



Understanding Sexual Harassment & Violence: Points to Consider While Studying Abroad

Sexual harassment and sexual violence are never the victim's fault. Therefore, there is no fail-safe way to prevent or protect oneself from being harassed or becoming a victim of sexual violence -- at home or abroad. However, educating yourself about sexual harassment, violence and gender dynamics abroad can empower you and your peers to make safer choices.

The three most important things to remember while studying abroad:

- A. Trust your gut.** Sexual harassment and violence may be particularly difficult to identify abroad, where cultural norms are often different than those in the US. However, cultural sensitivity does not mean that you need to submit to behaviors that invade your personal boundaries. Know your personal boundaries and know you deserve to have them respected. Trust your judgment or intuition -- avoid dismissing your instincts.
- B. Look out for your peers.** If you see something suspicious, say something. If your peer appears to be in an uncomfortable situation, check-in with them. Err on the side of caution; if you're unsure about a peer's welfare speak up, relocate or alter the situation to increase safety.
- C. You can seek support.** If you receive unwanted sexual attention of any kind, it was not your fault. There are resources available to you. You can get support through Northwestern. Also consider learning basic "help phrases" in the local language, so you know how to seek support from police, store proprietors, train conductors, etc.

Points to consider to improve safety:

1. Understanding local culture can improve your ability to make safer decisions. It is advantageous to...
 - a. **Learn as much about your host country's** language, religion, customs and dress **as possible**. Talk with your peers on the trip and with people who've visited your host country – share your stories and concerns.
 - b. Understand that although the Northwestern Study Abroad Office and CARE staff recognize that sexual harassment/violence are not the victim's fault, this may not be the prevailing belief in your host country.
 - c. **Watch and learn.** Observe interactions between local men and women for socially sanctioned ways of interacting. For example: Do men and women who are strangers make eye contact when speaking? How far apart do women and men sit or stand from one another when conversing? Watch how the locals avoid advances. Discuss your observations with your peers. Following these cues can improve your sense of safety throughout the trip.
 - d. **Consider your attire, body language and behavior.** Understand that what is seen as provocative or respectful in your host country may or may not be in line with your practices in the US. Consider the benefits of learning to blend in with the host culture.

2. **Brainstorm responses to uncomfortable situations.** Discuss how you might handle unwelcome attention with your peers. Reactions could include but are not limited to:
 - a. Taking initiative to help others in your group. If your peer looks uncomfortable, intervene.
 - b. Redirect the person by changing the topic of conversation
 - c. Ignore the person and/or harassing behavior
 - d. Feign confusion, ignorance or lack of understanding
 - e. Flash your meanest “don’t even think about messing with me” glare
 - f. Shout “NO!” or “Leave me alone!” or “Help!” or “Police” so others will hear you
 - g. Walk away or remove yourself from the situation. If someone sits next to you, get up and leave without comment. If someone walks alongside you, turn around and walk in the other direction.
 - h. Get help from others in your group or a local person at the scene
 - i. Make a scene, create a commotion and embarrass the person into leaving you alone

REMEMBER: It is normal to worry about hurting another person’s feelings. However, if someone does something to make you feel uncomfortable, they are not respecting your feelings. It is okay to be “rude” in order to be safe.

3. **Value safety in numbers whenever possible.** It may not always be possible to travel in groups. When you do need to go out alone, let friends or your on-site program staff know your whereabouts.
 - a. **Consider group dates.** If you are planning to date while abroad, consider planning a double date or a larger meeting with peers. Meet in public places; take time to get to know your potential partner before spending time alone together. Be aware that, in some countries, the concept of date rape is unknown.
 - b. **Keep your guard up.** Stay alert and look confident. Avoid drinking to excess or napping on the beach, park or other public spaces. In groups, look out for one another.
4. **Consider power dynamics.** Sexual harassment and violence are abuses of power. They occur when someone abuses another person’s vulnerability and/or goes out of their way to put another person in a vulnerable situation to then take advantage.
 - a. **Watch out for “freebies.”** Be aware of the false sense of indebtedness that can occur when someone buys you a drink or a meal. The person offering freebies or the culture in which they live may believe that you owe them something in return. Be conscious to carry enough money for your own food, drink and cab ride home.
 - b. **Be aware of “quid pro quo” harassment.** This occurs when sexual favors are used or threatened to be used as a basis for an academic or other decision, such as “sleep with me or you won’t pass,” “kiss me and I’ll make sure you get an A.” If you feel someone is using their positional power to make you feel uncomfortable, call one of the contacts listed below for support. It is not your fault.

If you experience sexual harassment or assault, please consider contacting the people/offices listed below:

The Center for Awareness, Response and Education (CARE):

<http://www.northwestern.edu/care/index.html>

Eva Ball, Coordinator of Sexual Violence Response Services and Advocacy

e-ball@northwestern.edu; (847) 491-2054

The Study Abroad Office: studyabroad@northwestern.edu; (847) 467-6400