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Non-Marital Sexual Violence in India: Findings from NFHS-4, 2015-2016



STUDY OBJECTIVE: While most sexual violence against women occurs in the context of marriage,¹ sexual violence outside of marriage is not inconsequential in India. This brief examines non-marital sexual violence in India.

MEHODS AND ANALYSIS: Estimates of non-marital sexual violence, disclosure of violence, and relationship to the perpetrator were taken from the 2015-16 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4).¹ The percent of women who were victims of non-marital sexual violence was derived from the question “In the last 12 months, has anyone physically forced you to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to?” For ever-married women, the question was modified to ask only about non-spousal perpetrators. This prevalence was calculated for the population of all women aged 15-49, and by age category. To determine number of women affected by non-marital sexual violence, we used population estimates of women in India taken from the United Nations’ World Population Prospects.² As interviews for the NFHS-4 spanned 2015-2016, population estimates for women aged 15-49 in 2015 and in 2016 were averaged. The number of women who experienced non-marital sexual violence in the past year was calculated by multiplying the prevalence of non-marital violence by the estimated population within the respective age group.

Disclosure questions were asked of women who reported any sexual or physical violence, and thus is not specific to experiences of non-marital violence. Disclosure was calculated as the percentage of women who reported experiencing non-marital sexual violence in the past year and who either a) sought help from any source, or b) did not seek help, but did tell someone. Reporting to police was the percent of women who reported past year non-marital sexual violence and then sought help from police. Relationship to perpetrator at first experience of sexual violence was also assessed. All estimates accounted for survey weights.

FINDINGS: One in four of women and girls reporting non-marital sexual violence was an adolescent (15-19), showing disproportionate burden among adolescents. Reporting to police was even less likely for this group.

NON-MARITAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE PAST YEAR



Perpetrators of first incident of non-marital sexual violence were most often the current or former spouse (36%), a family member (30%), or a friend of family friend (15%). Among 15-19 year olds, perpetrators of first incident were most often a family member (36%), a friend or family friend (24%), a current/former boyfriend (14%) or the current spouse (10%). Reports of spouse as perpetrator for non-marital sexual violence may be indicative of the abuse occurring prior to marriage. Stranger perpetration in first incidents was reported by 3% of all women and 5% of 15-19 year old adolescents.

NON-MARITAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST ADOLESCENTS (15-19) IN THE PAST YEAR



CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: Non-marital sexual violence is a pervasive concern affecting far greater numbers of women and adolescent girls than reported cases to police would suggest. More than 2 in 5 women affected in the past year have not told anyone of this abuse. Adolescent girls 15-19 are disproportionately affected and even less likely to report the crime to police. Most assailants of this violence are known to their victims, as partners, family members or friends. Stranger-perpetrated sexual violence against women and adolescents is less common.

Findings suggest three major implications to improve response to non-marital sexual violence in India:

1. Prevention of sexual violence in the form of female mobility restriction and fear of strangers will not be effective. More focus on potential perpetrators is needed for prevention.
2. Adolescent girls in dating relationships require more support to ensure their safety. Hidden relationships may pose greater risk, as girls may be less likely to disclose abuses in such cases.
3. Reduction of stigmatization of victims and improved police response to cases of sexual violence can facilitate victims' disclosure and support seeking, and may also improve accountability and penalization of perpetrators of sexual violence.

Stronger evidence-based policy and practical solutions are needed to tackle sexual violence in India.

REFERENCES

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