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Sexual violence in France: breaking the silence

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We now know more about the frequency of sexual violence in France thanks to a series of scientific surveys conducted in recent years on representatives samples of the population. In a 2006 survey, the number of people who reported having experienced sexual violence at some time in their life was double that recorded in a similar survey six years previously. Nathalie Bajos and Michel Bozon explain the reasons for this increase, which above all reflects a greater readiness to speak out.

Only a small minority of sexual assaults are reported to the police. General population surveys, which address the issue from the individual viewpoint, whatever the legal qualification of the act, provide a valuable source of data on the frequency, circumstances and consequences of sexual violence. The 2006 survey on the context of sexuality in France (*Contexte de la sexualité en France*, CSF, see box) asked respondents if they had experienced sexual touching, forced sexual intercourse or attempted forced intercourse at any time in their life, using the same question as asked six years previously in the national survey on violence against women in France (*enquête nationale sur les violences envers les femmes en France*, ENVEFF) [1]. From one survey to the next, the number of reported sexual assaults doubled, while the number of cases reported to the police and the gendarmerie remained stable over the period [2]. As the wording of the 2006 survey was the same as in 2000, the two sets of results can be compared to find an explanation for the sharp increase in reported forced intercourse (1).

◆ Events that are frequent, but rarely mentioned

The distinction made by respondents between forced intercourse and attempted forced intercourse may vary between social groups and by age, though the law treats both offences equally: it is the assaulter's intention which counts, as perceived by the assaulted person. In the CSF survey, 16% of women and 5% of men report having experienced forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse at some time in their life

(6.8% of women report forced intercourse, and 9.1%, attempted forced intercourse, and respectively 1.5% and 3.0% of men). Women aged 25-49 and men aged 40-49 report assaults of this kind more frequently than other age groups (Table 1).

A question was asked about the age at the time of the assault. For all age groups, respondents report that

Table 1 - Percentage of respondents reporting experience of sexual assault at some time in their life, by age and sex

Age at time of survey	Attempted forced intercourse		Forced intercourse	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
18-19	8.4	4.5	4.4	1.4
20-24	9.8	2.7	6.0	1.9
25-34	10.9	2.4	8.4	1.8
35-39	11.5	3.8	7.8	1.8
40-49	8.6	4.1	9.1	2.1
50-59	8.9	2.0	5.4	0.8
60-69	5.9	2.6	3.2	1.3
Overall	9.1	3.0	6.8	1.5

Note: number of respondents aged 18-69: 5,762 women and 4,641 men.
 Interpretation: Among women aged 25-34, 10.9% have experienced attempted forced intercourse.
 (N. Bajos, M. Bozon and the CSF team, *Population & Societies* no. 445, INED, May 2008)
 Source: CSF survey, INSERM/INED.

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 (1) Two other surveys including questions on sexual violence have been conducted recently, but can only partly be used for comparison as the questions are worded differently [3,4].
 (2) Among women aged 18-39, 11% experienced forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse before age 18.

most cases of forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse occurred before age 18. This is the case for 59% of assaulted women and 67% of assaulted men (2).

Acts of sexual violence are typically committed by individuals rather than by groups. More than 90% of assaulted persons mention a single assaulter (92% among women, 95% among men). But while half of all assaulted persons aged over 50 report repeated acts of sexual violence by the same person, generally a male relative, the proportion falls to one-third among younger age groups, who mainly report isolated episodes.

Persons who have had same-sex partners much more frequently report forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse than persons who have had opposite-sex partners only. For women who have had a homosexual relationship at some time in their life the proportion is 44% (versus 15% of heterosexual women) and for men reporting homosexual relationships the proportion is 23% (versus 5% of heterosexual men). The vast majority of assaults occur before age 18.

Forced sexual intercourse before age 18 is more closely linked to socialization (family, school, peer groups), while at later ages partners and co-workers are more often implicated. For example, 35% of women aged over 40 who experienced forced sexual intercourse for the first time after age 18 report that the assaulter was a spouse or a partner, while women who experience sexual violence before age 18 mainly accuse their father, step-father or a family member (27% of cases), or persons known to them (31%). Cases involving unknown assaulters have always been a minority, and the proportion decreases in the younger age groups [2].

Is sexual violence more frequent in certain social groups? Frequency before age 18 for both men and women varies little by father's social category (Table 2), the highest percentage (10%) being found among daughters of men in higher-level occupations. Among women, the frequency of forced sexual intercourse or attempted forced sexual intercourse after age 18 ranges from 6% to 10% depending on social status (while it varies little among men), with slightly higher figures for women in higher-level occupations and those who are self-employed. Clearly, sexual violence, both in adulthood and adolescence, is reported by people in all social categories.

In reply to the survey question "Did you tell anyone about it?", 46% of women who have experienced sexual violence and 62% of men say that they had never spoken to anyone prior to the survey. It is among the oldest age groups (women aged 60-69 and men aged 50-69) that the largest proportions had remained silent (33% and 30% respectively). In the younger age groups, on the other hand, among women aged 18-24 for example, 71% had already told someone about their experience, which suggests a greater readiness to speak out, probably thanks to information campaigns and stronger political focus on the issue of violence against women in recent years.

Among women who have experienced attempted forced intercourse, more than one-third (38%) inform their contact circle, a healthcare professional or law

Table 2 – Percentage of persons who have experienced forced sexual intercourse or attempted forced intercourse by socio-occupational category

Occupation of father (if assault occurred before age 18) or of the person assaulted (if assault occurred after age 18)	First forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse	
	before age 18	after age 18
Women		
Farmers	7.5	8.4
Self-employed: business, trade and crafts	8.1	11.3
Higher-level occupations	10.0	10.5
Intermediate occupations	7.2	8.0
Clerical and sales workers	8.8	6.8
Skilled manual workers	8.0	6.1
Unskilled manual workers	9.0	7.2
Don't know	17.0	-
Overall	8.8	7.4
Men		
Farmers	0.6	0.0
Self-employed: business, trade and crafts	3.5	1.9
Higher-level occupations	3.5	1.9
Intermediate occupations	3.3	2.1
Clerical and sales workers	2.8	1.9
Skilled manual workers	2.3	1.3
Unskilled manual workers	2.6	1.3
Don't know	6.4	-
Overall	2.8	1.6

Population: Persons aged 18-69.

Interpretation: Among women in higher-level occupations, 10.5% experienced forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse after age 18.

(N. Bajos, M. Bozon and the CSF team, *Population & Societies* no. 445, INED, May 2008)

Source: CSF survey, 2006, *INSERM/INED*.

enforcement officer immediately or within a few days, compared with just 17% of those who have experienced forced intercourse, while for those who wait several years before speaking out, the proportions are reversed (12% and 29% respectively). In the former case, reporting the offence may have a preventive effect, protecting the person against further assault.

For certain types of sexual violence, women are much more reluctant to speak about their ordeal. For example, in around 40% of cases of forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse by a spouse or partner, a friend or acquaintance, the women concerned speak up. On the other hand, women much more frequently divulge assaults by a father or step-father (78%), by colleagues (71%), by family members (62%) or by strangers (63%). In the 2000 ENVEFF survey, the authors found that rape by a father, step-father or other male relative was a form of sexual violence that women found especially difficult to talk about [1]. This was no longer the case in the 2006 CSF survey.

Who do the women who experience sexual violence confide in? Only 8% report forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse to a doctor, and 4% to the police or gendarmerie. They most often turn to family members (or certain family members) (31%), even if the perpetrator is himself a family member. Assaults by the father or step-father, massively condemned, are also divulged to friends, partner and health professionals. On the other hand, persons who experience violence

on the part of a spouse, partner or friend seldom speak about their ordeal, precisely because the women concerned rarely discuss this type of violence with their family and because the help of friends or health professionals cannot make up for this absence of close family support. Sexual violence on the part of a spouse or partner is still the most difficult to talk about.

Men who experience sexual violence rarely confide in their family: 20% have spoken to one or more friends, 14% to a family member, and only 0.6% to the police. When the act is committed by a stranger, the assaulted man most frequently informs the family, but when the assaulter is known to him, he tends to confide in his friends. Like women, men who experience attempted forced intercourse talk much more readily to their contact circle than those who have experienced forced intercourse. But in the majority of cases, they remain silent.

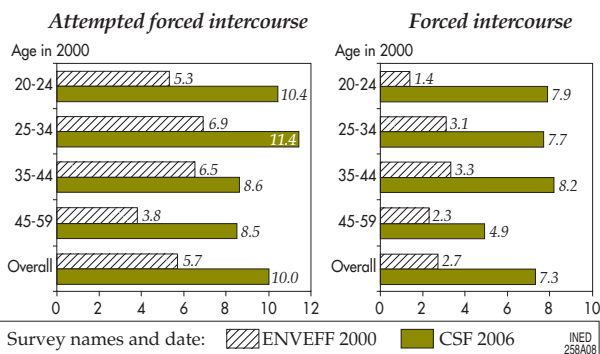
◆ A greater willingness to talk about certain types of violence

Comparison of the 2006 CSF survey with the 2000 ENVEFF survey shows that the increase in reported incidents does not correspond to a growing number of assaults, but to a greater willingness to report them.

The theme of violence against women has aroused social debate and spawned practical initiatives in recent years, and the results of the ENVEFF survey have helped to place this topic on the political agenda. Social recognition of this issue is changing the “intolerability” threshold. Women today are now tending to qualify as assault certain acts which, in the past, they did not consider as such. They are also less reluctant to talk about their experiences.

The frequency of sexual violence reported in the CSF survey by women aged 20-59 is twice as high as in the ENVEFF survey, in all age groups, be it for attempted forced intercourse (10% versus 6%) or forced inter-

Figure – Percentage of women reporting forced sexual intercourse and attempted forced intercourse in 2000 and in 2006, by cohort



Interpretation: Among women aged 45-59 in 2000 (born between 1941 and 1955), in 2000, 2.3% reported having experienced forced intercourse versus 4.9% in 2006.

(N. Bajos, M. Bozon and the CSF team, *Population & Societies* no. 445, INED, May 2008)

Sources: ENVEFF 2000 and CSF 2006.

Box

The Context of Sexuality in France (CSF) survey

The 2006 survey on the context of sexuality in France (*Contexte de la sexualité en France*, CSF)* concerns the link between sexuality and health, focusing on sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and protection against HIV, contraception, induced abortion, sexual dysfunction and sexual violence [2].

The survey was conducted by phone on a random sample of the population aged 18-69. A total of 6,824 women and 5,540 men (12,364 persons) replied to the questionnaire. The interview lasted 49 minutes on average.

The questionnaire module on sexual violence included the same questions as those used in the 2000 ENVEFF survey [1]. It was administered around 30 minutes into the interview after the following introductory phrase: “The press and TV regularly talk about sexual abuse of adults and children. Every year, people are victims of this abuse. To help us find out more about this problem, we would be grateful if you could give us frank answers to the following questions”.

CSF 2006 questions: “During your lifetime, has anyone ever forced you, or tried to force you to have sexual intercourse?” Respondents could choose from the following answers: “yes / yes, tried but didn’t succeed / yes, but I don’t want to talk about it / no / no response (nr)”. The question was asked to both men and women.

ENVEFF 2000 questions: “During your lifetime, when you were young or since you have become an adult, has anyone ever tried to force you, without succeeding, to have sexual intercourse (yes / no / nr)”. Followed by a second question «Has anyone forced you to have sexual intercourse? (yes / no / nr)». As the survey exclusively concerned women, these questions were asked to women only.

Similar questions were asked to characterize the circumstances of sexual assaults (age, type and number of assaulters, persons to whom the respondent spoke about the assault).

* The CSF survey was conducted in 2006 by INSERM and INED on the initiative of the national agency for AIDS research (ANRS). It was carried out by a team of 13 people under the scientific supervision of Nathalie Bajos (INSERM) and Michel Bozon (INED), and co-ordinated by Nathalie Beltzer. The team members were: Armelle Andro, Michèle Ferrand, Véronique Goulet, Anne Laporte, Henri Leridon, Charlotte Le Van, Sharman Levinson, Laurent Toulemon, Nicolas Razafindratsima, Josiane Warszawski, along with Agnès Prudhomme, Lucette Aussel and, from January 2008, Caroline Laborde.

course (7% versus 3%). This increase cannot be attributed to new episodes of violence during the six years between the two surveys, since in more than 85% of cases, forced intercourse occurs before age 25. The increase recorded between 2000 and 2006 among women aged 25-34 at the time of the ENVEFF survey (+65% attempted forced intercourse and +148% forced intercourse) clearly cannot correspond to an increase in the level of violence in the last few years (Figure).

The main reason for this increase is the respondents’ greater propensity to report their experience of violence in a scientific survey. An analysis in terms of assault characteristics – age at occurrence and perpetrator – gives a clearer idea of what this recent change in the perception of sexual violence actually signifies. The highest increase between 2000 and 2006 was in

reports of forced intercourse before age 18, notably those occurring before age 15. This was true for all age groups, both for attempted forced intercourse and forced intercourse. Regarding the perpetrator, the highest increase between 2000 and 2006 was in reports of sexual violence by a father, step-father or male relative (Table 3). Reports of assaults by spouses, partners or friends increased in absolute terms, but not their share of the total. There is every indication that women are now much less reluctant to speak up about violence perpetrated by male family members in their childhood or adolescence.

The survey also reveals high levels of sexual violence against boys during childhood and adolescence. These episodes are rarely reported or divulged, as social consciousness of this issue is still barely emerging.

Although sexual violence is reported more frequently, the levels recorded in scientific surveys such as the CSF survey probably under-estimate the phenomenon. It remains extremely difficult and painful for women and men to recall these traumatic events, especially when the assaulter is a husband, stable partner or friend. Sexual assault within a union is the form of violence women find most difficult to talk about.

◆ Stronger condemnation of violence, but a stable number of complainants

As we have seen, only a tiny minority of sexual assaults are reported to the police. According to the CSF data, 0.44% of women (3), i.e. between 50,000 and 120,000, have experienced forced sexual intercourse or attempted forced intercourse in the last twelve months. This is a comparable figure to that of the most recent INSEE survey in 2007 [4], yet in 2005 only 9,993 persons – around 10% of the total – pressed charges for rape. This illustrates the enormous difficulties faced by the persons concerned, and probably also reflects the way in which their cases are treated.

The spectacular increase in sexual violence reported in scientific population surveys in recent years reveals the growing condemnation of this elementary form of interpersonal violence and a refusal to accept its trivialization. At the same time, the number of registered complaints, which increased rapidly in the 1990s, has levelled off since the beginning of the 2000s (1,417 cases in 1972, 2,167 in 1981, 7,350 in 1995, 9,574 in 2001, 10,506 in 2004, 9,993 in 2005). This paradox of increased censure but unchanging recourse to the criminal justice system raises questions about the way in which such violence – which affects all social groups – is addressed in French society.

The essential role of the criminal justice system should be backed by other social policy responses

(3) The 95% confidence interval is between 0.30% and 0.64%.

Table 3 – Perpetrator of the first sexual assault in the 2006 survey and increase in reported cases since 2000

Perpetrator of first assault	Attempted forced intercourse		Forced intercourse	
	Distribution in 2006 (%)	Multiplication since 2000	Distribution in 2006 (%)	Multiplication since 2000
Spouse, partner, friend	17	1.4	34	2.1
Father, step-father	6	6.8	8	4.1
Male relative	10	2.5	13	3.9
Other acquaintance	39	1.7	25	2.6
Co-worker	5	1.2	2	1.0
Stranger	24	1.5	19	3.1
Total	100	1.7	100	2.6
Sample size	620		415	

Population: Women aged 20-59 with experience of forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse.

Interpretation: Among women aged 20-59 reporting experience of forced intercourse in the 2006 survey, 12.5% were assaulted by a male relative, and assaults of this kind were reported 3.9 times more in 2006 than in 2000.

(N. Bajos, M. Bozon and the CSF team, *Population & Societies* no. 445, INED, May 2008)

Sources: ENVEFF 2000 and CSF 2006.

which are all the more crucial in a context of sexual violence within a union, where one partner may be financially and emotionally dependent on the other. There is a need to create counselling and support structures much closer to the realities of the persons concerned, and to implement a full range of practical measures to provide material and social support to assaulted persons and their entourage.

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ABSTRACT

The *Contexte de la sexualité en France* (CSF) survey in 2006 asked respondents if they had experienced forced sexual intercourse or attempted forced intercourse at some time in their life, using the same question as asked in the 2000 national survey on violence against women in France (ENVEFF). From one survey to the next, the number of reported sexual assaults doubled, with 16% of women and 5% of men in 2006 reporting experience of forced intercourse or attempted forced intercourse at some time in their life. This increase is not due to a rise in the frequency of assault, but to a greater propensity to report experience of sexual violence in a scientific survey, associated with stronger social condemnation of such acts.