

# Perceived sexual rights and sexual violence among adolescent females in India - A longitudinal cross cultural analysis

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**Introduction:** Over the years a growing concern of academicians as well as policy makers on reproductive and sexual rights of women entails that a woman has the right to be free from torture and ill treatment and can be used for campaigning for protection from rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, coercion to engage in any unlawful sexual activities, sexual harassment and violence, including domestic violence. Despite these rights, it poses a severe threat to women's autonomy in safe sexual negotiations. A considerable proportion of women in almost every socio-economic set ups are ill-treated. However, the magnitude of sexual violence differs from state to state and can be attributed to different socio cultural setups. Sexual violence includes forced/coerced sex or rape, which has a detrimental effect on a woman's physical and mental health. Such violence also leaves a woman at the high risk of acquiring STIs and HIV due to her subordinate position. Therefore this paper aims to explore major determinants of sexual violence, the most critical component in the overall of domestic violence, within the context of sexual rights. Information on perception and practice of sexual rights has been organized under the two core indicators - equality in sexual relations and control over husband extra marital relations. However, in view of variation in manifestation of these indicators across different cultural settings, this paper focuses at relative importance of different socio-economic and cultural predictors and priorities tangible indicators for addressing the gap between perception and behavior.

**Objectives:** The broad objective of this paper is to study the prevalence of sexual violence and its socio economic and cultural determinants, especially the linkages between perception about sexual rights and experience of sexual violence. More specifically the paper explores:

1. Demographic and socio-economic determinants of perception about sexual rights of adolescents;
2. Linkages between perceived sexual rights and experience of sexual violence, if exists, and paths of association at different levels of socio-economic and contextual determinants;
3. The extent of formal support sought by women and the influence of CBOs/NGOs on the perception and behavior related to sexual rights of women;
4. The attitude and involvement of men towards the sexual health of women.

**Data, study design & methodology:** The basic data used in this paper was collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods from female adolescents in the age group 13-24 years and male adolescents aged 15-29, selected from five states representing different cultural settings in India. The study was conducted to collect information on the factors responsible for increasing young women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in India as a part of the CHARCA (Coordinated HIV/AIDS Response through Capacity building and Awareness) baseline and endline survey conducted by the author of this paper on the request of HIV/AIDS cell of the joint UN organizations working in India during 2005-2007. The study was conducted in one district from each of five states namely, Bellary in Karnataka (known for the prevalence of Devadasi system, where the eldest daughter of a family is offered to the priest), Guntur in Andhra Pradesh (an area where proportion of mobile sex workers has been increasing and extramarital sex has no longer been a taboo), Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh (where dominance of single male migration has been creating a conducive environment for women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS even in spite of very traditional society having strong patriarchal norms), Kishanganj, Bihar (the bordering district connecting Nepal and Bangladesh and internationally know rout for trafficking of women in sex trade in India from its neighboring countries) and Aizawl, Mizoram (center of modern culture in North-eastern India, where male female relations among adolescents have been passing through transition and the state has been experiencing more than one percent prevalence of HIV since the last four years). Three stage sampling design in urban areas and two stage design in rural areas was followed, thus the information collected from a relatively smaller number of adolescent women can be treated as representative for the district as a whole.

Bivariate analysis has been done with selected background variables to analyze socio-economic and demographic predictors of perceived sexual rights of women as well as the prevalence of reported sexual

violence. In Multivariate analysis, logistic regression technique is used to predict the likelihood of facing sexual violence among the adolescent women in view of their perceived sexual rights after controlling for the effect of different socio-economic and demographic variables.

**Findings and conclusions:** Regarding the perceptions about sexual rights, married adolescents were asked about their acceptance of their husband’s extramarital relations and the responses were recorded as: ‘they should accept it, they should protest, they should seek divorce’. A majority of the adolescents in Kishanganj (84 percent), Guntur (89 percent), Aizawl (93 percent) and Kanpur (69 percent) are not ready to accept their husband’s extramarital relationship. However, this percentage is substantially lower in the case of Bellary where only 48 percent of the women say that they are not ready to accept their husband’s extramarital relations. Perception varies very strikingly with age where a high proportion of young women across all the states. Compared with non-migrants, those women having migrant husbands perceive that the husband’s extramarital relations should be accepted.

Regarding the behavioral aspect on the dimension of sexual right i.e control over own sexuality, all the adolescents were asked whether a man should get sex whenever he wants irrespective to women’s wish. A fairly high proportion of married adolescents in Kanpur and Aizawl claim to have control over their own sexuality. On the other hand, a substantial proportion of women in Bellary (50 percent), Guntur (42 percent) and Kishanganj (42 percent) agree that men should get sex whenever they want irrespective of the women’s wish, which indicates the influence of patriarchy, low status accorded to women and female subjugation in these districts.

Linkages between perception about sexual rights at the time of survey and experience of sexual violence in the last 12 months shows that more than half of the married adolescents (52 percent) experienced coercive sex within their intimate relationship. The odds ratio shows that women’s perception that ‘*man can have sex irrespective of women’s wish*’ is the most significant predictor of coercive sex where a married adolescent who is ready to prevent sex without her choice is 7 times less likely to experience sexual violence as against those who are not showing any control over their own sexuality {95% CI, 0.086-0.247}. Similarly the odds of experiencing forced sex is 9 times lower in case of married adolescents who are never ready to have sex against their desire as {95%CI, 0.07-0.16}. The odds of experiencing sexual violence among those educated up to primary and secondary are reduced by one-third in each case than the odds ratio for those who are illiterate. Moreover women seeking support from formal sources is low due owing to neglect and unimportance attached to such issues; also the favorable influence of CBOs/NGOs towards increasing women’s rights and improving their health status is not much encouraging as observed from the variations between baseline and endline survey.

Findings on sexual rights reveal that young women are in a miserable position not only due to lack of their control over their husband’s extramarital relations but also due to their inability to protect themselves against forced penetrative sex within intimate relationships. On the other hand, though most of the males perceive favorably towards the sexual rights of women, still in terms of behavior they consider coercion as a right over their wives. These findings violate the concept of equality in sexual relations. However, the extent of relationship varies significantly across five states and also between the baseline and endline results. Therefore, an effort should be made to minimize the gender-imposed sexual violence in case of intimate relationships. One of such strategies may be to strengthen the concept of optimizing the sexual pleasure, which may be possible through respecting the partner’s sexuality. Information and education programs are needed to prevent acts of sexual violence and laws are needed to punish the perpetrators. However, any strategy to reduce the gap between perception about sexual rights and sexual violence, the core issue for addressing violence against women, should account its cultural manifestations. Trying to eliminate sexual violence and sexual wrongs can only be successful if a woman is also endowed with rights, including sexual rights. A women’s rights perspective cannot co-exist with an exclusively protectionist approach towards women.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT ALL FINDINGS & ALL TABLES ARE NOT PROVIDED HERE**

*Percent of married women who never seeks husband’s permission on mobility aspects*

Mobility Parameters	Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
	BL#	ELS	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
Visiting health services	15.5	3.8	7.3	17.7	2.5	9.8	10.0	-	4.9	-
Visiting natal family	5.5	2.0	0.9*	14.9	4.2	16.5	10.3	-	20.7	2.6
Visiting neighborhood	15.6	11.3	7.3	8.5	33.5	2.0	31.3	-	19.8	10.3

Participating in CBO/NGO meeting	35.9	7.5	76.5	25.4	0.4*	17.2	22.3	-	18.8	7.7
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\*Less than 10 cases; # Base Line survey; \$ End line survey

### Perception of Young Women About their Sexual Rights

Districts (No. of Women)	Men should get sex whenever they want	Husband's extra-marital affairs should be accepted
Kanpur (488)	9.4	29.9
Guntur (472)	42.6	9.6
Aizwal (471)	6.3	6.8
Bellary (488)	50.1	51.6
Kishenganj (539)	42.0	15.9

### Percentage of women age 13-24 who experienced any type of violence in the last 12 months

Type of Violence and perpetrator	Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
Young women who experienced violence	11.7	31.0	42.3		9.2	4.5	5.1	8.2	21.1	-
Type of violence experienced										
Pushed	3.5	42.5	14.5	42.6	1.6	36.0	0.4	26.5	7.9	-
Punched	2.7	35.6	11.9	27.3	1.2	24.0	1.9	8.8	11.5	-
Kicked	2.3	11.0	3.0	11.3	1.6	36.0	2.8	17.6	0.6	100.0
Others	3.3	6.8	12.9	6.0	4.7	4.0	0.0	2.9	1.1	-
Violence inflicted by										
Mother/Mother in Law	14.0	35.6	27.1	31.7	38.6	32.1	57.7	12.0	20.8	-
Father/father in Law	12.3	4.1	16.4	21.0	24.4	20.3	32.0	-	27.7	16.7
Brother/Sister	21.1	16.4	16.9	24.8	2.2	16.0	28.0	2.9	18.8	0.3
Husband/Boyfriend	38.6	37.8	25.8	29.8	22.2	44.1	48.0	8.8	13.9	33.3
Other relatives/friends/ neighbors	3.5	17.8	12.0	6.3	13.3	16.2	8.0	70.6	15.8	50.0

### Proportion of women reporting sexual violence in the five CHARCA districts

Sexual violence and Coercion	Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
Women reporting forced penetrative sex	10.7	43.4	41.4	26.0	38.3	50.7	16.3	33.0	2.8	0.9
Women whose husbands do not respect their decision about their unwillingness for sex	8.2	38.6	23.9	54.4	45.9	53.0	4.9	31.1	2.1	91.9

### Percent of women experiencing sexual violence according to perceived sexual rights

Sexual rights of women	Kanpur (488)	Guntur (472)	Aizwal (471)	Bellary (488)	Kishenganj (539)
<b>Women's perception of acceptance of husband's extra-marital relations</b>					
No	6.5	16.4	2.7	15.3	34.7
Yes	18.9	20.0	3.1	59.9	75.9
<b>Women's perception that men should get sex whenever they want irrespective of their wish</b>					
No	59.5	34.5	11.1	63.1	70.2
Yes	6.1	3.7	2.3	10.1	16.8
<b>Husband's reaction to women's decision of unwillingness for sex</b>					
Don't respect	11.3	9.0	2.3	43.3	32.5
Respect	9.2	24.4	5.3	18.2	65.5

### Percent women reporting issues discussed in CBO/NGO meetings during the last 12 months

Issues of discussion in CBO/NGO meetings	Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
Membership in CBOs/NGOs	2.7	23.0	1.6	-	5.9	27.4	18.4	45.0	71.5	-
Women's rights	12.0	64.0	65.4	66.7	13.1	83.3	10.3	71.3	43.8	-
STI/RTI/HIV	8.0	80.0	46.2	45.8	5.0	84.5	5.2	91.0	76.2	-

*Percent of women aged 13-24 who had experienced violence and sought support in the last 12 months*

Types of support system	Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
Formal source of support *	0.0	1.3	4.2	8.5	0.0	-	2.2	0.2	1.6	-
Informal source of support **	10.5	31.0	8.3	6.9	42.3	1.8	15.6	4.1	8.4	0.2
<b>Percent of women who experienced violence</b>	<b>11.7</b>	<b>74.0</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>1.4</b>

\* Formal support: Police, Nari adalat, Panchayat, Health facility\*\* Informal support: CBO/NGO, Mahila Mandal, Peers

*Percentage of women about their sexual rights by membership in CBO/NGO*

District		Young women perceive that husband should be accepted under any condition even he Has extramarital relation		Young women who don't have ability to refuse sex if she is not willing	
		membership	No membership	membership	No membership
Kanpur	BL	40.0	30.9	0.0	18.0
	EL	-	4.8	20.0	4.3
Kishanganj	BL	16.7	16.2	66.7	36.2
	EL	-----		13.0	33.3
Bellary	BL	54.5	51.7	64.2	48.5
	EL	36.1	44.7	23.7	18.3
Guntur	BL	16.7	9.9	8.5	5.9
	EL	5.7	3.8	-	-
Aizawl	BL	4.5	9.9	8.7	2.5
	EL	-----		-----	1.7

*Percentage of women reporting use of condom during last sexual encounter by their perception about sexual rights*

Women's rights		Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
		BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
Utilization of health services to be decided	Jointly	28.6	37.7	26.8	15.7	0.0	31.0	2.0	7.1	8.6	43.3
	Husband only	22.2	7.7	12.5	13.5	25.0	4.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	100.0
	Wife only	20.0	100	25.5	22.2	3.1	13.0	3.2	-	0.0	-
Acceptability of husband's extramarital relationship	Yes	23.0	33.3	24.2	21.4	0.6	7.0	0.0	6.7	0.0	-
	No	30.0	36.3	25.2	17.0	2.0	4.3	2.4	8.0	8.2	52.0
Ability to refuse sex when she is not willing	Yes	30.3	25.0	47.7	18.8	1.1	5.6	1.7	8.0	4.0	-
		19.6	36.7	19.9	14.2	1.1	5.6	1.4	-	0.0	-

**Perception of young men towards the sexual right of women in the five CHARCA districts**

Perception towards women sexual rights	Kanpur		Kishanganj		Bellary		Guntur		Aizawl	
	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL	BL	EL
A wife has a right to enjoy sex	98.2	96.6	93.8	93.8	82.4	91.2	99.2	95.3	98.2	99.5
A wife can say 'no' to husband when she does not want sex	93.1	98.8	90.7	95	88.3	83.9	97.3	97.2	97.7	99.5
A wife should not accept her husband's extra marital relations	53.1	98.8	87.5	96.3	66.8	66.6	96.9	78.0	98.6	100

*"It is necessary to satisfy one's wife to keep her happy as well as maintain a man's image in front of her." ( FGD with young men, Guntur, Karnataka).*

*"It is good that a husband considers his wife's wish for sex but the wife should also understand a man's sexual need otherwise problems and fights arises." (FGD with young men, Bellary, Andhra Pradesh).*