

Perspectives on sexual violence during early years of marriage in Nepal: findings from a qualitative study

Background

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as: “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”(1). Sexual violence is both a violation of human rights and a public health problem. Evidence shows that sexual violence is associated with detrimental emotional, psychological, social, and physical outcomes, both immediate and latent (1).

Context

Nepal is a traditional (mostly patriarchal) society in which most women receive little or no formal education and have limited decision-making power in the household. Both men and women marry early, with over half of all women and 15% of men aged 20–24 years reporting being married by the age of 18 years (2). Among both men and women, knowledge of sex and reproductive health is limited. The prevailing culture in Nepal values chastity in women, but accepts sexual assertiveness in men. A combination of primarily these and other factors inhibits communication between men and women on matters related to sex and sexuality.

Recognizing the existence of sexual violence within marriage in the country, in 2006, the Government of Nepal passed a law which made it a criminal offence for a husband to have forced sex with his wife. The law defines forced sex by a husband as a form of marital rape (3). In practice, however, this law is not enforced strictly owing to a lack of support for it among law enforcement agencies and the tendency among people to blame rather than support victims of sexual violence. To understand how people in Nepal define and perceive sexual violence, and to explore reasons for sexual violence within marriage among young couples, a groundbreaking study was conducted in Nepal in 2007.

Methods

A total of 387 households were visited to identify eligible participants who were defined as married women (aged 15–24 years) and married men (aged 15–27 years). Male and female participants were not drawn from the same household. Descriptive data from freelistings (N=106), case histories (N=26), and causal flow analysis (N=52 in six causal flow analysis groups) were used to describe the definition and potential causes of sexual violence within marriage among young couples from two major ethnic groups (Brahmin/Chhetri and Tharu) in two districts (Dang and Tanahu) of Nepal. The average rank and Smith’s salience were calculated from the free-listing data. The content analysis technique was used to analyse the textual data collected from causal flow analysis and case histories.



Results

The majority of young men interviewed: were aged 25–27 years (61%); had completed high school (53%); had married after age 18 years (64%); and were working in agriculture (61%). The women tended: to be younger (74% were between 20 and 24 years of age); to be less educated (26% completed high school); to have married before age 18 years (69%); and not to be working outside the home (72%).

What constitutes sexual violence from the perspectives of respondents?

During the free-listing exercise, participants were asked to list all acts and behaviours of their partners that they considered as sexual violence. Interviews identified a total of 43 different acts and behaviours as sexual violence. Table 1 shows the 10 most frequently mentioned acts and behaviours defined by respondents as sexual violence.

Average rank refers to the order that respondents spontaneously mention specific acts of sexual violence. Therefore, the item with lower ranking indicates that the term was mentioned earlier by respondents in their listing. 'Smith's salience' is an indicator that weights the frequency that an item is mentioned by the average rank. For example, participants were likely to mention forced sex and forced sex despite verbal refusal early in their listing of sexually violent acts (rank 2.433 and 2.0). However, more respondents mentioned forced sex despite verbal refusal than forced sex resulting in a higher Smith Salience score (0.531 vs 0.195).

Table 1. Acts and behaviours defined as sexual violence within marriage: results from free-listing

Items (Nepali)	English translations	Frequency (n=106)	Percentage	Average rank	Smith's salience
Ichha biparit yon samparka	Sex against partner's wishes	69	65	2.000	0.531
Jaad rakxi khayera yon samparka	Sex after consuming alcohol	43	41	3.326	0.261
Bimari huda yon samparka	Sex during illness	42	40	4.071	0.206
Mahinawari huda yon samparka	Sex during menstruation	41	39	3.488	0.223
Sutki huda/bachcha sano huda yon samparka	Sex after delivery/when baby is small	36	34	3.917	0.194
Yon samparka garna namane kutpit/gali/dhamki	Physical or verbal abuse or threats following refusal of sex	33	31	3.364	0.197
Jabarjasti yon samparka	Forced sex	30	28	2.433	0.195
Thakeko bela yon samparka	Sex in spite of being tired	20	19	4.000	0.112
Ichha biparit youn anga chalaune/stan samaune	Unwanted touching of breast/private parts	19	18	3.684	0.098
Ichha biparit sarirma hat halne	Unwanted fondling of body	17	16	4.176	0.083

There were only minor differences between how the Nepalese respondents defined sexual violence and how WHO has defined it. For example, study participants noted that sex during illness, sex immediately after delivery, and sex despite being tired is defined as sexual violence.

Experience of sexual violence

About half of the married women and about one fifth of men reported ever experiencing sexual violence. A higher number of women from the Tharu community compared with the Brahmin/Chhetri community reported ever experiencing sexual violence. This could be due to the low level of education and higher level of alcohol consumption among Tharu people compared with the Brahmin/Chhetri people. The nature of sexual violence ranged from unwanted physical touch to forced sex.

Causes of sexual violence

Participants listed more than 50 potential causes of sexual violence. The respondents considered double standards in gender roles, traditional cultural norms, lack of family and legal support, use of alcohol and women's economic dependence on men to be the major underlying causes of sexual violence. Below are some quotes from respondents:

- Differences in gender roles. Men are expected to initiate sex and to be aggressive in sexual matters while women are expected to be submissive.

“Our society is male dominated so women cannot express their views openly. That is why sexual violence takes place within marriage. If a woman expresses her sexual desires to her husband she would be considered indecent.”

– Community leaders, Brahmin/Chhetri community
- Traditional practices related to marriage. The tradition of child/adolescent marriage, forced or arranged marriage and the practice of polyandry/polygamy often lead to misunderstandings and quarrelling between wife and husband which, in turn, leads to sexual violence.

“I got married at the age of 14 years. I did not know anything about sex before my marriage. So when I had sex for the first time, my husband convinced me to have sex even though I did not want to. But he did it (sex) forcibly and I bled and screamed and cried but he did not stop”.

– Woman, Brahmin/Chhetri community, 22 years
- Lack of social and legal support. Sexual violence within marriage is generally considered a private issue, making it difficult for victims to seek and receive support.

“If government pays less attention to women's rights, or women rights are not strong enough, or there is lack of implementation of women's rights, then it could be a cause for sexual violence. Even if there are women's right, they are only on papers and they have not been put into practice”.

– Young men, Brahmin/Chhetri community, 26–27 years
- Use of alcohol was the most frequently mentioned cause of sexual violence. Case histories revealed that, after drinking, men become violent and failed to respond to their wife's requests. In such circumstances, women were more prone to sexual attack.

“It is natural that I take alcohol, and I return home late. In such a situation, she doesn't let me have sex. But I have desire, so we fight. So when I hold her hands firmly she, being a woman, can't do anything, and then I have sex with her forcibly”.

– Man, Tharu community, 22 years
- Economic dependency of women. Women reported that if a husband knows his wife and her parents are poor and are dependent on the husband's income, she is more prone to experience sexual violence.

“Since I am living on his earning he might think that it is his right to have sex whenever he wants”.

– Woman, Tharu community, 19 years

Conclusions

Marriage exposes many young Nepalese women and some men to sexual violence. The nature of sexual violence reported by the study participants ranged from unwanted touching to forced sexual intercourse. The reasons behind sexual violence are complex. However, the study revealed that both individual and societal factors probably help perpetuate such violence. This finding was consistent with data from other South Asian countries (4). Clarifying public understanding of the meaning of sexual violence is essential to defining potential causes and consequences of sexual violence, developing effective policies to address the problem and designing appropriate programme responses.

Policy implications

The results of this study represent a first step towards defining the problem of sexual violence within early years of marriage in Nepal and informing an effective policy and programme response to assist victims of such violence. As a priority, programme managers and policy-makers must identify effective ways of raising awareness about sexual violence and develop supportive social structures for victims. Since this study identified both individual and societal factors as potential causes of sexual violence, policies aimed at punishing individuals alone will be insufficient to address the root causes of sexual violence. Policy-makers must examine the social and cultural practices which undermine gender equality.

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