
2004

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Recommended Citation

Ganju, Deepika, William Finger, Shireen J. Jejeebhoy, Vijaya Nidadavolu, K.G. Santhya, Iqbal Shah, Shyam Thapa, and Ina Warriner. 2004. "Forced sexual relations among married young women in developing countries," research brief. New Delhi: Population Council.

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RESEARCH

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FORCED SEXUAL RELATIONS among married young women in developing countries

Recent research in developing countries suggests that a considerable number of young women may experience forced sex within marriage, but most women may be inhibited from reporting these experiences due to shame, fear of reprisal or deep-rooted unequal gender norms. The consequences of domestic violence can be severe, and in fact, intimate partner violence is one of the leading causes of death among women 15-44 years of age.¹

Papers highlighting the nature and prevalence of coercion among married young women were presented at a global consultative meeting in New Delhi (see box inside). Evidence comes from small-scale studies and large population-based surveys, such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), from some developing countries. Many women may underreport coercion by a partner within marriage, and there are variations in the framing of questions posed, methods of data collection and the reference period, making findings of small-scale studies difficult to compare. However, available data give an idea of the extent and nature of coercion that married young women experience.

Studies reveal that sexual coercion within marriage includes deception, verbal threats or psychological intimidation to obtain sex, attempted rape and forced penetrative sex.² Forced marital sex can be accompanied by physical or emotional violence.

Sexual coercion is observed in marital partnerships in diverse settings such as South Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. Although cultural settings and contexts condition the nature of coercion among married young women, there are striking similarities across different settings.

Experiences of forced sex within marriage

Forced marital sex is reported in a variety of socio-cultural contexts

The paucity of nationally representative data makes it difficult to establish the prevalence of non-consensual sex among married young women in developing countries. What is clear however from papers presented at the New Delhi meeting is that early forced sex is reported by married young women living in diverse contexts. Where arranged marriage is the norm, few women exercise choice in whom they will marry; forced sex is also experienced in settings in which partner choice among young women is more prevalent. Indeed, evidence from the DHS and other surveys suggests that between 3 and 23 per cent of married young women (aged 15-24) in developing countries such as Cambodia, Colombia, Haiti, India, Nepal, Nicaragua and Zambia have ever experienced non-consensual sex by a current or former spouse.³

Women in diverse settings reported, moreover, that they had experienced recent episodes of forced sex, that is, within the 12 months preceding the survey. In studies in Latin America and the Caribbean, between 3 per cent and 23 per cent of women who had ever experienced coerced sex in marriage had such an encounter in the last 12 months.⁴ A similar prevalence (1-23 per cent) was noted in Brazil, Japan, Namibia, Peru and Thailand in the World Health Organization multi-country study of violence against women.⁵

Few studies have explored the perspectives of husbands. Exceptions include studies of married men in India that also reflect the extent of partner violence in marriage and highlight the fact that younger men are more likely than older men to

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perpetrate such incidents. In Uttar Pradesh, India for example, one-third of men aged 30 or less and one-fourth of older men reported ever perpetrating non-consensual sex (with or without physical force) on their wives. Another study in Uttar Pradesh similarly reports that young men (those married less than 10 years) are significantly more likely to have recently perpetrated sexual violence on their wives than those married longer. Men also reported perpetrating current episodes of sexual violence on their wives. In three states in India (Punjab, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu), about two-third of men aged 15-24 and 43 per cent of men aged 36-50 had perpetrated violence on their wives in the 12 months preceding the investigation.⁶

Forced sex is initiated early and is not an isolated incident

Several presentations made at the New Delhi meeting reiterated that there is little variation in the lifetime experience of non-consensual marital sex reported by young women (aged 15-24) and older women (aged 30-39).⁷ Given the significantly shorter exposure period of young women, this finding underscores the fact that forced sex is initiated early in the marriages of young women. National-level data in Latin America and the Caribbean, where partner choice is more prevalent than in South Asia, for example, suggest that coercion is initiated early, often within the first two years of marriage. In Nicaragua, half of partner violence among adolescent married women (15-19 years) started within two years of marriage.⁸

In studies in South Asia, a region known for early and arranged marriages in which decision-making tends to exclude the young woman, early marital experiences and notably sexual initiation are also reported to be forced for many. Qualitative studies from Bangladesh, various parts of India and Nepal highlight the vulnerability of newly married adolescent girls who undergo arranged marriage, and are neither familiar with their husbands nor informed about sexual matters. In-depth interviews with women married in adolescence reiterate the point that early marital relations were coerced, traumatic and painful. Testimonies from young women in South Asia reflect their fear and helplessness during such incidents. In one study in Gujarat, India, a woman said: “my husband insisted on

doing it every day...I would cry and tell him it was painful...still he would continue”. In another study in Uttar Pradesh, women reported similar experiences of their wedding night. For example, one woman said: “It was a terrifying experience; when I tried to resist he pinned my arms above my head”. Another, married at 13 years, says: “Nobody would call this a normal sexual encounter. It can only correctly be labelled as ‘rape’ by her own man”. A third asks: “How can a child of twelve and a half enjoy that?” In Mumbai, a woman recalled: “When he did it for the first time, it was painful. I cried for days”⁹

Sexual coercion is not limited to single isolated episodes. Studies in at least two settings (Haiti and Nicaragua) report that most young women who had experienced sexual coercion in the preceding 12 months had suffered three or more incidents during the period.¹⁰

Gender power imbalances and sexual violence

Young women’s lack of autonomy

While unequal power relations and lack of autonomy characterize the situation of married women in many settings, the autonomy of married young women is particularly constrained. In many countries in South Asia and the Middle East, early and arranged marriages are the norm and in most cases, the young woman scarcely knows her husband and is not involved in marriage-related decision-making. A young woman’s powerlessness and inability to exercise sexual choices in her marital home exacerbate the non-consensual nature of early sex, particularly forced sexual initiation. Lack of information on sexual matters at marriage compounds the anxiety and fear that characterizes young women’s early marital experiences, particularly as young husbands are better informed and in many cases, sexually experienced before marriage. In contrast, studies in several settings imply that marriage in adulthood enables women to enter marriage on more equal terms than marriage in adolescence. For example, studies in India reveal that women who married in adulthood were more likely to report that marital sexual experiences were “positive” compared to those married in adolescence. In Bangladesh, women married at 20 or later were more likely to have negotiated first sex than those who married in adolescence.¹¹

Even in other settings not as prominently characterized by early and arranged marriage, women who married young were more vulnerable to early coercive sex. Findings from Latin America suggest that married young women had little autonomy and choice, and were at far greater risk of both physical and sexual violence from their partners compared to women who married later. Younger women were also more likely to have suffered current and more severe episodes of violence, experienced violence in pregnancy and suffered injuries and other negative health outcomes.¹² Qualitative studies reinforce this finding. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a woman married in adolescence said: "I screamed. He said, 'You have to do it.' It was a sad bloodbath, the next day I couldn't even walk."¹³

Male entitlement to force sex

In many developing countries women "believe" that the use of force is a man's "right" and submission is the only way to avoid pain and ensure security in the marital home. Young women from various settings in South Asia said or were told: "I had feelings of discomfort but I had to accept my husband's wishes." "If you won't give him then he will force you and you would have pain."¹⁴ In Zimbabwe women were told that the use of force by a husband is "a part of life."¹⁵ In Nicaragua and Haiti, it was believed that women did not have the right to refuse sex if they did not feel like it, and that in some circumstances men were justified in beating their wives.¹⁶

Gender norms stress male entitlement to sex, even if forced within marriage. In Nepal, 11 per cent of younger men (below age 30) and 8 per cent of men aged 30-39 years justified wife-beating for refusing sex.¹⁷ Men use threats of abandonment, seeking sexual gratification elsewhere, remarriage and quarrel to force sex upon wives early in marriage. Few husbands respect their wives attempts to refuse their sexual advances. A young woman from Bangladesh said: "My husband used to get angry...and told me that he would remarry if I refused to have sex with him."¹⁸

Emerging evidence of changing attitudes, greater autonomy

While prevailing norms in many developing societies support male dominance in marital partnerships, there is evidence to suggest that women's perceptions

and attitudes to their partners may be changing. In Latin America, while men feel a sense of entitlement to force sex, and young women feel a sense of powerlessness to negotiate sexual relations, cultural norms may be changing making it more acceptable for younger women to leave violent relationships. In Nicaragua, for instance, while older women continue to stay longer in violent relationships, younger women (15-24 years) are developing a greater sense of autonomy and are more likely to seek help early.¹⁹

In South Asia, where marriages are early and arranged, young women and men are recognizing the need for autonomy. In Nepal, both females and males overwhelmingly support women's right to refuse sex.²⁰ Large proportions of male and female college students in India argue that women must make reproductive decisions and that a man cannot force his wife to engage in unwanted sexual relations. In some settings, younger women are playing a more active role in choosing their husbands and making marriage-related decisions, which may allow women to exercise sexual choice and rights.²¹

Evidence suggests that as marital partnerships become more established, even in settings characterized by limited autonomy, women do indeed develop strategies to counter sexual violence. Evidence from South Asia suggests for example that sexual experiences later in marriage are varied. For many, passive acceptance tends to replace the trauma that accompanies early coerced sexual relations with their husbands due to the lack of options or as a strategy for survival. Other women have, however, developed strategies to avoid unwanted sex: they threaten to scream, endangering the husband's prestige, they threaten suicide, they wake young children or feign menstruation. In some cases, women have forged greater intimacy in their relationships with the husband and this has resulted in more sexually equitable and pleasurable relationships and the ability to communicate on sexual matters.

Summing up

While there is heterogeneity between different cultural contexts, several similarities characterize the early marital sexual experiences of young women.

- In every setting in which data are available, a considerable number of married young women experience coercive sex within marriage.



Global consultative meeting on non-consensual sex among young people

In September 2003, a global consultative meeting on non-consensual sex among young people in developing countries was held in New Delhi, India. The meeting was organized by Population Council in collaboration with World Health Organization/Department of Reproductive Health and Research, and Family Health International/YouthNet. Participants included researchers, legal analysts, representatives from community-based NGOs, policy makers, and young people themselves.

Sessions examined the following issues in relation to non-consensual sex: experiences of young females and males; prevalence, forms and contexts; youth perspectives, through a panel of seven youth; patterns of transactional sex; roles of the legal system; outcomes of coercion at the individual and community level; interventions to prevent non-consensual sex, and to support and treat victims; and research design and methods.

- In most settings sexual coercion is initiated early in marriage, and in settings characterized by early and arranged marriage, specifically at sexual initiation.
- Women who marry in adolescence are more likely than others to experience more episodes of violence compared to women who marry later.
- Irrespective of setting, gender power imbalances tend to underlie the persistence of forced marital sex among young women. Powerlessness and the inability to negotiate wanted outcomes characterize married young women's narratives in Latin America just as they characterize the narratives of married young women in South Asia who exercise far less choice in early and arranged marriages, and who may be particularly unable to negotiate wanted early or first sex.
- While in most settings, gender norms emphasize women's submissiveness and male entitlement to force sex, there is emerging evidence of changing attitudes and greater autonomy among young women. For example, some young women in Latin America are leaving abusive relationships; and in South Asia some young women express awareness of their sexual rights and choices, and display attitudes opposing forced marital sex. As marital partnerships mature, moreover, several women who experienced sexual violence in early marital relations in South Asia report strategies that enable them to resist forced sexual relations or forge more equitable partnerships.

Recommendations for action

Papers and deliberations at the New Delhi meeting suggested several recommendations for action to address factors that heighten young women's vulnerability to coercive sexual relationships within marriage.

- Prepare young women who are about to be married by providing them with information on sexual matters, and ensuring that they have the ability to communicate on sexual matters with the family and future partners, and the skills to negotiate wanted sexual outcomes.
- Provide young women and men who are about to be married sexuality and life skills education to address gender stereotypes and attitudes that reinforce male entitlement and women's submissiveness to forced sex within marriage.
- Sensitize parents to the need to provide their daughters with a supportive environment.
- Advocate delayed marriage among adult gatekeepers and enable young brides-to-be to play a more active role in decisions concerning their marriage.
- Provide married women who suffer forced sexual relations access to legal structures that are sensitive to their needs and vulnerabilities.
- Given the paucity of data on the subject, research is needed on the prevalence, forms and context of sexual coercion among married young women in different settings.
- Involve men in positive ways to change gender norms that lead to violence and to establish partnerships that are based on mutual understanding and a respect for each other's rights.



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