

## **Consent and coercion: Examining unwanted sex within marriage**

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Extended Abstract

### **Background**

Domestic violence generally, and sexual coercion in particular, in addition to being egregious violations of women's rights, are increasingly understood to be antecedents to poor reproductive health outcomes. Forced sex has been associated with decreased condom use, increased reporting of STI symptoms, and unintended pregnancy (Koenig et al, 2005; Parish et al, 2004; Martin et al 1999; Caceres et al, 1997). A study in South Africa found intimate partner violence and high levels of male control in a relationship to be independently associated with HIV seropositivity (Dunkle et al, 2004).

Despite increased recognition of the pervasiveness of domestic violence and its association with sexual and reproductive health outcomes, many aspects remain poorly understood. One such gap is understanding and measuring sexual coercion. Sexual coercion exists along a continuum of behaviours, from unwanted touch, to sex that may not be perceived as forced but is nonetheless unwanted, to threats and intimidation, to rape (Jejeebhoy and Bott, 2003, Heise et al 1999, Kelly 1988). Yet most studies have looked primarily at 'forced sex'. The few studies examining more subtle forms of coercion have shown that respondents, given the opportunity, specify experiences of sex that are not forced per se, but are unwanted (Laumann 1996; Abma, Driscoll and Moore 1998). Such studies have indicated a considerably higher proportion of non-consensual sexual experiences than questions of 'forced' sex alone elicit. Moreover, while exchanges of sex for gifts or money have gained increasing research and policy attention, fewer have looked at coerced sex within marriage. The interplay between power, habitual acquiescence, caring, and fear, and measurement of associated antecedents and outcomes, are further gaps in understanding sexual coercion in marriage.

In this paper, we examine the extent of unwanted sexual experiences among married adolescent girls/ young women in rural settings in two states in India – Gujarat and West Bengal. We explore the nature and context of coerced sex within marriage, and the various factors that are associated with such experiences.

### **Data and Methods**

The findings presented in this paper draw from a study comprised of both survey and indepth interviews conducted during August 2002 - October 2003 in two rural settings in India – Vadodara Block in the state of Gujarat, and Diamond Harbour Block in the state of West Bengal. The respondents were young women who were married two years prior to the survey, young women who were pregnant for the first time, or first-time mothers up to 18 months postpartum. The study area included 24 villages in Gujarat (with a

population of about 46,000) and 25 villages in West Bengal (with a population of 42,000). The respondents were identified through a rapid household listing in the study area and all eligible women identified at the time of the household listing were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 1079 women in Gujarat and 1036 women in West Bengal were interviewed. The refusal rate was marginal in both the sites. A structured questionnaire was used to explore a wide range of issues including young women's transition to marriage, livelihood experience, access to and control over resources, mobility, social connections, spousal communication and support, and reproductive health knowledge and practice. In order to gather additional insights about young women's transition to marriage, partner relationships, exercise of sexual rights and level of agency/ autonomy in reproductive health matters, in-depth interviews were also carried out among 69 women (30 in Gujarat and 39 in West Bengal) who had participated in the survey.

To understand the nature of young brides' relationships and the control they have over their bodies and sexual lives, questions were asked about a range of topics, including the experience of first intercourse, physical abuse, decision making, and the degree to which married girls can express – and achieve – their will. In order to explore experiences of unwanted sex, respondents were asked whether they tell their husbands when sex is not wanted and whether their husbands 'always', 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never' do what the girls/women wish. In this paper, we examine the prevalence, experience and correlates of unwanted sex. This is sex that the respondent did not necessarily perceive as forced, but did categorize as against her will. A variable with three categories reflecting different degrees of unwanted sexual experience is constructed and considered: "routine unwanted sex," i.e., women who report that their husbands rarely or never respect their wish whenever they say 'no' to sex with their husbands; "occasional unwanted sex," i.e., women who report that their husbands sometimes respect their wish; and "no unwanted sex," i.e., women who report that their husbands always respect their wish. In this paper, we explore the issue of unwanted sexual experiences only among the subsample of respondents who articulated their preference about when sex is not wanted to their husbands. These girls constitute 70% of the total sample in Gujarat and 89% in West Bengal. We acknowledge that many women who never expressed their sexual preference may also have experienced unwanted sexual experiences.

Multinomial logistic regression is used to identify variables independently associated with unwanted sex – i.e., how women who experience occasional or routine unwanted sex differ from those who do not experience unwanted sex. We examine if unwanted sex correlates with women's individual background variables (such as school attainment, work status), variables indicative of her autonomy or agency (such as mobility, whether she expresses disagreement with her husband), factors related to the context of marriage and experience of sexual initiation (such as familiarity with her husband before marriage, feelings after first sex), variables indicative of intimacy with her husband (such as time spent together alone, husband's support of her in the face of conflict), husband's background variables (such as schooling, spousal age difference), and household characteristics (e.g. type of household, religion).

## Findings

### *Experience of unwanted sex within marriage*

Different patterns are observed in the two sites regarding young women's ability to say "no" to sex, acceptable reasons for declining sex, and how such assertiveness plays out. Qualitative data provides important insights into interpreting data and highlights methodological considerations.

Of the total sample, more than two in three girls/young women (69.7%) in Gujarat and more than four in five (88.6%) in West Bengal report saying 'no' to their husbands' sexual demands when they do not want to have sex. Insights from the in-depth interviews indicate significant difference between the two sites in the circumstances in which women typically express their desire not to have sex. In Gujarat, the instances in which women typically express their desire not to have sex are those that are culturally condoned, for example, during their menstrual period, or that are normally accepted, for example, when they are tired or feeling sick. "I say no for 5-6-7 days after my period starts. At that time only" [Recently married woman]. In comparison, in West Bengal, most of the girls/young women typically say 'no' not only during culturally or normally accepted circumstances such as when they are feeling sick or having their menstrual period, but also whenever they do not feel like having sex. "Whenever I don't feel like having sex, I say 'no' to my husband" [First time pregnant woman].

Among the girls/young women who articulate their preference when they do not want to have sex, findings indicate that their husband always accepted their refusal to have sex in the case of a larger proportion of young women in Gujarat than in West Bengal – 73% vs. 42% (see Table 1). There are several possible explanations for this. The differences between the two sites may be due to the differences in the circumstances in which women typically deny sexual demands of their husbands. Another possible explanation may lie in context specific manifestations of gender bias. Despite married girls' greater ability to speak up and say what they desire in West Bengal, the greater acceptance of wife beating (87% in Diamond Harbour vs. 69% in Vadodara), and girls' descriptions of men's reactions to their saying no, as revealed in the qualitative data, indicate that young men in West Bengal may be more likely to believe that they are entitled to have sexual access to their wives whenever they wish.

**Table 1: Percentage of young married women reporting unwanted sexual experience within marriage by frequency of such experience**

	Gujarat (N=747*)	West Bengal (N=917)
Routine	8.7	14.0
Sometimes	18.3	43.8
Never	73.0	42.2

Note: \* Information is missing in the case of 2 respondents

Among the girls/young women who articulated their preference when they did not want to have sex, findings indicate that a substantial proportion of young women in both sites

experienced sex that was unwanted and against their will. Such unwanted sex may occur more or less frequently, and vary in its qualitative nature on a continuum of coercion. Nine percent of women in Gujarat and 14 percent in West Bengal had experienced unwanted sex 'routinely'. Another 18 percent of women in Gujarat and 44 percent in West Bengal had experienced unwanted sex 'occasionally'. In short, as many as 27 percent in Gujarat and 58 percent in West Bengal had experienced sex against their will routinely or occasionally.

Findings from the in-depth interviews also allude to the circumstances in which women have sex even when they do not wish to, but did not articulate their wish to their husbands for fear of abandonment or quarrel and in some cases, because of affection for their husbands.

*I don't like it ...If I tell, then he won't listen. My bhabhi [sister-in-law] didn't allow her husband to touch her. He divorced her. I feel that if I don't allow my husband to touch me, he may divorce me. That's why I allow him. [First time pregnant woman, Gujarat]*

*[I do not say 'no' to my husband's sexual demands]. What will I get after giving pain to his heart? If he likes it, then let him be happy and it does not matter even if I am not willing for it -- if he is happy, then I am also happy. [First time mother, Gujarat]*

In addition to these fears and sentiments, there is also an element of passive or resigned acceptance of unwanted sex in both sites.

*But he does not want to listen to me. He threatens me that he would not come to me anymore. Truly speaking, I love him very much and I feel very bad whenever he is not here. So, when he threatens me, I allow him to have sex, as I am scared that he will not come to me anymore. [Recently married woman, West Bengal]*

### ***Correlates of unwanted sex***

Multinomial logistic regression, using women who did not experience any unwanted sex as the base category, was carried out to identify factors that may be associated with occasional or routine unwanted sex. In Gujarat, the relative risk of experiencing *occasional* unwanted sex was higher for women who were currently working (rrr=2.231) and women who reported negative feelings prior to their first sexual experience (rrr=1.949). The relative risk was lower for women who paid dowry compared to those who did not pay any dowry (rrr=.492). The relative risk of experiencing *routine* unwanted sex was higher for women who justified wife-beating (rrr=2.093), women who reported negative feelings after their first sexual experience (rrr=2.520) and women who reported that their husbands sometimes supported them in the event of conflict with a family member compared to those whose husbands always supported them (rrr=3.352). The relative risk was lower for first-time mothers compared to newly-married women (rrr=.274).

In West Bengal, a different set of factors were found to be associated with *occasional* or *routine* experience of unwanted sex. Women who reported negative feelings after their first sexual experience (rrr=1.867) and women who reported that their husbands never/sometimes supported them in the event of conflict with a family member compared to those whose husbands always supported them (rrr=3.367 in the case of supported sometimes; 1.635 in the case of never/rarely supported) were found to have a higher relative risk of experiencing *occasional* unwanted sex. Women who were fairly/ very well familiar with their husbands at the time of marriage (rrr=.388) and women who belong to households with medium standard of living compared to those from household with low standard of living (rrr=.585) were found to have a lower relative risk. The relative risk of experiencing *routine* unwanted sex was higher for women who reported negative feelings after their first sexual experience (rrr=2.208), women who reported that their husbands never/ sometimes supported them in the event of conflict with a family member compared to those whose husbands always supported them (rrr=3.294 in the case of supported sometimes; 2.313 in the case of never/rarely supported) and Muslim women compared to Hindu women (rrr=2.308). The relative risk was lower for women who were better educated (rrr=.866) and women who were able to express their own opinion with their husband when they disagreed with husbands (rrr=.510).

## **Summary**

The paper explores patterns and variations across sites, drawing from the quantitative and qualitative data. Findings presented in this paper clearly indicate that girls/ young women do express their preference when sex is not wanted and that sexual experience within marriage among young married women is not always consensual or wanted. Married girls'/ young women's desire not to have sex is not often heeded by their husbands. The correlates of unwanted sexual experience vary by site as well as the degrees of unwanted sexual experiences. Methodological implications are examined, and areas for further research are suggested.