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.4 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).1,5 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 health policy, the discrepancy is worth investigating.

# Table: Sexual violence against women in India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of female population</th>
<th>Prevalence of sexual violence, 2005-06</th>
<th>Estimates of women who have experienced sexual violence, 2013</th>
<th>Reported rapes in 2001*</th>
<th>Reported rapes in 2012*</th>
<th>Increase in reported rape cases 2001-12*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women aged 15-19 years</td>
<td>9·3%</td>
<td>4·5%</td>
<td>2522 817</td>
<td>391†</td>
<td>5957†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women aged 15-49 years</td>
<td>53·5%</td>
<td>8·5%</td>
<td>27353 391</td>
<td>14 040†</td>
<td>21 665†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reported rapes are the number of rapes (non-martial) reported to police.1 Estimated number of females affected by sexual violence (marital or non-marital) used population estimates from the World Population Prospects.1,2

*Women aged 14-18 years. †Women aged 14-50 years.
perceptions of what constitutes “normal” sexual behaviour resulting from widespread media coverage, the source of the aforementioned discrepancy should be identified and addressed if need be.

I declare that I have no competing interests.

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Authors’ reply

The discrepancy in the mean number of sexual partners reported by men and women has long been recognised, and not just in the context of Britain’s National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal). The means should be identical if there are equal numbers of men and women in the population, and if all partners reside within the population. However, as analyses of the very first Natsal study show, these assumptions in practice do not hold true.

In Britain, the sex ratio for the population as a whole is around 1.1, but this varies over the life course, with more women than men at older ages. As older people report fewer partners, the mean for women is subject to greater influence from those of older age (who constitute a larger proportion of the population) than the mean for men. However, discrepancies in the mean also exist at younger ages because men, and to a lesser extent, women, have partners from outside of Britain, thus violating the assumption of a closed population. More generally, over a person’s lifetime, the sexually active-population changes, with discrepancies unsurprisingly smaller over shorter timeframes. Importantly, age mixing patterns also influence the discrepancy in the means. Men are on average 2 years older than their female partners, a difference which increases with age, so some participants’ partners will be outside the sampled age range—typically more women’s partners than men’s.

Finally, the population distribution of partner numbers is highly skewed, evident from the mean being consistently larger than the median, because the mean is sensitive to extreme values. Men are more likely than women to have larger numbers of partners, including paid partners, and to round up their estimates. Additionally, sex workers, who are more likely to be female and to have larger numbers of partners, have been shown to be under-sampled in probability sample surveys, thus lowering the female mean. However, a narrowing of the gender gap in partner numbers among recent birth cohorts has been observed in Natsal, suggesting that gender differences in response and reporting bias might be diminishing. This trend reflects generational changes but also methodological advances developed and adopted by Natsal, such as use of computer-assisted self-interview for more sensitive questions (including those on partner numbers), enabling more accurate reporting and thus more reliable data to be generated to inform policy and practice.

We declare that we have no competing interests.

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Natsal and sexual violence in Britain

Wendy Macdowall and colleagues’ Article (Nov 30, p 1845) addressed the issue of lifetime prevalence of sexual violence in Britain. The data were obtained from a population-based survey and relied on a question about having unwanted sex since 13 years of age. Excluding sexual assaults during childhood from a survey focusing on lifetime prevalence of unwanted sex is puzzling. The authors point out that the third National Survey of Sexual Health Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) was the first Natsal survey to include questions about sexual violence. However, use of one question about unwanted sexual intercourse did not allow them to explore the whole field of sexual violence.

The range of situations not considered for inclusion in the study is a matter of concern. First, these situations account for many more cases than rape itself, as reported in the USA, where sexual violence other than rape is estimated to affect 78 million people as compared with 23 million victims of rape. Second, child sexual abuse, sexually threatening behaviours, sexual harassment, unwanted touching, and unwanted non-penile vaginal or anal penetrations can all have severe consequences, including post-traumatic stress disorders and an increased suicidal risk. Omission of these situations in a major population-based study can reinforce the view that they are minor forms of sexual violence or not real sexual violence. The authors’ intention to counter myths and misconceptions regarding