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Rape and sexual assault in France: initial findings of the VIRAGE survey

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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].

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Question 3, for both sexes: “Has anyone ever forced you to engage in other sexual acts or practices?”

While the second question is classic in this type of survey, the aim of the third was to record acts not identified as “forced sexual relations” or “touching”, but which nonetheless constitute a form of rape or sexual assault. Respondents who gave a positive answer to one of these questions were asked to describe what happened by choosing from a list of items [8] so that they did not have to say the words out loud. On the basis of this list, the VIRAGE survey can be used *ex post* to construct indicators of violence that correspond as closely as possible to the legal categories.⁽³⁾ The respondents were not required to categorize the acts themselves.

Box 1. The Violence and Gender Relations survey (VIRAGE)^(a)

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; the Ministry of the Interior; MILDECA; INPES; ANRS; INED; CNAF; ACSÉ (CGET); Centre Hubertine Auclert; Observatoire de l’égalité entre les femmes et les hommes de la ville de Paris; Mission de recherche droit et justice; Défenseur des droits; the *départements* of 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)

Multiple forms of sexual assault in the previous year

An estimated 62,000 women and 2,700 men aged 20-69 in France are victims of at least one rape or attempted rape each year (Table 1). Among these victims, 27,600 women and 1,100 men experienced at least one rape and one attempted rape over the previous year. The list of reported acts confirms that rape takes multiple forms. Some of these acts, notably penetration with a finger or an object, were not mentioned in answers to the question which concerns “forced sexual intercourse”, but were mentioned in answers to the subsequent one.

In the VIRAGE survey, 0.3% of woman aged 20-69 reported being victims of rape or attempted rape in the previous 12 months (Table 1). This proportion is similar to that found in the ENVEFF and CSF surveys (0.5% and 0.4%, respectively) for forced intercourse and attempted forced intercourse, and in the CVS survey (0.4%) for the period 2010-2015.[8]

An estimated 553,000 women and 185,000 men were victims of other forms of sexual assault in the previous 12 months. Among these victims, 11% of women and 7% of men reported touching of the sexual organs, 95% of women reported touching of the breasts or buttocks, forced kissing or fondling and 93% of men reported

Table 1. Percentages and numbers of victims of rape, attempted rape and other sexual assaults in the previous 12 months

Legal category	Women		Men	
	%	Number	%	Number
Rape and attempted rape	0.31	62,000 ⁽¹⁾ [38,000-86,000]*	0.01	2,700 ⁽¹⁾ [0-6,000]*
- At ages 20-34	0.45	25,600	ns ⁽²⁾	ns ⁽²⁾
- At ages 35-49	0.40	26,100	ns ⁽²⁾	ns ⁽²⁾
- At ages 50-69	0.13	10,300	ns ⁽²⁾	ns ⁽²⁾
Other forms of sexual assault⁽³⁾	2.76	553,000 [483,000-622,000]*	0.97	185,000 [143,000-227,000]*
- At ages 20-34	5.36	303,000	1.47	81,000
- At ages 35-49	2.60	170,000	1.10	70,000
- At ages 50-69	1.02	80,000	0.46	34,000
All forms of sexual assault⁽⁴⁾	2.90	580,000 ⁽⁵⁾ [509,000-651,000]*	1.03	197,000 ⁽⁵⁾ [154,000-240,000]*

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey 2015.

Coverage: Men and women aged 20-69 living in metropolitan France.

Notes: (1) i.e. 52,400 women reported rape and 36,900 attempted rape, with 62,000 having been victims of one or other type, or both. Likewise, 2,700 men reported rape and 1,100 attempted rape.

(2) Non-significant as numbers are too small.

(3) Excluding sexual harassment, exhibitionism and other forced sexual acts and practices.

(4) Including rape and attempted rape, but excluding harassment and exhibitionism.

(5) A person may report several acts in different categories, so this figure is not equal to the sum of totals in each category.

* [38,000-86,000]: 95% confidence interval.

fondling.⁽⁴⁾ 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.

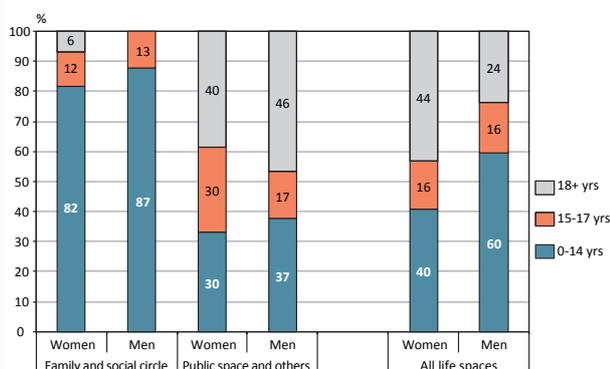
Given that many people reported several assaults in different legal categories, the number of victims of sexual violence each year – excluding harassment and exhibitionism – among persons in France aged 20-69 is estimated at 580,000 for women and 197,000 for men. For 7% of women and 5% of men who are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

Box 2. Definitions in the French penal code

“Sexual aggression is any sexual assault committed with violence, constraint, threat or surprise.” (art. 222.22 of the penal code). “Any act of sexual penetration, whatever its nature, committed against another person by violence, constraint, threat or surprise, is rape” (art. 222.23 of the penal code). A person who commits attempted rape is deemed to have committed the completed offence (art. 121-4 of the penal code). Rape and attempted rape are crimes subject to the same penalties before the Assize Court. Sexual assaults other than rape are offences tried before the criminal court.

Figure 1. Age at time of rape or attempted rape *



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*: When several acts were reported, age when first act occurred. Source: INED, Virage survey 2015. Interpretation: Among women who reported rape or attempted rape, 44% were victims for the first time after age 18.

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).[6] 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.⁽⁵⁾ 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

Table 2. Percentages of victims of sexual violence over their lifetime, by life space

Life space	Rape and attempted rape		All forms of sexual violence ⁽¹⁾	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Family and social circle	1.61	0.32	5.00	0.83
School or university	0.20	0.04	1.38	0.49
Partner ⁽²⁾	1.39	0.03	1.91	0.31
Workplace	0.06	0.00	1.79	0.57
Public spaces and other	0.90	0.27	7.85	2.19
All life spaces	3.72	0.61	14.47	3.94

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey 2015. Coverage: Men and women aged 20-69 living in metropolitan France. (1) Including rape and attempted rape, but excluding harassment and exhibitionism. (2) Partner or ex-partner at the time of the assault. Interpretation: Among women aged 20-69, 14.47% report experience of sexual violence at some time in their life (all life spaces), and 5.00% report experience of violence within the family or social circle.

(4) “Fondling” refers to an act committed by someone who “against your will, rubs or presses against you”.

(5) Age at first experience of violence is used here.

rape most frequently occurs. This is the case for three-quarters of female victims.

Sexual violence is especially prevalent in the family and the close social circle: 5% of women have been assaulted at least once since childhood in this context, and 1.6% have been victims at least once of rape or attempted rape. The victims are generally young, with 82% of instances of rape or attempted rape within the family beginning before their 15th birthday. This is also the space in which most men report being victims of rape and attempted rape, with the first assault occurring before age 15 in nearly 90% of cases.

The relationship (lasting at least four months) with the intimate partner or former partner, including boyfriends or girlfriends, are the second life space in which women are most often victims of rape and attempted rape, in 10% of cases before age 18. These are the most frequent forms of sexual violence in this context; other types of sexual violence are reported less frequently than in the family context.

Sexual assault other than rape or attempted rape are the most common offences in school or university and the workplace, in relations between peers and colleagues, between senior and junior staff, between teachers and students, but also in relations with customers.

Last, the public space is a more heterogeneous context, grouping a wide range of situations in which people meet friends, acquaintances and strangers: in their dealings with professionals (doctor's visits, contacts with tradesmen or police), their movements through public space (including in public transport), and their relations with neighbours, etc., many women have been victims of sexual assault in their lifetime (8%), notably rape or attempted rape (1%).

Whatever the life space, sexual violence reported by women is practically always committed by one or more men (between 94% and 98%). In the majority of cases (75% of cases in the family), violence reported by men is committed by other men, and in three-quarters of cases for rape and attempted rape.

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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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.