Sexual violence and rape in India

Rape in India received extensive media coverage after a fatal gang rape of a student in Delhi in December, 2012, and a village council-ordered gang rape of a young woman in West Bengal in January, 2014.1 Whereas an 8·5% prevalence of sexual violence in the country is among the lowest in the world,2,3 it is estimated to affect 27·5 million women in India (table). Only 1% of victims of sexual violence report the crime to the police.1 Low reporting to police might in part be because marital rape is not a crime in India. Most sexual violence in India occurs in marriage: 10% of married women report sexual violence from husbands.2 Adolescent wives are most vulnerable, reporting the highest rates of marital sexual violence of any age group.2 Adolescent girls also account for 24% of rape cases in the country,4 although they represent only 9% of the total female population. An estimated 2·5 million adolescent girls (aged 15–19 years) are victims of sexual violence in India.

Data from the National Crime Bureau suggest a growing incidence of rape reporting to police, particularly in the past year (2013).5 Past year increases have been attributed to better support for victim disclosure;5 but actual rape incidence might be increasing. Whether gang rapes are on the rise is not clear because of a lack of data;4 some suggest it might be the case.1 The substantial number of gang rapes suggests a social and peer support for men perpetrating sexual violence in India. In view of youth involvement in rapes, young men might be particularly vulnerable to such negative peer influence.

Estimated numbers of female victims (both women and girls) of sexual violence in India are in the millions and reported rapes are increasing. The health and criminal justice systems must be prepared to reach and support victims. Prevention approaches are needed to engage men and boys regarding treatment of women and girls, sexuality, and sexual entitlement. Criminalisation of marital rape is required, and so is premarital counselling about healthy and respectful sexual relationships. Safety of girls and elimination of child marriage must be at the heart of sexual violence and rape prevention. National and local surveillance of sexual violence will help us better understand, track, and reduce sexual violence in India.

We declare that we have no competing interests.

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Discrepancies in Natsal

One result to emerge from the National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) is that the mean lifetime number of opposite-sex sexual partners differs significantly between men and women. For instance, for the entire age range (16–74 years) examined by Catherine Mercer and colleagues (Nov 30, p 1781)1 in the most recent survey, the averages were found to be 14·1 for men and 7·1 for women. However, these averages should always be identical for the general population—given the following reasonable assumptions: firstly, that the population consists of equal numbers of men and women; and secondly, that for each member of the population, all of their sexual partners also reside within the population.

The discrepancy in the averages has two possible causes: a breakdown of one or both of the assumptions mentioned previously, or an error in the methods of the survey. In the latter, I include the possibility that the information provided by the survey participants is inaccurate. The discrepancy therefore brings into question the extent to which the survey results reflect the true sexual behaviour of the general population.

In view of the importance of this survey with regards to—among other things—shaping health policy in Britain, as well as its presumably substantial effect on public

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For Natsal see http://www.natsal.ac.uk/