

Why society should talk about forced sex in intimate relationships, too

December 1 2017, by Shervin Assari

In the wake of the deluge of news about sexual harassment and alleged assaults by several high-profile and powerful men, it is important to look at the causes and consequences of forced sex in the workplace – but also in intimate relationships.

Although forced sex by a boss and by an intimate partner considerably differ, they have these two things in common: They both disempower [women](#) and make women sick.

Sex is a double-edged sword. It enhances our well-being and boosts our relationships if it is consented. [It](#) becomes [detrimental](#), however, if it is forced.

My research on [sexuality](#) focuses on causes and consequences of [forced sex](#) in [intimate relationships](#). My studies have been on [individual and environmental risk factors](#) that increase risk of [sexual abuse](#) by male partners. I have studied the [co-occurrence](#) between sexual and nonsexual violence in intimate relations. Finally, I have also studied the consequences of sexual abuse on mental health and relationship quality among women.

The recent news events provide an opportunity to address forced partner sex, a long-overlooked but insidious practice.

All too common

Let's look at the numbers.

According to one report, [one in four](#) women experiences sexual violence by an intimate partner. According to another report, up to [50 percent](#) of all sexual coercions are done by intimate partners. Around [one-third](#) of adolescent girls also report that their first sexual experience was forced.

About [15 percent](#) of women also experience sexual harassment at their workplace.

Worldwide, [30 to 35 percent](#) of women in a relationship experience some form of violence by their intimate partner. In the [United States](#) alone, more than 12 million adults, mostly women, experience [intimate partner violence](#) each year.

A sickening effect at home

In addition to the moral and human right violations of individual women, intimate partner violence imposes huge costs to society. According to a [CDC report](#), the costs of intimate partner violence, including rape, physical assault and stalking, in the United States exceed US\$5.8 billion each year.

Sexual abuse has a number of health effects, including higher risk of [suicide](#). Individuals who experience [sexual assault](#) are also at higher risk of several [chronic diseases](#) such as asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, chronic pain conditions and heart disease.

Individuals who are forced into sex [by a partner](#) show depression and high psychological distress. In fact, sexual abuse increases risk for almost all forms of [psychopathologies](#).

Forced sex reduces women's ability to enjoy sex in the future. Although

some victims exhibit an [increase](#) in sexual activity, in most cases, forced sex is a risk factor for sexual avoidance.

[Shame](#) is a key aspect of the emotional suffering of those who experience sexual abuse. Shame is a core element of anxiety, depression and suicide, and is a barrier against help-seeking. As a result, victims typically continue to suffer in isolation. This is more so in societies where the rape victims are also [blamed](#) for their victimization.

My own research has shown a link between forced sex and [relationship distress](#) among married couples. By being forced to have sex, the women lose a sense of control of their bodies. Forced sex shakes women's trust and [attachment security](#).

Some believe that sexual violence is probably most [depressing](#) when it is committed by a spouse, partner or relative. When a woman is victimized by a stranger, she has to live with a frightening memory. When she is being forced into sex by a spouse or a partner, she lives with the "rapist" all the time.

A sickening effect at work

Sexual abuse can become chronic when it happens at the [workplace](#). Given the imbalance in the power, fighting an assault in the workplace may be an uphill battle for women. Many powerful forces, such as human resources directors and lawyers, can serve to protect the company or to discredit and blame the victim.

Sexual harassment has a major effect on women's careers. Some women leave their jobs to escape their harassing environment. Some people stay and fight. In both scenarios, sexual harassment causes [career disruption](#) for women.

Much of workplace harassment is a result of unbalanced power, and some scholars have called sexual harassment "[gendered expression of power](#)."

This inappropriate expression of power imperils young, minority and poor women in the workplace in particular. Studies have shown that [power differences](#) can increase sexual abuse of young, minority and low socioeconomic individuals.

So who does force women into sex?

My research shows that sexual abuse does not occur in a vacuum. It tends to [co-occur](#) with relational dysfunctions as well as other types of violence. Women should consider psychological or verbal abuse by a [partner](#), co-worker or boss to be a warning sign for future risk of sexual assault.

They should also know that men who show [other types of violence](#), including verbal, psychological and physical violence, are more likely to commit sexual violence. Men who are very [controlling](#) verbally, economically and emotionally are also more likely to be sexual perpetrators.

And, it is important to know that alcohol and drug use contribute to sexual [violence](#). Many men who force people into sex are [intoxicated](#). Also, [impulsive traits](#) increase the risk. Men who express more [anger and aggression](#) are also at a higher risk of committing [sexual violence](#).

Power plays a corrupting role

Social psychology research reminds us that power corrupts people, independent of their level of morality. So, when humans are given

unconditional power, authority and dominance (over others), they are very likely to abuse it. [Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment](#) showed that it is not evil people who do evil behaviors. Evil action is often about unconditional power and authority that people gain, rather than their immorality.

This may explain why the [list](#) of high-profile people who have been accused of sexually harassing women is mostly composed of powerful [white men](#). This is not, I would argue, because white men are immoral, but because white men have the highest authority, dominance, social power and job control over their co-workers.

While the U.S. is undergoing a surge in awareness around workplace [sexual harassment](#) and [abuse](#), people should also be mindful that the same dynamics are playing out among intimate relationships.

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