

The Shadow of Sexual Assault in Mexican Women from a Criminological and Gender Perspective

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Abstract: The perception of sexual aggression analyzed from the criminological theory of Fear of Crime by Kenneth Ferraro, indicates that women tend to have a greater rate of fear regarding the possibility of experiencing a sexual assault. The purpose of this research was to identify the perception of fear of sexual crime in Mexican women based on this criminological theory and with a gender analysis. To this end, a qualitative study with a hermeneutic-type phenomenological design was carried out. 30 college-educated women between 18 and 35 years old, residing in Mexico City, were interviewed. The results are organized in four categories: 1. Gender roles and sexual offenses, 2. Perceptions related to fear of sexual crime, 3. Spaces and conditions of risk,

and 4. Actions in the face of fear of sexual crime. It was identified that the female body is perceived as more vulnerable, as an objectified item based on gender roles, in situations of risk of sexual aggression. Also, a series of escalating assaults related to the fear of femicide were found, with sexual rape being a perceived antecedent. The criminological theory about fear of crime was an analytical tool that allowed the analysis of sexual crime from a psycho-social and gender approach, depathologizing the aggressive act, while presenting proposals for criminal policy and crime prevention in order to improve the quality of life of women.

Keywords: Fear of Crime; Sexual Crime; Gender; Rape, Female Body

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I. Introduction

People react in different ways when facing potential criminal situations. One of the most common reactions is the expression of fear. From the 1970s onward, the fear of crime became an object of interest as a criminological construct, analyzing this emotion not only as an individual phenomenon, but also as a collective problem¹. For some years, research on fear from a criminological perspective generated data which lacked a common framework of explanation. Currently, there are several theories that address it, but Kenneth Ferraro's Fear of crime theory is the most significant due to its statistical validity and empirical support².

Ferraro³ mentions that fear of crime is a response to crime or to the meanings that a person associates with crime. His model regarding risk interpretation allows us to understand fear as a result of risk interpretation based on the specific aspects of the space, people's characteristics and the crime situation of the place where we live. Such aspects have been systematically studied in other research^{4,5,6} in which the most common way of approaching the phenomenon is through questionnaires or large-scale surveys with few interview approaches⁷.

Other studies that have addressed sexual crimes based on the Fear of crime theory, highlight that women exhibit higher levels of fear than men, which is known as the "paradox of fear". In other words, this population presents greater fear when faced with the discrepancy between the objective risk of being a victim of crime and the subjective perception of that same risk: the probability of suffering a crime is lower than the feeling of fear of its presence, a situation that does not align with the actual exposure to crime^{8,9,10}.

In this regard, Ferraro¹¹, Mellgren & Ivert¹² mention that there are psychological,

¹ Santos, T., & Jiménez, M. A. (2019). El miedo de las víctimas: Diseccionando la Criminología del Control. *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 24(2), 133-153.

² Ferraro, K. F. (1995). *Fear of crime: Interpreting victimization risk*. SUNY press.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Grijalva-Eternod, Á. E., & Fernández-Molina, E. (2021). La multidimensionalidad del miedo al delito. Propuesta y validación de una escala para su medición. *Política criminal*, 16(32), 497-523.

⁵ Kuen, K., Weisburd, D., White, C., & Hinkle, J. C. (2022). Examining impacts of street characteristics on residents' fear of crime: Evidence from a longitudinal study of crime hot spots. *Journal of criminal justice*, 82, 101984.

⁶ Olvera-Aldana, F., & Martínez-Martínez, O. (2020). La percepción de inseguridad: miedo a la victimización en la zona del Valle de México. *Journal of Behavior, Health & social issues*, 11(1), 29-38.

⁷ Bailey, C. (2022). Fear of crime among Caribbean women in university: A qualitative exploration using the free association narrative method. *Violence against women*, 28(3-4), 851-871.

⁸ Rosas, A. M., & Rosso, M. A. (2024). De las dudas corporales a las dudas epistémicas. La situación de las mujeres en el espacio social. *Daimon. Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, 47(1), 1-19.

⁹ Camacho, A. (2023). El miedo al crimen y las acciones gubernamentales en México. *Espiral: Estudios sobre Estado y Sociedad*, 30(86), 151-190.

¹⁰ Mendoza, A. L. R. (2014). Miedo en las calles: principal emoción de la inseguridad pública delictiva. Un estudio criminológico y de género. *IUS. Revista del Instituto de Ciencias Jurídicas de Puebla AC*, 8(34), 81-100.

¹¹ Ferraro, K. F. (1995). *Fear of crime: Interpreting victimization risk*. SUNY press.

¹² Mellgren, C., & Ivert, A.-K. (2019). Is women's fear of crime fear of sexual assault? A test of the shadow

social and cultural factors that influence the perception of crime beyond actual statistics, such as the environment, the social setting, fear of violence, or self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-care.

However, the number of sexual crimes supports the thesis of “the shadow of sexual assault” mainly in women, based on the perception of fear as potential victims of sexual crimes. In Mexico, rape is classified as a crime against freedom and normal psychosexual development, found in Title Fifteen, article 265 of the Federal Criminal Code¹³ and it refers to forced copulation with a person of any sex, by means of physical or moral force.

Furthermore, in article 178 of the Criminal Code of Mexico City¹⁴ it is mentioned, as an aggravating factor for this crime, the increase of two-thirds of the penalty when it is committed on board a private or public service vehicle; in an uninhabited or solitary place; within educational, cultural, sports, religious, work centers or any other center of a social nature; and in public buildings (subparagraphs V-VIII, p. 62). In addition, the convicted person will be registered in the Public Registry of Sexual Offenders as a measure of protection and security for the community.

The incidence of rape in 2024 was 21,474 cases [Datos de incidencia delictiva nacional disponibles en el portal del Gobierno de México]. It is reported that, for every 1,000,000 inhabitants, 4,290 women and 465 men are victims of rape, with women being the ones who report it the most¹⁵. In this regard, and considering that the risk interpretation model incorporates social, situational and contextual elements, gender statistics become relevant, where women are more vulnerable due to gender roles that place them in private spaces instead of public ones¹⁶. Moreover, the thesis of “the shadow of sexual assault” allows us to understand this phenomenon, but does not explain the fear of rape as an archetype of gender ascribed to women more than to men.

II. Objective of the Study

The present study aims to identify the perception of fear of sexual crime in Mexican women based on the criminological theory of fear of crime, that will allow the analysis of this crime from a psycho-social approach with a gender perspective.

of sexual assault hypothesis in a sample of Swedish university students. *Violence against women*, 25(5), 511-527.

¹³ Código Penal Federal [CPF]. (2025, última reforma). *FedDiario Oficial de la eración*, 28 de noviembre (México).

¹⁴ Código Penal Para el Distrito Federal [CPDF]. (2025, última reforma). *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 27 de agosto (México).

¹⁵ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI] (2024). *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE)*.

¹⁶ Mendoza, A. L. R. (2014). Miedo en las calles: principal emoción de la inseguridad pública delictiva. Un estudio criminológico y de género. *IUS. Revista del Instituto de Ciencias Jurídicas de Puebla AC*, 8(34), 81-100.

III. Methodology

A qualitative study with a hermeneutic-type phenomenological design was carried out, which is defined as the study that explores, describes and understands what people have in common, according to their experiences with a given phenomenon, through the meaning that each participant gives to the situation under study¹⁷.

The participants were 30 cisgender women with university studies, between 18 and 35 years old, residents of Mexico City, who joined the study on a voluntary basis and free of charge. The interviews were conducted virtually through the Zoom platform and in person in an academic cubicle at a public university. The informed consent and interview guide were endorsed and favorably ruled by the Faculty Ethics Committee [Dictamen favorable avalado sin recomendaciones. CE/FESI/012024/1678].

Based on a scientific review of the state of the art on the topic, an interview script was prepared that included initially 40 questions. Subsequently, an expert judgement was conducted to validate each question, resulting in a final version of 25. Informants were then contacted via email inviting them to participate. The informed consent was signed, and participants were notified that the interviews would be audio-recorded with the protection of their personal data. A calendar was prepared to schedule the interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each.

Google's Pinpoint Works program was used to make the transcriptions of the speeches from the interviews. The analysis was carried out by means of an inductive-deductive method in which the transcripts were structured into categories and subcategories. A qualitative analysis chart was created with the verbal narratives, and these were interpreted from a gender perspective. The results based on the relevant metrics found are described below.

IV. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the study results yielded four categories with nine subcategories, which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 (a): Categories and Subcategories Yielded

Category	Subcategory
Category 1 Gender Roles and Sexual Offenses	- Meanings of Female Body - Female Vulnerability
Category 2 Perceptions Related to Fear of Sexual Crime	- Fear of Sexual Crime in the Past - Fear of Sexual Crime in the Present
Category 3 Spaces and Conditions of Risk	- Public Spaces - Conditions of Risk

¹⁷ Hernández, R., Fernández, C., & Baptista, P. (2014). *Metodología de la investigación* (Vol. 6). Mcgraw-hill México.

Table 1 (b): Categories and Subcategories Yielded

Category	Subcategory
Category 4 Actions in the Face of Fear of Sexual Crime	- Restrictive and Defensive Actions - Social Support Networks - Resilient Aspects

1. *Gender Roles and Sexual Offenses*

This first category refers to how the informants described their experience regarding the concept they have of their body and their position as women in a socio-patriarchal world, in which the female body is often objectified and turned into a sexual object that must be protected from criminal attacks, through measures that the participants use themselves in their daily lives^{18,19}. Therefore, the way in which they live their own bodies is not only about enjoying them, but also departs from the caregiving by and for others²⁰; that is, women are perceived as being in similar situations of body vulnerability.

Informants mention that they learned to be afraid of sexual crimes during their adolescence, when physical development and physiological changes are more evident. They report that becoming undesirable emerged as a self-protection measure against the risk of a sexual assault. In this respect, the female body ceases to be a territory belonging to the individual and becomes the axis of its own dehumanization. A shared vulnerability is then revealed in feminized bodies, giving priority to the assessment of male gender as an agent of permanent risk, even within family relationships. Let's look at some examples in the testimonies.

I believe that a certain degree of obesity makes me less attractive; it could make me less attractive in these kinds of situations (EH, 32 years old).

When I am with men it's different, because they can defend me or take care of me (OY, 20 years old).

What scares me are men in general; with them I have changed, I am more reserved (JI, 27 years old).

I tend to feel vulnerable in that context, and that diminishes the pleasure and everything else (YPB, 31 years old).

2. *Perceptions Related to Fear of Sexual Crime*

On the other hand, the second category describes the participant's fear of suffering criminal situations at very young ages, with a clear understanding of concepts such as rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and even femicide. For some of them, there

¹⁸ Segato, R. L. (2016). *La guerra contra las mujeres*.

¹⁹ Cruz, L. C. O., Castillo, V. R., Fernández, L. F. P., & Hoyos, N. E. F. (2021). El cuerpo de la mujer como territorio de violencia. *Justicia y derecho*, 9(1), 26-35.

²⁰ Pryor, D. W., Hughes, M. R., & Langdon, J. J. (2023). Agents of socialization, anxiety, college women, and fear of rape. *Violence against women*.

is a connection between the various forms of violence they might experience in the future and the feelings associated with previous experiences.

Although not-so-recent studies have found that women would rather die than be raped^{21,22,23} the results from the interviewed sample reveal a perception of continuity between these two crimes. The women interviewed believe that if they were raped, it would inevitably culminate in being murdered. The body remains a fundamental aspect in the meaning of fear of sexual crime; however, the high incidence of femicides may be reshaping the understanding of this socio-emotional vulnerability. The following narratives illustrate this point:

I could be kidnapped, if I'm kidnapped, I could be raped, and then I could be dismembered or killed (MGM, 26 years old).

If I had to say which crime I'm most afraid of experiencing, it would be being raped. I think this would be the worst thing that could happen to me, and to be alive to talk about it (EH, 32 years old).

In my third year of junior high school, I started to be very afraid of men because at that age one of my school classmates was murdered, and I began to have a lot of fear (YBP, 31 years old).

I think that was my first experience of abuse... I had like four or five years old (EH, 32 years old).

3. *Spaces and Conditions of Risk*

Another important category considers factors related to the environment where they perform their activities, modulating the fear they live with against a potential criminal situation. Generally, they feel more fear in public spaces than in private ones²⁴, besides the fact that mass media also impacts their perception.

Below are some narratives from the women in the sample:

Streets that are generally not very busy are common spaces to feel that fear of being sexually assaulted (TAL, 23 years old).

I don't remember feeling those fears in any specific place, but I do remember them outside, on the street (LZ, 32 years old).

If it's daytime I wouldn't be scared, but when it is already dark, I would certainly feel a little afraid (LR, 19 years old).

I feel very scared on public transport (MS, 19 years old).

The entire recreational aspect has been set aside for women (NG, 27 years old).

²¹ Ferraro, K. F. (1995). *Fear of crime: Interpreting victimization risk*. SUNY press.

²² Stanko, E. A. (2009). ¿ Se puede reducir el miedo a la delincuencia que tienen las mujeres? *Revista Catalana de Seguretat Pública*, 51-65.

²³ Madriz, E. A. (2001). A las niñas buenas no les pasa nada malo. *Siglo XXI*.

²⁴ Min, Y. H., Byun, G., & Ha, M. (2022). Young women's site-specific fear of crime within urban public spaces in Seoul. *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, 21(3), 1149-1160.

There was one teacher who did have comments like these (JI, 27 years old).

On the other hand, public spaces are the environments of greatest risk reported in the narratives of women who were interviewed. Factors such as poor lighting and low pedestrian traffic on their routes, as well as insecurity on public transportation at night, influence their perception of fear of sexual assault. This appreciation limits their freedom of movement, prevents them from living in the city with greater confidence, and increases the deterioration of the social fabric. Therefore, it is essential to develop an urban design with a gender perspective that facilitates the reappropriation of public spaces and increases women's safety²⁵

4. *Actions in the Face of Fear of Sexual Crime*

The fourth category is based on the actions taken by the women participating in the study to cope with their fear of sexual crime. Most of them focused on restrictive activities, in which they constrain their behavior and even their time in public spaces, or also begin to carry protective items among their everyday belongings. They also mentioned establishing routines with family members to have male companions accompany them when they go outside in order to feel safer²⁶. This category also highlights the resilient aspects of the informant women in the face of these situations of criminal risk in the street. Some examples of their statements are as follows:

Fear comes to me as an obstacle to do certain things (FG, 27 years old).

We downloaded an app that tells us all the time where everyone is, so for the past few months, my younger sister, my mother and I, have access all the time to the location of each other (KG, 22 years old).

I believe we have reason to be afraid, but there is no reason not to live because of that fear (DS, 20 years old).

I cannot do anything. Well, you can, but fear paralyzes you. (NG, 27 years old).

In this category, the most frequent speech for preventing sexual offenses consisted of avoiding the use of potentially provocative clothing, as well as reducing alcohol consumption and avoiding going out alone. These self-care measures are, for the most part, avoidant behaviors. Based on the notion of the vulnerability of female body, it is easier to accept restrictions on individual freedom under the belief of greater safety.

As can be observed, the way in which the participating women construct their conception of femininity based on the conditions of their sexed bodies places them in a perception of vulnerability where the fear of sexual assault becomes ever-present in the face of potential harm, and this fear influences how they live their daily lives,

²⁵ Kern, L. (2022). *Ciudad feminista: La lucha por el espacio en un mundo diseñado por hombres*. Ediciones Godot.

²⁶ Olvera-Aldana, F., & Martínez-Martínez, O. (2020). La percepción de inseguridad: miedo a la victimización en la zona del Valle de México. *Journal of Behavior, Health & social issues*, 11(1), 29-38.

from the spaces they choose to walk, their preferred times of day, and even the clothes they wear. In addition, it also impacts the actions they take to protect themselves, which are mostly avoidance measures.

Although the study demonstrates a relationship between the construction of female sexuality, permeated by gender roles and the perception of fear of sexual crime, the psychological, environmental and social factors present in public spaces will continue to be visualized as situations of structural vulnerability inherent to the fact of being women.

However, based on the analysis of the criminological theory of fear of crime, the fear of sexual crime perceived by the women in the study decreases when their vulnerability to threats against their lives increases, and not just when their sexed bodies are targeted. The crime of femicide, today, is a criminal phenomenon that produces collective terror not only in the streets, but also in Mexican women's own homes.

Finally, one limitation of the study is that, due to the fact that it was carried out only with female university students, the conclusions regarding resilient defensive behaviors are influenced by their knowledge of higher education. It is suggested that the study be extended to include female samples from other educational levels, where other forms of protection against situations of criminal risk could be observed. It would also be important to broaden the age range and to consider adolescence as the primary period in this process of learning about fear of sexual crime, taking into account the gender roles of women learned at an early age. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted only with women from Mexico City, so it would be interesting to know the responses of women from other States of the country or who live in rural areas with different criminal policies.

V. Conclusions

The way Mexican women perceive the fear of sexual crime is derived from their conception of the vulnerability of their sexualized bodies. While the fear of a potential sexual crime, rape in particular, is still present, many women see this crime as a precursor to possible femicide, conceptualizing it as a ladder of violence.

To perceive themselves as vulnerable in contexts of sexual crime results in an interpretation of high risk in public spaces. Therefore, most of their possible action mechanisms involve avoiding certain places, hours, activities, and even clothing. However, some of the women in the sample reported resilient behaviors, and therefore it is suggested to evaluate which conditions foster a more community-oriented approach, resilience, and empowerment as an action measure to the fear of sexual assault.

Additionally, it is important to develop new lines of research that allow us to deepen the way in which a potential murder of women is perceived by both women

and men. The shadow of sexual assault arises from women's perception of the vulnerability of their bodies to any type of crime; but in a Mexican context, it seems that this shadow is not just limited to sexual assault, but it goes beyond the sexual corporeality, where life itself is considered.

At present, recognizing femicide as another expression of gender-based violence linked to sexual crime makes the fear of the latter a more complex phenomenon. If we start from the theory of fear of crime this becomes relevant, considering that fear arises from specific crimes, environmental conditions, and personal factors; elements that should be taken into account in the development of individual and collective action measures that can be part of criminal and public safety policies.

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