetrating or experiencing sexual aggression varied between countries due to the differences in the legal age of consent. Future studies might want to present a fixed period of time to all participants, such as the last 12 months, to overcome this problem. Alternatively, reports of perpetration and victimization could be followed up by asking about the timing of the incident(s) to be able to establish prevalence rates for matched time windows in different countries and to obtain more detailed qualitative information about the nature of the incident (see Moore, Madise, and Awusabo-Asare 2012, for a similar approach). Finally, it must be noted that the number of countries was at the lower end of the feasibility of estimating country-level effects (Hox, v. d. Schoot, and Matthijsse 2012), so that the failure to detect further significant country-level effects may be due to insufficient power.

Studies including a larger number of countries are required for a more conclusive assessment of the role of socio-structural variables in explaining variability in young people's experience of sexual aggression.

In several of the countries included in this study, the present data are the first to systematically describe the scale of youth sexual aggression and victimization. Although it will, of course, be important to follow them up with more rigorously selected, larger samples, a study by Straus (2009) has made a convincing case for the value of convenience samples in cross-cultural comparisons. In this vein, the current data may be seen as a first step towards creating a harmonized research agenda for studying sexual aggression as a threat to young people's sexual well-being in Europe and for developing a template upon which future cross-cultural research may build.

**Note**

<sup>1</sup> In Spain, the items from the Spanish version by Sierra, Vallejo-Medina, and Santos-Iglesias (2011) were used.



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Table 1

*Sample Composition and Gender Equality Index Scores*

Country (Age of consent)	<i>N</i> Total	<i>N</i> Men	<i>N</i> Women	<i>M</i> Age	% Students	EIGE* Political Power	EIGE* Economic Power	EIGE* Work Equality
1. Austria (14)	302	302	-	21.4	36.8	63.1	9.3	73.9
2. Belgium (16)	393	119	274	20.7	73.3	65.7	31.1	70.7
3. Cyprus (17)	291	51	240	21.1	88.3	31.9	4.7	68.7
4. Greece (15)	292	116	176	21.6	100.0	41.4	14.4	59.7
5. Lithuania (16)	298	105	193	21.2	62.4	35.6	29.0	61.0
6. Netherlands (16)	328	79	249	21.9	72.0	69.2	39.4	73.1
7. Poland (15)	352	96	256	21.9	93.0	35.1	34.0	61.4
8. Portugal (14)	245	63	182	21.9	71.4	44.1	21.2	66.2
9. Slovakia (15)	371	72	299	22.9	76.0	75.4	29.6	61.0
10. Spain (13)	608	169	439	21.0	100.0	31.8	34.4	61.3

\* Figures from the European Index of Gender Equality, <http://eige.europa.eu/content/gender-equality-index>. Scores range from 1 (total inequality) to 100 (total equality).

Table 2

*Prevalence Rates (Since Age of Consent) of Perpetration of Sexual Aggression in Percent: Total Rates and Broken Down by Coercive Strategy*

Gender	Men					Women				
Country	Total	Force	Exploi	Verbal	Author	Total	Force	Exploi	Verbal	Author
Austria	21.5	6.3	11.3	9.9	6.3	-	-	-	-	-
Belgium	5.5	2.5	2.5	1.7	0.0	2.6	0.7	1.5	0.7	0.7
Cyprus	11.8	7.8	9.8	5.9	3.9	3.3	2.5	0.4	1.7	0.4
Greece	48.7	31.9	40.7	23.9	15.0	14.8	7.4	8.0	8.5	2.0
Lithuania	15.2	12.4	9.5	7.6	6.7	4.1	0.5	2.6	2.6	0.5
Netherlands	11.4	2.5	7.6	1.3	-	6.4	4.0	4.0	3.2	-
Poland	7.3	4.2	3.1	1.0	0.0	6.3	2.7	4.7	2.0	0.4
Portugal	9.5	1.6	3.2	6.3	1.6	3.3	1.1	1.6	1.1	0.0
Slovakia	6.9	5.6	2.8	1.4	0.0	5.0	2.3	2.0	1.7	0.3
Spain	9.5	1.8	5.3	6.5	.06	3.0	0.7	0.5	1.8	0.2
Overall	16.3	7.6	10.3	7.5	4.0	5.0	2.2	2.5	2.3	0.7

*Note.* Force = use or threat of physical force; exploi = exploitation of victim inability to resist; verbal = use of verbal pressure; author = exploitation of position of authority. Multiple responses possible across the four coercive strategies, total rates per country count at least one yes-response across the four strategies.

Overall rates = computed across the ten samples; these rates may be lower than rates for individual countries due to differences in sample size.

Gender differences are significant for total rates and for all four coercive strategies.

Table 3

*Prevalence Rates (Since Age of Consent) of Perpetration of Sexual Aggression in Percent:*

*Broken Down by Victim-Aggressor Relationship*

Gender	Men			Women		
Country	(Ex) Partner	Acquain- tance	Stranger	(Ex) Partner	Acquain- tance	Stranger
Austria	9.9	13.9	10.9	-	-	-
Belgium	3.4	1.7	0.8	1.5	1.1	0.4
Cyprus	11.8	9.8	13.7	4.2	1.3	0.8
Greece	39.8	26.5	31.9	13.1	8.0	4.5
Lithuania	15.2	13.3	10.5	2.6	2.1	1.6
Netherlands	5.1	6.3	3.8	4.8	3.2	1.6
Poland	8.3	6.3	3.1	7.0	3.5	1.2
Portugal	7.9	3.2	1.6	2.7	1.6	0.5
Slovakia	8.3	4.2	4.2	5.7	2.3	0.7
Spain	7.1	4.7	3.0	3.0	0.5	0.0
Overall	12.2	8.7	8.1	4.6	2.3	1.0

*Note.* Multiple responses possible across the three relationship categories. Total rates may be lower than rates for individual countries due to differences in sample size.

Gender differences in the overall rate are significant for all three relationship categories.

Table 4

*Prevalence Rates (Since Age of Consent) of Sexual Victimization: Total Rates and Broken Down by Coercive Strategy*

Gender	Men					Women				
Country	Total	Force	Exploi	Verbal	Author	Total	Force	Exploi	Verbal	Author
Austria	19.9	6.3	7.6	9.6	7.3	-	-	-	-	-
Belgium	10.1	5.9	5.9	1.7	0.8	20.4	12.4	8.4	9.9	2.9
Cyprus	49.0	41.7	15.7	15.7	11.8	31.7	24.2	11.7	11.7	3.8
Greece	55.8	33.6	39.8	21.7	21.2	45.5	22.2	22.7	17.0	17.6
Lithuania	33.3	24.2	21.9	18.1	13.3	19.7	11.9	11.4	7.8	3.1
Netherlands	15.2	7.6	10.1	3.8	-	52.2	35.5	35.7	27.7	-
Poland	35.4	28.1	16.7	13.5	8.3	30.1	19.5	16.0	8.2	5.5
Portugal	28.6	15.9	15.9	11.1	7.9	24.2	14.8	11.0	11.5	4.4
Slovakia	29.2	23.6	13.9	6.9	5.6	35.8	26.1	20.1	9.4	6.0
Spain	21.9	6.5	12.4	11.8	3.6	30.8	12.1	16.9	15.7	2.7
Overall	27.1	15.8	14.6	11.2	7.8	32.2	19.5	17.2	13.3	4.9

*Note.* Force = use or threat of physical force; exploi = exploitation of victim inability to resist; verbal = use of verbal pressure; author = exploitation of position of authority. Multiple responses possible across the four coercive strategies, total rates per country count at least one yes-response across the four strategies.

Overall rates = computed across the ten samples; these rates may be lower than rates for individual countries due to differences in sample size.

Gender differences in the overall rate are significant only for misuse of authority.



Table 5

*Prevalence Rates (Since Age of Consent) of Sexual Victimization in Percent: Broken Down by Victim-Aggressor Relationship*

Gender	Men			Women		
Country	(Ex) Partner	Acquain- tance	Stranger	(Ex) Partner	Acquain- tance	Stranger
Austria	9.3	10.3	7.9	-	-	-
Belgium	3.4	5.9	8.4	10.9	6.6	8.4
Cyprus	58.8	47.1	41.2	32.9	18.3	13.8
Greece	43.3	33.6	41.6	31.3	23.9	18.2
Lithuania	33.3	28.6	25.7	14.5	11.9	7.3
Netherlands	7.6	7.6	7.6	22.1	29.7	34.1
Poland	35.4	27.1	19.8	28.1	18.8	12.5
Portugal	15.9	22.2	15.9	16.5	14.8	7.7
Slovakia	23.6	25.0	18.1	19.4	23.4	22.1
Spain	11.8	16.0	10.7	13.9	18.7	11.8
Overall	23.6	21.9	19.7	20.3	18.5	15.2

*Note.* Multiple responses possible across the three relationship categories. Total rates may be lower than rates for individual countries due to differences in sample size.

Gender differences in the overall rate are significant for all three relationship categories.

Table 6

*Individual-Level Correlates of Sexual Aggression Perpetration and Victimization across Countries*

Construct (Range)	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	1	2	3	4	5
	Men	Women					
1 Sexual assertiveness (1-5)	3.06	3.85	-	-.04	-.04	-.10**	.04
2 Attitudes toward dating aggression (1-5)	1.91	2.15	-.10***	-	.10*	-.04	-.10**
3 General drinking behavior (z-standardized)	0.17	-0.13	-.05	.06	-	.51***	.03
4 Drinking when having sex (1-5)	2.21	1.99	-.08***	-.04	.46***	-	.07*
5 Age	21.56	21.73	.07**	-.05*	.00	.09***	-

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Except for age, all means differ significantly between men and women at  $p < .001$ . Correlations above the diagonal are for men, correlations below the diagonal are for women.

Table 7

*Individual-Level and Macro-Level Correlates of Sexual Aggression Perpetration and Victimization (Unstandardized Regression Coefficients)*

Criterion	Perpetration						Victimization					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Level 1: Individuals												
Age	-.00	.035	0.99	.11**	.038	1.11	-.02	.029	0.98	.04	.024	1.04
Sex. assert.	-.04	.120	0.97	-.39***	.082	0.68	-.30***	.062	0.74	-.38***	.080	0.68
Att. dating aggress.	.73***	.089	2.07	.61***	.141	1.84	.34**	.108	1.40	.15	.095	1.16
General drinking	-.04	.182	0.96	.17	.230	1.19	.04	.135	1.04	.06	.114	1.06
Drinking when having sex	.42***	.114	1.52	.13	.178	1.14	.36***	.106	1.43	.27***	.076	1.31
Level 2: Countries												
Econ. power equal. <sup>1</sup>	-.04*	.017	0.96	.01	.010	0.97	-.01	.011	0.99	.01	.018	1.01
Polit. power equal. <sup>1</sup>	-.00	.011	1.00	-.01	.010	0.99	-.03***	.009	0.97	-.00	.012	1.00
Work equality <sup>1</sup>	-.06 <sup>+</sup>	.033	0.94	-.03	.022	0.97	-.03	.009	0.97	-.01	.027	0.99

<sup>1</sup> From the European Index of Gender Equality (EIGE). <sup>+</sup>*p* < .10 ; \*\* *p* < .01; \*\*\* *p* < .001 (two-tailed). OR = Odds Ratios.