



Getting at the Roots of Sexual Violence Against Women

Research shows sexual violence is more likely where women are isolated, unsupported, undereducated, unmarried, and surrounded by addiction.

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SEXUAL ABUSE

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What conditions make violence against women more likely?

I first began asking this after an experience as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Northeastern Brazil, when we passed by a home where a woman had just, the night prior, been killed by her husband.

I'll never forget that day. Neighbors were speaking on the street in hushed tones about how they had heard the screams. Rather than a surprise, this woman's violent death seemed to have followed years of torment at the hands of her husband—so much so that some who lived close-by admitted they had become used to it.

How was this even possible? How could anything like this take place, I wondered, especially at the hands not of strangers, but of men most responsible to nurture, love and protect?

Women around the world continue to face disheartening levels of violence from husbands, boyfriends, dates, colleagues and sometimes strangers. Perhaps if we understood—truly understood, at a deeper level—why such abuse was taking place, we could do something more about it.

Several years ago, Public Square Magazine generously provided initial funding for me to gather a research team to gather published studies around the world that get at the roots of this question. Our small team reviewed thousands of studies to identify those focused specifically on risk factors for sexual violence.

Our team paid careful attention to risk factors for both sexual perpetration and victimization. The studies explored span the globe, uniting insights from dedicated research teams doing incredible work in many countries and across a wide variety of settings (campuses, workplaces and homes). We also paid careful attention to general studies of “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence,” which tend to include some degree of sexual coercion and abuse as well.

Earlier this year, I completed this review of 500 abuse studies (285 adult, 215 youth), publishing a [summary version](#) of these results in the Deseret News, and the [full-length, 73 page version](#) also posted on my Substack last month.

In this project, we have hoped to add to the ongoing, international project to “further unravel the complicated ... interactions related to victimization,” as European analysts [wrote](#) recently—ultimately considering how “specific combinations of characteristics may contribute to an increased likelihood of victimization.”

Clearly, there’s no simple cause of any of this, accurately [described](#) by one research team in Kenya recently as a problem that is “complex and multifaceted.” The CDC likewise [advocated](#) nearly two decades ago for building a comprehensive ecological model that “offers a framework

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for understanding the complex interplay of individual, relationship, social, political, cultural and environmental factors that influence sexual violence.”

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In 2014, however, other CDC researchers [admitted](#), “Rates of sexual violence remain alarmingly high, and we still know very little about how to prevent it.”

The good news is that if we can capture a clearer picture of what’s really making this kind of tragic violence against women more likely, we can then take [more effective steps](#) to eradicate this evil which terrorizes so many women (of all ages and backgrounds) around the world today.

Here, I provide a summary analysis of patterns that make sexual violence against women more likely—with a deeper focus on patterns in relation to faith and religiosity. After reviewing these results, I will touch on practical steps that families and communities can take—each of which follow from these findings.

10 patterns associated with increased vulnerability

1. Fragile family economic well-being

Women growing up in difficult economic circumstances (insufficient family income, lack of employment, food insecurity) are more vulnerable to being victimized sexually—while men growing up in these same circumstances are more vulnerable to becoming sexually aggressive.

The opposite is also true in homes where economic needs are met (sufficient income, employment and food), consistently showing men and women in these families being protected from being drawn into sexual violence and other kinds of abuse too.

While having paid work outside the home acts as a preventive measure against sexual violence for some women, many studies in developing countries find the opposite—with formal employment sometimes heightening a risk of victimization for women, especially those with isolated jobs or which involve night shifts.

2. Limited educational opportunities

Studies around the world show women to be more vulnerable to sexual violence when they have little to no education. Men are also more likely to be sexually aggressive when they are illiterate, or have a lower level of formal education.

The opposite is again true, with women who have more years of education frequently less likely to be victimized and men with more education are also less likely to perpetrate sexual violence.

There are exceptions to this protective effect from education since some campus environments appear to raise the risk of sexual violence. And there are some parts of the world where a woman with more education than her husband somehow raises her risk of being victimized.

3. Living in an unhealthy, conflicted intimate relationship

Women who are divorced, cohabiting or living alone are all at greater risk for sexual violence, according to different studies. None of this means married women are automatically safer, however, with so much depending on how cooperative and happy a marriage is, along with how much serious conflict is involved.

A number of studies confirm that how well a couple is able to work together in decision-making has an influence on their risk for different kinds of abuse. And unsurprisingly, when higher levels of control exist in a marriage, there is simultaneously a greater likelihood for all types of abuse. Men with less empathy and more hostility generally are also more likely to perpetrate violence of various kinds.

Higher numbers of sexual partners increase the likelihood of men perpetrating sexual violence.

4. Raising young children without adequate support

According to multiple studies, the presence of children in a home increases a mother's risk level for abuse victimization generally—likely due to the added stress this places upon marriages and families.

Whether due to marital conflict, economic struggles, mental health challenges or additional children, families enduring heightened levels of stress clearly appear more vulnerable to different kinds of abuse.

Even the addition of a single child raises victimization risk, with studies also showing heightened vulnerability to abuse at the hands of an intimate partner during pregnancy. Sadly, women unable to have children face additional victimization risk. And in some parts of the world, having a daughter instead of a son likewise increases the risk of victimization.

The quality of parenting clearly makes a difference for what a child's future safety will be as adults. A home life that is chaotic, disrupted, impoverished, with parents who are uneducated, addicted or divorced, raises the risk of eventual victimization for that child as they become an adult.

5. Drug and alcohol abuse

Few factors have received more consistent empirical verification than the impact of alcohol and drugs—not only on men who are significantly more likely to perpetrate sexually under the influence of substances, but also on women who are more likely to be sexually victimized under the influence.

As Italian researchers [summarize](#), “alcohol can impair cognition, distort reality, increase aggression, and ease drug-facilitated sexual assault.”

Drug use can also “render a victim incapable of defending themselves or unable to avoid dangerous situations where victimization may occur” [according](#) to U.S. researchers.

This is especially true with heavy, regular substance use, which U.S. researchers in one campus study [called](#) “one factor that has been found in most studies to be associated with higher risk for sexual aggression.”

There appears to be even higher vulnerability when both a man and woman are under the influence, with one U.S. research team [concluding](#), “the amount of alcohol consumed by both perpetrators and victims also predicted the amount of aggression and type of sexual assault.”

If you grew up in a home with alcohol or were exposed to alcohol and other substances at an early age, there's also evidence of increased risk for sexual violence as an adult. Alcohol is also one major reason sexual violence is often higher in college, especially campuses with a cultural acceptance of heavy drinking as a social norm.

6. Early, risky, casual sexual behavior

When women have sexual experiences earlier in life, they are at greater risk of sexual violence—especially when that involves casual “hook-ups” with multiple people. One research team **called** this “simple probability,” in that “multiplying partners would increase the chances of being involved with a violent partner.”

Repeatedly, studies also confirm that higher numbers of sexual partners increase the likelihood of men perpetrating sexual violence.

Cohabitation and extramarital affairs likewise raise the risk of sexual violence, as does overall impulsivity. For example, gambling is associated with increased risk of both perpetration and victimization.

In the other direction, stronger impulse control and overall self-control unsurprisingly protect against sexual violence.

Relatedly, **over 100 studies** have linked compulsive pornography use to sexual aggression, coercion and violence against women and children. For instance, one 2015 analysis examining 22 studies from 7 different countries **concluded** that pornography consumption was “associated with sexual aggression in the United States and internationally, among males and females, and in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.”

7. Ongoing, significant mental health challenges

It's expected that victims would experience depression and anxiety in the difficult aftermath of abuse. There's also evidence that women who experience mental health problems are at greater, additional risk of being victimized sexually—as are those who endure traumatic effects from any previous abuse.

Studies also find that men with different mental health challenges, including depression and bipolar disorder, can sometimes be at greater risk of perpetration. And there are cases in which medical treatments appear to have prompted sexual aggression among male patients that was “wholly alien to their character and antithetical to their prior behavior,” in the words of one psychiatrist.

In terms of victimization, Canadian researchers also **note** several studies confirming that “psychotropic drug abuse” can sometimes alter women’s judgment and “keep them from recognizing and avoiding dangerous situations and defending themselves against an attack.”

8. Adverse childhood experiences and young adult aggression

The atmosphere of one’s family upbringing can influence risk for sexual victimization and perpetration as an adult. Studies highlight lower levels of earlier “family cohesion” and “emotional expressiveness in the family” as predicting later abuse.

Witnessing significant fighting between a mother and father as a child also raises later victimization risk—especially if that conflict is unresolved and leads to separation and divorce. Any type of family disruption and residential displacement increases the risk of sexual victimization and exploitation. This risk rises to an entirely new level, however, for children who have witnessed parents hurting each other physically, emotionally or sexually.

When those children get hurt emotionally or physically, they experience even more risk for victimization or perpetration when they grow up. This is especially true when children are sexually victimized, with German researchers **observing** that “sexual abuse in childhood increases the odds of experiencing and engaging in sexual aggression in adolescence and young adulthood.”

This has been known for decades now, with U.S. researchers **stating** back in 1998, “childhood sexual abuse consistently predicted sexual re-victimization in adulthood.”

That risk rises even more when multiple kinds of early abuse are involved, with Swedish researchers **reporting** that exposure to different kinds of abuse in childhood was “found to be the most potent risk factor for sexual violence in adulthood among adult women.”

When women experience sexual violence as a young adult—be that from a boyfriend or stranger—they are also more likely to be victimized again (even repeatedly).

9. Limited social support and expanding isolation

One pattern that seems especially clear empirically is that anytime a woman is isolated she is more at risk. This includes women who: (1) communicate less with their own family of origin, (2) live at a residence with no other adults, (3) have only a transient place of residence, (4) live in a rented house (especially by themselves), (5) work a night shift, and (6) experience barriers to healthcare access.

Women who are refugees or immigrants also experience elevated risk of victimization, especially when a language barrier exists or when they are undocumented. And ethnic and gender minorities often experience heightened risk, likely due to associated social isolation or economic disadvantage.

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This may also explain why women (and children) living in a “post-conflict” zone or areas that have recently endured natural disasters experience heightened risk for sexual victimization.

In the other direction, those women who report experiencing the support of friends, family and surrounding community are less likely to be victimized sexually.

But a lot depends on the attitudes of surrounding relationships. It’s clearly no great protection to be surrounded by in-laws or other neighbors who see violence in a marriage as “sometimes justified.” And being around friends who also experience sexual violence or normalize any kind of abuse also measurably raises the risk of victimization for women.

Clearly, not all communities have equal levels of awareness of this problem. That is even more apparent when we look back through different time periods in history when global awareness of this danger was far less.

10. Limited religious community and faith commitment

Religious faith plays an important role in the risk for sexual violence. For instance, one set of studies finds a lack of religious affiliation to be associated with more likelihood of sexual perpetration among men and sexual victimization among women. For instance:

- “Low religious involvement” in the family raises risk for abuse among immigrant women in Spain (Vives-Cases, et al., 2014).
- Women “lacking religious commitment” are at greater risk of victimization in Mozambique (Maguele, et al., 2020).
- “Lack of faith and lower attendance at religious services correlated with higher levels of abuse” according to U.S. researchers—sharing their findings that women abused during pregnancy “professed less religious faith and religious service attendance” (Dunn & Oths, 2004).
- “Being less involved in religious activities” is among the “risk factors for dating victimization” (Vézina & Hébert, 2007).
- “Non-Christians were at increased risk for clinically significant intimate partner violence victimization” in a study of U.S. Air Force personnel (Foran, et al., 2011).
- There is higher risk of intimate partner violence among women who “practiced no religion” in a Kenyan study (Memiah, et al., 2021).
- “Being without religion” is “associated with increased chances of rape” in a Brazilian study (Diehl, et al., 2022).
- Citing “lack of church attendance” as one of the characteristics that are “common risk factors for abuse,” Lown & Vega, 2001 found additional evidence that “no or infrequent church attendance” among women was among a set of factors associated with more intimate partner violence. “No church attendance or infrequent church attendance significantly increased the odds of intimate partner violence” among women, they stated—adding that “religious involvement has been shown to be protective in previous studies as it was in our sample.”
- After summarizing Fergusson, et al., 1986’s finding that couples attending church most often in New Zealand were also least likely to report violence in their relationship, Ellison & Anderson, 2001 continued to describe the “graded pattern” this earlier research team found: “On the other hand, men and women who never attend religious services are much more likely than their more religious counterparts to engage in domestic violence.” This research team goes on to report their own research that “shows that religious communities can provide a

haven and resource for the victims of abuse, particularly through the informal support networks of church women.”

These effects of low faith show up with male partners as well:

- “Men with no religious affiliation” are among the “significant predictors” of intimate partner violence in another Brazilian study (Zaleski, et al., 2010).
- Intimate partner violence is more common among women whose husbands “attend church less frequently” according to Hindin & Adair, 2002. These researchers report in the Philippines that intimate partner violence (IPV) is “less likely with more household assets, and more frequent church attendance by the husband.” They go on to emphasize the value of “finding additional activities, like attending church, where men might be receptive to messages that discourage IPV or that promote the value of communication.”

The patterns reviewed above make one thing unmistakably clear: sexual violence does not emerge from nowhere. It grows in environments of accumulated strain—economic fragility, relational conflict, addiction, isolation, untreated trauma, and, often, spiritual disengagement. No single factor guarantees harm. But when vulnerabilities stack, risk rises.

Understanding these patterns is not about assigning blame; it is about identifying leverage points for more effective protection. If certain life conditions consistently increase danger, then strengthening their opposites—education, stability, supportive community, emotional health, and genuine, healthy faith—becomes a meaningful path toward prevention.

In Part II, I will move from patterns of vulnerability to practical application—examining what families, congregations, and communities can proactively and specifically do to interrupt these cycles and build stronger layers of safety around women and children.

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If you or someone you love has experienced sexual assault of any kind and need additional support in the U.S., contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-656-HOPE)- with virtual and text-based options available. This is a confidential networking service in the U.S. helping connect victims with local agencies who can offer therapeutic support across the country. Similar kinds of hotlines exist in many countries around the world.

About the author



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