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“Women in Travel: An Analysis of Gender Based Violence”

1. Introduction:

Gender based violence is one of the many wicked problems our planet faces. It is seen as something that is unsolvable, which grows in complexity as the world itself grows in complexity. As a result gender based violence is daunting, even to those who wish to solve it the most. However, like all wicked problems there is a way to make gender based violence seem less intimidating and this is done by breaking the issue into smaller, more addressable pieces. By doing this it is more feasible to induce positive change. This paper will look at gender based violence specifically through the lens of traveling. Travel is a relevant and large subcategory of gender violence, but one that is more addressable. However in order to get to the core of the problem, this paper will battle with the conversations and messages that are currently being directed towards women who are looking to travel.

2. Context:

In order to understand the complexities and any means to a solution of gender based violence, it is first important to define what gender based violence is, pertaining to this paper.

2.1 What is Gender Based Violence

Gender based violence (GBV) can be broadly defined as an act of abuse or harm towards someone that occurs because of a gender superiority complex. There is a general sense of entitlement in the world that leads some genders to believe they are more capable than others, and as a result, “less superior” genders are at a higher risk to be taken advantage of and targeted. Women are most commonly affected by gender based violence; 1 in 3 of them will face an act of physical, verbal and or sexual abuse at some point in their lives . (United Nations Population Fund). Sometimes when these statistics are revealed, people think of GBV as more of an individual problem, rather than one that should be regarded as socially-wide. This is inaccurate, as gender based violence is much more complex and deeply rooted into society.

2.2 Why Does it Occur?

There are political, economic, and religious factors that drive the gender superiority complex, and subsequently violence against women. In politics, there is corrupt legislation, law enforcement, and judicial processes all of which let GBV occur, many times with no repercussions or punishment for the attacker. Under-representation of women in positions of political power also means that women have fewer opportunities to speak about GBV or to help affect change and policies. (Council of Europe Portal) Economic factors also affect levels of GBV. In lower economies, there is simply less resources being devoted to preventing and enforcing violence against women. When something is not enforced, it becomes a norm within a population, and escalates the problem. Religion also plays a large role in how women are treated within a society. Religion often has its own normative expectations of femininity and masculinity, and often socializes gender in a way that is hurtful to women.

2.3 How Being A Global Problem Complicates Gender Based Violence

All of these factors intertwine gender into many aspects within a culture which already makes it a difficult problem to address. However the fact that culture varies across the world may be an even bigger concern. Different cultural norms means that women are not viewed the same across the world, and thus are going to be treated differently depending on where they are. Thus it is crucial to remember that when gender based violence is being discussed in a global context it will look different depending where in the world it occurs.

3. Violence In Travel

Women often find themselves feeling unsafe while traveling. We as a society are constantly traveling whether it be for business or pleasure, and this trend is only increasing. After its decline during the pandemic, it was recorded that 32 million American women traveled internationally alone in 2021, an increase in ~30% from any year in history. (United Nations Human Rights). Unfortunately with this increase in travel levels, also came an increase in instances of gender inequality. In 2021 the Global Business Travel Association reported that 83% of women reported feeling unsafe while traveling alone, and 31% of women experience some form of discretion: the most common being verbal abuse (Peace of Women). This is a problem that a majority of women who travel face, but unfortunately it has not been analyzed enough for a solution to arise. However before examining possible solutions, it is important to understand the factors that complicate and drive GBV on a global scale.

These statistics reveal how large of a problem violence during travel is, however these statistics are not the sole reason that women in travel has become such an issue. Arguably the

biggest issue within gender based violence is found at the root of it: The modern conversations circulating around women traveling.

4. The Femenist Lens

It is clear that women are susceptible to being taken advantage of while traveling. It is also clear that depending on the norms of a society, the degree to which women are unsafe is going to vary in different cultures. However what is unclear, is the correct way to have the conversation around this unsafety that will actually help women travel, because the current stigma around women traveling is extremely unhelpful. Currently, there is a polarization between women who have been scared into thinking that traveling alone is a death wish, and those who have fallen into the facade of glamorized travel and fear nothing. Neither of these opposing sides are going to be the key to safe travel for women. Instead, a new social conversation that synthesizes the two of these must occur. Women are constantly told what and what not to do in society through pop culture and evolving social norms. This paper is not here to argue the bigger inequalities behind that statement, yet it is acknowledged in order to understand why a new conversation is the most effective way to change the stigma around this problem for women.

4.1 The Conversation of Shouldn't

In many cases, women have been told that traveling alone is something they are not capable of, and are often blamed when something goes wrong after attempting it. Sarai Sierra was a New Yorker woman who was brutally murdered while traveling alone in Istanbul in 2013. This story was very publicized and was the center of attention not only in travel

communities, but in the public eye. The New York Times published a heart wrenching report on the series of events, but what was even more appalling was the nature of the comments on the article. One reader wrote “What in the world was this woman doing leaving a spouse and children home while traveling by herself” another writing “What kind of husband would let his wife do that?” (New York Times). Instead of being sympathetic or trying to find a way to help prevent this tragedy from happening again, many people immediately blame Sarai for her own death. Had it been a man who had been killed this would not be the case. People would not immediately assume that he was being stupid, or had no right being where he was. There are always people looking to see what a woman was “doing wrong” to have allowed herself to be taken advantage of. The culture of female traveling is eerily similar to that of rape culture in this way. When women are worried about being blamed, they are not focused on exploring new things and places. They are going to act more conservatively rather than act on impulses and desires to travel that they might be having. It is this culture of blame that discourages women from traveling.

It is not solely the fear of blame that keeps women from traveling, but also the negative societal perception of their capability. In psychology, there is something known as the Stereotype Threat, which is when feelings of doubt increase when one is labeled as part of the stereotyped group. This threat is present in the world of female traveling because people constantly voice their concerns about the capability of women traveling safely. Beth Santos, a travel researcher estimated in her own work that 40% of female travelers have opted out of a trip “because they didn’t feel safe, or because of someone else’s concerns about their safety” (Santos). This means that in some cases a woman will cancel her trip that she feels capable of going on, solely because the people around her do not share that same belief. When people are constantly voicing their

concerns and doubts about women traveling, it starts to become less of a personal opinion, and more of a concrete restriction. The more people that hear these things being said, the more accepted and believed it is across a population, as more people are involved to reinforce it. As a result of the societal belief that women are not safe to travel alone, more women avoid travel and doubt their own capabilities

4.2 The Conversation of “Why Wouldn't”

Along with this demeaning conversation comes an opposing view. The belief that the dangers of travel should not be focused on, in order to encourage more women to travel. In the age of the internet, travel is booked electronically. While this offers a side of convenience and accessibility, it also raises large scale misrepresentation in the travel industry. It is much easier to skew how an experience online which many companies, influencers and countries have used to their benefit to attract tourists. However this false representation is hurtful to women who wish to travel, because they might be led into a dangerous situation, or one they were unprepared for because of incorrect information when planning their trip. It is important to understand that there are often economic benefits behind the opinions and guidelines of promoting travel that may be compromising the safety of women.

a. Social Media

Social media influencers are a prime example of how travel is being glamorized, and presented to consumers in a way that doesn't always have safety in mind. According to research by JoAnna Haugen, founder of Rooted which is a “solutions platform at the intersection of sustainable tourism, storytelling and social impact,” found that in the US in 2020, “92% of the

Gen Z generation have researched a destination after being inspired by other users' posts online" as opposed to the pre-pandemic rate which was only 73%" (Haugen) . With this information it is clear that we as a society are increasingly trusting the opinions and recommendations of those around us, especially famous influencers. People want to experience the same things that their idols have, and share these similar experiences on social media.

However, what many people don't understand is that many "Instagrammable trips" are sponsored events by brands, and are catered towards looking appealing on social media. On brand trips influencers are given products, clothing, and photographers all in the brands hopes that their products are reflected in an appealing way. For example in 2021 Revolve, a popular clothing website recently hosted a "brand getaway" to Mexico. Revolve provided 20 famous influencers with mass amounts of clothing, dining experiences, and amenities and told the influencers their only job was to share these moments with their social media platforms. From their instagram posts, and snapchat stories this trip looked like the dream vacation. However what many people did not see, was all the behind the scenes of these trips. One influencer, UMiami student Alix Earle, posted a TikTok video telling her unexpected behind the scenes experience. In the video she outlined the mass amounts of security the influencers had throughout the trip, and the strict covid travel guidelines that made the trip much more "exhausting" and a "hassle" than it seemed. She also noted how she was glad everything they needed was inside of the Revolve Resort, as the surrounding area "seemed sketchy." This is just one example of how social media can not always give an accurate representation of travel destinations. The normal traveler is not going to have a "safe bubble" to stay within while they are traveling as there are countless economic resources and safety precautions that go behind the

scenes to Influencer travel. Thus, women should not blindly trust the pictures that they see online as what they experience is going to be far different from this glamorization of travel.

b. The Value of Economic Revenue over Transparent Information

The misleading advertising of travel does not stop at social media. In fact many legitimate companies and even countries use the framing effect of the internet to attract more tourists. At the end of the day, tourism is a huge source of revenue for many countries and companies, and thus a majority of their planning is going into making money, rather than providing safe travel experiences. Blindly trusting the information given by these companies and countries are not going to provide people, especially women with an honest gauge of their safety. These problems with transparency are present at every part of the planning process.

Many major airline companies and travel agencies have used the social tendency to trust information to make their platforms catered towards spending money rather than providing details about destinations. For example, EasyJet is an airline company that recently launched a “look and book” feature. This feature allows users to search for a flight simply using a screenshot or photo from their phone. The app then finds the best flight deal to this destination and presents it to the user. The user only has to click “book” and enter a payment method for their reservation to be confirmed (Easy Jet). These convenience tactics take away the informative part of bookings. There is no need to sift through information to find things like flights and hotels, and thus important information is often overlooked in bookings. Even when information is presented, it is not always shown in a way that is completely transparent. For instance, if a

hotel is searched on Tripadvisor, all the positive amenities and reviews about the hotel come up first, it takes some digging to get to any problematic factors.

In even established travel communities and blogs, some people argue that to avoid misleading information you must simply navigate the official travel websites of the destination country, as they will provide raw statistics that are beneficial for planning purposes. (The Nomadic Matt) However, these sites can not be fully trusted either, as many countries are relying on tourism to bring in significant revenue. A Journal named “Tourism Advertising in Times of Crisis: The Case of Spain and COVID-19” reveals the extent to which some countries go to advertise their countries in a good light. The article brings to light how in the past year Spain has participated in the “competition between the different tourist destinations [which] is focused on the construction of a distinctive and relevant brand image that encompasses its territory, which can be configured from the smallest scenario” (Martin-Critikian). It is important to focus on the phrase “can be configured from the smallest scenario” as this implies that an official state-wide travel advertisement can be configured from one small positive that a location has to offer. Countries, just like normal travel companies, use the same framing techniques to mislead people. They present the information that makes their country seem like the dream travel destination and never mention any safety concerns, or other problems that people encounter while traveling.

No one, let alone women, are seeing the raw fact of what traveling entails. The internet has skewed the true nature of travel, which often is far from glamorous. Instead we are given the facts that the travel industry wants us to see. It is a naive version of travel, and women are not safe seeing the facts from this lens of the travel conversation. It is the moments where women are uncertain of their surroundings, and the true cultural norms that they are most vulnerable to be

taken advantage of. Thus this conversation around travel is not sufficient enough to encourage women to travel while still keeping them safe.

5. Looking Towards a Solution

Neither the confining and demeaning conversation nor the misleading glamorized conversation around travel is sufficient to empower women to travel, while still keeping them aware of the dangers that come with it. The answer to breaking this social issue around travel is to facilitate a new conversation that combines the two perceptions. However, I do not believe that the ordinary solutions for social justice will be sufficient on this global stage.

Historically within social movements, one of the first steps in achieving change is believed to be legislative action. However there have already been many documents and laws passed that have resulted in little to no change. In 2012 the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations did a survey that encompassed all the legislatures they had created that related to women's rights to "participate and contribute to all aspects of cultural life." However, because there is no true global executive governing power, all of the "legislature" that the United Nations had passed were labeled as "recommendations to the state." (United Nations General Assembly). In essence the study laid out everything the UN believed individual countries should replicate in their own legislature, but had no way to enforce it, nor even ensure it was implemented in the first place. Even the progressive countries who did implement these laws do not have a true means of enforcing them. Thus legislative action cannot be the only thing being relied upon in the battle against gender violence. It would be nearly impossible to draft and implement a law

across all countries that would create a universal standard of how women should be treated.

There are simply too many differences in cultural values, and not enough methods of enforcing laws.

6. A Solution

Without law as a viable solution, this global problem needs a more modern solution. I believe an app would be able to provide accessible information concerning the cultural norms of travel destinations, and allow for a healthy and true conversation to take place without the slander from the general internet. The App I propose will have two parts to it; an informational side and a social network side.

The informational side of the app will provide information about different travel destinations and how certain cultural norms can be explained by the political, economic, and religious state of the country. Where the country falls on the gender inequality scale can be found within this informational side, as this simple statistic is very telling for a woman about her safety. All of this research will be conducted by the apps developers and be drawn from various places, including interviews and in person visits to appropriately understand the location. The purpose of this side of the app is to provide women with transparent, unbiased information. This app does not have any economic or social responsibilities towards these countries, and thus can present information in its true form. It also allows women to find valuable information without having to through the vast amounts of opinions and reviews from the internet. Women will be equipped with the knowledge of what to expect before traveling giving them a better understanding of

necessary safety precautions, which minimizes the risk of being taken advantage of from simply not understanding their surroundings. Should any women still find themselves in an uncomfortable situation, directions on how to contact local law enforcement and other services will be presented in this section as well.

The other side of this platform will be a social one. This will provide a space for women to communicate with each other about how to travel safely, and advertise any bad experiences or share tips they might have learned. Women will be able to post public questions or experiences under a certain country. These posts will be tagged under a specific subcategory (for example Hotels, Safe Neighborhoods, etc.), so that the information is easy to navigate. These posts will be monitored by the app developers to weed out any misinformation or users who are abusing the platforms. Users will be verified by submitting a short application during the app sign up process to ensure that the app is not being used by aggressors, or people with poor intentions. Identities will remain anonymous, in order to mitigate the embarrassment that often hinders gender based violence being shared, or acted against. If users see fit, there will be direct messaging options to follow up on posts that might have sparked their interest. This social side of the app is important because user experience is one of the most effective ways to understand a culture. It provides the first hand experience that data simply cannot capture. The negative “haters” on the internet have made it hard to come across social conversations that have pure intentions, and I hope this app will facilitate a more ideal way to post. The social side of the app will provide women with a safe space to share ideas and ask questions about safe travel across the world.

If women can understand the cultural norms before traveling, it will be much easier to navigate while they are there. This can be learned through traditional data, but also from first

hand experience. This app will help present both of these informative pieces in a more useful and reliable way, which the public internet cannot.

7. Conclusion

The world is a scary and difficult place to navigate. In theory, there should be a uniform level of difficulty, but women have an especially hard time. This stems from the negative gender based stereotype that is rooted within the foundation of our society. Travel breaks away from traditional household roles, and requires a capability that is “over the heads of women” according to many men across the world. This stereotype has inhibited women from believing in their capabilities and from acting upon travel desires. However, with the right tools, women can be empowered to experience different cultures. These tools consist of understanding the various cultural norms of a country, having a supportive network of female peers, and traveling with confidence to mitigate the doubt society has towards the capabilities of women. I believe that in our modern internet age, an app is the best way to do this. The more women that start to travel, the more of its own norm travel will become across our society, and subsequently be criticized less. This is not just the case for travel. If women can empower each other to do every day tasks with unapologetic confidence, people are going to start respecting females more. The doubters will be faced with our true capability. Traveling with confidence is just one small piece of the fight to diminish the restrictive stereotype that has dominated society for centuries. Even with the solutions outlined, it is not going to be an easy task. The information outlined in this essay can be

used as a weapon, but breaking away from the normative expectations of our roles takes someone extremely brave to wield them.

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