How common are rape and other forms of sexual assault in France today? In what contexts, and at what ages do they occur? In 2015, the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) conducted a large-scale survey of violence and gender relations (Violence et rapports de genre, VIRAGE), on a large sample of respondents representative of the French population aged 20-69. Their answers to the survey questions provide a detailed picture of the sexual violence experienced by women and men in France.

Sexual violence has become more visible thanks to feminist activism and scientific surveys.[1] It is difficult to measure, however, as the acts involved and the contexts in which they occur are very diverse and can be qualified under a variety of legal definitions. The VIRAGE survey (Violence et rapports de genre; [Violence and Gender Relations] Box 1), conducted by INED in 2015 on a sample of almost 16,000 women and 12,000 men representative of the French population aged 20-69, enables us to examine in detail the types of violence experienced and to link them to the existing legal categories (Box 2). Here, we present the results for rape, attempted rape and other forms of sexual assault.(1)

The VIRAGE survey: describing acts to qualify the different forms of violence

In France, the first quantitative measures of sexual violence date back to 1992, with a survey of sexual behaviours in France (Analyse des comportements sexuels en France, ACSF).[2] The methodology used in this and subsequent surveys involved collecting information on experience of violence without referring to the penal categories of “rape” or “attempted rape”, as victims often do not know precisely what acts are covered by these terms. The survey asked about “sexual relations under constraint” (ACSF), “forced sexual relations”, “attempts” or “sexual touching” (Baromètre Santé, 2000; Enveff, 2000; EVS, 2005-2006; CSF, 2006; CVS, 2010-2015(2)).

The VIRAGE survey, following on from the ENVEFF survey, examines sexual violence in different life spaces (school or university, workplace, public places, partner, ex-partner, family and social circle), in the last 12 months and over the lifetime. For each life space, three questions were asked to record all facts relating to rape, attempted rape and other sexual assaults, and to specify their nature and the context in which they occurred:

**Question 1, for women:** “Has anyone, against your will, touched your breasts or your buttocks, cornered you in order to kiss you, rubbed or pressed against you?”

**Question 1, for men:** “Has anyone, against your will, rubbed or pressed against you?”

**Question 2, for both sexes:** “Has anyone forced you to perform or submit to sexual touching, and has anyone attempted to have sexual intercourse with you against your will, or succeeded in doing so?”

(1) Sexual harassment and exhibitionism, in the French penal category of “sexual aggressions” will be studied at a later date. (2) Baromètre Santé, 2000 (Health barometer, 2000)[3]; Enveff: Enquête nationale sur les violences envers les femmes en France (National survey on violence against women in France) [4]; EVS: Enquête Événements de vie et santé (Life events and health survey)[5]; CSF: Enquête Contexte de la sexualité en France (Context of sexuality in France) [6]; CVS: Enquête cadre de vie et sécurité (Living environment and security survey)[7].
**Box 1. The Violence and Gender Relations survey (VIRAGE)**

The VIRAGE survey (Violences et rapports de genre) on the contexts and consequences of violence experienced by women and men, focuses on experience of interpersonal violence within the last year and over the lifetime. The survey was administered by the MV2 polling company. Interviews took place by telephone between February and November 2015 on a representative sample of 27,268 persons (15, women and 11,712 men aged 20-69, living in an ordinary household in metropolitan France.

To put respondents at their ease, the questions on violence (psychological, verbal, financial, physical and sexual) were preceded by a series of questions on their (and their partner’s) sociodemographic characteristics, their life history and their state of health. Respondents were then asked about incidents of violence experienced over the last 12 months in school or university, in the workplace, in public spaces, or committed by a partner or ex-partner. The next module concerned experience of violence over the lifetime within the family or close social circle. The last set of questions looked at violence experienced outside the family and prior to the last 12 months. Throughout the questionnaire the words “violence” or “assault” were never used. Descriptions remained purely factual.

(a) The VIRAGE survey was coordinated by the INED research team and designed by a multidisciplinary group of researchers and institutional partners (the full list of team members can be found at http://virage.site.ined.fr). The survey received financial support from: the Ministry for Families, Children and Women’s Rights; the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research; from: the Ministry for Families, Children and Women’s Rights; the départements de Bouches-du-Rhône, Somme, Essonne, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Val-de-Marne, Seine-Saint-Denis; and Mutualité française.

(3) The VIRAGE survey complies with international guidelines for recording acts of sexual violence in quantitative surveys, which recommend that the information collected should be detailed enough to distinguish between different categories of acts (rape, attempted rape and other forms of sexual assault). (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/docs/Guidelines_Statistics_VAW.pdf)
fondling. These most frequently mentioned forms of assault are associated with different levels of gravity: while one-third of women qualified them as “very serious” and another third as “quite serious”, this was the case for one in six men.

Given that many people reported several assaults in different legal categories, the number of victims of sexual violence each year – excluding harassment and exhibitionism – among persons in France aged 20-69 is estimated at 580,000 for women and 197,000 for men. For 7% of women and 5% of men who are victims of violence, the acts of violence take place in at least two different life spaces.

Sexual assaults in the previous year are more frequently reported by young people: at ages 20-34, one in 20 women are victims of assault, five times more than at ages 50-69. But even older women are exposed to violence, with 1% reporting at least one assault in the previous 12 months. Rape and attempted rape are three times more frequent among the youngest women than among the oldest. The youngest women, who are at school or university and are more present in public spaces, are more exposed than their elders, notably to touching of breasts and buttocks, and fondling.

**Experience of sexual violence in numerous contexts over the lifetime**

In the VIRAGE study, one in seven women (14.5%) and one in 25 men (3.9%) reported experience of at least one form of sexual assault (excluding harassment and exhibitionism) in their lifetime (Table 2). These proportions are between those estimated by the ENVEFF survey in 2000 (in which 11% of women aged 20-59 reported experience of sexual violence in their lifetime) and those of the CSF in 2006 (20.6% of women and 6.8% of men aged 18-69). These disparities may be due to differences in question wording and in the age groups interviewed.

Sexual violence against women is not only much more frequent, but occurs in all life spaces throughout life (Table 2). Among women with experience of rape or attempted rape, for 40% it occurred during childhood (before age 15), for 16% during adolescence and for 44% after age 18. Violence by a family member or a partner is frequently repeated and may continue over many years. For men, on the other hand, rape and attempted rape occurred before age 18 in three-quarters of cases (Figure 1).

Generally speaking, it is in the private space, i.e. in relationships with family, friends, partners and ex-partners, including boyfriends or girlfriends, that rape or attempted...
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The proportion of women reporting experience of rape or sexual assault is much higher than that of men. For women, sexual violence takes place within the family during childhood and adolescence, but is also committed by partners and ex-partners. It is also experienced in the various life spaces (workplace, public spaces etc.) throughout life.

Abstract

The proportion of women reporting experience of rape or sexual assault is much higher than that of men. For women, sexual violence takes place within the family during childhood and adolescence, but is also committed by partners and ex-partners. It is also experienced in the various life spaces (workplace, public spaces etc.) throughout life.

References


Women are much more often the victims of sexual violence than men, and in the vast majority of cases their attackers are men. The proportion of victims in the population of women has not fallen to any marked extent in recent years: among women below 35, one in 20 reported experience of a sexual assault within the previous 12 months. The VIRAGE survey gives a clearer idea of the multiple forms of sexual violence and of the various contexts in which it is experienced by women at different ages. During childhood and adolescence, women are exposed to sexual violence within the family and the close social circle. In adulthood, rape and attempted rape may be committed by partners or ex-partners, while other forms of assault take place in school or the workplace, or in public spaces more generally. Public policies to sanction and prevent sexual violence must take account of this multi-faceted reality.

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