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Sexual violence against women: The scope of the problem

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Rape and sexual violence occur in all societies, and cut across all social classes. Prevalence estimates of rape victimisation range between 6 and 59% of women having experienced sexual abuse from their husbands or boyfriends in their lifetime. Two population-based studies from South Africa have found that 28% and 37% of men, respectively, have perpetrated rape. Estimates of rape perpetration from high-income countries seem to be lower than those from low- and middle-income countries; however, current data make it impossible to confirm this. Women and girls are much more likely to be the victims and men the perpetrators and, in most instances, the perpetrator is known to the victim. Children are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, with girls being at greater risk, especially while at school and at home. High rates of child sexual abuse are emerging from the research, with an increasing understanding of the effect of child sexual abuse on later perpetration and victimisation, highlighting the importance of primary prevention for sexual violence to address childhood exposures to violence. Much of our knowledge about sexual violence has historically been based on research undertaken in high-income countries. This, however, is changing with the emergence of good-quality studies from other settings, particularly in Africa, alongside an increasing number of multi-country studies looking at interpersonal and sexual violence. Most countries lack population data on perpetration of sexual violence, across all categories, including children, and a major gap exists in research on sexual violence among sub-groups and populations. Much of the existing research has limitations that affect cross-study comparability, owing to differences in definitions, research tools, methods and sampling used. Improved research is essential. Research priorities for understanding the magnitude of sexual violence prevalence include assessment of the prevalence and patterns of sexual violence

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victimisation and perpetration in a range of settings, across a range of acts of sexual violence, in men and women, in adults and children, using methodologies based on best practice in gender-based violence research and standard measures of different forms of sexual violence; research on the social context of sexual violence perpetration and victimisation by both men and women; and methodological research to measure sexual violence for particular population sub-groups or violence types, such as child perpetrators or young child victims, or sexual harassment at work and school.

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Introduction

Sexual violence is a profound human rights violation and public health concern. It cuts across class and race, and occurs in peace and conflict settings. Perpetrators are most commonly men known to the victims, and often an intimate partner or, in the case of child sexual abuse, a trusted family or community member. Perpetrators of sexual violence may also be women and children.

Sexual violence has been defined in the *World Report on Violence and Health*¹ as

‘any sexual act, attempts to obtain a sexual act, or acts to traffic for sexual purposes, directed against a person using coercion, harassment or advances made by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

Sexually violent acts take place in many different circumstances and settings. These include the following: rape in marriage or dating relationships; rape of non-romantic acquaintances; sexual abuse by those in positions of trust, such as clergy, medical practitioners or teachers; rape by strangers; multiple perpetrator rape; sexual contact involving trickery, deception, blackmail or of persons who are incapacitated or are too drugged, drunk or intoxicated to consent; rape during armed conflict; sexual harassment, including demanding sex in return for work, school grades or favours; unwanted sexual touching; rape of men in prisons; unwanted exposure to pornography; sexual abuse of mentally or physically disabled people; sexual abuse of boys and girls; and violent acts against sexual integrity, including female genital mutilation, inspections for virginity, forced anal examination and forced trafficking of people for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Thus, the diversity of sexual violence encompasses a range of different victim perpetrator relationships, a range of different sexual acts, a range of forms of coercion and contexts of vulnerability and it occurs in a range of settings.

What these examples have in common is that they are all sexual acts or acts directed against women and men’s sexuality, and they all occur in circumstances where consent is not given or not given freely. Laws across countries differ in the aspects of sexual violence that they regard as offences. Great variation exists in the scope of legal definitions of ‘rape’, and even though marital rape, for example, is a criminal offence in many countries and a crime under international law, 127 countries fail to criminalise marital rape.²

In this chapter, we review research on the prevalence of sexual violence against women. It does not address all types of sexual violence; for example, it does not discuss sexual harassment or female genital mutilation. Rather, the focus of the paper is on available prevalence estimates on rape and sexual abuse, from peacetime or post-conflict settings. We also discuss some of the challenges experienced when researching sexual violence, provide information on available data sources, and outline what we know about the scope of the problem of rape and sexual violence in terms of victimisation and perpetration of rape.

Researching sexual violence: challenges and data sources

‘The measurement of rape or sexual assault represents one of the most serious challenges in the field of victimization research.’³

Measuring the extent of sexual violence presents challenges. Sexual violence is an unusual violation in that, irrespective of setting, the victim is often roundly blamed for its occurrence. Furthermore, rape is commonly regarded as defiling. As a result, the experience of sexual violence is seen as stigmatising and shameful, which

makes it difficult for victims to share their stories.⁴ Social consequences of sexual violence may be extreme; for example, a family may feel that the victim has brought dishonour to them and victims may be forced to marry the perpetrator, ostracised, or even killed.⁵ A further challenge that is rooted in rape stigma, as well as women's internalisation of strong, culturally rooted ideas about male sexual entitlement, is that they may, after the sexually violent act, reclassify acts of sexual violence as 'not rape', and thus avoid perceiving they have to take action against the perpetrator and enable them to pass as 'not raped'. In South Africa, for example, it is estimated that one in 25 women who have been raped have ever reported it to the police,^{6,7} compared with the USA, where higher reporting is found, but still only an estimated 40% of rapes are reported.⁸

Research shows that higher levels of reporting of sexual violence are found when questions are framed around behaviourally specific acts; for example, 'being forced into sex against your will'. Notions of 'rape', 'violation' or 'abuse' are highly subjective, and questions that use these words always result in low levels of reporting. Considerable debate exists around the use of popular constructions such as 'having sex' compared with formal constructions such as 'sexual intercourse', with clarification of vaginal and anal penetration. Researchers in the USA have developed and widely used the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES).⁹ The SES uses precise specification of acts. It seems likely that the acceptability of this may show cultural diversity, as has been seen in South Africa. When the SES was tested in South Africa, men indicated that they found the anatomically precise questions offensive. They preferred to be asked about the vernacular version of 'having sex', and indicated that they all interpreted that as an act of vaginal intercourse.¹⁰

Questions also need to ask about a range of victim and perpetration contexts, such as when a woman is too drunk to consent, and also multiple perpetrator (gang) rape. Furthermore, they need to be framed around perpetrator type for proper ascertainment. In particular, it is important to ask about sexual violence from intimate partners specifically, as this form is often under-reported unless it is specially asked. The number of questions needed to measure sexual violence exposure will differ, depending on the operational definition; however, all validated scales measuring rape, attempted rape, sexual coercion or sexual harassment use multiple questions.

Ascertainment is also sensitive to the contexts in which research is undertaken, particularly when face to face interviews are used, and in the training and support of fieldworkers. Much higher levels of ascertainment are found in surveys that use small numbers of highly trained and supported fieldworkers. For perpetration surveys, the use of computerised technology for questionnaire completion has also been extremely valuable.¹¹ These differences influence our ability to compare prevalence estimates across settings. The figures provided in the literature need to be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Multi-Country Study (MCS) has assisted the field greatly by developing and formalising operational definitions for intimate partner violence.¹² It also provides measures of sexual violence by a non-partner and child sexual abuse, although these are limited in scope and thus cannot be seen as gold-standard measures. The operational definitions and questionnaires provide us with the tools to compare rates of sexual violence across time and settings. The operational definitions used in this study for the different categories of sexual violence researched in the WHO MCS are presented in [Table 1](#).¹²

The WHO MCS focused on victimisation, and did not include men. It is increasingly understood, that for us to gain insight into the global scope of the problem, the causes of sexual violence and how best to strengthen prevention programmes, it is important to also include men in our research. A methodology for measuring prevalence of perpetration was developed for research in South Africa,^{13,14} and has been used in the multi-country IMAGES study¹⁵ and further refined for the Change Project run by the United Nations Development Project's Partners for Prevention.¹⁶ It is currently being used in research with over 15,000 men in seven countries in the Asia and Pacific Region ([Table 2](#)).¹⁷

Country-specific national surveys are also a source of sexual violence prevalence data, as are country-specific studies. For example, the USA has created the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS). The NISVS was started in 2010 and involves annual interviews with adults in English and Spanish.¹⁸ The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Reproductive Health Surveys^{19,20} also have country-specific data available on violence against women. The Reproductive Health Survey and DHS data have limitations. For example, DHS data have been shown to under-report violence against women consistently, compared with findings from the WHO MCS and country-based studies specifically looking at violence against women.^{21,22} Efforts are being made to strengthen the Violence Against Women module in the DHS, but these do not overcome the problems of surveys that

Table 1

Different categories of sexual violence used in the World Health Organization multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women.¹²

Category	Operational definition
Sexual violence by an intimate partner	Physically forced to have sexual intercourse when she did not want to. Had sexual intercourse when she did not want to because she was afraid. Forced to do something sexual that she found degrading or humiliating.
Sexual violence from the age of 15 years ^a (by non-partner)	Forced to have sex or to perform a sexual act she did not want to.
Childhood sexual abuse (before age 15 years)	Touched sexually or made to do something sexual that she did not want to
Forced first sex	First sexual intercourse, forced or rape.

^a , It is suggested that, in future studies, the 15-year cut-off should be changed to 18 years to reflect legal definition of adulthood, which in most parts of the world is 18 (with some exceptions).

have large numbers of fieldworkers who are not particularly well trained and interested in gender, and do not have adequate support for vicarious trauma.

Sexual violence prevalence: what do we know?

Sexual violence is rooted in gender inequality and discrimination.^{23,24} It occurs at an alarmingly high rate in many settings. The WHO MCS found that between 6 and 59% of women have experienced sexual violence from their husband or a boyfriend in their lifetime¹² (Table 3). Prevalence estimates of sexual violence victimisation from other population-based studies from 39 countries estimate that between 0.3% and 39% of women report intimate partner or non-intimate partner sexual violence at some point in their lives.²⁵ A review of violence against women in Latin American and Caribbean countries, using data from Reproductive and Demographic Health Surveys from six countries,^c found that between 5.8% and 13.4% of women reported forced intercourse in their lifetime, with up to one-third of first experiences occurring before the age 15 years.²² South African studies estimate prevalence rates for sexual violence across all categories, ranging from between 12 and 28% of women ever reporting rape.^{26,27}

Research from high-income countries also reflects relatively high prevalence of sexual violence. The US NISVS, for example, found almost one in five women (18.3%) reported having been raped in their lifetime compared with one in 71 men.¹⁸ A total of 34, 28, 27 and 25% of women in the Australian, Danish, Swiss and Swedish arms of the International Violence Against Women Study, respectively, reported ever having been raped in their lifetime.^{25,28}

As already mentioned, when looking at sexual violence prevalence, we need to distinguish between the different types of rape and their contexts, including sexual violence by intimate partners, sexual violence by non-intimate partners, experiences of first forced sex, childhood sexual abuse and gang rape. Failure to do so are likely to result in an underestimate of sexual violence prevalence.¹

Sexual coercion by an intimate partner

Perpetrators of sexual violence are in most cases known to the victim, and rapes mostly occur within intimate relationships. Not surprisingly then, when intimate partner sexual violence is separated from non-intimate partner sexual violence, we find higher prevalence rates. For example, the WHO MCS found that, in all countries surveyed, sexual coercion by an intimate partner was much more common than rape by a non-intimate partner (Table 1),²⁹ dispelling the myth that most rapes occur in dark alleys perpetrated by an unknown assailant. In 10 of the 15 sites in the WHO MCS, more than one

^c Paraguay, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Guatemala, El Salvador and Ecuador.

Table 2A new methodology for measuring prevalence of perpetration.¹⁷

Category	Operational definition
Rape of a partner (current or previous wife or girlfriend)	Forced to have sex with you when she did not want to. Sex when he knew she didn't want it but believed she should agree because she was a wife or partner. Forced her to watch pornography when she didn't want to. Forced her to do something sexual that she did not want to do
Rape of a non-partner (a woman who was not your wife or girlfriend at the time)	Forced to have sex. Sex with a woman or girl when she was too drunk or drugged to say whether she wanted it or not.
Multiple perpetrator rape	Sex with a woman when she didn't consent to sex or was forced by 'you and other men'. Sex with a woman when she was too drunk or drugged to stop it by 'you and other men'.

in five women had been forced into sex by an intimate partner. Rates of sexual violence by an intimate partner reported by women in the study were as high as 59% in rural Ethiopia.¹²

Sexual violence within intimate partnerships generally co-occurs with other forms of intimate partner violence.¹ This patterning is not always consistent across all cases.^{1,30} For example, the WHO MCS found that a substantial proportion of women reported experiencing sexual violence only at the hands of their intimate partner: for example, in Thai province, Bangladesh province, and Ethiopia province, 28.9, 49.7, and 58.6% of women reported only sexual violence and very few reported any other form of sexual violence (Table 3).³⁰ Similarly, physical violence is not always more common than sexual violence. A community-based, cross-sectional survey of 845 ever-married women aged 15–49 years in Southwest Ethiopia reported a life time prevalence of sexual violence of 50.1%, which was much higher than the rates of physical violence (41.1%) found in this study.³¹

Sexual violence of an intimate partner is also high during pregnancy. A systematic review of African studies on intimate partner violence against pregnant women found prevalence rates ranging between 2.7 and 26.5%.³²

Table 3Prevalence of sexual violence against women and children.^{29,a}

Site	Child sexual abuse before age 15 years (best estimate) ^b	Forced first sex	Sexual coercion by an intimate partner		Non-partner sexual coercion from the age of 15 years
			Ever%	Past 12 months (%)	
Bangladesh City	7.4	24.1	37.4	20.2	7.6
Bangladesh province	1.0	29.9	49.7	24.2	0.5
Brazil City	11.6	2.8	10.1	2.8	6.8
Brazil province	8.7	4.3	14.3	5.6	4.6
Ethiopia province	7.0	16.6	58.6	44.4	0.3
Japan City	13.8	0.4	6.2	1.3	3.5
Namibia City	21.3	6.0	16.5	9.1	6.4
Peru City	19.5	7.3	22.5	7.1	10.3
Peru province	18.1	23.6	46.7	22.9	11.3
Samoa	1.8	8.1	19.5	11.5	10.6
Serbia/Montenegro City	4.2	0.7	6.3	1.1	3.9
Thailand City	8.9	3.6	29.9	17.1	6.1
Thailand province	4.9	5.3	28.9	15.6	2.6
United Republic of Tanzania City	12.2	14.3	23.0	12.8	11.5
United Republic of Tanzania province	9.5	16.6	30.7	20.2	9.4

^a Based on work from Garcia-Moreno et al.¹²^b In those sites where anonymous reporting was not linked to the individual questionnaire, the best estimate is the highest prevalence given by either of the two methods of data collection used in the multi-country study (i.e. face-to-face and anonymous report).

Sexual violence in intimate relationships is not unique to heterosexual partnerships.³³ Population-based research with adult men in South Africa found that 9.6% of men reported male-on-male sexual violence victimisation and 3.0% reported perpetration; 3.3% had been raped by another man, and 1.2% perpetrated male-on-male rape. Men who have sex with men (MSM) were over four times more likely than non-MSM to disclose sexual violence victimisation (34.4% v 8.1%), and over nine times more likely to have been raped (21.3% v 2.3%).³⁴ A similar rate of 4% experiencing forced sex within their intimate relationships was reported by MSM in a study undertaken in the USA.³⁵

These findings reflect the need for a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence within intimate relationships to help guide service responses and prevention programmes.

Non-partner sexual violence

Non-partner rape is common, although with varying rates of occurrence across settings. This perpetrator group includes a family member, stranger, person known by sight or acquaintance. Comparability of estimates is sometimes hard as some include rape and attempted rape, whereas others focus just on completed rape. According to the WHO MCS, the proportion of women reporting rape by a non-intimate partner since the age of 15 years ranged from less than 0.3% in Ethiopia province, up to 11.5% in Tanzania province¹² (Table 3). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that one in seven female victims (13.8%) had experienced being raped by a stranger.¹⁸ The latest estimates of prevalence of non-partner completed rape victimisation from South Africa is 12.2% in a population-based representative sample of adult women living in Gauteng province. In this study, an additional 1.8% had experienced an attempted rape. Overall, 4.9% of women had been raped by a non-partner on more than one occasion.⁶ This is higher than previous estimates, but the study methodology was stronger and it is compatible with the finding from the 1998 'Three Province Study' that 2% of women had been raped in the past 12 months.³⁶

Again differences in prevalence rates are a reflection of the type of study, the definitions used and the context within which the studies were conducted, as well as true underlying patterns of rape. Prevalence studies, done well, using well-developed research tools and definitions, are of fundamental importance for policy making and service development.

Forced first sex

For many young girls and women around the world, their first experience of sex is that of coercion and force. The WHO MCS study, for example, found that, in six of the 15 sites, more than 10% of women reported their first sexual experience was forced. The prevalence ranged from less than 1% in Japan and Serbia and Montenegro, and highest in Bangladesh, where between one-quarter and nearly one-third of women reported that their first experience of sex was forced (Table 3).

Forced sex and coercion is more prevalent among girls than boys, and adolescence is a time of risk for experiencing forced first sex.¹ Forced sexual intercourse was reported by 45.0% of female students, and 32.0% of male students, in a sample of 2705 pupils from 39 schools in Plateau state, Nigeria.³⁷ A study with young adolescents and adults in Lima Peru, found that 40% of females and 11% of the males reported coercion at sexual initiation.³⁸ In a nine-country study in the Caribbean,^d 47.6% female and 31.9% of male sexually active adolescents said their first sexual experience was forced.³⁹ In a multi-country study of school-going children in 445 schools across 10 southern African countries,^e the overall reported prevalence of forced or coerced sex for 16-year olds was 28.8% for female students and 25.4% for male students.⁴⁰

The high prevalence of forced sex disclosed by boys largely reflects two social phenomena. One is pressure boys experience to show manliness through having sex at a time in their lives when they do not feel ready for it. This is often pressure from male peers, but it can also be from girlfriends. The other is coercion of boys into sexual acts with older women. In a South African study with a large sample of adolescents, 3.4% of men disclosed being forced into sex by a man, and 9.7% by a woman. Unwanted sexual touching was reported by 7.8%; and 2.3% reported having sex with someone who wasn't

^d Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica and Saint Lucia.

^e Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Tanzania.

a girlfriend due to being threatened or forced.⁴¹ Women who coerced were generally much older and the boys were in their early teens. These acts were clearly distressing for the boys. The context of forced first sex needs to be better understood.

Multiple perpetrator rape

Most rape involves only one perpetrator; however, in some settings, rape by more than one man is quite common. This is particularly true in war, but also in some peaceable countries. As with other forms of sexual violence, great variation exists in reported prevalence of multiple perpetrator rape across studies, owing to context and definitions used. Studies from South Africa that have captured data on rapes involving two or more perpetrators report a multiple perpetrator rape population prevalence ranging between 7 and 9%, although one study of adolescent research volunteers found a prevalence of 14% (Table 4). Comparable data from Bangladesh found a population prevalence of 2%.¹⁷

A study in the USA on what the researchers described as ‘multiple person sex’ (MPS), was conducted in an effort to gain insight into adolescents having sex with three or more people. Researchers in this study defined MPS as sex involving multiple people that was either consensual (i.e. ‘three-ways’ or ‘group sex’) or forced (i.e. ‘gang rape’). The study sample was 328 females visiting an urban health clinic. Overall, 7.3% reported engaging in MPS, of which just over one-half (52%) said they were coerced and 43% reported having being threatened or forced.⁴³

Rapes involving more than one perpetrator are reportedly more violent than single perpetrator rapes, most perpetrators of gang rape are male,⁴⁴ and weapons were much more commonly found in rapes involving two or more perpetrators.⁴⁵ Substantial under-disclosure by women is likely to influence reported figures on multiple perpetrator rape. Such under-reporting is almost certainly caused by considerable stigma associated with having been ‘gang raped’.

Prevalence of rape perpetration

As with victimisation, estimates on perpetration of rape also vary greatly across settings. Most countries lack population prevalence data on perpetration of sexual violence against partners and non-partners.⁴⁶ Globally, the only population-based data on rape perpetration from large samples of men is from middle- and low-income countries. In this work, South Africa has led the way (Table 4). South Africa has high levels of rape perpetration, with 28–37% of men, aged between 18 and 49 years, interviewed in two large community-based surveys reporting having perpetrated a completed act of rape.^{13,14} The IMAGES¹⁵ study also found high rates of rape perpetration. In India, for example, 24% of all men (and 36% of married men) surveyed disclosed having ever been sexually violent, compared with 9% of men in Chile and Rwanda. Preliminary findings from Bangladesh from the Change Project¹⁷ multi-country study found that 10% of urban men, and 15% of rural men, had ever forced their partners into sex.¹⁷ As with India, almost all sexual violence identified in Bangladesh occurred within marriage.

Estimates from population-based studies and studies with college men from high-income countries on rape perpetration range from between 5.6% and 27% of adolescents and are based on men reporting an act that would meet legal definitions of rape or attempted rape. In a small population-based sample of US men, 24.5% reported perpetration of an act that would meet legal definitions of rape or attempted rape.⁴⁷ This figure was much higher than that from a national study of US college men, 7.7% of whom reported having engaged in behaviour that met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape,⁹ or

Table 4
Prevalence of multiple-perpetrator rape in studies conducted in South Africa.⁴²

Country	Study	Prevalence (%)
South Africa	Stepping Stones trial: 1400 men aged 15–26 years from rural Eastern Cape, school going volunteers in HIV prevention trial. ¹⁴	14
South Africa	Study of men, masculinity and rape: randomly selected general population sample of 1738 adult men from Eastern Cape and Kwa Zulu Natal. ¹³	9
South Africa	Study of GBV in Gauteng province: randomly selected general population sample of 500 men. ⁶	7

a national study of adolescents, where 5.6% of male adolescents reported they had sexually coerced a romantic partner.⁴⁸ Perpetration of sexually coercive practices that fall short of rape are much more common in many high-income settings than rape. For example, 15% of men in a study on the prevalence of perpetration among Spanish college men, reported some involvement in sexual behaviours when the woman did not want it, whereas 5.2% had raped or attempted rape.⁴⁹

Available prevalence estimates indicate that perpetration of rape may be lower in high-income countries than in low- and middle-income countries but, currently, insufficient data confirm this.⁴⁶

Sexual violence in childhood

Child sexual abuse is global problem.⁴⁸ A number of reviews and meta-analyses have been undertaken on child abuse victimisation, and have found lifetime prevalence rates ranging from 7–36% for women and 3–29% for men.^{50–52} The WHO MCS found that between 1 and 21% of women interviewed reported child sexual abuse before the age of 15 years. In most cases, the perpetrator was a male family member other than the father or stepfather.¹² The IMAGES study⁵³ found rates of child sexual abuse against boys ranged, for example, from between 3% in Croatia, 8% in Chile, to 17% in Rwanda and 21% in India. Other data on the history of child sexual abuse (including both forced sexual intercourse and other sex act including such as unwanted touch) reported by adult women sourced from large Reproductive Health national surveys from Latin America and the Caribbean, found prevalence rates among women from 5.8% in El Salvador, 4.0% in Nicaragua, 2.9% in Ecuador, and 2.6% in Paraguay.²² Population-based data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse perpetration are completely lacking.

National surveys undertaken in developing countries have found high rates of child sexual abuse. Research from Bangladesh found a high proportion of men interviewed reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse during childhood (37% of urban men and 22% of rural),¹⁷ Other recent large studies on child abuse have been undertaken in Swaziland (girls only) and Tanzania. The Tanzanian study found that nearly three out of every 10 girls and three out of every 20 boys reported having experienced sexual abuse.⁵⁴ The study in Swaziland found that about one in three girls had experienced some form of sexual violence before the age of 18 years. Most perpetrators (75%) were men and boys from the victims' communities.⁵⁵ In Switzerland, a survey of more than 6500 school children found that 22% of girls and 8% of boys reported ever having experienced sexual assault at least once in their lives, but only 3–5% of them said they had reported the abuse.⁵⁶ Data from the US-based Adverse Childhood Experiences study found that 24.7% of girls and 16.0% of boys had experienced sexual abuse during their childhood.⁵⁷

Estimates for child sexual abuse vary greatly between studies. As with other types of sexual violence, variations in prevalence may be explained by differing methods and definitions used.^{51,58} Memory of the abuse may be repressed and thus prevent disclosure or uncertainty about what 'really happened'. Much of the research has been conducted with adults asking about childhood experiences, and this increases the likelihood of recall bias. If children are interviewed, comparability is hindered by the age structure of the population (i.e. it is not possible to calculate the proportion of children 'ever' abused). Similarly, if adults are interviewed a past year prevalence of child sexual abuse cannot be calculated. The estimates cited by research need to be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

Sexual violence in schools

Sexual violence in schools takes a number of forms, and sexual assault and harassment are common in many countries, with perpetrators most often being school teachers, other school administrators and fellow pupils.⁵⁹ Owing to poverty, many school-going girls are forced into transactional sexual relationships with teachers.^{60,61} The South African Demographic and Health Survey conducted in 1998 included questions about experience of rape before the age of 15 years, and found that school teachers were the largest group of child rape perpetrators, responsible for 32% of the disclosed child rapes.⁶² A study undertaken in Kenya with 1206 in-school youth, found that 58% of the children interviewed reported sexual harassment, with most of the perpetrators being peers.⁵⁹

To accurately gauge the size of the problem is difficult, particularly given the clandestine nature of sexual violence in schools. Disclosing rape and sexual assault within a school setting can be particularly challenging for the victim. Research indicates that disclosure of such abuses is often met with disbelief,

denial, or that it is a normal part of life so what is all the fuss about.⁶³ Schools in many countries around the world are failing in their commitment to protect children and provide safe places for learning.

Conclusion

Sexual violence against women and children, and in some instances men, in its many forms is prevalent across all societies. No society is free from rape. Prevalence of sexual violence differs across settings. Reasons may include how sexual violence is measured, the definitions used, the stigma and shame associated with the act, the extent to which disclosure of abuse and assault is encouraged, and cultural beliefs and the role of women and children in society.

Measuring prevalence is, however, important, hence global efforts to strengthen the tools and methodologies to do so. Data are lacking on the various forms of sexual violence, particularly in developing countries, making it difficult to develop appropriate responses and prevention programmes. Prevalence estimates provide policy makers and advocates with information to guide service and policy development and to advocate for resources to do so. It also provides us with insight into where to focus our prevention efforts.

Practice points

- Rape-free societies do not exist; depending on setting, between one in 20 and one in two women have been raped by either an intimate or non-intimate partner.
- Global published research on the prevalence of rape perpetration is limited, but current estimates are that between one in 20 and one in three men have perpetrated a completed act of rape.
- The proportion of boys and men who have been forced into sex against their will in many settings is quite high, and perpetrators may include women as well as men.
- Child sexual abuse is common and affects both girls and boys, but girls are more at risk than boys. Perpetrators are usually well known to the victim.
- Sexual violence often occurs in schools and school health services need to be aware of the potential for problems on school premises as well as likely prevalence of sexual violence among learners of all acts of sexual violence, and put in place school based prevention programmes.

Research agenda

Improved research is essential. Research priorities for the magnitude of sexual violence prevalence needs to include:

- Measurement of the prevalence and patterns of sexual violence victimisation in a range of settings, across a range of acts of sexual violence, in men and women using methodologies based on best practice in gender-based violence research and standard measures of different forms of sexual violence.
- Measurement of the prevalence and patterns of sexual violence perpetration in a range of settings, across a range of acts of sexual violence.
- Measurement of the prevalence and patterns of sexual violence experienced by children in a range of settings, across a range of acts of sexual violence.
- Research on the social context of sexual violence perpetration and victimisation by both men and women.
- Methodological research to refine measures of sexual violence for particular population sub-groups or violence types, such as child perpetrators or young child victims, or sexual harassment at work and school.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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