

## Sexual abuse and accepting attitudes towards intimate partner rape in Uganda

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The aim was to study sexual abuse, accepting attitudes towards intimate partner rape and psychological concomitants in intimate partner relationships in Uganda.

**Method:** A questionnaire was completed by 315 respondents (174 females and 141 males). The mean age for females was 31.7 years (SD = 10.3) and 33.6 (SD = 12.4) for males.

**Results:** Females scored significantly higher than males on victimization from aggression due to denial of sex, victimization from sexual abuse, and psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape. The acceptance rate for rape in intimate relationships was high, only one percent among females and two percent among males reported zero tolerance. Victimization from sexual abuse as well as psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape were significantly higher among respondents who had completed only primary school compared to those with a higher education. Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships were positively correlated with age, no sex differences were found. Respondents with higher educational levels reported significantly lower levels of acceptance of intimate partner rape. For females, but not for males, accepting attitudes correlated positively with both victimization and psychological concomitants.

**Conclusions:** Victimization from sexual abuse, psychological concomitants and accepting attitudes towards intimate partner rape were all related to low educational level. Reasons for the high levels of accepting attitudes towards intimate partner rape especially among female victims are discussed.

**Keywords:** Sexual abuse, Intimate partner rape, Psychological concomitants, Uganda

### Introduction

Intimate partner sexual abuse is still not recognised as such in many societies, because of the attitudes, values, and beliefs shaped by deep-rooted traditional norms. In Uganda, women are till commonly viewed as commodities belonging to their partners, and intimate partner sexual abuse is perceived as a bedroom matter that should be kept private. This often breeds among men a sense of entitlement to sexual favours without consent, and sex is viewed as an obligation (1).

#### Definitions of sexual abuse and rape

Sexual abuse can take on many forms and is defined as any attempted or actual sexual act or unwanted sexual advances or comments directed towards a person's sexuality by means of coercion, threats, blackmail, or psychological intimidation (2). Sexual abuse also involves acts that sexually degrade a person, e.g. intentional harm to someone during sex, such as the inserting of sharp objects vaginally or anally; proceeding to pursue sex even when the victim is not fully conscious; and coercion of individuals into sex

without any means of protection against sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy (3, 4).

There are three core elements characterising legal definitions of rape: (1) penetration, regardless of how slight it was and regardless of whether there was ejaculation or not; (2) lack of consent, or if was with a person who was not capable of giving consent due to mental incapacitation or intoxication; and (3) compelling involvement by either threat, force, or actual bodily harm (5, 3). It has been claimed that the most defining characteristic of rape is the lack of consent or choice by one of the parties during sexual intercourse (5, 3). Rozee (1993) prefers to use the word "choice" rather than consent, because it takes into account also unvoiced disapproval to engage in sexual intercourse.

Research has provided evidence that many non-consensual sexual acts take place within consensual unions such as marriage and long term cohabitation (6). Intimate partner rape is one of the most common types of sexual abuse

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within relationships. It is defined by the victim's relationship to the perpetrator and may include date rape, acquaintance rape, and marital rape (7).

Marital rape is in some cultures a new concept. The traditional definition of rape excluded that by intimate partners and it was only considered rape if the offender was unknown to the victim (8). Before the late 1970s, marital rape was not recognised by definitions in the United States which narrowed rape to "unconsented sexual intercourse by a man with a female who is not his wife" (9). For example in India, the penalty for rapists is the death sentence, yet there is no crime committed if a husband rapes his wife (10).

Marital rape includes acts of unwanted or forced sexual contact by a spouse, be it vaginal, anal, or oral; most times, it involves penetration. It can be achieved by means of physical aggression and force, by means of a threat, or when the spouse due to certain circumstances is unable to reject the sexual assault (11).

### **Cultural definition of marital rape**

The biggest obstacle to the criminalisation of marital rape is the clash with cultural norms and values. Defining what "using force" entails in intimate partner relationships, especially in the context of wife rape, has proved challenging. This is because a woman's history of being dominated, intimidated, or battered by her husband may shape her beliefs regarding what and how a normal sexual encounter should be (12). Social coercion is reinforced by societal messages regarding appropriate sex roles for men and women within marriage. For instance, it has been found that many survivors of wife rape believed it was a wife's duty to submit to a sexual act or intercourse, regardless of their own desires (8).

Religion, family, and other cultural norms also play an important role in this context. When women attempt to discuss sexual assaults with friends, family, or service providers, they may be blamed, mocked, or not taken seriously (11). Non-consensual sex in marriage is in many cultures viewed as merely claiming a conjugal right and society considers it normal (3). Some of the arguments put forward over the years for exempting husbands from rape charges include: (a) it is a hard case to prove, (b) the exemption protects husbands from malicious and vindictive wives, (c) a marital relationship should be kept private, and (d) marriage has ups and downs, and a criminal charge like rape discourages reconciliation between spouses (13).

There are myths about masculinity and rape that are risk factors for marital rape, e.g. notions like, "boys will always be boys", and that men are in most cases at the "mercy of their sexual drives" (14). Such myths and beliefs create a conducive environment for rape to take place, and sexual coercion is seen as inevitable, therefore acceptable behaviour. In societies where such beliefs are promoted, there are more cases of marital rape (15). The aftermath of rape is commonly characterised by blame, confusion, and guilt felt by the victims. These feelings are also usually reinforced by the reactions they receive from family and

friends, such as questions about how they were dressed, or whether they were intoxicated. The victims are often blamed even by the people they would normally rely on for support (16).

### **Prevalence of sexual violence and rape**

In a survey carried out in the USA, nearly 61.9% of the adult female participants had been raped by a former or current boyfriend, cohabiting partner, spouse or date (17). In the United Kingdom, national surveys have estimated the prevalence of intimate partner sexual abuse among women to be 14.2% (18). In Uganda, a report by UN Women (2016) (19) estimated the prevalence of physical or sexual violence against women from an intimate partner to be 51%.

Most victims usually experience multiple forms of abuse, with a substantial fraction experiencing both physical and sexual abuse, as evidenced in a study carried out in the USA where an estimated 40–52% of women who experienced intimate partner physical violence also experienced sexual abuse (20). It has been argued that incidents of intimate partner sexual abuse are under-reported, and that the estimates are not even close to the actual prevalence rates (8).

### **Psychological concomitants of sexual abuse and rape**

It is stated in DSM-5 that both experiencing and witnessing a traumatic event trigger feelings of horror, helplessness, and fear as response to actual or perceived threat of death or injury (21). Victims from intimate partner sexual abuse may experience severe and usually long-term psychological consequences due to being violated by someone they love and trust (22). They may experience symptoms such as panic attacks, generalised anxiety disorder, substance abuse, depression, and suicide attempts or actual suicide, all which can also be indications of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (23).

Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) (12) found that marital rape victims had developed similar or even more severe psychiatric disorders than stranger rape victims, a fact that dismisses the myth that marital rape is a less traumatic event. Like other types of rape, marital rape is a personal violation of the victim's body, but specific to marital rape is also a violation of trust at a deeper level. In cases of stranger rape, the perpetrator and the victim do not know each other, but in wife rape cases, the assault becomes personal to the victim (12).

### **Legal prohibition of marital rape in Uganda**

For decades in Uganda, the Marriage and Divorce Bill, which also includes a clause on marital rape, has been awaiting to be approved by the parliament (24). The history of the bill is quite troubled. The first version of it was tabled in the 1970s, and about forty years later it was re-tabled in 2003, as it was again in 2006, 2009, and 2013, consecutively. The bill still remains unpassed. Some provisions in the bill are considered controversial, hence the conflicting interests are witnessed every time it is tabled in parliament. From its first tabling in the 1970s, the bill

was designed to help improve women's rights in marriage (25).

## Material and Method

### Sample

A questionnaire was filled in by 315 Ugandan respondents, 174 females and 141 males. The age range was between 18 and 80 years. The mean age for females was 31.7 years (SD = 10.3) and 33.6 (SD = 12.4) for males, the age difference was not significant. Of the respondents, 71.7% were born in urban areas, and 28.3% in rural areas; 33.3% were married, 24.1% were cohabiting, 18.1% were in a relationship but not married, and 24.4% were single but had previously had a partner.

The respondents with a partner had been cohabiting between one and 61 years (m = 8.9 years, SD = 9.8). Of the respondents, 16.2% had one child, 16.8% had two children, 8.6% had three children, and 6.2% had eight or more children. In the sample, 18 different tribes were represented: Muganda (54.3%), Musoga (11.1%), Munyankole (7.0%), Mugisu (6.0%), Mutooro (4.4%), Itesot (3.5%), Acholi (3.2%), Mukiga (2.2%), Munyoro (1.9%), Langi (1.3%), Alur (1.0%), and less than 1%: Mudaama, Munyole, Kakwa, Lugbala, Mugwere, Mukonjo, and Musamya. Of the respondents, 77.8% were Christians, 19.7% were Moslems, 1.0% adhered to a traditional African religion, and 1.6% were atheists.

The educational level of the respondents was as follows: no education (5.7%), primary school level (14.0%), lower secondary level (14.3%), upper secondary level (18.1%), diploma or vocational training (11.4%), Bachelor's degree (32.4%), and Master's degree or higher (4.1%).

### Instrument

The questionnaire included scales for measuring (a) victimization from aggression due to denial of sex, (b) victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships, (c) psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape, and (d) accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships (Table 1).

The response alternatives were on a five-point grading scale, ranging from never (0) to very often (4) for the scales of (a) victimization from aggression due to denial of sex, (b) victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships, (c) psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape, and strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4) for (d) accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships.

The construction of the scales were inspired by articles by Rondenburg and Fantuzzo (1993) (26), Perilloux, Duntley and Buss (2012) (27), Faravelli, Giugni, Salvatori and Ricca (2004) (28), and Mahoney and Williams (1998) (1), although the scales were not fully based on any of them. Single items and Cronbach's alphas of the scales are presented in Table 1.

### Procedure

An online questionnaire was constructed with Google Drive. Since the topic of the study was intimate partner sexual abuse, participation was not limited to married couples but also unmarried participants were invited. A link to the questionnaire was published electronically; a paper version was also used. The link was active between 13.12.2016 and 8.2 2017 and spread via snowball sampling on WhatsApp and Facebook. Email channels like Google mail and Yahoo were also used. The paper version was made available for distribution on 20.12.2016, and the questionnaires were hand delivered to participants in Uganda. The respondents were mainly found in a medical clinic in Kampala. The electronic version of the questionnaire was filled in by 40 respondents, and 275 respondents completed the paper version.

### Ethical considerations

The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (29) adopted by the World Medical Association, as well as guidelines for the responsible conduct of research of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) (30).

**Table 1:** Single items and Cronbach's Alphas for the scales in the study (N = 315)

Scales
<i>Victimization from Aggression due to Denial of Sex</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .79$ )
a) Have you ever been afraid to say no to sexual engagements with a partner?
b) Have you ever been called a horrible person after denying your partner sexual acts and favours?
c) Have you ever been humiliated in public because of denying sexual favors to a partner?
d) Has a partner ever been aggressive when demanding for sex?
e) Has a partner ever become very upset and hit, slapped or kicked you when you denied him/her sexual favors?
<i>Victimization from Sexual Abuse in Intimate Relationships</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .79$ )
a) Has a partner ever attempted to rape you but for some reason he/she was not successful?
b) Have you ever been forced by any partner into unwanted sexual acts?
c) Has a partner ever put their arms around your neck to choke you in order to forcefully have sex with you?
d) Has a partner ever sexually abused you after giving you alcohol and drugs?
e) Has a partner ever threatened to hurt you with a weapon/object or thrown objects at you in order to have sex with you?

*Psychological Concomitants of Intimate Partner Rape* (10 items,  $\alpha = .96$ )

- a) Have you ever been depressed following forced sexual acts by a spouse?
- b) Have you ever felt hopeless and helpless following forced sexual acts from a partner?
- c) Have you ever felt "dirty" and worthless due to forced sexual acts by a partner?
- d) Have you ever experienced anxiety as a result of forced sexual acts from a partner?
- e) Have you ever experienced a feeling of constantly being on guard, watchful, or easily startled following a rape from a partner?
- f) Have you ever had nightmares following a rape from a partner?
- g) Have you ever experienced sleepless nights or bad sleeping habits following forced sexual acts from a partner?
- h) Have you ever experienced spells of terror and panic due to having experienced forced sex from a partner?
- i) Have you ever experienced a feeling numbness or being detached from others, activities, or surroundings after a rape from a partner?
- j) Have you ever thought about ending your life as result of forced sex from a partner?

*Accepting Attitudes towards Rape in Intimate Relationships* (14 items,  $\alpha = .84$ )

- a) Having sex without consent is sometimes acceptable in a relationship.
- b) Rape by a partner only happens to women, men cannot be raped.
- c) When it comes to sex, women mean "yes" even when they say "no".
- d) There is no such thing as rape when in a relationship, since partners have sexual rights over each other.
- e) Sex without consent can be excused or forgiven if the partner is intoxicated.
- f) Sex without consent is more acceptable in marriage than when partners are not married or do not know each other.
- g) It stops being rape if it is enjoyed by both partners at the end of it all.
- h) Regular sex, even when sometimes against the wish of a partner, is after all healthy for the survival of a relationship.
- i) Some partners call for rape through teasing and dressing provocatively.
- j) It can only be considered a rape by a partner if excessive force and some sort of physical aggression was used.
- k) Using coercion or physical restraint is a legitimate way to acquire sex from a certain type of partners.
- l) Partners who lead others on deserve less sympathy when raped.
- m) Being legally prosecuted as a result of unwanted sexual acts with a long term partner like a wife is ridiculous.
- n) Respectable men and women do not experience intimate partner sexual abuse.

## Results

### Correlations between the scales

For females, all four scales of the study correlated significantly with each other at a  $p < .001$ -level (Table 2). The highest correlational coefficients were found between psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape and victimization from aggression due to denial of sex ( $r = .88$ ), and victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships ( $r = .85$ ). Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships was found to correlate positively with both victimization and psychological concomitants. For males, the scales measuring victimization and concomitants were intercorrelated, but in contrast to the results for females, accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships did not correlate with the other scales (Table 2).

### Correlations with age

Victimization from aggression due to denial of sex, victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships, and psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape did not correlate with age of the respondents, whereas accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships was positively correlated with age ( $r = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Sex differences

It was found that among females, 36.2% were never victimized from aggression due to denial of sex, 47.7 % were never victimized from sexual abuse in intimate relationships, 50.6% did not suffer from any psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape, and 1.1% had zero tolerance for accepting rape in intimate relationships. Among males, 41.1% were never victimized from aggression due to denial of sex, 52.5% were never victimized from sexual abuse in intimate relationships, 75.2% did not suffer from any psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape and, 2.1% had a zero tolerance for accepting rape in intimate relationships.

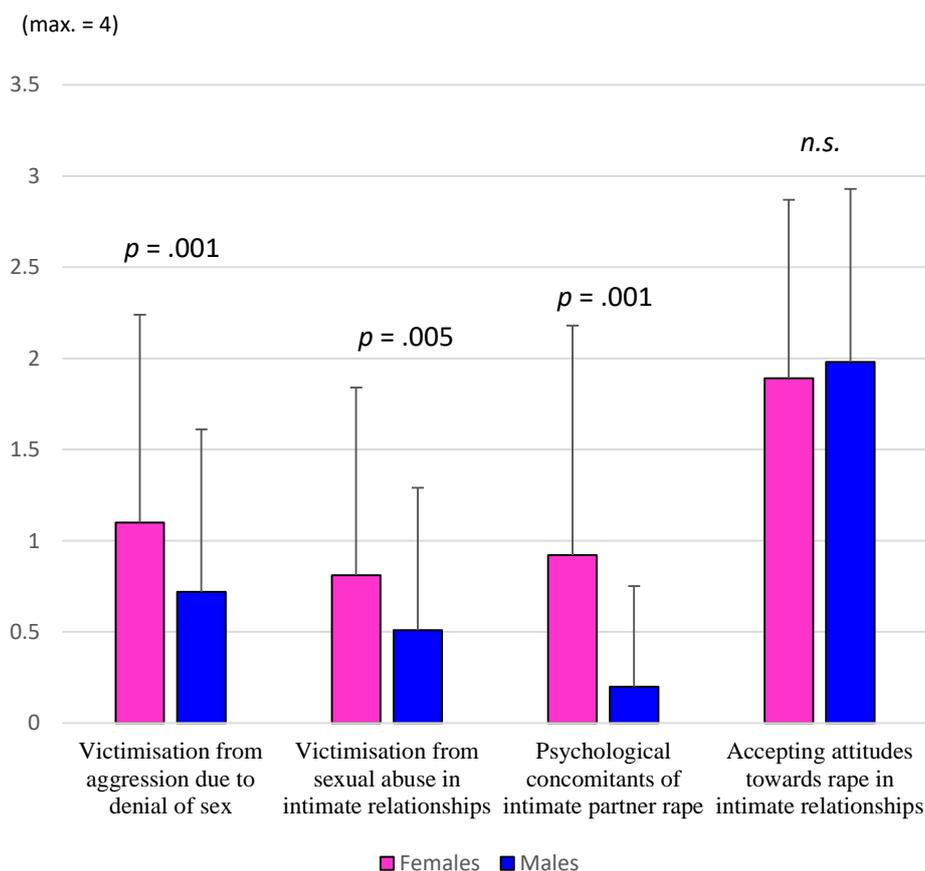
A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with sex as the independent variable and the four scales as dependent variables. The multivariate test was significant. The univariate tests showed that females scored significantly higher on victimization from aggression due to denial of sex, victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships, and psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape. No sex differences were found regarding accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships (Table 3, Fig. 1).

**Table 2:** Correlations between the scales in the study, for females (N = 174) below and for males (N = 141) above the diagonal

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Victimization from aggression due to denial of sex		.77 ***	.58 ***	-.00 ns
2. Victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships	.85 ***		.49 ***	.01 ns
3. Psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape	.88 ****	.84 ***		.05 ns
4. Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships	.41 ***	.32 ***	.45 ***	

**Table 3:** Results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with sex as independent variable and four scales as dependent variables (N = 315). C.f. Fig. 1.

	F	df	p ≤	η <sup>2</sup>	Group with higher mean
Effect of Sex					
Multivariate analysis	14.43	4, 309	.001	.157	
Univariate analyses					
Victimization from aggression due to denial of sex	10.43	1, 312	.001	.032	Females
Victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships	7.97	“	.005	.025	Females
Psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape	39.05	“	.001	.111	Females
Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships	0.54	“	ns	.002	-



**Figure 1:** Mean values on four scales related to rape and sexual abuse in intimate relationships for females and males (N = 315). C.f. Table 3.

**Education**

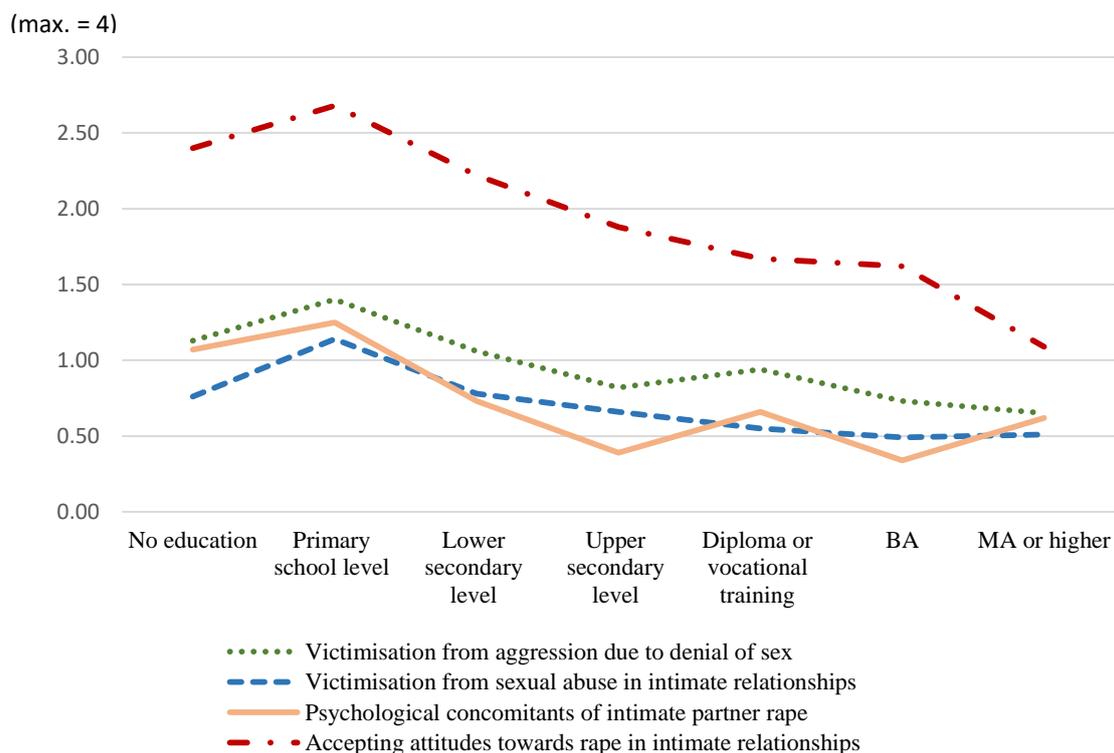
A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with educational level as the independent variable and the four scales as dependent variables. The multivariate test was significant (Table 4, Fig. 2).

Respondents with a Master’s degree or higher reported significantly lower levels of accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships than for respondents with no education, primary school level, or lower secondary level education. Respondents with a primary school education reported significantly higher accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships as than for respondents with upper secondary level or higher education.

The univariate tests were significant for all four scales. Scheffé’s test revealed no significant differences for victimization from aggression due to denial of sex between respondents of different educational levels. Victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships was significantly higher among respondents who had completed only primary school in comparison with those who had a Bachelor’s degree. The level of psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape were significantly higher for those who had only primary school than for those with an upper secondary level, a Bachelor’s, or a Master’s degree or higher.

**Table 4:** Results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with level of education as independent variable and four scales as dependent variables (N = 315). C.f. Fig. 2).

Effect of Education	F	df	p ≤	η <sup>2</sup>
Multivariate analysis	3.65	24, 1228	.001	.067
Univariate analyses				
Victimization from aggression due to denial of sex	2.62	6, 307	.017	.049
Victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships	2.87	“	.010	.053
Psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape	5.81	“	.001	.102
Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships	11.64	“	.001	.185



**Figure 2:** Mean values on four scales related to rape and sexual abuse in intimate relationships for respondents on different educational levels (N = 315). C.f. Table 4.

## Discussion

It was found that females were the main victims from sexual abuse in intimate relationships. Still, it should be noted that also males were frequently victimized. In the sample, more than half of the males (59%) had, to some degree been victimized by their female partner's aggression due to denial of sex, and almost half of them (48%) were also victimized from sexual abuse. Furthermore, one male in four (25%) suffered, to some extent, from psychological concomitants of intimate partner rape.

### Victimization from aggression due to denial of sex

It was found that females scored significantly higher than males on victimization from aggression due to denial of sex. For both females and males, a correlation was found between denying an intimate partner sex and victimization from sexual abuse by the partner. In Uganda, it is common to think that denying a husband sex strips him of his masculinity, since a wife are seen as a mere personal possession. This circumstance may spark feelings of anger and threaten the husband's ego; hence he uses force to acquire sex regardless of whether his wife consents or not. Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) (12), found that denial of sex in intimate relationships was seen by men as emasculating them, and as a lack of appreciation by their spouses, which brought up feelings of anger.

The study, however, found that also females victimized their partner from sexual abuse when denied sex. In the cultural context of Uganda, a man is supposed to satisfy his spouse's sexual needs at all times, and denying a partner sex could be met with aggression. Denying a woman sex could signify that she is no longer physically attractive, sexually pleasing, or that the man is getting sex from elsewhere. In such instances, verbal attacks usually belittle the men, and they may be accused of having low libido, small penises or extra-marital affairs. If accusations are frequent, it may well lead to psychological consequences like stress and depression.

### Education

The findings revealed that the higher the level of education, the less exposure to intimate partner sexual abuse. Victimization from sexual abuse in intimate relationships was significantly higher among respondents who had completed only primary school or had no education at all. Educated women are able to compete in the labor market, hence giving them economic empowerment and the ability to financially support their families. Financially stable women are an asset to their husbands, and they are usually respected and probably therefore less exposed to physical and sexual abuse. Because of the high victimization level among the less educated, psychological consequences of intimate partner abuse were significantly higher for those who had only a primary education than for those with a higher education. However, economic independence and education do not per se guarantee protection from intimate partner sexual abuse.

## Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships

It was found that accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships correlated with all the other scales for females, but not for males. This finding indicates that also victimized women held accepting attitudes towards sexual abuse, yet one would think they would be less tolerant and accepting towards such acts since they have experienced the abuse first hand, and therefore should know the pain and suffering associated to it. Some victims probably choose to cope with sexual abuse from a spouse by rationalizing it. In many cases, victims of sexual assault by an intimate partner are willing to accept the victimization due to the fear of being betrayed if she denies intercourse, especially if the victim relies on the perpetrator for economic and emotional support. They therefore minimise the assault in order to make it bearable. In a stranger rape scenario, the victim is only left with memories of the horrible encounter, while in the case of rape by an intimate partner, the victim has to deal with seeing and living with the perpetrator.

Contrary to expectations, no sex difference was found regarding accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships. The finding that women had equally accepting attitudes might be explained by cultural beliefs. In Uganda, women are often advised by their parents to cater for their husbands' sexual needs at all costs, otherwise the husband will find another spouse. Terms such as "wifely duties" are a clear indication of seeing sexual relations between intimate partners as mere chores and obligations.

Religion also plays central role in this. Some married people believe that marriage vows oblige spouses to give in sexually at all times, therefore a sexual encounter within a marriage, regardless of its nature, can never be considered assault or rape. Furthermore, the concept of sexual abuse in the context of marriage is very unclear to many Ugandans, regardless of level of education or status in society. Many wonder if there is such a thing as marital rape at all, and they have a difficult time comprehending how a wife or a husband can be raped. Russell (1990) (8) received similar findings in his study on wife rape, noting that many victims were hesitant to label sexual coercion by spouses as sexual assault or rape.

Accepting attitudes towards rape in intimate relationships were found to correlate positively with age. The older the respondents were, the more accepting they were towards sexual abuse in a partnership. The failure to recognise it as abuse lies in longstanding cultural beliefs on sexuality and the self-image of men and women in Ugandan society. Women's sexuality is seen as a mere commodity, and it is also believed that rape in marriage is unnecessary if the woman plays her role of offering her husband his well-deserved sexual entitlement. The older generation is protective of cultural beliefs in a now seemingly Westernised society, while among the younger generation, many regard cultural traditions as outdated.

## Conclusion

The study reaffirmed that sexual abuse in intimate partner relationships is prevalent in the Ugandan society and needs to be addressed. The marital rape clause in the domestic bill is therefore overdue.

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