



An Examination of Sexual Coercion Perpetrated by Women

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Abstract

Studies by researchers such as S. S. Judson and L. Stemple stated that many people underestimate female sexual coercion. Thus, this paper attempts to answer the question “what proportion of women have sexually coerced someone?”. As will be shown, studies dealing with this are predominantly heterosexual, demonstrating the need for more research into non-heterosexual female sexual coercion. While the number of sexually coercive women is related to the number of people who have been sexually coerced by a woman, these quantities are not necessarily equal as a woman can coerce more than one person. Therefore, this study surveys studies which measured female perpetration. The authors found 32 such studies, predominantly, but not entirely, heterosexual, with a cumulative sample of 22,632 women and calculated weighted means with the results of these studies. We searched reference lists of studies and used Google Scholar. We did have to also specifically search for non-heterosexual studies. We included all studies we found that reported female perpetration rates except those with high school girls. The weighted mean of those studies which were predominantly heterosexual indicate that, worldwide, approximately 17% of heterosexual women have sexually coerced a man sometime during their lifetime. Our studies also include evidence that bisexual and homosexual women sexually coerce at similar rates.

Keywords Gender · Men · Sexual coercion · Stereotypes

Introduction

Stead (2022) defines sexual coercion as “the act of using pressure, alcohol or drugs, or force to have sexual contact with someone against his or her will”. Studies have stated that many people underestimate female sexual coercion (Judson et al., 2013; Stemple & Meyer, 2014). Some reasons for this were given in

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DiMarco et al. (2021). But another reason is given in this quote from Cook and Hodo (2013) pages 70 and 71,

“The problem is, however, that society wishes to close its eyes to the plight of men who are emotionally and physically abused by wives or female partners. It is too destructive of all our cozy patriarchal notions of men and women and male and female stereotypical roles; woman as victim, man as perpetrator, women as sexually pursued, man as sexual pursuer. Sexually aggressive women and sexually victimized abused men really turn all that completely inside out and upside down. It makes it all seem as if real men and real women might be equal after all! That’s why it is the ultimate taboo. And why it is something more difficult to contemplate.”

Thus, the objective of this paper is to survey past research and to attempt to answer the question “what proportion of women have sexually coerced someone?”. The answer to this question demonstrates the need to consider female perpetrators in prevention efforts. The rationale behind focusing on this particular area is to breakdown the aforementioned patriarchal stereotypes of who commits and is victimized by sexual abuse.

Sexual victimization is an extraordinarily serious problem in our society. It is important that we acknowledge male, female, and non-binary victims, as well as male, female, and non-binary perpetrators. A complete discussion of all aspects of sexual victimization could fill volumes. It is the aim of this paper to examine one, little discussed component of this important issue, namely, the role of female perpetrators of sexual coercion. Specifically, in this survey, we review the literature regarding self-reported data from women regarding their propensity to commit sexual coercion. We will compare and contrast these studies with each other. Before we begin this discussion, let us be clear about one thing: sexual victimization can be mentally and physically devastating regardless of the genders of victim and assailant. Investigating all aspects of it is important, and this paper looks at just one of these aspects. Our hope is that, by having open discussions about all aspects of sexual victimization, people will become more knowledgeable and the instances of sexual victimization (of all genders by all genders) can be reduced. Given the fact that both men and women are frequently victims, we decided, in this paper, to investigate the role of female perpetrators since, at least in casual conversation, this aspect is not frequently discussed.

As will be shown, studies dealing with this are predominantly heterosexual, demonstrating the need for more research into bisexual and homosexual female sexual coercion. While the number of sexually coercive women is obviously related to the number of people who have been sexually coerced by a woman, it is just as obvious these quantities are not necessarily equal as a woman can coerce more than one person. Therefore, this study surveys studies which asked groups of women if they have ever sexually coerced a person, as opposed to asking groups of people if they have been coerced by a woman.

For heterosexual cases, there is another reason to focus on female perpetration studies as opposed to male victimization studies. Williams (2008) stated that

they only included articles which included self-reported perpetration by women (as opposed to male victimization) because evidence indicates men and women report female-on-male violence differently, with females indicating more violence. Stating that researchers suggest males have a tendency to under-report such acts, possibly because they are frightened or threatened by them.

Numerous studies have shown that both male and female victims of sexual coercion suffer similar after-effects (see Elliot et al., 2004, Judson et al., 2013, Masters & Sarrel, 1982, Perrott & Webber, 1996, Peterson et al., 2011, Stemple & Meyer, 2014, Tewksbury, 2007 and Walker et al., 2005). In particular Judson et al. (2013) states male victims of sexual coercion suffer short term consequences such as feeling “bad” or “very bad”, and long term effects such as “a sense of loss of control, bewilderment, embarrassment, doubts of one’s heterosexuality, fear, anger, resentment, depression, alcohol-related consequences.” Elliot et al. (2004) in a sample drawn from the American population reported higher scores on the Trauma Symptom Inventory for sexually assaulted men than women. Tewksbury (2007) states that several studies found that male sexual assault victims are more likely than female victims to experience more severe depression and hostility in the short term at least.

Another popular misconception is that a victim’s sexual arousal means he or she “must have wanted it”. DiMarco (2021) pointed out that sexual arousal can occur during nonconsensual sex in both females and males. Arousal does not imply consent.

Some of our 32 studies only surveyed women, but many surveyed both men and women. In virtually all of these studies men perpetrated sexual coercion more often than women did, showing that sexual coercion perpetrated by men is a huge problem. Our work, by no means, is intended to minimize this fact. Although, as will be seen, the amount of sexual coercion perpetrated by women is far from trivial. We are studying female sexual coercion because, as we have said, female sexual coercion is underestimated. We also consider that in our society at large, male sexual victims are seldom acknowledged. According to Judson et al. (2013), in discussing attitudes of college students, while many are aware of male perpetration of sexual assault against females, more education is needed to end the amount of silence, ignorance and lack of services available to male victims of female-perpetrated sexual assault.

We wish to point out that this journal, *Sexuality & Culture*, has published literature reviews on the topic of female aggression towards their partners in the past. Two note-worthy examples are Fiebert (2000) and Fiebert (2014).

Methods

The authors performed calculations (weighted means) with the results of the 30 mostly heterosexual studies that we found. Specifically, we calculate the weighted mean proportion, μ_w , as follows:

$$\mu_w = \sum_{i=1}^{30} NiPi, \quad (1)$$

where N_i is the sample size of the i th study, and P_i is the sample proportion from the i th study.

In order to find these studies, we searched reference lists of studies and used Google Scholar. We now delineate our criteria for choosing which studies to include in this manuscript. Our desire was to include as many studies as possible and still have an accurate result. In our opinion the way to achieve this was to include all studies that reported female sexual coercion perpetration rates excepting those studies which surveyed high school girls. We avoided studies of high school girls because we only wanted to include subjects that had a fair amount of time to sexually coerce someone. We did have to specifically search for non-heterosexual studies in order to find the two such studies we found. All such studies we found that fit these criteria were included.

Given the mathematically straight forward method of calculating the weighted mean proportion, no bias should be introduced through our data analysis. That said, there is always a risk of bias inherent in data collection. In order to minimize this risk, the researchers, as previously noted, included all studies which met their criteria for inclusion. Hence, no judgement calls were needed to refine the sample of studies included. Additionally, the two authors worked independently in reviewing the studies.

We now consider possible bias in the studies that we found. First, all of our studies passed peer review, indicating that the reviewers did not see any bias. Also, we carefully read the studies and did not see any signs of bias. Six of our mostly heterosexual studies and both of our mostly non-heterosexual studies did discard some completed surveys. Thus, these eight studies have original sample sizes that differ from their final sample sizes. (The original sample sizes and final sample sizes for all 30 of our mostly heterosexual studies are given in the appendix of this paper. For both of our mostly non-heterosexual studies this information is given in the Results section of this paper). It is possible that authors who discarded some data (different beginning and ending sample sizes) did so in a systematic way (thus introducing bias), but we have no reason to believe this is the case.

As those familiar with this topic know, studies on the topic of sexual coercion use a variety of questionnaires in their surveys, begging the question, is it legitimate to compile these data, collected from such disparate sources? In particular, the question of whether or not weighted averages and other statistics can be computed from these studies is of interest. We start to answer this question by first pointing out that there is precedent for doing this. Struckman-Johnson (2020) calculated the mean perpetration rate over 20 studies that used varying measures and methods. Spitzberg (1999) in a major study dealing with the exact same situation performed numerous calculations. What is more, in doing so, that study found statistical evidence that it is valid to do so. Stating as new entries were added there were less and less change in the results as their work progressed, concluding their results are resilient to the addition of new studies or the reclassification of studies already on their list. We point out that Spitzberg was not saying this because all 120 studies were used in each calculation, rather that study calculated several weighted means, some of which were based on a relatively small subset of those 120 studies.

Results

The authors found 32 studies fitting our criteria, predominantly, but not entirely, heterosexual, with a cumulative sample of 22,632 women and performed calculations (weighted means) with the results of these studies. Thirty of our 32 studies have samples that are predominantly heterosexual. The weighted mean of those studies which were predominantly heterosexual indicate that, worldwide, approximately 17% of heterosexual women have sexually coerced a man sometime during their lifetime. Our studies also include some evidence that bisexual and homosexual women sexually coerce at similar rates.

So, how much of this female sexual coercion was directed at males? A large majority of it actually. Of our 32 studies, 20 explicitly included only heterosexual activity. The most common reason these studies gave for discarding surveys completed by homosexual or bisexual women was the non-heterosexual part of the sample was too small to be of significance. Five studies made no explicit mention of sexual orientation. Two studies were a little less clear on the issue. Krahe et al., (2015) said women who reported only same sex activity were excluded because they were only 2.4% of the sample—which seems to imply perhaps some bisexual activity was included in the study. Poppen and Segal (1988) said “Because there were only a few opposite sex-typed persons (e.g., masculine females, feminine males), they were discarded in this analysis. When this was done, there were no effects of sex role orientation on the coercive behaviors and strategies for females.” Whether or not this excluded homosexual and bisexual females we are not sure. Five of the studies explicitly mention including non-heterosexual females (including two heavily non-heterosexual studies). Three studies; Bonneville and Trottier (2021), d’Abreu et al. (2013), and Harned (2001), with a cumulative sample of 1,462, mentioned including heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual activity. In Bonneville and Trottier, of the 128 female perpetrators, 107 (83.6%) were heterosexual, 13 (10.2%) were bisexual and 4 (3.1%) were homosexual and 4 did not specify orientation. No mention was made of the gender of the victims. In d’Abreu the sample was 90% heterosexual, 9% bisexual and 1% homosexual, and all of the victims for whom the gender was known were male. In Harned 4% of the sample identified as homosexual and 2% identified as bisexual, and the study said heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual females all had about the same rate of perpetration. Since the two heavily non-heterosexual studies are not listed on the table below, we will discuss their findings in more detail here. These two studies are Kirschbaum (2019) and VanderLaan and Vasey (2009) with a cumulative sample size of 355. Kirschbaum had a sample of $n = 266$ international cisgender females and used the Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SES) to find out that 19.2% of the sample reported same-sex sexual coercion perpetration. VanderLaan & Vasey had a sample of 89 non-heterosexual Canadian women and used the SES to find out that 38.2% of the sample used physical tactics to get sex. We note that Kirschbaum had an original sample size of 339 women and that VanderLann and Vasey had an original sample of 215 women. Looking cumulatively at the results for non-heterosexual females from the five studies that included non-heterosexual

women we conclude that non-heterosexual women sexually coerce at rates similar to heterosexual women.

This is not to say sexual victimization of sexual minorities does not take place, or even that it takes place in relatively low rates. We are only saying that in these 32 studies, a large majority of this female sexual coercion was female-to-male. The subjects examined in these previous studies underscores the heteronormative bias in much research and points out the need for more study in this area. It would seem there is a dearth of studies of female non-heterosexual sexual coercion that reports what percentage of the sample are perpetrators, making this a good area for future study.

While Spitzberg (1999), a meta-study with a massive scope (the entire USA) and sample size (120 studies with cumulative sample of over 100,000 subjects) might seem to be a massive source of data for us, such is not the case. It states its female perpetration of sexual coercion is based on only one of those 120 studies. That one study seems to be Anderson (1996), a study which is already on our list. Thus, while we used Spitzberg (1999) for other purposes, its results will not be used in our calculations and that study is not included on our table of studies below.

Among the studies we do base our calculations on, one stands out for its broad scope and large sample. Gámez-Guadix et al. (2011) has a sample of 9,972 female students from 68 universities in 32 nations. Among these 32 nations, two were in sub-Saharan Africa, seven were in Asia, 13 were in Europe, four were in Latin America, two were in the Middle East, two were in North America, and two were in Oceania. The same core questionnaire was used throughout all countries. That study found that 19.6% of females engaged in coercive sex.

One other study by Krahe et al. (2015) on our list is also international in scope. This study surveyed 2,308 women from 10 European nations using a common questionnaire. It found that 5.0% of women reported at least one form of sexual aggression.

Below is a table containing the 30 studies used in our calculations of heterosexual female sexual coercion. (We have already discussed the results of our two predominantly non-heterosexual studies). If we were able to ascertain that the questionnaire used by the study was one of the following commonly used ones, that information is included in the study results.

- (1) Sexually Aggressive Behaviors Scale (SABS), (Anderson, 1996).
- (2) Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SES), (Ross & Allgeier, 1991)
- (3) Revised Conflict Tactics Scales, (CTS-2) (Straus et al., 1996).
- (4) Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S), (Krahé & Berger, 2013).
- (5) Postrefusal Sexual Persistence Scale (PSPS), (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003).
- (6) Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex, and Aggression (MIDSA), (Knight, 2007).

All students in the table below are understood to be college students. Anderson et al. (2002) is only available through Anderson & Savage (2005) so questionnaire

information is not available for that study. To save space in the table we use the approach of using “et al.” anytime a study has more than one author. If a study made up its own questionnaire, the table labels the questionnaire as “original”. The sample sizes in this table are the final sample sizes. The original sample sizes are in an appendix to this manuscript.

We pause to make one additional point before looking at our table. Some of these studies use terminology other than “sexual coercion”. Terms such as “sexual aggression”, “used aggression for sex”, “sexual violence”, “sexually abused/assaulted”, and “sexual persistence” are used. However, using the definition of sexual coercion previously cited in this paper, all of these terms would qualify as sexual coercion.

In this section, we wish to compare and contrast the results of the studies listed in Table 1 below. This may shed some light onto similarities and differences between the surveys used and the rates of sexual coercion in different areas.

First, we take a look at the overall rates of heterosexual sexual coercion. When the data from all of the studies listed in the table are compiled, 17.11% of heterosexual women were found to have reported that they committed an act of coercion. This is the weighted average (based on sample size) of the proportions reported in each individual study in the table. (Previously in this paper we stated that, “approximately 17% of heterosexual women have sexually coerced a man”. The reader should keep in mind that, even in these 30 predominantly heterosexual studies, this 17.11% figure includes some very small part of female victims, as was previously stated herein.)

We now turn our attention to the dates of the studies included herein. We somewhat arbitrarily break the studies into two groups – those conducted in 2003 or earlier and those conducted after 2003. The year 2003 was chosen as the cut-off date for two reasons. First, (very) roughly half of the studies were conducted before this date. Second, there is a 5-year gap (2003 to 2008) from which we have no data. Hence, this naturally occurring gap seems to be a logical place to draw our cut off.

The overall proportion of coercion in the heterosexual studies prior to 2004 was found to be 20.4% while the overall proportion of coercion in the heterosexual studies since 2008 was 16.4%. A t-test for the difference between the proportions was statistically significant at the 5% level ($p\text{-value} < 0.01$).

Discussion

In the following comparisons, in order to compare like with like, we limit our comparisons to our 30 predominantly heterosexual studies.

If we prefer to look at an even more homogenous population, it can be seen that the proportion who admitted to coercion is 19.5%, when only the studies examining solely US students are included. As one would expect from the work of Cook (2002), many statistically significant different proportions of sexual coercion exist between the surveys. Looking at the weighted means for each questionnaire taken over the studies in our list, these proportions range from 9.3% of those surveyed using the SAV-S survey and 35.2% on the MIDSA, though these differences might be exaggerated since the studies that used those two questionnaires

Table 1 List of Studies

Study	(Female) Sample Size	Results
Anderson (1996)	212 USA students	28.5% sexually coerced, SABS
Anderson (1998)	249 USA students	25.7% sexually coerced, SABS
Anderson et al. (2002) (2 samples)	272 South USA students 268 Midwest USA students	43.8% sexually coerced 39.9% sexually coerced
Bonneville et al. (2021)	562 French-speaking Canadians	22.8% sexually coerced, SES
Brousseau et al. (2012)	209 Canadians	20.9% sexually coerced, SES
D'Abreu et al. (2013)	411 Brazilian students	3% sexually coerced, SES
Doroszwicz et al. (2008)	100 Polish students	40% sexually coerced, CTS-2
Gamez-Guadix et al. (2011)	9972 students world-wide	19.6% sexually coerced, CTS-2
Harned (2001)	489 USA students	8% sexually abused/assaulted, SES
Hines et al., (2003)	302 USA students	13.5% sexually coerced, CTS-2
Hogben et al. (1996)	113 USA students	24% sexually coerced, SES
Krahé et al. (2003)	248 Germans	9.3% used aggression for sex, original
Krahé et al. (2015)	2308 Europeans	5% used sexual aggression, SAV-S
Moyano et al., (2015)	333 Spaniards	12.9% used sexual aggression, SES
Palmer et al. (2010)	195 USA students	6% sexually coerced, SES
Parent et al. (2018)	274 Quebecois students	41.2% sexually coerced, MIDSA
Poppen et al., (1988)	100 USA students	14% sexually coerced, original
Russell et al. (2001)	285 USA students	18.2% sexually coerced, SES
Russell et al. (2017)	1031 Americans	10.1% perpetrated sexual violence, SES
Ryan (1998)	411 USA students	2% used sexual aggression, SES
Schatzel-Murphy (2011)	177 Americans	26% sexually coerced, MIDSA
Schuster et al., (2016a, 2016b) (Chile)	885 Chilean students	16.5% used sexual aggression, SAV-S
Schuster et al., (2016a, 2016b) (Turkey)	886 Turkish students	14.2% used sexual aggression, SAV-S
Shea (1998)	171 USA students	19% sexually coerced, SES
Stead et al. (2022)	151 English people	42.4% sexually coerced, PSPS
Strauss et al. (1996)	204 USA students	18% sexually coerced, CTS-2
Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003)	381 USA students	26% used sexual persistence, PSPS
Struckman-Johnson et al. (2020)	634 Americans	16% used sexual persistence, PSPS
Tomaszewska et al. (2018)	356 Polish students	6.5% sexually coerced, SAV-S
West et al. (2000)	88 low-income African Americans	19.5% used sexual aggression, original

have subject sets with no common nationalities. However, slightly smaller differences exist even when the population studied is limited to students in the US.

As for the difference in the means between the pre-2004 studies and the post-2008 studies, the reason behind this difference is uncertain. It is possible that it may be related to the different mix of surveys used in the two time frames, or it may be due to some systematic change in the level of coercion.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined 32 previous studies on sexual coercion committed by women (predominantly directed towards men). As stated earlier, in virtually all of the studies in which both men and women were surveyed, men perpetrated sexual coercion more often than women did. We are studying female sexual coercion because, as we have said, female sexual coercion is underestimated. Also, regarding male victimization (which, it appears from extant studies, is primarily perpetrated by females), as stated in Judson et al. (2013), inadequate attention and resources are given to male victims. Our results show that approximately 17% of heterosexual women have sexually coerced a man during their lifetime. They also include some evidence that bisexual and homosexual women sexually coerce at similar rates. Studies such as Stemple and Meyer (2014), Masters and Sarrel (1982), Walker et al (2005) and Judson et al. (2013) all stated male victims of sexual coercion suffer after-effects similar to female victims. Thus, a great many sexual coercion victims are essentially being ignored. We disagree with the idea that paying attention to male victims of sexual coercion detracts from female victims, as this is not a zero-sum game. Female, male, and non-binary victims must all be acknowledged.

Our study of these previous works has identified several areas for future research. One area for future research involves the investigation of how frequently non-binary individuals are the victims and perpetrators of sexual victimization. There appears to be very little data and discussion of this topic. We believe that, in a spirit of inclusion, it is important to recognize that this affects all human beings, regardless of gender. Related to this, another area for future research is the investigation of the rates of non-heterosexual sexual coercion. Another area worthy of more study involves the investigation of whether or not the proportion of females committing sexual coercion is changing over time. Finally, our work raises the question of whether or not it might be useful for future researchers in this field to use a more standardized survey inventory. A variety of survey were used in the studies that we sampled, and, in the future, the use of a standardized survey might provide for easier comparison of studies.

Appendix A

See Table 2.

Table 2 Original and Final Sample Sizes for Included Studies

Study	Final (Female) Sample Size	Original (Female) Sample Size
Anderson (1996)	212	212
Anderson (1998)	249	249
Anderson et al. (2002) (2 samples)	272 268	272 268
Bonneville et al. (2021)	562	Unknown
Brousseau et al. (2012)	209	209
D'Abreau et al., (2013)	411	411
Doroszwicz et al., (2008)	100	100
Gamez-Guadix et al. (2011)	9972	Unknown
Harned (2001)	489	600
Hines et al., (2003)	302	302
Hogben et al. (1996)	113	113
Krahé et al. (2003)	248	248
Krahé et al. (2015)	2308	2308
Moyano et al., (2015)	333	333
Palmer et al. (2010)	195	195
Parent et al. (2018)	274	274
Poppen et al. (1988)	100	100
Russell et al., (2001)	285	285
Russell et al. (2017)	1031	1058
Ryan (1998)	411	411
Schatzel-Murphy (2011)	177	177
Schuster et al., (2016a, 2016b) (Chile)	885	988
Schuster et al., (2016a, 2016b) (Turkey)	886	1010
Shea (1998)	171	171
Stead et al. (2022)	151	151
Strauss et al., (1996)	204	204
Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003)	381	381
Struckman-Johnson et al. (2020)	634	634
Tomaszewska et al. (2018)	356	356
West et al., (2000)	88	88

If a particular study did not specify any difference between the original sample size collected and the actual sample size used, or if the original sample size collected was not available, we list the original and final sample sizes as being equal

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Availability of Data and Material The authors declare that data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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