

# Sexual Violence

## Sweeping it out from under the rug

Dr Sara Spowart, author, facilitator of humanitarian work and adjunct Professor of Global Health and Psychology at the University of South Florida, USA, examines sexual violence globally. Reporting rates are low, justice systems fail survivors, and human trafficking and conflict-based violence cases remain especially high. Spowart suggests that greater awareness – especially in the global health community – can help combat sexual violence.

**S**exual violence is a broad term. It encompasses many specific crimes, including stalking, rape, human trafficking, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. While most survivors are female, it can happen to anyone, anywhere. Incidents of sexual violence are enormous. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 27% of girls and 14% of boys worldwide have experienced childhood sexual abuse, and that a third of women who have had a partner have experienced sexual or physical violence within a relationship.

Sexual violence varies around the world. While child sexual abuse generally affects girls more than boys, rates are more equal in Asia. WHO found hugely varying rates of sexual violence within intimate partner relationships: from 6% in Japan to 59% in Ethiopia. A study examining what proportion of women's first experiences of intercourse was forced also yielded large differences. In Japan, this was 1%, whereas in Bangladesh it was 30%.

The societal impact of sexual violence is incalculable. Due to the health problems it can cause, it puts enormous pressure on the global health sector and removes potentially millions of people from the workforce. It can have catastrophic effects on families and local communities. For individuals who have survived sexual violence, the short- and long-term psychological and physiological damage can be immense. Sadly, not everyone does survive – sexual violence is a bigger killer of women and girls across the world than traffic accidents and malaria combined.

### Speaking up

Despite the magnitude of this issue, there are still many barriers to tackling it. For centuries, Dr Sara Spowart explains, it has been considered a woman's issue, even though most perpetrators are men. Different cultural responses to gender-based violence mean some women will not recognise unwanted sexual experiences as sexual violence, making it hard to determine how prevalent sexual violence is in different countries.

Around the world, survivors of sexual violence are unlikely to report it – especially if they are male. Stigma, shame, and secrecy surround

this type of abuse. Fear of not being believed, of being blamed, or of being socially ostracised can prevent people from speaking up. Most survivors know their abuser, so fear of retaliation is another obstacle. In some cultures, reporting sexual violence can result in honour killings or victims being forced into marrying their abusers. In total, somewhere between 80 and 95% of the world's sexual violence cases go unreported.

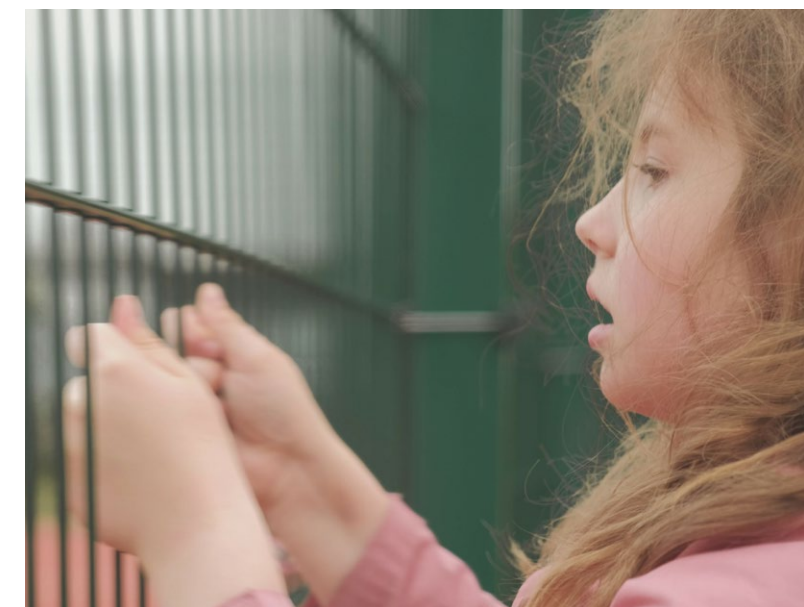
For those cases that are reported, there is little hope of justice anywhere in the world. In the USA, only 2.5% of perpetrators see jail time. Unfortunately, judicial systems inherently protect perpetrators.

### No woman's land

War, post-war and humanitarian areas are rife with sexual violence. For offenders, unstable enforcement and justice systems mean the risk of consequence is low. They are generally strangers to their victims, often using sexual violence as a weapon. For survivors, instability means there is minimal structural, judicial, and healthcare support.

The risk of conflict-based sexual violence is well known. Over twenty years ago, the UN Security Council recognised that the outcomes of armed conflict negatively impact women and children the worst and acknowledged the heightened prevalence of sexual violence in conflict zones. But reducing the risk of sexual violence in unstable settings is difficult. Humanitarian aid predominately focuses on supporting reproductive health needs instead of preventing sexual violence in the first place. Spowart believes UN peacekeeping

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forces require better training surrounding these issues. She also recommends a greater interrogation of why sexual violence occurs so frequently in conflict – of what motivates perpetrators in this setting.

Various prevention strategies are being employed. The International Committee for the Red Cross and the United Nations engage armed conflict groups across the world in conversations around sexual violence, aiming to increase awareness and prevent it from being used as a weapon. Measures to reduce stigma are also in play: theatre can be used to help the public understand the complexities around reporting sexual violence and to grow empathy for survivors. But in unstable settings, criminal and health systems must be more robust to ensure perpetrators are held accountable and survivors can be helped.

## Profiting from pain

Human sex trafficking is one of the least discussed and most damaging types of sexual violence. Every year, around 11.4 million women and girls are trafficked around the world. Almost half the victims are children, with 12–14 being the average age at which a person is trafficked. The largest market for sex trafficking is in Germany, followed by the USA. Between 18,000 and 50,000 people are brought into the USA each year, about 90% of whom are female. But the term 'human trafficking' also refers to victims trafficked within their own country. Disadvantaged, marginalised, and isolated young people are at higher risk of being trafficked locally.

So why do people engage in sex trafficking? The answer is simple: it's low risk and high profit. Traffickers can hide easily, using the Internet as their market. The US Department of Justice has admitted that many police are unaware of the prevalence of trafficking in their area and that more training is required in laws surrounding trafficking. Meanwhile, traffickers are making 5–20 times what they have paid for a person – that's more than drug traffickers make.

Identifying victims of sex trafficking is challenging. Victims themselves may lie about their situation through fear or manipulation. Many traffickers, called 'Romeo pimps', use highly coercive strategies to build up trust with their victims, fulfilling their needs and providing for them. Eventually, this demonstration of care becomes threatening and violent. Traffickers are sometimes related to their victims, using them to fund



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drug addictions or gain power. Victims may therefore be traumatically bonded to their traffickers in complex ways, making them untrusting of strangers and fearful of asking for help. They may feel they have nowhere else to go.

Spowart suggests that while a moral awakening to human trafficking is possible, it will not solve the problem. Instead, she advocates for an economic approach. Sex trafficking is profitable because there is a large market for it. This market could be reduced by educating the public about the realities behind sex trafficking and the Internet's role in marketing its victims. Alongside this, providing economic support for the most at-risk populations would reduce the ability of traffickers to exploit economic vulnerabilities. Put simply, a trafficker disguised as a knight in shining armour will have no success if his potential victim does not need rescuing.

## Turning up the volume

To tackle sexual violence, Spowart argues, we must reduce stigma. This requires vocal support from leaders throughout the world, better education for the global public, and more open conversations about these issues. This way, victim-blaming narratives can be challenged, and reporting rates may increase. Involving men in these discussions may prevent potential perpetrators and help more male victims speak out. This is especially important as, unfortunately, victims of sexual violence are at greater risk of becoming perpetrators themselves. Reducing stigma and improving reporting rates may help stop the cycle of violence.

Spowart emphasises the importance of a multi-faceted approach. Many sectors can help combat sexual violence, including academia, entertainment, and education. Legal systems must adapt to support survivors, and law enforcers must be better trained to identify and prevent sexual violence. The global health sector has an especially important role, as – with proper training – health practitioners have a unique opportunity to identify and support those experiencing sexual violence.

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## A brighter future – eventually

There is hope, going forwards. Movements like 'Me Too' are garnering public support and raising awareness. Small- and large-scale organisations are working across the world with perpetrators and survivors to better understand how to prevent sexual violence and support its victims. These efforts mean we are now more equipped than ever before for how best to support survivors, both psychologically and physiologically.

Presently, however, perpetrators are causing extraordinary amounts of damage to millions of people. This enormous human rights issue has been a problem for centuries. It is still, in some cultures, thought of as 'the way things are'. Spowart suggests a new perspective is required: understanding perpetrators' motivations. 'We need to ask tough questions', she writes, to determine what benefit perpetrators get from causing such harm.

If we can understand the reasons behind these brutalities, we can perhaps understand how to stop them. It is important to remember, Spewart emphasises, that we are talking about real suffering here. It's easy to get bogged down in the horrifying statistics, but what it comes down to is countless individual experiences of immense pain and trauma. It's time to make a change.

## Personal response

*Regarding sexual violence, how optimistic do you feel about the future, and why?*

The more we can open up and have conversations about this issue, the more optimistic I feel. I actually do feel optimistic because the more light is shined on it, and the greater the reach of education on the issue, the more I feel it will improve. However, there also needs to be some kind of consequence for perpetrators that initiate sexual violence and that helps to lessen the issue. Maybe something like a court-ordered sexual violence for perpetrators course could make a positive impact. There is a batterers intervention course in the US that is court-mandated, but I think a sexual violence intervention/sexual violence prevention course is also a good option for an optimistic future.

## Details



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## Research Objectives

Dr Sara Spowart examines global incidence of sexual violence.

**Bio**

Dr Sara Spowart has written numerous articles, chapters, and books. She is the owner and founder of Compassion-Based Happiness, the facilitator of humanitarian projects in Tanzania, Mali, Burkina Faso and Afghanistan, and an adjunct professor at the University of South Florida.

### Further reading

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