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Author's declarative title: Adolescent girls are susceptible to sexual pressure, coercion and victimization and strategies need to be developed and aimed at males and females to prevent this.

Yvonne Wilkinson

Commentary

Implications for practice and research

- The power imbalance within sexual relationships needs to be addressed; sex and relationship education should focus around consent, issues of respect and gender harassment.
- Research exploring the attitudes of young males towards sexual relationships, including sexual pressure and coercion may provide valuable insight in order to develop appropriate sexual health promotion programmes.

Context

The #MeToo campaign and the use of social media have highlighted and brought to the forefront of society the sexual pressure, coercion and victimisation of women that has been an experience of women across time¹. Tarana Burke began using the phrase 'me too' more than 10 years ago when as an activist she supported women of colour surviving sexual abuse. More recently high profile cases such as the allegations against Harvey Weinstein have enabled all women to share their experiences of sexual harassment, victimisation, assault and coercion using the #MeToo. The study by Morrison-Beedy and colleagues focusses on adolescent girls and their experiences of sexual pressure, coercion and victimisation.

Methods

The purpose of the study² was to describe the sexual experiences of adolescent girls relating to sexual pressure, coercion and victimisation. This study was part of a larger randomized control trial testing the impact of a gender specific sexual risk reduction intervention. Convenience sampling was used to recruit 735 sexually active girls aged 15 -19 years from a large urban area in New York State. Following completion of a demographic and sexual history survey, the participants were asked to complete the Koss Sexual Experiences Scale to measure sexual coercion and abuse. Participants were specifically asked about sexual experiences that occurred by a) a man using his position of authority, b) using continuous arguments or pressure, c) being provided with drugs or alcohol, d) using threats or actual force. Baseline data was analysed using SAS

with means, standards deviations and percentages to describe the participant's experiences with sexual pressure, coercion and victimisation.

Findings

The average age of participants was 16.5 years, 50% of the participants said that sexual experiences (excluding intercourse) had occurred by at least one of the four means on the survey. 21% of participants stated this coercion was by a man who used his position of power with up to 1 in 5 girls stating that at least one of these had occurred on three or more occasions. 12-28% of participants reported experiences of attempted or actual intercourse or various sex acts due to threats and actual physical force.

Commentary

This study found that 21% of girls experienced coercion from males, who used their position of authority eg a boss, coach or teacher in this negative and damaging way. This clearly indicates a breach of trust and has stark similarities with the #MeToo campaign. However 50% of the girls reported being coerced into sex acts (excluding intercourse) which suggests a significant proportion of these were not solely by men in authority. The age of the men referred to in this study is not clear, however participants reported at baseline they had older sexual partners with a mean age of 18.7 years, compared to the average age of girls being 16.5 years, which would suggest that sexual pressure, coercion and victimisation exists in partnerships with ages more closely aligned. The use of language in this study should be viewed with caution as the age range of participants is from 15 -19 years and they are referred to as adolescents girls and whilst the age of the men referred to by participants is not specifically included, the age of partners would suggest that many of these are also adolescents boys and yet are referred to as men. Irrespective of this, the study does highlight an unequal power dynamic within relationships suggesting that men have and are perceived as able to exert control over women. This gender difference was also found in young people's experience of sexting³, girls felt coerced, threatened or bribed by boys to produce images and participate in sexting practices. This gender imbalance and unequal power dynamics in sexual relationships must be addressed; work needs to focus on both males and females throughout the lifespan to develop strategies to eliminate this.

References

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Competing Interests None