



Published in final edited form as:

JAMA Pediatr. 2014 June ; 168(6): 581. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2013.5408.

Understanding Sexual Violence Perpetration: Gender Matters

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The article entitled, “Prevalence Rates of Male and Female Sexual Violence Perpetrators in a National Sample of Adolescents” recently published in *JAMA Pediatrics* documents that both males and females can be perpetrators or victims of sexual violence;¹ however, the methodology used and interpretation of the findings ignore the important influence of gender, particularly in the etiology underlying sexual violence perpetration.

First, while authors have stratified their findings by males and females, there is no discussion provided to explain how findings would be expected to vary by gender (or biological factors related to male or female sex, though less plausible). However, presenting findings separately for males and females, implies an expectation of the role of gender (and/or sex) to afford significant differences in findings.

Increasingly, studies such as Ybarra et al. have reported that females are perpetrating dating and/or sexual violence in similar proportions as males.² Collectively, these works imply that such violence perpetration is not differentiated by gender. However, numerous other studies have presented empirical findings highlighting that such conclusions are a result of limitations in measurement, primarily by using measures that do not consider relevant differences by gender in the motivations, context, or consequences of abuse.³ Namely, differences exist in the reporting of violence by gender. Male perpetrated violence, particularly sexual violence, including pressure or coercion, is a highly stigmatized behavior and likely under-reported in a way that is not comparable to female's reports of violence perpetration. Furthermore, males and females perpetrate violence and abuse for different reasons that are influenced by gender. The majority of male perpetrated violence, particularly against females, is gender-based; regardless of the gender of the victim, male perpetrated sexual violence has been linked to gender norms that promote male dominance and control, as demonstrated by a recently published multi-country study on rape perpetration.⁴ We have seen this as a significant finding across every study on the topic, and this has arisen from practical evidence on the ground.⁴⁻⁵ In contrast to these findings among males, there are no societal level gender norms or other societal level factors that are influencing populations of females to perpetrate sexual violence in the same way.

In summary, consideration of the role and basis of gender in violence perpetration is needed in both the way research questions are developed, the measures used, as well as within the

interpretation of findings to ensure that findings most appropriately inform future research and prevention/intervention efforts.

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