Histories of Violent Victimization Among Women Who Reported Unwanted Sex in Marriages and Intimate Relationships: Findings From a Qualitative Study
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Histories of Violent Victimization Among Women Who Reported Unwanted Sex in Marriages and Intimate Relationships

Findings From a Qualitative Study

Kathleen C. Basile

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

This article summarizes results of semistructured telephone interviews with 41 women about experiences with various forms of violent victimization. Women who reported an incident or incidents of unwanted sex in their intimate partner relationships were recruited from a national telephone poll and interviewed about other types of victimization, such as childhood maltreatment, unwanted sex by a date or acquaintance, and nonsexual violence by a husband or partner. Results suggest that women who report unwanted sex by a husband or partner have commonly experienced various other forms of abuse in their lives. The author discusses implications of the findings for prevention of unwanted sex in intimate relationships.

Keywords: child abuse; intimate partner; marriage; prior victimization; sexual coercion; unwanted sex

Researchers have established that coerced sex, defined here as sex that is unwanted by the victim and occurs without her consent, is perpetrated most frequently by someone known to the victim, such as a married partner, dating partner, relative, friend, or acquaintance (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b). The large majority of victims of coerced sex are female and most perpetrators are male. Coerced sex can occur without force, violence, or threats (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Russell, 1990; Wiehe & Richards, 1995), so it goes beyond the traditional definition of rape, which is commonly defined as forced penetration or attempts at this without consent or when the victim was incapacitated (e.g., by alcohol or other drugs; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). In married and other intimate partner relationships in particular, researchers have documented types of coerced sex that may or may not qualify as rape according to legal definitions (Basile, 1999, 2002; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985).

Author’s Note: The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
Coerced sex in marriage is believed to be a common type of sexual violence (Basile, 2002; Bergen, 1995; Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Russell, 1990). However, much of what we know about rape and other types of coerced sex in marriage and previous experiences with victimization comes from survey research (Basile, 2002; Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). Although quantitative surveys enable an understanding of prevalence and correlates of sexual victimization by intimates and other types of interpersonal victimization (e.g., child maltreatment, acquaintance rape), survey methods do not allow for an in-depth understanding of the context, experience, and consequences of victimization. In line with the qualitative work of Russell (1990), this study utilized qualitative interviews to explore the experiences of coerced sex by a spouse or intimate partner and other forms of prior victimization such as child maltreatment, acquaintance rape, and other nonsexual abuse by a sexually coercive partner.

**Literature Review**

Research has concluded that rape and other coerced sex in marriage and intimate partner relationships are relatively prevalent. Different from coerced sex by other perpetrators, rape or other forms of coerced sex by a husband or partner (heretofore called wife rape) are likely to happen frequently in relationships where they do occur (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Frieze, 1983; Russell, 1990). In her seminal book on rape in marriage, Russell (1990) conducted face-to-face interviews with women and found that 14% of ever-married women reported wife rape in their lifetimes. In her study, Russell found that 71% of wife rape victims reported being raped more than once, and 34% reported that it occurred more than 20 times (Russell, 1990). Most other studies on wife rape have not involved face-to-face interviewing, which may explain their slightly lower prevalence rates. In another central book on this topic, Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) found a lower rate of 10% for lifetime prevalence of wife rape among a regional sample of ever-married women living in Boston, Massachusetts. In a nationally representative sample, Basile (2002) found that 10% of women had experienced rape by a current spouse or partner. Another nationally representative study by Tjaden and Thoennes (2000a) found that 8% of women were raped at sometime in their lives by a current or former spouse or partner.

**Vulnerability Factors for Wife Rape**

The literature indicates strong support for an association between child maltreatment and subsequent victimization by an intimate partner (Desai, Arias, Thompson, & Basile, 2002; Messman-Moore & Long, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). Some researchers have concluded that vulnerability to adult sexual victimization is best understood as an after effect of childhood victimization, particularly child sexual
victimization. Therefore, revictimization can be viewed as both a risk factor for and a consequence of sexual coercion. For many victims, rape and other sexual coercion are repeated at different life stages, and evidence suggests that women who experience child sexual abuse followed by sexual victimization in adolescence are more vulnerable for future experiences of unwanted sex than those who did not experience sexual victimization in adolescence (Siegal & Williams, 2003).

Previous research also shows a link between intimate partner violence and other types of victimization. For example, Tjaden and Thoennes (2000a) found that intimate partner violence (sexual or physical) against women was often accompanied by emotional abuse or controlling behavior by the partner. Frequency of the incidence of wife rape has also been positively associated with physically violent relationships (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985). Described by Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) as “battering rape,” women who are beaten by their spouses are often also likely to be raped. These types of severely violent relationships (i.e., battering and rape) often include forced anal intercourse. Finkelhor and Yllo found that one third of their sample of battered wives had been subjected against their will to anal intercourse by their husbands. Campbell and Alford (1989) found anal intercourse to occur among 53% of their sample of 115 battered women, and in Bergen’s (1996) sample of wife rape victims (not all battered women), 40% of the women reported having had forced anal intercourse.

Studies have frequently shown a link between wife rape and alcohol and drug use by husbands (Bergen, 1996; Russell, 1990; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a), and alcohol use has also been associated with risk of injury for intimate partner rape victims (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). However, research about the relationship between alcohol or drug use and wife rape is inconclusive and suggests that other factors might be involved. Bergen (1996) found that although more than two thirds of her sample of 40 wife rape victims had partners who commonly used drugs and alcohol, only 3 women made a connection between the alcohol and drug use and the sexual assault, making alcohol and drug use a poor predictor of wife rape for this sample. More recently, Johnson (2001) examined a national sample of Canadian women and reported that when asked in an open-ended question format, 29% of women victims identified alcohol as a precipitating factor in their abuse. However, quantitative findings from this study revealed that when attitudes of the perpetrating spouse about the control of women were included in the model, the association between husband’s excessive alcohol use and wife assault ceased to exist (Johnson, 2001). Johnson’s study offers empirical support for the importance of other factors beyond alcohol and drugs, such as perceptions of masculinity and the need for dominance of women, in understanding wife rape and other male violence against wives.

There is some evidence in the literature that wife rape may occur after a woman has been in the hospital or suffered from an illness. Campbell and Alford (1989) found that approximately 50% of their sample of battered women was forced to have sex after being in the hospital or after an illness. In many cases, staying in the hospital was linked to pregnancy. Women may be vulnerable during pregnancy, as Bergen
(1996) found that one third of her sample noticed an increase in forced sex with their husbands during their pregnancy. Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, and Lewis (1998) found that one quarter of their sample of women with violent partners reported at least one forced sexual encounter perpetrated by their partners while the women were pregnant. More recently, Stermac, Del Bove, and Addison (2001) found that women sexually assaulted by a current spouse were more likely to report being pregnant (6.2%) than women assaulted by boyfriends (5.9%) or acquaintances (1.6%), although these differences were not statistically significant because of the small numbers.

Consequences of Wife Rape

The immediate physical effects of wife rape have been widely documented in the literature. As many wife rapes are the result of physical violence (Basile, 1999; Bergen, 1996; Russell, 1990), wives sometimes have injuries such as broken bones, black eyes, and other bruises after being raped (Bergen, 1996; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). Campbell and Soeken’s (1999) sample of battered women revealed that those who experienced wife rape reported significantly more gynecological problems.

The psychological effects of wife rape are often more numerous and longer lasting. The psychological impact of wife rape could also be more severe than the impact of rape by other perpetrators, such as strangers (Mahoney & Williams, 1998). In the early 90s, Shields and Hanneke (1992) presented two arguments regarding the psychological damage of both stranger and wife rape. Rape by a stranger could lead to a more serious sense of violation of physical privacy and/or a fear of pregnancy than wife rape. On the other hand, rape in a marital relationship could be equally if not more damaging to the psyche, given the salient status assigned to the marital relationship in this society. Experiences with rape in such a central social relationship as marriage could lead to loss of trust in the spouse, fear of continued assault given the likelihood for continued interaction, and an overall questioning of the meaning of the relationship and of sex within it (Shields & Hanneke, 1992).

Just a few of the numerous psychological and health-related consequences of wife rape reported in the literature are depression, anxiety, fear, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993). In addition, wife rape victims report guilt and self-blame for the incidents (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985). Wife rape victims have reported severe depression and considering or attempting suicide (Bergen, 1998). It follows that these feelings of anxiety, fear, depression, and guilt could be intensified in incidents of wife rape, as the intimate relationship between perpetrator and victim often continues after the rape has occurred.

The Current Study

This study used qualitative interviews to learn more about the experience of coerced sex by a spouse or intimate partner and other forms of prior victimization from a
subsample of women who completed a national survey and reported unwanted sex by a current or past husband or intimate partner. The interviews explored earlier life experiences with child maltreatment, witnessing parental violence as a child, date or acquaintance rape, and physical or psychological intimate partner violence to get an in-depth picture of the lives and experiences of the women. This article is a descriptive summary of the women’s histories of violent victimization. The author makes connections between “less severe” and “severe” (defined below) unwanted intimate partner sex in adulthood and previous victimization experiences, discusses the short and long-term effects of the coerced sex reported by the women, and concludes the article with implications of the research for prevention of intimate partner sexual coercion.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 41 women previously involved in a national telephone poll of 1,108 men and women in the United States conducted from March through May 1997. Of the 602 women polled, 204 reported having unwanted sex with a husband or intimate partner, and 96 of those women agreed to be called back for a longer interview. Of the 96 women who agreed to be called back, 41 interviews were successfully completed. The remaining 55 women did not complete interviews because of disconnected numbers (n = 17), their inability to be reached after five or more attempts (n = 17), their request to reschedule the interview upon being contacted (n = 12), and subsequent refusals to participate (n = 9). These follow up, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted from June through October 1997. This sample does not represent the United States. As only 96 of the 204 victimized women in the sample agreed to be called, and about half of the women who agreed to be called back were not interviewed, this sample cannot be generalized to the population. However, an analysis comparing the sample of 41 women to the other victimized women in the nationally representative sample who did not complete a qualitative interview (n = 163) revealed no statistically significant differences between these two groups on demographics or types of sexual coercion experienced. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the 41 women discussed in this article are similar to the sexually coerced women in the national sample.

Procedure

Semistructured, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with the women. This kind of interviewing gives the researcher opportunities for clarification and discussion of various topics. This type of data collection also typically allows for free interaction between interviewer and research participant (Reinharz, 1992). Although
this study is somewhat atypical because the in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone rather than in person, the important benefits of this type of data collection were still realized. This collection method also allowed for avenues of discovery that were not initially expected. Although the interviews were semistructured, the interview guide evolved to some extent after approximately 10 interviews were completed.

Reinharz (1992) discusses some benefits of the interviewing method from a feminist perspective. For one, the interviewing method, in its conversational way, allows the interviewer to avoid a position of “control over others” consistent with other methods such as experiments. In this sense, the research participants are valued for their knowledge and are “actively involved” in “constructing data about their lives” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 20). Another important element of the feminist interview technique is that women interview women. Woman-to-woman talk has been found to create a different dynamic than talk within mixed sex groups (Spender, 1980). Particularly with sensitive topics, such as sexual victimization, woman-to-woman interviewing is important to maintain a level of comfort and trust, and a sense of shared experience. With regard to wife rape victims, it can be argued that women interviewers can best understand and relate to the experiences of women victims, thus creating a more open and comfortable environment for the interview. The author conducted all interviews, in line with a feminist technique of woman-to-woman talk (Spender, 1980). The average length of the interviews was 45 minutes, with a range of 20 minutes (only one interview) to 80 minutes. The interviewer read an informed consent form over the phone and received verbal consent to proceed with the interview. As part of the oral consent form, all respondents were given the phone number for a national domestic violence hotline, and they were also offered the number again at the end of each interview. All interviews were tape recorded, with the respondent’s consent, and transcribed verbatim into a computer word-processing program.

**Measures**

The interview started with a few questions about the women’s satisfaction with their current marriages or relationships, in an effort to get them comfortable talking about their relationships. Then participants were asked to verify and elaborate on the responses they gave in the national survey they participated in earlier the same year about the types of coerced sex they experienced. The women were asked to give detailed descriptions of the incident or incidents of coerced sex in their marriages or intimate relationships, including when, where, and the circumstances under which it happened. If they had experienced coerced sex in more than one intimate relationship, they were asked to discuss each relationship and the experiences within it separately. The women were asked if they were still living with their spouses or partners, and the circumstances under which they stayed with or separated from their spouses or partners. Women were asked various questions about previous victimization, including childhood experiences with sexual, physical, or verbal abuse; witnessing parental violence as a child; whether
they experienced date or acquaintance rape in the past; and whether they experienced physical or verbal abuse, or were subjected to other controlling behaviors by a current or past intimate partner. Finally, women were asked how they thought the sexual coercion incident or incidents had affected them, and what support they sought, if any, as a result of the incident or incidents. All of these questions were asked in an effort to uncover the “stories” of these women’s victimization histories in their own words. Their responses are used here to describe how, when, and in what life contexts experiences with coerced sex in marriages or intimate partner relationships occur.

Sample Characteristics

The 41 participants were 71% white (29 women), 20% multiracial (8 women), 5% Hispanic (2 women), 2% African American (1 woman), and 2% Native American (1 woman). At the time of the interview, the women ranged from 21 to 74 years old, with an average age of 43. Of these women, 9% had some graduate school or a graduate degree. A total of 20% were college graduates. Most of the women (39%) had some college credits. A total of 22% of participants had high school diplomas. The remainder of the sample (10%) did not receive a high school diploma. The largest percentage of women had total family incomes in the $15,000 to $25,000 range or in the $50,000 to $75,000 range (23% of women in both of these categories). Women were split between married (51%) and unmarried (49%), but two thirds of these women lived with a partner (66%) at the time of the interview whether they were married or not. The majority of women (64%, or 26 women) owned their own homes. Using church attendance as an indication of religiosity, 44% of the women said they attend church less than a few times a year. There were 10 women (24%) who said they attend church once a week. Most of the women identified their political party affiliation as Independent (44%) or Democratic (36%), with very few Republicans in the sample (8%). Of the participants, 32% lived in the South, 29% lived in the Midwest, 27% resided in the West, and 12% lived in the Northeast.

Findings

This section summarizes the victimization experiences of a subsample of women who reported some form of unwanted sex by a current or past partner. The specific types of intimate sexual coercion experienced by these women are not discussed here, but can be found in Basile (1999).

Background on Unwanted Sex Perpetrated by a Spouse or Partner

A total of 14 women (34%) described unwanted sex with a current husband or partner, whereas two thirds of the sample (27 women, or 66%) disclosed having
unwanted sex with a past husband or partner. Most of the women (76%, or 31 women) were married to the coercer at the time the unwanted sex occurred. The length of the relationships ranged from several months to more than 50 years. The women’s experiences with unwanted sex were varied. For the purposes of this article, unwanted sexual experiences were divided into two categories: “less severe” and “severe.” “Less severe” experiences (19 women, or 46%) were incidents in which physical force and threats were not involved. “Severe” experiences (22 women, or 54%) involved verbal bullying, threats of physical force, or physical force. If a woman experienced any severe coercion, she was classified in the severe category. But these classifications are not mutually exclusive, such that women in the severe category often experienced a combination of less severe and severe coercion. Indeed, those women whose experiences were severe tended to have suffered the full gamut of forms of sexual coercion. Of the 22 women who described severe coercion, 20 of them were describing past relationships. For the remainder of the article, coercive experiences are described by the level of coercion (severe or less severe) and by when the coercion took place (present or past).

Setting the Stage: Childhood Experiences of Maltreatment

A substantial percentage of the sample was subjected to abuse as a child. Types of child maltreatment explored in this study include physical, verbal, or sexual abuse from a parent or other adult, or the witnessing of abuse in childhood between parents or between a parent and his or her intimate partner. The women involved as adults in past relationships of a severely coercive nature (e.g., physically violent) were most likely to have had childhood experiences with abuse.

Verbal abuse. Verbal abuse as a child was the most common type of abuse directed at the women. A total of 20 women, or 49% of the sample, said they experienced what they defined as verbal abuse in childhood, most typically from a parent. For example, one woman described verbal abuse from her alcoholic mother:

She would get real drunk and talk about how horrible her life had been because I had been born, I guess that is verbal abuse, and [talk about] all the things she had to do because she had children. (46-year-old participant)

Another participant, 32 years old, who had a severely coercive ex-husband, had this to say about her father:

My father was kind of a verbally abusive person. . . . He had very low tolerance. . . . Sometimes, we would get “you stupid idiot” kind of stuff . . . if we didn’t understand something . . . or, “klutzy” if we broke something.
A 36-year-old woman whose adult sexual coercion experiences were categorized as less severe said this to explain her father’s verbal abuse: “Whatever I did wasn’t good enough.” Another participant, 33 years old, with a severely coercive ex-husband, said this about her mother: “She would get angry about something . . . and when she got angry, she would say ugly things, you know. . . . I guess probably I was called a bitch before I knew what it was.”

**Physical abuse.** Of the women, 32% (13 women) reported that they were physically abused as children. One woman described physical abuse from her mother:

I had neighbors report my mother for child abuse . . . [she would] leave bruises on me, bruises on the back of my legs, my ankles. I’ve had child services come up to my high school and have me undress so they could see it. (35-year-old survivor of a severely coercive previous adult relationship)

She went on to marry a man who was very physically abusive, an alcoholic, and who tied her up at times. She also could be classified as experiencing Finkelhor and Yllo’s (1985) battering rape, as physically forced sex often occurred in the context of this violent relationship.

Physical child abuse was also reported by women who were now in less severely coercive relationships that they defined as “healthy,” such as in this example of abuse by a father: “We used to get our butts beat for waking him up in the afternoon. My dad worked nights, and we used to get our butts whupped pretty good, and get hollered at” (36-year-old participant). Another woman, age 31, who described an emotionally manipulative ex-boyfriend, detailed the abuse she experienced at the hands of her adoptive father: “A lot of times he . . . threw sharp knives, forks, plates, sometimes it would be the belt, sometimes it would just be a hand across the face and I’d go flying across the room.”

**Sexual abuse.** Childhood sexual abuse was the least common type of child abuse reported by this sample, although 4 women (10%) experienced it. One woman, age 45, talked about how she was molested by her uncle:

My uncle used to make me sit on his lap and he’d play with me and told me don’t ever let mommy know what was going on. . . . As I got older he became more open with it, and finally it got so that whenever I knew he was coming, I was going out. . . . It never came out into the open until I was about 34 to 35 [years old].

She goes on to describe what her molesting uncle said at her wedding: “I got married and [my uncle] walked up to me and asked my husband, ‘Well, I hope you do her the way I did.’” This participant, after being fondled outside and underneath her clothes as a child, was later compelled to have forced oral and anal sex with her husband.
Another participant, age 60, also experienced sexual abuse, but from her father. She explained it in this way:

It was sexual advances and trying to get me alone so he could molest me. We never actually had intercourse, although it was so close one time I was just absolutely scared to death. It’s like I think of myself as the little field mouse, being pursued by the snake, and you’re just within striking distance, you’re just frozen, [you] just sit there and stare, you can’t do anything, you can’t move.

She connected the molestation to the “adverse feelings toward sex” she experiences as an adult. She explained these feelings about sex: “The [molestation] had a definite impact on how I look at sex. . . . I just have to put it out of my mind because I know that it has warped my thinking.”

These words suggest that she has not healed the psychological wounds created by the sexual abuse, but instead, she tries very hard to repress her memories. This woman revealed that her father was an alcoholic. She was also involved in a severely coercive adult relationship about which she spoke in the interview.

Witnessing abuse. Physical and verbal abuse were about as equally common for the participants to witness, as 13 (32%) of the women witnessed verbal abuse between parents or a parent and a stepparent, and 11 (27%) of the women witnessed physical abuse. One example came from a 48-year-old woman who described the conflict she remembered between her parents:

Physical, when I was a small child, I don’t remember it as much as I got older, but my mother and father would fight verbally a whole lot. . . . I knew my father was running around. . . . He’d move out of the house for a while and then be back.

Often, women who witnessed abuse also had a parent or parents who were alcoholic. Another participant, age 46, described this childhood memory:

I seem to remember. . . . I think my father was drinking. My mother had had a little skin cancer removed from her face, had a couple of stitches. . . . The only time I remember or know of him ever hitting my mother, he slapped her face and broke the stitches open.

This same father also held a gun to her mother’s head and demanded that she drive him to the liquor store. A 42-year-old woman who had two alcoholic parents remembered physical abuse perpetrated on her mother:

I did have a flashback where one time they were fighting. . . . and he had shot at the car we were in with his gun. . . . Then I called [mother] the next day and told her. . . . and she said it did happen.
Alcoholism by a parent was fairly common among this sample. A total 17% of women (7 women) had alcoholic fathers or stepfathers, whereas 5% cited their mothers as alcoholics, and an equal number said that both parents were alcoholics (2 women in each case). Once again, this was primarily an issue among women who were being interviewed about severely coercive past partners. As mentioned above, having an alcoholic parent was often connected to other experiences in childhood, such as suffering or witnessing abuse.

Experiences With Date or Acquaintance Rape

Of the women in this sample, 20% had experienced either completed (6 women) or attempted (2 women) rape by an acquaintance or date. Similar to childhood experiences with abuse, these rapes, which happened before their sexually coercive adult relationships in all 8 cases, could have been precursors to their experiences with coercion by their partners. The following examples are particularly illustrative. A 32-year-old woman who was formerly involved with a severely coercive, physically abusive, alcoholic ex-husband, described being raped by a male acquaintance when she was 14 years old:

We were in the car, and I was just about to leave, and that’s when he told me I wasn’t going anywhere . . . I tried kicking him in his face, and screaming, and he was, he was ripping my clothes.

Another participant, age 32, who was currently married to a less severely coercive partner at the time of the interview also experienced a date rape in her past:

I was date raped by a boyfriend . . . when I was 17, and it was my first experience . . . I just kept saying “No, I don’t want to,” and I tried to get out from underneath him, and it was too late.

She explained how she didn’t tell anyone at the time that she was raped, and did not even recognize it as rape herself until years later. In addition, she said that she continued to date the boyfriend after the rape occurred. These findings regarding adolescent date or acquaintance rape support Siegal and Williams’s (2003) quantitative research that revealed a particularly detrimental pattern of recurrent sexual abuse in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Sexually Coercive Adult Partners’ Other Abusive Behavior

As suggested by the above data, in many cases, experiences that the women had earlier in life were repeated in adult relationships. Many women, some of whom had childhood and adolescent experiences of victimization, experienced physical abuse,
verbal abuse, or had their children witness their own abuse by a current or former partner.

**Physical and verbal abuse by a partner.** The women were asked if their current or previous partner had ever been physically violent toward them (beyond the forced sex experiences) or had ever sworn at them, called them names, or humiliated them. More than half of the sample suffered from both physical and verbal assaults by their partners at least one time during their relationship. For the most part, these incidents of abuse were unrelated to the undesired sex. Women who were referring to past partners were most likely to cite physical and verbal abuse by the partners, but these kinds of abuse were also fairly common among presently intact couples. Table 1 displays the numbers of women citing physical and verbal assaults, by the type of coercion they experienced and the present or past status of their relationships.

As the table shows, most of the women who experienced severe coercion in a past relationship also experienced either verbal or physical abuse. Verbal abuse was reported more often than physical abuse, as it was cited by 76% of the sample and physical abuse was reported by about half of the sample (51%). Verbal abuse took the form of such things as belittling, demeaning, or emotionally manipulating on the part of the husband. For example, a 36-year-old participant described it this way: “He at times gets really arrogant and patronizing and talks to me like I’m a piece of dog shit, basically.” A 40-year-old participant described how her ex-husband would verbally abuse her by saying the following: “You don’t dress right, you don’t talk right, you don’t cook something right.”

Physical abuse usually occurred in relationships that were severely coercive and included verbal and physical abuse that were both related to and unrelated to the unwanted sex. Most of the partners described here were extremely forceful, and violence was used as the ultimate tool. A 57-year-old woman described one of many of her alcoholic ex-husband’s physical assaults:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Abuse</th>
<th>Less Severe (n = 19)</th>
<th>Severe (n = 22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present (n = 12)</td>
<td>Past (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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a. One of these women experienced verbal abuse in both her present and in past relationships.
I left him a few times. . . . When he was gone, I’d get up and leave. Like that one time on a Friday, I left, because he had choked me until I couldn’t breathe, tore my clothes off of me in front of my children. Every uniform I had, he ripped it off of me. . . . He thought he was going to have to take me to the hospital because he thought he had crushed my larynx.

Another participant, age 28, described a history of what she called “domestic violence” unrelated to unwanted sex, with her current husband:

He was upset because I was on the phone too long with a girlfriend of mine, and uh, he had a bad day at work I think. . . . He just wasn’t in a good mood. . . . I just stayed on the phone and then when I got off the phone he started verbally abusing me and then everything escalated and . . . he sprayed mace in my face and then he chased me around the house and he threw things at me, then he finally got me on the ground and he was choking me.

This quote shows both verbal and physical abuse from her husband, and some rationalizing of the violence by the woman. By mentioning his “bad day at work,” she uses a source external to their relationship to explain his violence.

Children witnessing physical and verbal abuse. Almost half of the sample (19 women or 46%) said that their children had witnessed their verbal and/or physical abuse at least once, if not more often. Most often, these women were describing past relationships (13 cases), and the majority of these prior relationships (12 cases) were severely coercive in nature. One participant, 57 years old, described the negative impact she thinks the verbal abuse and physical beatings at the hands of her ex-husband had on her children:

My kids were always with me. . . . [They saw] the yelling and the cussing and the screaming. As a matter of fact, I’ve got one who had to have ulcer surgery when he was 22 years old. He’s had ulcers since he was 15. . . . I’ve got a son and daughter both who chewed their nails down into the quick.

A 47-year-old woman who described a physically abusive and alcoholic ex-husband against whom she often fought back, said this about her children:

Well, usually the kids would be in their room, and sometimes they would come out to make sure he wasn’t hurting me, which was rare, and sometimes they’d make me stop beating his behind.

Sexually Coercive Partners Controlling in Other Ways

Participants were also asked if their partners controlled them in other ways. Specifically, women were asked (a) whether they were isolated from their friends by
their partner, (b) whether he controlled the money in the household, and (c) whether he controlled her appearance by telling her what to wear and what not to wear. Isolation from friends by current or former partners was the most common form of control for the sample as a whole (56%), followed by control of money (41%) and control of appearance (34%). The forms of control ranged from minor suggestions to outright demands from the partner. The percentages for each type and the breakdowns by type of coercion and the past or present status of the relationship are found in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, all three types of controlling behaviors were almost exclusively found in past relationships of a severely coercive nature.

Table 2
Numbers of Women Experiencing Different Types of Control by Partners by Type of Coercive Sexual Relationship

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Control</th>
<th>Less Severe (n = 19)</th>
<th>Severe (n = 22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present (n = 12)</td>
<td>Past (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolating her from friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling the money</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling her appearance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Isolation from friends. Isolation from friends could arise when a partner continually mentioned to the woman that he didn’t like a certain friend, to a point at which she would stop seeing the friend in an effort to please him. This type of isolation usually occurred in relationships that were not physically severe, but more emotionally manipulative in nature. This kind of behavior on the part of the partner often manifested itself in a subtle way. For example, a 31-year-old woman described her ex-boyfriend in this way:

I would have friends call me who were in relationships and they would want to get together and do something . . . and he would basically just say no. . . . Sometimes he would say that he was too busy, other times he would say that [friend] was weird so he didn’t want to go out.

Some partners were not at all subtle in their approach, as this quote from a 46-year-old participant about her previous partner illustrates: “He would say, ‘You know, I really don’t like that woman, that friend of yours from work. I really wish you wouldn’t run too much with her. I think she is a slut.’”
In other cases, isolation from friends took place in physically severe relationships where battering was often involved. In many cases, their partners did not give the women a choice whether or not to have friends. The women were often isolated from all their friends, and many of them were also isolated from family members. These women’s lives consisted of no outside contact, which served to totally alienate them from anyone who could help them get out of the abusive relationship. In the following quote a 31-year-old woman described total isolation by her ex-husband:

I didn’t have any friends in that relationship. . . . I didn’t go outside of the house very much. The only time I left was to go to the store . . . to get something he needed or to get something for the home. He didn’t let me. . . . [It was] more like prison.

**Control of money.** Partners who controlled money usually managed the household checkbook, and the women often had to justify every penny that was spent. Some women complained that their partners demanded their entire paycheck as soon as it was received, leaving no money for personal use and adding to the women’s total dependence on the husband. Some women were totally isolated from money because they did not work for pay, so they did not have any earnings. A 61-year-old woman described her severely coercive ex-husband’s control of money: “I had no money. . . . He controlled whatever. . . . I didn’t work at the time and then, whatever money [he had] went into the pot to support the family, of course.”

**Control of appearance.** This type of control ranged from a partner saying he did not like a certain outfit, to demanding that she take off makeup before she goes to work while accusing her of having an affair. Dressing up, for some women, became something only to be done in the privacy of the home and for the benefit of the abusive partner. For some participants, any time they seemed to be dressing up to go out, they were accused of having affairs and trying to impress someone else. A 46-year-old woman explained how her verbally abusive, and in a few cases, physically abusive ex-boyfriend reacted to certain clothes she wore: “He didn’t like me wearing certain clothes. . . . One time he took a pair of scissors to a blouse, cut it up and said, ‘You are not wearing this anymore.’ I liked that blouse.” A 63-year-old woman described a situation common among severely coercive partners: “He didn’t want me wearing anything that made me look nice. He didn’t want me fixing my hair. He thought I should wear no makeup, and just be a drab little mamma.”

Sometimes control of appearance occurred more indirectly, through comments directed at the women’s weight. One participant, age 41, gave an example of this kind of behavior from her less severely coercive ex-boyfriend. He would say, “You’re getting a little chunky here, don’t you think?” Perhaps even more damaging were comments regarding the women’s weight such as this one, from a 46-year-old participant’s former husband: “He would say, ‘If you were skinny like [her friend] . . . if you looked like her, boy, we’d be doing this, things would be different.’” Some partners
would periodically ask the women to change their appearance before coming to bed, such as the experience of a 33-year-old woman, who spoke about a severely coercive ex-husband who completely controlled her:

I could wear makeup when he said I could wear makeup, and usually that was only for him, not leaving the house. If I had clothes he did not want me to wear he would get rid of them . . . throw them away, cut them up . . . . When he wanted sex, in between the beatings [laugh], when it was . . . I hate to say good because it wasn’t . . . but when we were cohabitating . . . then he would say, “Why don’t you go put some makeup on?”

**Contexts for Adult Sexual Coercion**

*Contexts* is used broadly here to refer to different settings in which the sexual coercion took place. This includes the timing of the coerced sex, such as coerced sex during or after a pregnancy, a cheating partner as a context or circumstance of the coerced sex, and the ways in which the women changed or “reconstructed” their home life and behaviors to try to avoid the context of coercion. All of these settings for sexual coercion and abuse help to “fill in the picture” of the experiences of the women.

**Unwanted anal sex and sexual coercion after hospitalization or during or after pregnancy.** A total of three women (7%) reported unwanted anal sex. All three women were describing severely coercive past relationships. In addition, there were three women (7%) who described unwanted sex with a previous partner after the women had been hospitalized or when they were pregnant. A 45-year-old woman, describing unwanted sex with her ex-husband, exemplifies this type of experience:

I came out of the hospital from having surgery and I had to figure out a way of rolling myself on my bad knee to go ahead and have sex with him. [He] didn’t care what situation I was in, I had to do what he wanted.

One participant, age 47, described physical abuse by her ex-husband which started in the first 6 months of their marriage, during her pregnancy. She said that it sometimes led to forced sex and that it sometimes did not: “In [the fifth month of their marriage], that’s when the hitting and kicking started. And I was pregnant. I got pregnant the day after we got married.” All three of these women were describing severely coercive prior partners.

**Cheating by a partner.** Cheating was most common among partners who were severely coercive, and it was often among former partners. There were 13 women (32%) in all who said their partners had cheated one or more times during their relationship. Of the 13 women, 10 were referring to partners who were severely coercive, and 8 of the 10 women were describing former relationships. A 74-year-old
woman, referring to a severely coercive ex-husband, described his infidelity and the consequences of it:

His secretary and he became sexually involved and she became pregnant and had a child by him and then she became pregnant again and he asked me for a divorce and promised faithfully that he would support my children... and I never received any support financially from him at all.

There seemed to be an association between cheating and alcoholism, as many unfaithful husbands were also alcoholics. A 31-year-old participant described her current alcoholic partner’s cheating:

Right now we are not living together because he has been running around in the last month and it caused a lot of problems, and I feel like maybe that’s what we needed because it’s a lot better now, but I know it’s gonna always go back to the same. It always has and I believe it will.

Another participant, a 63-year-old woman, describing the final straw that led to her leaving her alcoholic ex-husband, said this:

When you come home and find your husband in bed with another woman... in my house in the bed [I] sleep in with him, going at it, it’s time to give up. It’s time to quit fooling yourself that it’s [ever] going to get any better.

She went on to explain how, after she threw the “other woman” out, her ex-husband wanted to have sex with her.

Changing routines to avoid unwanted sex. Only women who were currently involved with their coercive partners mentioned that they change their behavior to avoid unwanted sex. The most common tactic used by these women to avoid coerced sex was going to bed early or late in an effort to avoid an encounter with their partners that might lead to unwanted sex. This behavior was mentioned by 20% of the sample, including 5 women who were currently in less coercive relationships and 3 women who were currently involved with severely coercive partners. For example, a 32-year-old woman currently involved in a less severely coercive marriage, had this to say:

I try to be asleep before he comes to bed. I do go to bed early anyway, he’s a night owl, but if he said that he was going to bed at 9:00 I would certainly try to get up there by 8:30.

Diane, 42, currently involved in a severely coercive marriage, had a novel approach to try to avoid unwanted sex with her husband and, incidentally, was taken aback by the question, suggesting that even she thought her idea was original:
I can’t believe you’re asking that question. I started . . . walking with him early in the morning trying to make like a void, that way. Trying to please in other ways instead of that way.

“That way” refers to the unwanted sex, and she hoped that walking with him would serve as a substitute for it.

Immediate Effects of the Unwanted Sex

Participants were asked to describe the emotions they experienced when the unwanted sex took place. Responses were diverse, but there were a few prevalent themes. The most frequently reported emotion was anger at the coercive partner, mentioned by a total of 18 women (44%), 14 of whom were referring to severely coercive past partners. Another common emotion, reported by 11 women (27%), was feeling used or cheap. Again, most of the women (6) who reported this were referring to past relationships of a severely coercive nature. A total of 10 women (24%) reported being angry at themselves or blaming themselves for the coercion. This emotion was split between less severe and severe experiences, but was most likely to be reported about past partners (5 severely coercive past partners, 4 less severely coercive past partners).

Table 3 lists the 12 most prevalent feelings experienced by the women during the unwanted sex, by whether the unwanted sex was less severe or severe, and whether it was in a present or past relationship.

Self-esteem and identity issues. Many of the women in this sample made reference to a decline or increase in their self-esteem. Often, this was tied to a discussion of the effects of a previous coercive relationship. Although some women described their self-esteem decreasing as a result of continued abuse and forced sex from a partner, a few women recognized improvements in their self-esteem when they left a coercive partner. For the most part, issues of self-esteem and loss of identity were discussed by women who referred to previous, severely coercive relationships. Women describing these types of relationships ended up losing part of their identities as they reacted to the abuse, and blaming themselves for the predicament in which they found themselves, which served to perpetuate the abuse. A total of 10 women (24% of the sample) specifically mentioned a decrease in self-esteem (or self-confidence). Of these 10 women, 8 of them were referring to past relationships (6 severe and 2 less severe). The other two women were currently involved with severely coercive partners, bringing to a total of 8 of these 10 women who were relating issues of self-esteem to experiences of severe coercion. A loss of identity was described by 12% of the sample (5 women), and all of these women described past relationships. Identity issues were divided between severely coercive (2 cases) and less severely coercive relationships (3 cases).
Help-seeking behaviors and getting out of the relationship. Pursuing outside help to deal with the experiences of unwanted sex was not very prevalent among this sample, but some of the women did take advantage of outside help either during or after the relationships about which they spoke. The kind of help sought by the women ranged from informally talking to a friend to more formal assistance, such as therapy or counseling. Results show that talking to friends was the source of outside help used most frequently, as it was mentioned by 39% of the sample (16 women). Talking to a friend was about as common among women in severe relationships (7 women) as it was for women in less coercive relationships (9 women). A total of 9 women, 6 of whom were describing severely coercive former relationships, said they sought individual therapy to deal with the experiences. Couples counseling was also sought by 7 of the women and their partners, 4 of whom were describing severely coercive relationships (and one of the four relationships was current). Finally, 3 of the women who spoke of severely coercive past relationships said that they attended Alanon meetings to cope with their partners’ alcoholism.

A total of nine women (or 22% of the sample) confided that they wished they had gotten out of their coercive relationships sooner. All of these nine women were referring to severely coercive past relationships.

Table 3
Numbers of Women Experiencing Different Emotions and Feelings During Unwanted Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Emotions</th>
<th>Less Severe (n = 19)</th>
<th>Severe (n = 22)</th>
<th>Total (n = 41)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present (n = 12)</td>
<td>Past (n = 7)</td>
<td>Present (n = 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry at him</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used or cheap</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry at herself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad, wanting to cry</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-esteem, worthless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak, defeated, helpless, hopeless</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violated, degraded</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disgusted</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashamed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Help-seeking behaviors and getting out of the relationship. Pursuing outside help to deal with the experiences of unwanted sex was not very prevalent among this sample, but some of the women did take advantage of outside help either during or after the relationships about which they spoke. The kind of help sought by the women ranged from informally talking to a friend to more formal assistance, such as therapy or counseling. Results show that talking to friends was the source of outside help used most frequently, as it was mentioned by 39% of the sample (16 women). Talking to a friend was about as common among women in severe relationships (7 women) as it was for women in less coercive relationships (9 women). A total of 9 women, 6 of whom were describing severely coercive former relationships, said they sought individual therapy to deal with the experiences. Couples counseling was also sought by 7 of the women and their partners, 4 of whom were describing severely coercive relationships (and one of the four relationships was current). Finally, 3 of the women who spoke of severely coercive past relationships said that they attended Alanon meetings to cope with their partners’ alcoholism.

A total of nine women (or 22% of the sample) confided that they wished they had gotten out of their coercive relationships sooner. All of these nine women were referring to severely coercive past relationships.
Long-Term Effects of the Coercive Experiences

For the most part, participants were willing to talk about the ways in which unwanted sex had affected or changed them only if the relationships in question were in their past. Generally, the women who spoke of present partners did not see their experiences as making much of a difference in their lives. Some of the most common effects of the unwanted sexual experiences were both positive and negative. The most often cited manner in which the unwanted sex had changed the women in a positive way was that it has made them stronger (13 participants, or 32%). Of these 13 women, 6 were describing severe past experiences, and 6 spoke of less severe past relationships. There was only one woman who described a present relationship in which she feels stronger, and this woman was speaking of a less severely coercive partner. A total of three women who spoke of past relationships (one that was severe, two that were less severe) said the unwanted sex had changed them in that they now know that they would not put up with it again. In addition, two women who were involved in severe past relationships said they now understood why women do not leave abusive and unhealthy relationships. These responses suggest that these women believe that they have learned from their experiences. Women also mentioned other more negative feelings as a result of the unwanted sex. There were eight women (20%) who said they were no longer trusting, which led some of them to be hesitant to start another relationship. Of these eight women, seven were referring to severely coercive former partners, whereas the remaining woman described a less coercive former partner. Of the eight women who spoke of severe relationships in the past, two felt they were more angry and bitter as a result of the unwanted sex.

Discussion and Implications for Prevention

This article provides histories of victimization of 41 women who completed follow-up interviews after reporting coerced sex by a current or previous husband or partner. Findings reveal that women who have experienced severe types of coerced sex in their intimate relationships also experienced other traumatic sexual, physical, or psychological abuse in their lives. These women also reported low self-esteem more frequently than the other women in the sample. Most of the women who were victims of severe coercion were describing their previous partners (e.g., ex-husband). It is likely that these women, who experienced severe coercion at different points in their past, were only able to share their experiences because they happened in the past. This is consistent with the perspective that forced and coerced sex in ongoing marriages and intimate relationships is widely underreported, and that women who do disclose their experiences do not do so until several years after the abuse occurred (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Russell, 1990). As others have suggested (e.g., Bachar & Koss, 2001), researchers who seek to count rape and other kinds of sexual violence are reminded
by this study that estimates of this crime are likely to be huge underestimates of the problem because of the fact that most victims do not disclose immediately, and many victims never disclose their sexual victimization. Qualitative interviewing is one way to improve disclosure, because it allows the researcher and research participant to develop rapport. But no method seems to solve the problem of underreporting.

A major theme throughout the findings is the way in which the contexts of the women’s experiences determined not only their reactions to their experiences, but also their attitudes about them. One way to contextualize the women’s experiences with coercive partners is to relate them to the women’s childhood experiences. Many of the women in this sample had childhood experiences with verbal and/or physical abuse, parental violence, and parental alcoholism. A few of the women survived sexual abuse as a child. It is not surprising (and it is supported by previous research) that the majority of women who described physically abusive and severely sexually coercive adult relationships also reported childhood maltreatment. As some of the women alluded, early life exposure to abuse and alcoholism sets the stage for adult relationships with similar characteristics. This could be due, in part, to lower levels of self-esteem as a result of these childhood experiences, and/or subconscious feelings of comfort in adult relationships that are similar to what the women had grown used to from their childhood. Intermediating experiences with date or acquaintance rape would only serve to exacerbate the damage done in the women’s childhoods. This compounding of risk associated with subsequent victimization has been confirmed prospectively in a recent study (Siegal & Williams, 2003). These findings, which suggest a pattern of repeated sexual and other victimization over the lifespan, support previous quantitative research (Maker, Kemmelmeier, & Peterson, 2001; Merrill et al., 1999) and support the need for primary prevention of sexual violence for both adolescent girls and boys (before they become potential perpetrators). Prevention and education should also be focused on parents who, for many women in this sample, were their first perpetrators of abuse. Primary prevention efforts with youth should be coupled with efforts to identify and assist young victims of abuse in an attempt to end the cycle of revictimization.

Another important finding is that most women in this sample did not seek help from traditional services, such as rape crisis centers or domestic violence shelters. Consistent with findings from quantitative research with larger and more generalizable samples (Kilpatrick et al., 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b), most women in this sample did not seek professional help from a formal system. This finding speaks to the sexual and domestic violence fields’ need to provide education to both men and women about this problem, and outreach to women in intimate relationships, in particular, about available services, so that they are aware of sources of help if and when they choose to seek it. It is also important that educators and service providers for women in sexually coercive intimate relationships recognize and validate that coerced sex in marriages and intimate relationships does not always come in forms that fit the legal or social definition of rape. Furthermore, shelters for battered women should educate
counselors and other workers about the connection between battering and wife rape. As the present study and other research (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985) has shown, battering and wife rape often co-occur. This study also documents other severely coercive experiences in the context of a battering relationship, such as unwanted anal sex and unwanted sex during pregnancy or after hospitalization, which were also found by Bergen (1996) and Finkelhor and Yllo (1985).

Limitations of this study should be noted. One limitation is that the range of ages of the women and the length of their relationships were quite variable. This could have had an effect on some of the women’s ability to remember past experiences with abuse, particularly childhood experiences or coercive experiences by an ex-partner that happened several years before the interview. This could have led to some recall bias, which is a limitation with all retrospective studies. Also, the women in this sample do not represent all women who have been sexually coerced by a partner. Although these findings are not generalizable, they support previous work and provide a more in-depth examination of this topic than is possible with survey research. Findings from this study provide testable hypotheses for future quantitative research. This analysis provides rich, detailed data on the experience, context, and consequences of sexual coercion by husbands and partners, filling in the past histories of victimization that may have foreshadowed the sexually coercive experiences in this very intimate of contexts. This study suggests that sexual violence prevention programs should start as early as possible in the life cycle and take into account the potential for a cumulative effect of repeat sexual victimization and other related violent trauma across the life course. Continued quantitative research on the temporal relationships between intimate sexual coercion and other traumatic victimization, such as the recent work of Siegal and Williams (2003), is necessary to further delineate the sequencing of violence suggested in the present study among representative samples in an effort to better target prevention efforts.

Notes

1. *Coerced sex, unwanted sex, and sexual coercion* are used interchangeably in this article from this point forward.

2. There were only 12% of African American women (or 24 women) among those who reported ever having unwanted sex. Of that number, there were only 9 women who agreed to be called back for an interview. Every effort was made to contact those 9 women, but only 1 was reached and interviewed. The fact that 20% of the sample self-identified as “multiracial” could mean that there are actually more women in the sample of African American origin, although this cannot be determined.

References


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