

Most men do not perpetrate sexual violence against women

October 2 2018, by Joan M. Cook, Ph.d.



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With at least [three](#) women accusing Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct, and the 81-year-old comedian Bill Cosby [sentenced](#) Sept. 25 to three to 10 years in prison for sexual

assault, it might seem like predatory men are everywhere we turn. As a trauma psychologist, I applaud the [#MeToo movement](#) and hope it continues to hold perpetrators accountable, and elevate, validate and support survivors' voices. Survivors deserve that and more.

But, I also want to make the important point that the majority of men are not sexual predators.

Many [women](#) found last week's testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee gut-wrenching. As she described her [alleged sexual assault](#) from 36 years ago, many people wept with her. We saw ourselves, our sisters, mothers, daughters and friends in her story. As a deeply empathetic human being, I understand this reaction. I had it myself.

For the past 20 years, I've been researching traumatic stress and treating its survivors – working with people who directly experienced the 9/11 terror attack on the former World Trade Center, combat veterans and former prisoners of war, and men and women who have experienced physical and [sexual assault](#) across their lifespan. It is jarring for many people without this area of professional expertise to know that the rate of [interpersonal violence in this country is high](#), and that there are "bad" people out there who perpetrate violence on others.

A look at the numbers

Data from national crime statistics, [criminal victimization studies](#), as well as conviction and incarceration rates, indicate that women's reports of experiencing attempted rape, sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact are much higher than many people realize. Although it's hard to get a solid prevalence rate on the percentage of [men](#) who perpetrate sexual violence, one estimate indicates that almost [a quarter of men](#) admit to engaging in some form of [sexual coercion](#) by the end of their

fourth year of college.

The sexual interest and activity of most heterosexual males follows a fairly orderly pattern. Though there are some gender differences between males and females in regards to their first dates, kiss, serious relationship and act of intercourse, most report that they have [fallen in love](#) at least once by age 17. By the time they reach college, many men and women are [sexually active](#) and have had multiple sexual partners. Generally, [college men have more sexual partners](#) than college women and report greater willingness to [casually hook up](#).

In talking to their parents about sexual relationships, both boys and girls nowadays seem to hear more about [loving, reciprocal relationships](#). However, young women still receive more restrictive sex messages of caution and pause, whereas some men continue to [be encouraged to go for it and score](#).

Though gender differences have narrowed, women tend to be [socialized](#) to pursue closeness, satisfy a partner's needs, and avoid relationship tension, whereas some boys and men continue to receive the [message](#) that more sexual experiences and partners are desirable, and that they confer status.

Still Venus and Mars?

[Research from the 1980s](#) found that college men were more likely to fantasize about being the recipient of sexual activity, while college women were more likely to daydream about past sexual experiences and romantic settings for future sexual rendezvous. These divergent views of [sexual fantasy](#) seem somewhat [persistent today](#).

[We are all sexual beings](#). That's a fact. Growing up surrounded by a barrage of titillation and sexual innuendo, however, makes it harder to

engage in normal sexual consumption. We see people gyrating on our Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat feeds, and engaging in highly sexualized behavior in the movies, on television, on the radio and in print media.

With pervasive [sex glorification and widespread pornography](#), men are particularly primed to embrace the erotic cultural messages, but [reject the relationship responsibility](#). With this constant sexualized input, it is understandably harder for some to go from viewing sex as an [endpoint](#) to seeing it as an important component of a healthy, intimate, adult relationship. But, to be clear, that never gives permission for any type of sexual abuse or assault.

In general, heterosexual men describe [getting less satisfaction](#) than women from consensual sexual activities, whether it's tender moments, sensual pleasures or erotic play. These findings give pause and beg the questions: What's going in our culture, and how can we work to improve this?

As the #MeToo movement continues, and as powerful men, and women, fall, we as a society should remind ourselves that most men and women do not transgress [sexual violence](#) on one another, and should be careful not to demonize sexual activity and eroticism altogether.

However, it is my sincere hope that parents take this opportunity to teach our children about gender equality and [gender differences](#) in sexuality as well as change the narratives around toxic masculinity and rape myths. One other important thing society can do – be it in schools, places of worship, or youth groups – is impart knowledge and skills on how to create healthy sexual boundaries: what they are, how to set them and how to respect them. Some universities are [already doing this](#), but it would be great if other organizations joined them. In addition, it's important for all dating partners or couples to communicate how much

they value each other and negotiate for healthy, pleasurable [sexual activity](#) in consensual relationships.

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