

Does perceived sexual right affect sexual violence among married adolescents in India? A 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. Socio-economic determinants of perception about sexual rights of married adolescents, measured in terms of their capacity to articulate their response to the husband's extramarital relationship and equality in sexual relations, across different cultural settings, and
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.

Data and study design

The basic data used in this paper was collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods from approximately 2500 female adolescents in the age group 13-24 years 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

survey conducted by the author of this paper on the request of HIV/AIDS cell of the joint UN organizations working in India. The study was conducted in one district from each of five states namely, Bellari 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 known route 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). Approximately 500 married adolescents were selected from each of the five districts following three-stage sampling design in urban areas and two-stage design in rural areas. Thus, the information collected from a relatively smaller number of adolescent women can be treated as representative for the district as a whole.

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 married 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 in 13-16 years age group, say that the husband should not be accepted if he has extramarital sexual relations as majority of them are unmarried. However, it is noteworthy to observe that a large majority of women in the age group of 21-24 years perceive that the husband should be accepted despite his extramarital relations. The only exception is Aizawl, where the response remains similar across all age groups and it reflects that they are not ready to accept the husband's extramarital relations. Women whose husbands are migrant, across all the states are ready to accept their husband's extramarital relations. This figure is higher in Bellary than in the rest of the states. Compared with non-migrants, those women having migrant husbands, perceive that the husband's extramarital relations should be accepted.

Regarding the perception on the another 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. In Kishanganj, one can say that since it is a Muslim dominated district and the women have very limited say in household decision making, their status within the household becomes even more subordinate. It may be possibly due to prevalence of Devadashi system in Bellari which provides a traditional norm among females towards gender roles and dominance of men over women.

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. proportion of such women is the maximum in Kishanganj, Bihar (91 percent) followed by Bellari, Karnataka (64%), Guntur, Andhra Pradesh (30%), Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh (29%) and the minimum in Aizawl, Mizoram (14%). 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 versus not experiencing forced sex is 9 times lower in case of married adolescents who are never ready to have sex against their desire as against those who are not in a position to deny sex to their husband or partner if they are not willing {95% CI, 0.07-0.16}. Another equally important predictor significantly reducing experience of forced penetrative sex is their educational attainment, where odds of experiencing sexual violence against not experiencing 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. The extents of associations are profound in Bihar and Karnataka. However, control over husbands extra marital relations and memberships of CBO/NGO, standard of living index and current age of respondent are not significant predictors of experience of forced penetrative sex. However, the extent of relationship varies significantly across five states included in the analysis. Therefore, 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.