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Victim Blaming, Justified Risks, and Imperfect Victims

Marianna Leventi

Abstract

Victim blaming is a harmful but quite pervasive phenomenon occurring in contemporary societies. When people engage in victim blaming, they shift the burden of the harmful act from the perpetrators and place it upon the victims instead.

This article explores how the discourse on moral responsibility can help make sense of victim blaming. The distinction between moral responsibility and blameworthiness can shed light on the contradictory intuitions that people experience when they hear about a victim who took what seems to be an unnecessary risk. The focus of this article is to explain these intuitions and respond to them by suggesting that victims not only are not blameworthy when they take risks that challenge specific norms but instead are praiseworthy.

Finally, whether such risks are justified when the agents taking them have people dependent upon them is discussed. Attending to structural injustice can point out why some choices seem more justified than others. Victims who take justified risks are praiseworthy, even when their efforts do not produce significant results.

This article aims to address the absence of victim blaming in discussions of moral responsibility and to bring philosophical attention to this issue. The goal is to disentangle the phenomenon of victim blaming while supporting victims and vulnerable groups.

Keywords: victim blaming, moral responsibility, risk, epistemic blame

Introduction

When something terrible happens, the natural reaction seems to be to try to analyze it, to examine and understand where things went wrong, why things went wrong, and how this situation can be avoided in the future. Car accidents, assaults, financial crises, and other harmful events where people suffer a great deal of damage are often discussed with the aim of avoiding such events in the future. This, of course, happens not only when people are experiencing a harmful event themselves but even when people are observing harmful actions as bystanders. Investigating the circumstances that led to the harm seems like the natural way to deal with the event's

aftermath. Thinking of what went wrong or how future events can be improved is essential to reestablishing the individual's lost control and helping them move on.

Unfortunately, the burden of the aftermath of such harmful events often falls on the shoulders of the victims. Victims of sexual assault are often questioned about their choice of clothing during the assault (Murray, Calderón, and Bahamondes 2023). Victims of domestic violence are frequently asked why they did not leave or even why they did what they knew would upset or anger their abusers (Gracia, García, and Lila 2014). Even people who suffer from chronic disease are asked why they did not adopt a healthier lifestyle earlier in life (Dougherty 1993).

People who blame victims in this way may argue that they have good intentions. They may be trying to give advice or explore the causal link of events that led to the harm, which can be helpful in gaining information and becoming aware of patterns of behavior that can lead to harm. However, in these cases, victims can often be portrayed as reckless or irresponsible for not knowing better or for refusing to conform to specific norms, even when they should have known better. Such behavior can often lead to victim blaming, even when grounded in good intentions.

Although victim blaming is admittedly a harmful phenomenon, it often occurs in contemporary societies. Examples of victim blaming include cases in which the blame or the burden for the harm inflicted is placed upon the victims instead of the perpetrators. Questioning the choices, behavior, and appearance of victims are instances where victim blame is expressed implicitly or explicitly. Victim blaming is harmful not only to the victims but also to society at large. Perpetuating harmful stereotypes and myths, while missing the opportunity to address the root of the problem, harms the victims as well as the other members of society. Recognizing and addressing the problem is an important step in alleviating the situation. Equally crucial is underlining that certain behaviors or well-established beliefs are problematic and can potentially burden the victims with the weight of the harm.

The simplified idea behind victim blaming is that when people are aware that an action might lead to them being harmed, they should obviously avoid it. If, instead of avoiding this action, they keep performing it, then it makes sense that they will eventually be harmed and be partly or entirely responsible and blameworthy for that harm. This brings to the forefront the idea that people should know better and avoid risky situations. Although this idea appears convincing, it potentially leads to victim blaming.

This idea is supported even further by the assumption that victims of systemic harm often have the epistemic privilege and an obligation to know everything regarding such events. They know when and how the harm occurred, and sometimes they can reliably predict these occasions of harm. Often targeted and victimized, vulnerable groups are requested to avoid behaviors and circumstances that might

elicit such harm from perpetrators and be informed of the best ways to avoid these potentially harmful situations.

Victim blaming is a topic discussed in research fields such as psychology and law. These disciplines have in common the study of transgressions and compensations, as well as the societal and agential circumstances of the people involved. Although moral philosophy and, more importantly, discussions on moral responsibility have been exploring similar topics, the concept of victim blaming has surprisingly been missing.¹

The debate about moral responsibility has primarily centered on the perpetrators' circumstances and state of mind. Issues such as luck, moral competence, and epistemic requirements for when it is permissible to blame perpetrators have been some of the main themes of the philosophical discourse. The experience of being a victim or of being systematically wronged has been significantly overlooked. This preoccupation of the debate with the perpetrators can potentially harm victims.² Taking the perspective of the perpetrators often isolates the harmful incidents without considering broader behavior patterns and thus diminishes the harm to a single event. Additionally, issues of fairness toward the perpetrators are often raised, but there are no similar discussions for the victims.

This article aims to explore victim blaming from a philosophical point of view while maintaining a focus on supporting victims as well as potential victims. The goal is to shed light on the conflicting feeling of the well-meaning observer who does not want to blame victims for their victimization even when there seems to be a connection between the victims and the harm that has been inflicted on them.

I suggest that these conflicting intuitions stem from the conflation of moral responsibility with blameworthiness. If the schematic of the concepts is well defined, then it explains the problematic idea that victims are somehow blameworthy for disregarding social norms, which are placed with the presupposition that they keep vulnerable groups safe. Therefore, examining how the current debate on responsibility makes sense of and responds to such a harmful phenomenon is crucial.

I aim to show not only that victims are not blameworthy for not complying with such norms but also that they are praiseworthy for trying to reclaim places and

¹ A notable exception is Kate Manne's (2018) *Down Girl* discussion of victim blaming and responsibility responses.

² Exceptions in the responsibility debate have been Talbert (2022), Edlich (2022), and Walker (2006), who talk about the perspective of victims. Of course, discussions on the victim's perspective are developed to a greater extent in other fields of philosophy. However, in this article I am focusing on the literature that implicates responsibility responses and victim blaming. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing more attention to this.

situations that have been restricting their freedom and agency. Finally, I suggest that vulnerable groups are justified for not conforming to such restrictions, even if their defiance does not change the norm.

The Phenomenon of Victim Blaming

This section addresses what the phenomenon of victim blaming entails and how it is connected to the debate on moral responsibility. The concept of victim blaming was first introduced by psychologist William Ryan. In his book *Blaming the Victim*, Ryan (1971) described how the tactic of victim blaming was used to facilitate the idea that racial injustice was not due to power imbalances but due to the agents' individual shortcomings.

Victim blaming has been a common problem in many areas of society. People who belong to low-income households are perceived as having certain negative stereotypical features that should explain their nonideal financial situation (Lindqvist, Björklund, and Bäckström 2017). In public debates, victim blaming is often used to divert attention from who is to blame for specific situations (Ryan 1971). In addition, victim blaming is quite a common legal tactic used to shift responsibility for the harmful action away from the perpetrators (Bieneck and Krahe 2011).

Unfortunately, victim blaming has also been a prominent phenomenon in many countries. Women worldwide have been subjected to victim blame in various aspects of their lives. In cases of sexual assault in Iran, women tend to be regarded as at fault for the event, since they must have done something wrong to provoke their offenders, such as wearing inappropriate clothes (Alinejad and Hakakian 2020). Victim blaming plays a significant role in controlling women's lives and behavior. Women in India face similar situations (Qureshi et al. 2021), and to a lesser extent, women in Greece have to tackle similar obstacles (Pamoukoglou 2022).

Although it is evident that victim blaming can be used as a strategy to oppress vulnerable groups, there is a psychological basis for victim blaming. On an individual level, there are many reasons why people choose to blame victims. I will not explore the roots of victim blaming at length; however, I will provide a general outline of researchers' reasons on why victim blaming occurs.

As a conscious or unconscious behavior, victim blaming has multiple functions. It has been suggested that many people need to believe that the world is a place where justice prevails (Lambert and Raichle 2000). The idea is that in the end, people get what they deserve and that this is how the world always works (Lerner and Miller 1978; Lerner 1980). Such beliefs imply that victims must have done something to deserve what happened to them, thus making them entirely or partly responsible for their fate.

By adopting such a stance, people want to create as much distance as possible from the harmful event. They want to reassure themselves that they cannot possibly

experience something like that because it happens so far away from their life. This event does not belong within their narrative, so they could never be involved in such a situation. They are not vulnerable to such harm (Hammond, Berry, and Rodriguez 2011). In addition, victim blaming supports the idea that bad things do not happen to good people or, at the very least, that people who are cautious and do not take unnecessary risks would not be harmed. This gives people a false sense of control, given that it suggests that the circumstances are within one's control so that harmful acts can be avoided (Grubb and Turner 2012). As a result, victim blaming can be seen as a coping mechanism for individuals to deal with the uncertainty of living in an unsafe world. Such a mechanism can further allow the individuals to feel relieved of any kind of burden, whether financial or psychological, of supporting victims.

There are many ways in which victim blame can be expressed. Questioning the victims' choices and characters, suggesting that certain behaviors are provocative or deserving of harm, and ignoring or minimizing the perpetrators' part in the event are just some of the manifestations of victim blaming. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Victim blaming can be caused or influenced by a variety of factors. Internalized racism or implicit acceptance of stereotypical features of specific populations can lead to victim blaming (Taylor 2020), which leads to more profound social problems. Empirical research suggests that there are specific circumstances in which people tend to blame victims, at least in the example of sexual assault. For instance, clothing (Workman and Freeburg 1999), alcohol consumption (Schuller and Stewart 2000), and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (Ben-David and Schneider 2005) are variables that often influence judgments about blaming the victims.

Walking through the Park Alone

Imagine a young woman walking home alone late at night. She is a resident of that area, so she knows which parts of the city are safe to walk late at night and which parts are not. She has read the statistics that say walking through a specific park late at night is risky, especially for young women, since this is where local criminals hang out. With all that information in mind, she decides that this day she wants to walk through that specific park to go home, despite it being late at night and her being alone. Unfortunately, she is assaulted.³

³ This kind of statement, "women are assaulted," "women are raped," and so on, often restricts or completely removes the perpetrator's role in the assault. Women are not being raped. Someone rapes them, and using passive voice in such phrases eludes the true meaning of the event by leaving out of the conversation the perpetrators (Ciurria 2020). Although the perpetrator's role is a significant social and moral problem, in this

It is evident that the woman did not protect herself. She did not take all the reasonable precautions to avoid being assaulted. In fact, she did not take any precautions. She did know that this area was not a place to be alone at night; she knew the risk she was taking by walking there late at night. She was not kept late at work, and there was an alternative route to reach her home. She had the money for a taxi to drive her home.

The woman does not lack control over her actions, nor does she lack knowledge of the relevant information. She made a choice that led to her harm. It appears that she is connected to the situation, and she is undeniably part of the causal chain of her choice and, thus, of the assault itself.⁴

So she is, in a sense, morally responsible for her choice to be in an area where she could potentially be assaulted. Not only that, but her choice appears to be detrimental to the assault occurring. It is natural to think that she would not have been harmed if she had decided not to take the risk. There were prudential reasons to avoid the park, but she chose to ignore them, which seemed reckless, pushing her luck or even provoking fate. People cannot live their lives like this, ignoring risks and expecting not to have to deal with the consequences of their actions. This appears to be a plausible recount of the events leading up to the assault. There seems to be at least something in the retracing of the steps of the assault that belongs to the victims. They are part of the causal chain that led to the harmful event (Pickard 2021).

Even if people refrain from thinking that she is to blame for her own harm, they can still reasonably argue that her choice played a significant role in her being assaulted, which renders her, at the very least, morally responsible.⁵ Intuitions about such a scenario can pull in different directions. On the one hand, it feels wrong to argue that the victims are morally responsible for the harm that was inflicted upon them and, in doing so, to open them up to potential blame. On the other hand, denying that she is responsible for the harm does not appear to be the correct answer either. The victim made choices that led to the assault in the sense that other people

article, I will not examine it, and I will take for granted that the perpetrators exist and that there is a high probability that they are going to assault the victims.

⁴ However, she does lack control over whether she will be assaulted or not. In this sense, this example appears to be more like the example of drunk drivers. Drinking and driving is already the wrong choice, but what comes next is subject to luck. I will come back to this point later in the article.

⁵ Here I understand being morally responsible for an event in the sense that McKenna (2012) describes the concept.

who refrained from these choices were not harmed, and this fact connects the victims and the harm in a specific way.⁶

Clarifications for the Example

It could be argued that the victim in this example is not strictly speaking a victim. She does not show caution or any kind of respect for the social norms that encourage women not to walk alone late at night, especially in areas with high crime rates. Many people might ask what she was doing there, thus moving away from the idea that she is the perfect victim and instead closer to the idea that she is the imperfect victim.

She is an imperfect victim in the sense that if we were in a legal proceeding, the defense could raise several questions about multiple aspects of what she did wrong.⁷ This might be familiar to many who have watched women go to trial for assaults and end up being figuratively put on trial themselves over their behavior that led to their being harmed.⁸ Being the perfect victim would require her to have taken all reasonable precautions. She should have done everything right, avoided the city's dangerous areas, walked in the middle of the day, been with someone else, not made eye contact with strangers, and followed every other piece of advice she received that she could remember.

It is evident that every victim, regardless of age, social status, or gender, can be at least partially blamed for their victimization. This is a real and significant problem that many societies have to face. Victims of sexual assault learn ways of not being assaulted again, an idea that implicitly insinuates that the victims could have somehow prevented the harmful act (Taylor 2020).

The woman in the example knows what she is doing. It is important to emphasize that she did not find herself in this situation of walking home alone by accident. She made a choice and went through with it.

⁶ Here I am considering the responses of people that do not immediately condemn women for walking at night. Some people would suggest that the harm inflicted on the woman was well deserved as she was "asking for it," but I am not interested in explaining the behavior of people who would respond in such a manner. My focus remains on the benevolent person who hears this story on the news.

⁷ From the point of view of a perpetrator, it feels that the opposite definition will hold. Perfect victims are viewed as the people who are not going to prosecute or, even when they do, are not going to be believed, or are not covered by the law. However, this is not the perspective I wish to adopt in this article.

⁸ See, for example, Miller (2019).

Epistemic vs. Moral Blame

A plausible question is why it is crucial to clarify that the woman in the example was aware of the danger she was putting herself in. She could have accidentally been there, or she could just have been misinformed of how dangerous walking through this park can be.

In this version of the example, other people could blame her for failing to gain knowledge that is important for her well-being, but they could not plausibly suggest that she did something morally wrong. Failing to get this information can open her to epistemic blame but perhaps not to moral blame. Thus, victim blaming does not really target the victim as a moral agent but as an epistemic one, so the woman in the example can be epistemically but not morally blameworthy.⁹ Even if it were accepted that she could potentially be open to epistemic blame, it would still depend on whether her ignorance can be a potential excusing factor.¹⁰

This article does not focus on this type of example for two main reasons. First, the appropriateness of victim blaming would then depend on the nature of the blame, whether it is epistemic or moral, and whether this distinction is a plausible one. However, both possibilities are harmful to the victims. In addition, the issue of ignorance and the questions of whether it exculpates and under which circumstances it does are ongoing themes in the responsibility literature. For these reasons, in the working example, the woman has all relevant knowledge of the situation in the park and makes an informed decision that puts her at potential risk.

In addition, in this article, I do not examine the situation where the victims do whatever they can to avoid harm but still end up being harmed. Nor do I talk about people who cannot really deliberate on what to do and just happen to be in places where other people take them—for example, young children or people with dementia. I also refrain from talking about people who are pressed by circumstances, such as being impoverished, and have no choice but to walk through the park.¹¹ This idea that such victims are blameworthy is obviously false. Children, people who live below the poverty line, and generally vulnerable groups should not be blamed for such events. These people often lack control and knowledge of the situation, a fact that, for many philosophers, would render them inappropriate targets of responsibility responses. This idea, of course, is not apparent or taken for granted by nonphilosophers. However, for this article, I take for granted that these people who lack control, for example, cannot be evaluated in the same way that the woman in the example can be regarded.

⁹ See, for example, Boulton (2021), Brown (2020), and Schmidt (2021).

¹⁰ See, for example, Harman (2017).

¹¹ Generally, the people that a Strawsonian account would excuse or exempt from responsibility.

Moral Responsibility and Blameworthiness

Many philosophers have talked about the distinction between moral responsibility and blameworthiness.¹² According to Michael McKenna (2012), agents can be morally responsible for what they do and yet be neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy for those actions. Blame is a response that may follow on the judgment that a person is morally responsible for behavior that is wrong or bad, and praise is a response that may follow the judgment that a person is morally responsible for behavior that is right or good (Talbert 2022).

First, however, it must be established what type of action was performed. For a person to be morally responsible for an action, that action has to be morally meaningful. Agents cannot be morally responsible if their actions are not morally significant. It can be challenging to really distinguish a morally insignificant action from a morally significant one.

McKenna (2012, 16–17) uses an example to illustrate this distinction. Singing a song while cooking dinner is a morally insignificant act. Now imagine a man who is walking around and sees another person in need. The man has the choice of helping the person in need, but he will be putting himself in danger. If he helps, he would be praiseworthy for doing so, but the risk he would have to take is so great that his helping would be considered a supererogatory act; so, if he decides not to help, it will not render him blameworthy. The man has another choice; he could take advantage of the situation and steal the wallet of the man in need and render himself blameworthy. However, the protagonist decides not to do anything and just continues walking away. So the man in this example is morally responsible for his conduct, but he is not blameworthy nor praiseworthy. The woman singing alone cannot be morally responsible for her conduct since her action is morally insignificant.

Judging which actions can carry moral significance might be unclear or quite tricky. The situation and the corresponding variables would definitely play a significant role in judging whether an act is morally significant or not. For the rest of this article, I assume that the woman walking home alone is morally responsible for her action. If being morally responsible for an action means that there is a connection between those agents and the action, then this could explain the intuitions that the woman has a connection to her choice. This connection is, of course, crucial by itself; it shows that she has agency and that she has at least some extent of freedom to make her choice or refrain from it.

This connection is also evident in the causal link between the choice, the consequences, and the woman in the example. She would not have been harmed if

¹² Such theories have been developed by McKenna (2012), Zimmerman (1988), and Fischer and Ravizza (1998).

she had decided not to walk through the park.¹³ In this sense, tracing back through the events in order to find the cause of her harm leads to her, and this could explain why someone might suggest that she is not only morally responsible for her harm but also blameworthy.

In addition, people who are morally responsible for their actions or choices can open themselves up to evaluating those actions, and this evaluation can be positive or negative. It can further reveal aspects of the person's character based on the evaluation of the morally significant act. In the working example of the woman, her choice may indicate that she is more inclined to risky behavior in general.

It can be challenging for the benevolent observer to maintain the idea that the woman is morally responsible for her choice but not blameworthy. A popular legal strategy is to try to absolve people from the weight of their choices by denying their part in the moral community, either in general or just at the moment of the act. As it is suggested by John Gardner (2003), when people appeal to the diminished responsibility defense for certain behaviors, they run into the danger of diminishing the rational capacities of those agents.

However, it is essential to maintain the idea that imperfect victims are morally responsible for their choices. Diminishing their responsibility would suggest that their agency is in question. This kind of tactic may absolve victims from being blameworthy in the short run, but in the long run, it may call into question their capacities as moral agents.

Suggesting that victims have no moral responsibility over their choices would invite the implication that something is missing from them as people or, more importantly, as agents so that their own decisions do not belong to them in any meaningful way.¹⁴

Emphasis should be placed on the notion that the agents have to be connected with the action or the choice of actions that opens them up to being evaluated for their blameworthiness or praiseworthiness. If the concept of moral responsibility and blameworthiness, or praiseworthiness, are kept distinct, this could provide a theoretical basis for explaining the contradictory intuitions that the cases of imperfect victims elicit.

¹³ Although it is very likely that she would not be, she may still have been attacked somewhere else.

¹⁴ The literature on free will and what is meant by someone having the freedom to choose to do something is quite extensive. Here I assume a more everyday notion of freedom; for example, nobody threatens her to make her choice, but she might feel obliged to do it.

Justified Risk-Taking

One might ask whether risk-taking can be seen as an action that is neither positive nor negative. At first glance, it might seem that risk-taking is evaluated negatively. Most people have been discouraged from taking unnecessary risks from a very young age. Although this might be a fact for at least educational and prudential reasons that are part of growing up, as adults, people take many risks that we disregard entirely as we have accepted them as part of life.

People drive cars, fly around the world, and walk down the street all the time. All these activities come with a certain amount of risk. Even worse, sometimes people perform these activities under more pressing circumstances. Driving in bad weather conditions or walking down the street without observing the surroundings are actions that we often take without too much thought. These actions are usually viewed as low risk, so most people do not really think about them.

For example, if you have a car accident while driving to work on a particularly rainy day, it would be confusing for a friend to say that you should have chosen a road more appropriate for driving in such conditions. It seems to imply that you are not a competent driver or that the road is dangerous for you in bad weather. Things like that happen constantly; you cannot blame people for driving to work in the rain, even if they are taking a risk with higher stakes.¹⁵ It seems that these risks are justified. It makes sense to take them. People who judge this type of risk-taking negatively are usually seen as unreasonable or possibly too entitled since not everyone has the option of staying at home or working from home on a rainy day, and these risks are widely accepted. It might seem that these types of risks are somehow lower cost even when there is evidence that suggests that they are not (Saha et al. 2016).¹⁶

It is an unfortunate fact that many things are riskier for women.¹⁷ Walking late at night, running early in the morning, and going to a party alone are some of the activities that not all women can enjoy without thinking that they have to evaluate risk factors. These risk factors can be different things, such as the crime rate in the

¹⁵ There is potential tension between connecting the example of bad weather and sexual assault. Sexual assault is a product of an agent's behavior that is based on unjust social conditions. Although there is value in drawing this philosophical distinction, I believe that most people are not able to differentiate between the two types of situations. After all, if most people were able to comprehend the difference, then there would be fewer instances of victim blaming. I am especially thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

¹⁶ They might appear as risks with lower costs given that people are taking them more often.

¹⁷ This, of course, is not a reality that only women face. I have focused on women in this article, but this is just a methodological choice.

area, whether people they trust are there, whether they can run in the shoes that they are wearing, and so on. This could be more or less a list of things that women have to take into account when they go out. Of course, this is not a reality that all women face. Different women have fewer or more burdens. However, such considerations exist, especially if we take into account that even the most privileged women are potentially vulnerable to some form of assault. In the United States alone, one in every five women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (Smith et al. 2018).

The recommendations of what women should do to avoid getting assaulted can be extensive and influenced by many variables. It is doubtful, of course, that following all these recommendations can guarantee that a woman will not get assaulted. Many women are assaulted by family members or friends—that is, people they should be able to trust, and people that nobody suggests could be a potential threat to them (Taylor 2020). Generally, these recommendations are consistent with the idea that perpetrators are the stereotypical offenders with specific features. Thus, they often reinforce rape myths, which is a harmful and counterproductive practice that does not really aim to protect potential victims but rather to control them.¹⁸ Having to conform to such norms is a psychological, not to mention physical, burden. It is important to emphasize that these burdens impact specific people. It is not always the case for everyone that they are viewing themselves as potential victims. The default state for most people is thinking that they will not get assaulted and that they do not have to worry about such things, except in extreme cases where this would be the situation for everyone.

Finally, it is a fact that people can find different ways to go about changing norms or situations. There should be ways to change the norms other than putting people in danger. Information and political influence are just two factors that can influence social circumstances, but they are often not available to members of vulnerable groups.

Victims Who Are Praiseworthy

The woman walking home in the example is morally responsible for her choice to walk through the dangerous park; the next step would be to suggest that she is blameworthy for her decision and indirectly or partially blameworthy for the harm that was inflicted upon her.

There are many reasons to suggest that she is blameworthy for her choice, but they are not entirely convincing. First, it can be assumed that she acted recklessly and in defiance. Rules are there to protect people; thus, they should be respected. She did not show the proper respect and care, and for that reason, she is blameworthy.

¹⁸ Often it is not just a recommendation. It can be a demand, a duty, or even the law.

However, I believe that, in this case, the woman is not acting recklessly. She knows the stakes of walking alone through the park and chooses to do so. This seems to be more of a statement than a reckless decision. It is not that she does not care about the norms in general but that she does not accept these particular norms that extensively restrict her freedom.

Second, it is not uncommon for people to assume that the woman's risk is very high, and it makes sense that she has to face the burden of the consequences of that action as a form of punishment or lesson for herself and others in the future. This is consistent with the idea that victim blaming is a strategy of relieving other people or the state from having to compensate the victim or having to take steps to alleviate the situation. So she has to be blameworthy in order to lose any chance of demanding compensation. Here it seems counterintuitive to suggest that the risk and the harm are analogous to each other so that one can be punished by using the other.

Third, it could be argued that the woman has a duty to herself or others to protect herself from this kind of harm. Evidently, if she has people dependent on her, the demand to take back the park can be outweighed for other reasons. People with strong reasons against breaking a norm should not feel obliged to do so. If such a thing is demanded of vulnerable groups, we might again end up with victim blaming.¹⁹ Women and vulnerable groups, in general, should be free to choose whether they can themselves afford the possible consequences.

Finally, it is vital to examine the moral value of the choice itself. As previously mentioned, evaluating whether the agents performing certain acts are blameworthy or praiseworthy depends on whether the act they perform is morally wrong.

Contrary to what these arguments suggest, the woman in the example is in fact praiseworthy. Women, or members of any other vulnerable group, should not be confined in specific spaces. There is a pressing need to expand the places where women feel safe. The amount of cognitive resources used to stay safe is an unnecessary burden that women must carry, often failing to prevent the assault. The "space" here does not necessarily have to be a park or some kind of physical restriction that they have to break. It can be, for example, the "space" created by using a slur in order to make it lose its power over the group that it is used against. It can be the result of protesting when people make sexist jokes or of cutting off a family

¹⁹ Questions like "Why didn't you do anything about it if you thought that the situation was bad?" often imply that the victims should have done something to change the situation and that they are to be blamed for not trying to. Not only is this kind of assumption false and far from the reality that members of vulnerable groups have to face, but it also shows the lack of understanding of the precarious situations that these people often find themselves in.

member who acts disrespectfully. This act of defiance could be more or less symbolic, and it can have lower or higher stakes.

In the working example, the choice helps to break or begin to break gender norms, since a single act cannot really be a reason to break the norm. What Rosa Parks did is viewed as praiseworthy, and I believe it is safe to suggest that her action would still be viewed as praiseworthy even if she did not help initiate the civil rights movement. These types of acts, even when they do not start a revolution, draw attention to the situation and perform a type of political protest.²⁰

When people want to change a norm, they often have to make sacrifices. These types of actions are supererogatory, and they cannot and should not be expected of everyone. It should be accepted that not all people can afford to put themselves at risk in order to change the norm. The people who choose not to perform such acts are not blameworthy. However, the people who do perform such actions are praiseworthy. In addition, even if the choice and the possible harm are intentional, this does not make them undeserving of compensation or sympathy. Even when the harm is a real possibility that these victims can accept, it remains a painful and traumatic experience, and its impact is the same. They can regret the situation, and they can feel bad about it or even regret their choice. This does not take away from their act of challenging the unjust situation. Their feeling of regret or demand for attention and compensation reaffirms their agency rather than diminishing the extent of their choice.

Justified Risk and Gauguin

It was mentioned earlier in this article that members of vulnerable groups should weigh the reasons they have to stay safe with the need to change the reality that limits them. One way to judge whether the risk was worth taking is whether it actually produced a result.

It can be illuminating to compare the working example with a similar case presented by Bernard Williams (1981, chap. 2). Gauguin is an ambitious artist who leaves his family to go to Tahiti for inspiration so that he can actually become a great artist. Whether the decision to leave his family is justified would be a matter of his artistic achievements or lack thereof. The same could be said for the woman in the

²⁰ It could be a parallel to civil disobedience, but in this case, walking alone at night is not illegal, at least as the example is described. Here, there is no law that people can object to, but there is still a restriction on the things that certain groups can perform. This, of course, makes things more interesting as it pushes obligations more toward individuals and less toward the state. The individuals must themselves take measures to protest instead of letting the state protecting them by enforcing a legal restriction.

example. The justification will depend on the outcome, which no one can know beforehand.²¹

However, the two examples are different. The woman is trying to break an unjust social norm, and it seems counterintuitive to suggest that efforts to change this unjust social situation are unjustifiable due to the lack of social change. Her risk-taking decision appears justified regardless of the result. She is putting herself in danger for what she believes is the right thing to do. On the other hand, Gauguin is arguably acting selfishly. He wants to be a great artist, so he decides to take the risk; but the burden of his choice is imposed on his family. I believe that this is not a convincing justification. He is also reinforcing a gender norm; men can leave their families in order to pursue their personal interests and growth. However, it can be worthwhile to examine whether the judgment of the woman's choice would change if she had a family and people dependent upon her as Gauguin did. Her risk would then be something that her family would have to share with her. The existence of dependent family members can make us reconsider whether she is justified in taking such a risk. However, this is based on the idea that women should put their families first. Women are the primary caretakers.²² This fact can signify that her risk-taking is viewed more negatively than that of her male partner. So by suggesting that she is not justified to take a risk because she has a family, we are reinforcing a gender norm and imposing more burden on her. Thus, the structural injustice within the family makes the argument appear more convincing than it actually is or should be.²³

Conclusion

Victim blaming is a contemporary and significant issue that vulnerable groups have to face in addition to suffering from harmful events. This article was an attempt

²¹ Williams (1981, 22) calls it rational justification, but I will refrain from entering this complicated discussion. My aim is to evaluate whether the justification offered is convincing.

²² See, for example, İzdeş Terkoğlu and Memiş (2022); Stefanova, Farrell, and Latu (2023); and Swinkels et al. (2019).

²³ It would be interesting to examine a case of a progressive family where both parents have an equal amount of caretaking duties. Williams suggests that even if Gauguin makes it as an artist, his family will still be able to blame him. I am not sure whether this would be the case for the woman. If she has family members who depend on her, and this does not happen due to gender norms but due to equal parental obligation so the family will still be affected by her being harmed, then it makes sense that they will have a negative attitude toward the situation and possibly her. Similarly, it would be interesting to investigate an example where the victim is a single father. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to this point.

to shed light on victim blaming and to provide a philosophical account that can explain the phenomenon and respond to it in an appropriate way. Attending to structural injustice can point out why some choices seem more justified than others. Further, it has been emphasized that victims should not be blamed for taking justified risks but should be praised for trying to act against restrictive norms. Victim blaming has been missing from philosophical discussions, and I hope that this article rectifies that situation. It would be optimal if philosophical theorizing could make a practical contribution to empowering victims and vulnerable groups in general.

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