



What is Sexual Violence?

updated June 2019

Sexual violence is a broad term that describes any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality.

It can include but is not limited to:

- sexual abuse
- sexual assault
- rape, (date rape, marital rape, partner rape, stranger rape, rape where there is multiple perpetrators)
- ritual abuse
- sexual harassment
- incest
- childhood sexual abuse
- stalking
- indecent/ sexualized exposure
- degrading sexual imagery
- voyeurism
- exhibitionism
- sharing sexual photographs without permission
- online sexual harassment
- rape during armed conflict
- trafficking and sexual exploitation
- unwanted comments or jokes



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Defining Sexual Violence

It is understood that each person defines sexual violence differently based on their own personal and unique experience. It is also understood that any definition must acknowledge that while the majority of sexual violence is committed by men against women and children, it is also experienced by people in same sex relationship, by trans people and by men.

Broadening Our Understanding

Sexual violence includes any act that undermines an individual's sexual or gender integrity.

Forced prostitution, forced marriage (especially of minors), forced cohabitation, forced adoption of a gender role that does not conform to an individual's identity, trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation also come under this category.

Some hate crimes and the more loosely defined "hate incidents" such as those directed at women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, Two Spirit, intersex, queer and questioning individuals are also sexual violence.

Sexual Violence and Health

Sexual violence includes the imposition or elimination of actions related to sexual and reproductive health. Non-availability, withholding or forcing abortion and contraception, not allowing measures to prevent STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) and HIV/AIDS, Female Circumcision/ FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), and practises designed to detect whether a woman's virginity is intact, are all examples of this kind of violence.



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Perpetrators

Perpetrators of sexual violence are not usually strangers but someone known to the person such as a parent, partner, caregiver, professional, teacher, co-worker, boss, coach, friend or acquaintance, clergy, or a person in a position of trust. It also occurs during war and armed conflicts being either as part of a larger coordinated system of violence or as part of one person's actions.

Sexual Violence and the Law

The Canadian Criminal Code defines sexual assault and criminal harassment and the Ontario Human Rights Code defines sexual harassment. These codes only address a very small proportion of the sexual violence perpetuated and neither system has proven very effective in responding to the needs of survivors.

Who Experiences Sexual Violence?

Social location – meaning how we are located in society based on our identity - continues to be the single most important predictor of the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence.

While the greatest risk factor is being female, one's risk of experiencing sexual violence increases when one is young, old, poor, a person of colour, Aboriginal, an immigrant, Deaf, a person with a disability, has a sexual orientation or gender identity which does not conform to heterosexual gendered norms, is criminalized or is institutionalized



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Systemic Violence

Sexual violence must be understood not as a series of unconnected and isolated incidents but as systems of violent expressions of power and dominance in the context of deeply oppressive societies.

These are not acts of sexual passion or the “abnormal” behaviour of a few individuals. “Sexual violence is perpetrated by a rape culture, a system of attitudes, beliefs, messages, inequities and acts that support sexual aggression and violence. Sexual violence occurs within a context of oppression including sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, ageism and classism.”

Based on the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centre's 'Defining Sexual Violence'