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# Fact Sheet: Sexual Assault and Rape<sup>16</sup>

**Sexual violence** is any sexual act (or attempt to obtain a sexual act), unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person's sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim.

**Rape** is non-consensual penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth with a penis or other body part. Also includes penetration of the vagina or anus with an object. Rape can be perpetrated by someone known to the victim or by a stranger. Rape by two or more perpetrators is often referred to as gang rape.

**Sexual assault** is any form of non-consensual sexual contact that does not result in or include penetration. Examples include attempted rape as well as unwanted kissing, fondling, or touching of genitalia and buttocks. This incident type does not include rape, i.e., where penetration has occurred. Female genital mutilation/cutting is an act of sexual violence that impacts sexual organs, and as such will be classified as a sexualized act.

There are many types of sexual assault and rape that include, but are not limited to the following:

- Rape in marriage or dating relationships
- Rape by strangers
- Rape by soldiers
- Unwanted sexual advances, or touching, including demanding sex in return for favors
- Sexual abuse of people who are mentally or physically disabled
- Sexual abuse of children
- Forced marriage, including the marriage of children
- Forcing someone into prostitution

## Impacts of Sexual Assault and Rape

Sexual violence is harmful and negatively impacts survivors, their families, their communities, and wider society. There are many short- and long-term physical, mental and psychosocial consequences. At its worst, sexual violence can be life-threatening. The nature and severity of consequences are influenced by the type, duration and severity of the violence, the individual's age and developmental level, her relationship to the perpetrator/s, her psychosocial circumstances and the care and support she receives.

## Physical Consequences

Physical consequences of sexual violence can include acute physical effects such as injury, shock, disease, and infection, as well as chronic health problems such as disability, infections, chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, eating and sleeping disorders. There may also be immediate and ongoing reproductive health problems including miscarriage, unwanted pregnancy, menstrual and gynecological disorders, and pregnancy complications.

Some consequences are present immediately after an incident, while others appear at a later stage. For example, it is common for survivors to experience shock immediately after an assault; they may feel cold, faint, confused or disoriented, they may feel sick and even vomit. In the hours, days and weeks following sexual assault, many people report difficulty falling or staying asleep, heart palpitations and breathing

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<sup>16</sup> Source: UNICEF Communities Care: Transforming Lives and Preventing Violence Toolkit.

difficulties, headaches or general aches and pains, feeling tired and fatigued, nausea, being easily startled by noises, general agitation and muscle tension, numbness, eating problems, or oversensitivity to noise. It is also common for women to come for medical care months or even years after sexual violence. Physical effects depend on the violence itself. In cases of child sexual abuse, there may be no obvious physical signs. The absence of physical injuries or signs does not mean that sexual violence did not take place.

## **Psychological and Emotional Consequences**

Psychological effects generally refer to inner thoughts, ideas and emotions and can be less visible or even completely hidden, so survivors may need to offer this information. Psychological and emotional effects of sexual violence can be immediate and longer term. Common psychological effects of sexual violence include anxiety, depression, self-harm, chronic stress reactions, and overwhelming feelings of fearfulness, disempowerment, shame, and anger. It is very important to remember that everyone shows emotions differently and judging how people outwardly is a mistake.

People are all different, and the way they act and behave will depend on the individual and the context, including the culture. The reactions vary from person to person, depending on the age of the survivor, her life situation, the circumstances surrounding the violence and the response of support persons.